

The Amalgamation of the Personal and the Political:
Frederick Douglass and the Debate over Interracial Marriage

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This thesis titled
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Frederick Douglass and the Debate over Interracial Marriage

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ABSTRACT

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The Amalgamation of the Personal and the Political:

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Frederick Douglass's marriage to a white woman in 1884 provides insight into views on interracial marriage—particularly into African American views, which have been neglected in the historical literature. Although consistent with his long-held beliefs on the naturalness of amalgamation and the importance of assimilation, Douglass held that the marriage was a personal matter, not a political statement. Many African Americans, however, bemoaned the political implications of the interracial marriage of their most prominent figure. Already beset by white violence and discrimination, some feared a further backlash or lamented the impact of the marriage on race pride and solidarity. Therefore, this thesis examines Douglass's motivations for the marriage, the context in which it occurred, and the reaction for and against it. The controversy surrounding the marriage serves as a unique spotlight on African Americans' debates over interracial marriage and the race's future in the United States.

To Andy and his “blue-penciling.”

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INTRODUCTION

“No man, perhaps, had ever more offended popular prejudice than I had then lately done. I had married a wife.” —Frederick Douglass, 1892¹

On the morning of January 24th 1884, Frederick Douglass went to his office like normal. No one thought much of it when his secretary, Helen Pitts, left the office around two and Douglass a little later. As a well-known figure, however, clerks took notice when Douglass entered Washington D.C.’s city hall and spoke privately with the chief clerk to obtain a marriage license. He requested the clerk maintain “the strictest secrecy” especially with regards to his own office, the office of the Recorder of Deeds. Despite the request for privacy, the clerk immediately contacted a reporter for the *National Republican*, a D.C. daily. The reporter headed straight for the Recorder of Deeds’ office and informed Douglass’s daughter, a clerk and co-worker of Helen, of the impending nuptials. After noting that Douglass’s daughter was “visibly affected” by the news, the reporter headed to Helen’s home. Upon “persistent questioning,” Helen confirmed that she and Douglass were to be married, but refused to answer where or when. That evening the reporter met the couple outside Douglass’s home and congratulated the pair as they had already married. The newlyweds answered the reporter’s questions “in good spirit” until Douglass intimated that the “questioner was rather ‘cheeky’” and bid him goodnight.²

Douglass and Helen had married at the home of Francis Grimké, D.C.’s most prominent African American minister and the illegitimate half-nephew of abolitionists

¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966 [1892]), 961.

² “A Black Man’s Bride—Frederick Douglass Married Last Night to Miss Helen Pitts—The Woman Young, Attractive, Intelligent, and White,” *National Republican* (D.C.), January 25, 1884, 1.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Blanche K. Bruce, Mississippi's former senator, and his wife Josephine served as witnesses. No family attended the wedding; Douglass's children were only told of it hours before. Helen's mother and sister happened to be visiting D.C. at the time, but were not invited or informed; they learned of it the next morning in newspapers, as did her father in New York. Thus, they married in an intimate setting with close—and prominent—friends, but without advance warning to family or the public.

The front-page of the *National Republican* the day after the wedding revealed the reasons for the reporter's steadfast pursuit of the story and Douglass's discretion. This was not simply a noteworthy marriage of a prominent figure, but a budding scandal. The headline read: "A Black Man's Bride—Frederick Douglass Married Last Night to Miss Helen Pitts—The Woman Young, Attractive, Intelligent, and *White*."³ In the ensuing days and weeks newspapers' responses to the marriage ranged from joy to amusement to outrage. One paper described the marriage as "one of the best things that could happen," while another termed it a "national calamity."⁴ Whether considered a boon or a disaster, Douglass's interracial marriage caused a reaction.

News of Douglass's this marriage lingered in newspapers for months and long remained a point of contention. The advertisement from 1886, "Sulphur Bitters" (Figure 1), which disparagingly pictures the couple, testifies to the persistent public consciousness of the marriage. It features the couple emerging from a pharmacy with Douglass clutching a package—"Sulphur Bitters: The Great Blood Purifier"—and

³ "A Black Man's Bride," 1. Italics added.

⁴ *The New York Independent* quoted in "The National Capital," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 1; *Grit* (D.C.) quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

children discussing them in the background. Another contemporary advertisement for the product promised that it would “cure the worst kind of...stubborn, deep seated diseases.”⁵ In addition to the racial overtones of the “The Great Blood Purifier,” the advertisement intimates that Helen, whispering to Douglass and having him carry her coat and purse, is pushing him to change his complexion and thereby his race. The advertisement also depicts Helen as a blonde. In reality, she had curly black hair, but this and other accounts describe her as blonde or redheaded, most likely to ensure she was not mistaken for a light-skinned African American woman.



Figure 1: “Sulphur Bitters: The Great Blood Purifier” (1886).⁶

⁵ “Sulphur Bitters: The Greatest Blood Purifier Known,” *Kendallville Standard* (IN), March 8, 1895, 4.

⁶ “Frederick Douglass advertisement, c. 1886 [Sulphur Bitters],” *Miscellaneous Ephemera*
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~dalbino/ephemera/misc.html>.

More modern examples illustrate the controversy the marriage still evinces. Nearly one-hundred years afterward, Douglass's great-granddaughter complained that his marriage to a white woman was the only thing African Americans knew about him.⁷ This exaggerated assessment partially reflected the resurgence of black nationalism in the 1970s and its leaders' characterization of Douglass as insufficiently radical, but also showcases the marriage's contentiousness. Further eliciting a lack of knowledge and misinformation about Douglass, the co-authored work, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (1992), incorrectly reported that Douglass divorced his first wife, a "dark-skinned Black woman (who allegedly made the sailor suit Douglass wore when he escaped from slavery), to marry a White woman."⁸ While Douglass's first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, played a crucial role in financing his escape and making his disguise, Anna and Douglass never divorced; after forty-four years of marriage, she died of a stroke in 1882. Eighteen months later, Douglass and Helen married.

The enduring controversy that Douglass's second marriage created highlights the fact that interracial marriage in the United States has, until recently, been contentious. Statutes banning it in all but nine states attest to white opposition, as does the hundreds of lynched African Americans falsely "charged" with coveting white women. Whites' views on interracial marriage were thus public, prominent, and largely negative.

⁷ "People Are Talking About..." *Jet*, November 22, 1979, 30. *Jet* reported, "Anne Weaver Teabeau, great-granddaughter of revered writer-abolitionist Frederick Douglass, is sick and tired of people approaching her only to complain that Douglass married a White woman on his second go-round. 'It seems,' she sighs, 'that's the only thing Blacks know about Frederick Douglass.'"

⁸ Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1992), 117.

African American views on interracial marriage, however, have primarily only been visible through “breaches in the color line” which “prompted controversies that revealed how sharply divided the black community was on the issue,” according to Willard Gatewood.⁹ As such a “breach,” Douglass’s marriage offers a window into African Americans’ views on the subject. From outright condemnation to grudging tolerance to celebration, views on interracial marriages amongst African Americans fill a vast spectrum underlined by notions of racial uplift, race pride, gender, class, safety, and confidence or despair in white society’s willingness to accept them as equal members. According to Joel Williamson, their views on the matter can serve as “an index to the changeover in race relations” wherein “the dominant white society moved from semiacceptance of free mulattoes...to outright rejection.”¹⁰

Despite this potential to be a barometer for the times, little attention is given to African American views in literature on interracial marriage. It therefore misses their diverse, nuanced and evolving views toward the subject. With a long history of rape and concubinage at the hands of whites and a desire to protect and forge an identity, not all African Americans favored interracial unions. Further still, many African Americans disapproved of interracial marriage, but nevertheless fought fiercely to protect the right to it. Yet, most analyses miss these subtle views as they focus predominantly on white opposition.¹¹ Examining only how and why whites proscribed interracial marriage omits

⁹ Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 177.

¹⁰ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 62.

¹¹ For example, Martha Hodes’s *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (1997) examines white society’s response to interracial marriage and sex before and after emancipation, but does not offer African American views. Her edited volume of essays, *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing*

not just African American views, but the full impact of whites' actions as their opposition, particularly its violent manifestations, played a significant role in shaping African Americans' responses. Furthermore, examining African American views on interracial marriage through the response to Douglass's marriage reveals both interracial and intra-racial relations within the late nineteenth-century United States.

Recent literature has started to combat this one-sided narrative on interracial relationships and several of them are referenced throughout this thesis. Michele Mitchell's *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (2004) argues that post-emancipation African Americans worked as a sociopolitical body to ensure their collective future by policing intra-racial activity, which discouraged interracial intimacies. Randall Kennedy's *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (2003) examines whites' attempts to establish and subvert racial boundaries and touches upon African American views. Willard Gatewood's *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (1990) and Joel Williamson's *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1980) offer complementary insights into an overlapping population—elite and light-skinned African Americans—that both authors argue were acutely sensitive to legal prohibitions to interracial marriage, but roundly critical of such unions nonetheless. Douglass's

Boundaries in North American History (1999), explores many different aspects of interracial sexual relations, but does not address African American views until the 1920s when Garvey cooperated with white supremacists in support of an anti-miscegenation bill. Peggy Pascoe's *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (2009) traces amalgamation's history from the Civil War to *Loving v. Virginia*. Yet, African American sentiment toward interracial marriage is missing from her account. Studies of miscegenation typically have two approaches to the subject: one rooted in civil rights and a newer approach that uses critical race theory to show the power of law to shape identity. As Hodes—a disciple of the first approach—and Pascoe—a follower of the latter—show, both lenses fail to capture the diverse and evolving views of African Americans.

marriage and the reaction to it substantiates many of these authors' contentions and offers an example that adds to the depth and complexity of the subject.

Marriage served an important function for African Americans after emancipation, which makes their views on interracial marriage especially revealing. One of the first demands of freed slaves was legal recognition of their marriages. Unable to legally marry under slavery, marriage allowed the newly emancipated to assert more control and protection over their families—particularly women who had long been at the mercy of white owners. Furthermore, marriage in the nineteenth century connoted respectability and responsibility. Slaves before and after emancipation were accused of lacking the requisite “marital and familial attachments” that allowed lasting unions.¹² Therefore, marriage served not just as a right of freedom, but also as a corrective to allegations that African Americans were unable to fulfill private duties. Consequently, more than a personal act of reorganizing one's life after slavery, African American marriages possessed political implications. Many even asserted that the “social future of the colored race” depended upon “the marriage relation.”¹³ Marriage, therefore, was “perceived as both a personal act and as an institution with ramifications for the entire Afro-American collective.”¹⁴

As such, Douglass's marriage was far more than a private matter. Rather, it appeared to be a political statement vested with unwanted consequences and connotations, especially for a leader. As a contemporary said of Douglass:

¹² Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 428.

¹³ Wesley Gaines, *Negro and the White Man* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Publishing House, 1897), 147.

¹⁴ Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 202.

His surroundings and doings are of more consequence to our people than those of all the other colored men who have and have ever had white women for wives. No comparison then can be made between them, because none have held the peculiar position in public life that Douglass holds.¹⁵

As the foremost African American of his day, Douglass was without equal and thus the reaction to his marriage is, at best, an imperfect comparison to all other responses to interracial marriages. His prominence simultaneously excused him and subjected him to increased criticism. Recognized as a man of distinction and ability by even some of his most racist critics, Douglass was not subject to some of the dehumanizing depictions other African Americans faced. Had he been less prominent or lived outside the relative safety of D.C., his marriage might have had dire consequences. Amongst African Americans, however, he faced far more censure than he otherwise would have as his “doings” were indeed of more “consequence” to them.

Thus, his marriage and reactions to it, though unique in many respects, showcase widespread discussions regarding African Americans’ future in the U.S. Few could ignore the political implications brought on by the marriage of the most prominent African American to a white woman, celebrated with the minister of the most prominent African American church, and witnessed by the second most prominent African American. Further still, all three of the men involved were the products of amalgamation between white men and enslaved women.

The marriage’s timing too proved crucial. For African Americans the period was one of readjustment. With Reconstruction fading into the background and segregation, lynching, and discrimination rising, many African Americans were turning away from the

¹⁵ “The Douglass Marriage,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

faith in full integration in American society that characterized the post-emancipation period and were looking to separatist solutions instead of integration. Interracial marriage—as it represents complete social, economic, and physical integration—was the ultimate form of assimilation. Many, therefore, cited the marriage as indicative of Douglass’s lack of race pride and cause to challenge his loyalty and leadership.

Yet, pragmatism shaped African American reactions as well. African American males increasingly faced the threat of lynch mobs for the mere suggestion that they looked the wrong way at a white woman. Perennially judged collectively, the prominent example of an interracial marriage caused many to fear that some whites would believe all African American men sought white brides. Many African American women too felt threatened by Douglass’s choice as some believed it fed stereotypes that they lacked the same virtues as white women. The fear of a white backlash therefore remained omnipresent in African Americans’ reactions to Douglass’s marriage. Not all, however, were opposed to it. A significant contingent condoned it as a private right, embraced it as a symbol of prejudice transcended, or held interracial marriage in general—along with assimilation—to be the race’s only possible future. As such, they were leery of growing efforts to cultivate race pride and self-segregation.

Given the range of reactions to the marriage, this thesis examines what debates and concepts underlie African Americans’ response to interracial marriage in the post-Reconstruction Era and what motivated Douglass to defy conventions and marry across the color line. His marriage did not create the debate over interracial marriage, but it did generate public discussion and strong reactions. Showcasing the reception to this

interracial marriage evinces divergent stances amongst African Americans and offers insight into the period. White reactions as they form both an important background to and source of interaction with African American views will not be ignored, but will not be covered in the same depth. Understanding Douglass's motivations for marrying someone he knew could undermine his position by bringing him public disfavor will likewise illuminate an important view. Only by placing the marriage in context and with Douglass's personal views can its significance be understood.

Despite being heralded today as the most prominent African American of the nineteenth century, Douglass and his second marriage almost vanished from the historical record. His autobiographies were out of print for most of the twentieth century, no biographies were written on him from 1906 to 1948, and he received scant scholarly attention until the 1960s.¹⁶ Yet, even after his reemergence, knowledge of his long post-slavery career remained limited as his first autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), dominated Douglass studies. After emancipating himself at the age of twenty, Douglass spent his nearly six decades of freedom as an orator, newspaper editor, traveler, recruiter of troops during the Civil War, adviser to presidents, bank president, federal marshal, the Recorder of Deeds for D.C., and minister to Haiti. He was a leading abolitionist, early crusader for women's rights, tireless advocate for African American suffrage, and stalwart member of the Republican Party. He was lauded by nearly all African Americans and earned at least grudging respect from many whites.

¹⁶ John Stauffer deems Douglass's "canonization" a relatively recent phenomenon. John Stauffer in John McKivigan and Heather Kaufman, eds., *In the Words of Frederick Douglass: Quotations from Liberty's Champion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), xi.

Despite all this, few today know much of his post-Civil War career. Fewer still know of his second marriage. His role as America's most famous ex-slave overshadowed all of his future endeavors and continues to delineate historical coverage of him. In keeping with "the model of most nineteenth-century autobiographies," Douglass included only minimal personal information.¹⁷ His autobiographies were, as Eric Sundquist suggests, "public political acts with a single goal foremost in view"—ending slavery and combating discrimination.¹⁸ In the revised version of his final autobiography, Douglass barely referenced his second marriage or the controversy it caused.¹⁹ Therefore, many initial biographers, repeating the structure and themes of Douglass's autobiographies, omit many controversial aspects, especially his second marriage.²⁰ Likewise, Douglass's views on assimilation and amalgamation were often overlooked.

Only since interracial marriage has become more acceptable have biographers given Douglass's views on assimilation, amalgamation, and his marriage more coverage,

¹⁷ Eric J. Sundquist, ed. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Douglass mentioned the outcry surrounding the marriage in the revised version of his final autobiography, but only because it served a political purpose of depicting the marriage's opponents as unreasonable. He mentioned the scandal, but not the cause as he did not mention Helen's race. As such, the marriage seemed commonplace and the reaction unjustified. Douglass, *The Life and Times*, 961.

²⁰ Douglass's first biography, Frederick May Holland's *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (1891), only mentioned Helen once—a far contrast from coverage of Douglass's first wife and children. Moreover, both her race and the controversy surrounding their marriage are entirely absent from the biography's four hundred pages. Professor James M. Gregory's *Frederick Douglass: The Orator* (1893) mentions Helen's complexion, but does not mention the controversy surrounding their marriage. Charles Chesnutt's *Frederick Douglass* (1899) only devoted three sentences to Douglass's second marriage and the resulting controversy. Furthermore, he buried it within a paragraph also relating the death of Douglass's first wife and the erection of a bronze bust of Douglass. The last Douglass biography for over forty years, Booker T. Washington's *Frederick Douglass* (1906), only offered a page of the tome's 351 pages to Douglass's second marriage. Despite describing the marriage causing "something like a revulsion of feeling throughout the entire country" and depicting the general sentiment to be that Douglass had "made the most serious mistake of his life," Washington further diminishes the controversy around the marriage by embedding it in a chapter entitled: "Evidence of Popular Esteem." Booker T. Washington, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000 [1901]), 306, 302.

but even these works often lack sufficient context. The first biography on Douglass in over forty years, Benjamin Quarles's *Frederick Douglass* (1948) covered the marriage and its surrounding controversy more than any previous work. Published when integration was beginning to seem possible and direct action was gaining currency, Quarles praised the marriage as "a burning protest against color prejudice."²¹ Similarly, Philip Foner's *Frederick Douglass* (1964) devotes most of the marriage's coverage to those who congratulated the newlyweds.²² Although mentioning the outcry that the marriage caused amongst many African Americans, neither Quarles nor Foner offers a detailed assessment of how the act fit within Douglass's views on assimilation or amalgamation. Nor do they situate the white or African American resentment to the marriage into the evolving debate over interracial marriage.

More recent works have not dwelt substantially on the marriage or the public reaction. Instead, the marriage has been mentioned in passing as proof of Douglass's support for assimilation and amalgamation. Waldo Martin offered the first intellectual biography of Douglass—*The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (1984)—and incorporates the marriage into discussions of Douglass's philosophy. He notes the public condemnation and deems the African American reaction "particularly intense" as some "argued that Douglass had slapped his race in the face."²³ Yet, like Quarles and Foner, Martin leaves this avenue unexplored. Douglass's next biographer, William McFeely in *Frederick*

²¹ Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Atheneum, 1948), 300. Quarles' biography of Douglass was published the same year President Truman desegregated the armed forces and the year after the Congress of Racial Equality's Journey of Reconciliation began to challenge segregation in public accommodations.

²² Phillip Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1969), 337-8. Foner quotes extensively from congratulatory notes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, H.W. Gilbert, and Julia Griffiths Crofts.

²³ Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 99.

Douglass (1991), did not attempt to explain the public reaction either and focused instead on the response from the couple's family and friends. He offers, however, far more on the long-term personal costs for Douglass and Helen than any previous biographer.²⁴

Outside of biography, scholars debate what changes, if any, the marriage caused in Douglass's philosophy. Both Wilson Moses and August Meier contend that Douglass grew more unequivocal in his statements against all forms of racial exclusiveness in his last decade. Meier suggests this resulted from Helen's influence, but Moses disagrees and contends that Douglass's "long-standing distaste for racial chauvinism" is what allowed him to marry Helen.²⁵ Neither Moses nor Meier assess the possibility, however, that Douglass grew more committed to (or at least vocal about) the issue in the face of widespread condemnation and allegations that he had betrayed his race. A rise in support for separatist solutions among African Americans, ever increasing white supremacy, and the influence of Helen might have all contributed to his increased dedication to assimilation and opposition to racial separatism, but so too did the virulent public backlash over what Douglass considered to be a purely private matter. As his views, the marriage, and the reaction to it have not been explored in combination, this possibility has been missed.

²⁴ See also Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland, eds., *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Peter Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Ronald Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

²⁵ August Meier in Benjamin Quarles ed., *Great Lives Observed: Frederick Douglass* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 160; Wilson Moses in Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78.

This is partially because controversial aspects of Douglass's life have always been "play[ed] down" according to Moses.²⁶ He finds this a critical gap as Douglass's true views are not well known and have never been widely accepted as "neither black nor white Americans are committed to the eradication of racial distinctions in American life."²⁷ As evidence of the weak understanding of Douglass's views, Moses finds that although Douglass believed "racial pride 'ridiculous' he has come to be venerated among the most important saints in the Afrocentric pantheon."²⁸ Further illustrating Moses' contention, *The American Directory of Certified Uncle Toms: Being a Review of...Negroes Against the Freedom Aims of the Black Race* (2002) issued by the Council on Black Internal Affairs, seems unable to definitively place him as it vacillates between celebrating Douglass and decrying him as a race traitor for marrying a white woman.²⁹

After a long period of neglect, controversial elements of Douglass's life are now being examined more closely, but his marriage still lacks sufficient context and critical analysis. Scholars have begun to unpack some of Douglass's views and use his interracial marriage as evidence for them, but have not examined the public reaction to the marriage in-depth or shown how that informs understanding on attitudes towards interracial marriage, and its impact on Douglass's leadership. Neglecting Douglass's controversial

²⁶ Wilson Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30.

²⁷ Moses, *Creative Conflict*, 59.

²⁸ Moses, *Creative Conflict*, 27. Martin concurs with this assessment that Douglass's interracial marriage and views on assimilation and amalgamation have frequently been overlooked or diminished by biographers. Therefore, he has ironically often been categorized as a black nationalist. Martin concluded that this "has persisted among many blacks who either ignored or were unaware of conflicting evidence." Waldo Martin in Sundquist ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary*, 281.

²⁹ Council on Black Internal Affairs, *American Directory of Certified Uncle Toms: Being a Review of the History, Antics, and Attitudes of Handkerchief Heads, Aunt Jemimas, Head Negroes in Charge, and House Negroes Against the Freedom Aims of the Black Race* (New York: CBIA Publishing, 2002), 220, 324.

marriage ignores more than a mere personal matter—it obscures understanding of both the time and the figure. Douglass’s prescriptions for race relations were integration and assimilation. With the ratification of the Reconstruction Amendments, he held African Americans’ future in the U.S. as full and equal citizens to be beyond dispute and therefore held that amalgamation was an inevitable outcome of political and social equality. He therefore envisioned the creation of a “composite nationality” that would homogenize the U.S. and lead to national greatness. As the reaction to his marriage shows, however, on both sides of the color line, many were not so convinced of this “inevitability” or even its desirability.

Only by situating the marriage in the context of the times, alongside Douglass’s philosophy and life, as well as the reaction it caused, can its significance be understood. The marriage does not receive an adequate treatment in biographies, as it is just one instance in a long and momentous life. Even in literature on interracial marriage that includes African American views, the marriage lacks the context of Douglass’s philosophy. Exploring the reasoning behind the reactions to this marriage and Douglass’s motivations offers a unique window into African American views that complements and expands upon the existing literature. Although Douglass’s prominence made the interracial marriage atypical even amongst such unusual unions, the debate it prompted illuminates an ongoing dialogue about race, class, racial pride, pragmatic concerns, and public and private distinctions during a period of flux. Douglass may have felt the marriage a private matter of no public concern. Yet as a definitive statement on his prescriptions for race relations and as an event that generated debate over the future of

African Americans in the United States, the marriage serves as a window into a period when some, like Douglass, questioned the permanence of race.

Chapter 1, “Interracial Marriage,” offers background to the forces shaping views on interracial marriage. It further explores the reluctance of amalgamation supporters to address the issue directly. Initially banned to curtail cooperation between white indentured servants and African slaves, interracial marriage was prohibited, but amalgamation occurred nevertheless as slave-owners exercised their illicit prerogatives on their female slaves. Abolitionists condemned this forced amalgamation, but were accused of desiring interracial unions themselves. The immediate postwar climate allowed some freedom of marriage and hope in the possibility of ultimate integration. By the end of Reconstruction, however, and in response to white supremacy, racial science, and the restriction of African American rights, African Americans increasingly cultivated race pride as a means for protection and uplift. As such, many looked upon interracial marriage with suspicion and as a threat to both safety and race solidarity.

Chapter 2, “Amalgamating the Personal and Political,” explores Douglass’s conceptions of the future of race relations in the U.S., his personal reasons for marrying Helen, and the ideas of those who supported Douglass’s marriage. Douglass believed nations were best served by a blending of races into what he termed a “composite nationality.” As a mixed-race figure himself, Douglass personified such a composition. He made no secret of his support for assimilation, but given the political climate, remained circumspect on what he saw as assimilation’s natural consequence—amalgamation. He considered amalgamation inevitable, natural, and beneficial. Because

he had long associated and found intellectual companionship with white women, he thus believed it only natural that he marry a woman with whom he had much in common but who happened to be white. Aware of the political implications of his personal choice, however, he sought to minimize the public backlash to emphasize his belief in the naturalness of interracial marriage. Defenders of his marriage often echoed these sentiments or maintained it was a private matter.

Chapter 3, “Reactions,” analyzes the public outcry against the marriage. As Douglass grew increasingly vocal about the inevitability of amalgamation and the dangers of race pride, American society—both black and white—moved in the opposite direction. Amongst whites, Jim Crow segregation and the “one-drop” rule were becoming the norm. Amongst African Americans, pleas for race pride and solidarity became increasingly prevalent as many became convinced they would never be accepted on equal terms with white society unless they cultivated race pride and created their own institutions for racial uplift. As such, interracial marriage signified to some a betrayal of the race. Further reasons for disapproval centered upon concerns for safety, dismay at the connotation Douglass’s choice denoted on African American women, anxiety from the class-conscious, and the divisions between elite and non-elite African Americans the marriage exposed. Regardless of these objections, however, the reaction shows African Americans almost universally supported the legal right to interracial marriage, even if they disapproved of actual instances.

The conclusion, “After Douglass,” explores the immediate legacy of Douglass’s marriage. Two future African American leaders, Mary Church Terrell and W.E.B. Du

Bois, refused to marry whites they purportedly loved. The former pledged never to marry interracially after seeing the response to Douglass's marriage. Whereas the latter, despite the prominent example of Douglass, concluded that he could not be a leader of African Americans if he married a white woman. By the turn of the century, interracial marriages were at their lowest rates and race relations reached their nadir. Douglass's "composite nationality" had given way to a ridged racial caste system.

In the aftermath of emancipation, the concept of race was in flux. Those living through this period could not be certain that race would continue to bear the significance it had during the antebellum period. The social and economic disruption of the Civil War and emancipation and the revolutionary changes brought by the Reconstruction Amendments "meant that race had come unfixed" in the words of Hannah Rosen.³⁰ No longer did race exclude those of African descent from citizenship or suffrage. Nor could anyone be certain that race would continue to structure communities, public life, family patterns, and personal identity. Furthermore, no one could have predicted the defining of all those who possessed even "one-drop" of African American blood as the same race. Indeed, as the "Sulpher Bitters" advertisement indicates, many even believed—or feared—complexions, and thereby race, could be changed.

Admitting to the existence of biological races but maintaining a universal humanity, Douglass embraced this "unfixing" of race. Yet, as many whites sought to resurrect barriers between the races, some African Americans turned inward to protect themselves—putting Douglass at odds with a growing proportion of African Americans.

³⁰ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5.

Douglass held to the promises of the Reconstruction Amendments, but especially after losses like the Civil Rights Cases in 1883, he was increasingly out of line with the African American masses that could not foresee, or for some even desire, assimilation and integration's apex—amalgamation. “Race had come unfixed” after the war, but by Douglass's marriage was calcifying as whites sought to supplant slavery with a racial caste system. Yet, still unsettled in 1884, the reaction to the marriage offers insight into a period in which the future of race relations remained, for some, an open question.

A Note on Terminology and Sources

Assimilation and amalgamation, although often used interchangeably in the nineteenth century, are separate doctrines. Assimilation is social and cultural and “can theoretically go in either direction, say from black to white or white to black, or it can involve a subtle blending,” according to Ronald Sunstrom.³¹ Amalgamation refers primarily to biological mixing and was Douglass's preferred terminology.³² Some believed amalgamation would inevitably follow assimilation, but not all supporters of assimilation agreed or thought such mixture would be beneficial. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois favored assimilation, but not amalgamation as he believed racial and ethnic identities should be maintained. Amalgamation and interracial marriage too are separate, but related concepts as the former could apply to interracial unions or procreation in or outside of marriage. Likewise, assimilation and integration are distinct. Martin Delany

³¹ Ronald Sunstrom, “Frederick Douglass's Longing for the End of Race,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012) <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frederick-douglass/>.

³² For a larger history of the use of the term “amalgamation,” see David A. Hollinger, “Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (December 2003): 1363-1390.

and Alexander Crummell—early black nationalists—were separatists, but believed those of African descent should assimilate by adopting Christianity and other Western institutions. While not a black nationalist, Booker T. Washington promoted both assimilation and separatism. Although used by supporters and opponents of interracial marriage alike, miscegenation—a neologism invented during the Civil War—will not be used as it has a problematic origin and was never used by Douglass.

While Helen Pitts Douglass’s motivations and thoughts will not be ignored, the focus will be on her more prominent husband. Therefore, she will be referred to by her first name while Douglass will be referred to by his last name. Likewise, their marriage will be primarily referred to as “Douglass’s marriage.” His first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, will similarly be referred to by her first name and their marriage will be described as “Douglass’s first marriage.”

Given the importance of the public reaction, much of the research for Chapter 3 has been drawn from historical newspapers. The following databases were used for newspaper searches: Access Newspaper Archive (1700-2006), America’s Historical Newspapers (1620-1922), Chronicling America (1836-1922), and African American Newspapers (1827-1998). The last database served to distinguish between African American and mainstream newspapers. When relevant and not previously stated or otherwise apparent, newspapers will be noted as either African American or mainstream. These monikers are imperfect as African Americans read and contributed to mainstream newspapers and remarks in African American newspapers found their way into mainstream papers. Nevertheless, the distinctions reveal valuable insights.

CHAPTER 1: INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE

“For 200 years and more in slavery and outside of marriage amalgamation went on under the fostering care of church, pulpit, press and American statesmanship with only here and there a voice, and that a hated and despised voice, raised against it. But now that the Negro is free, and has been invested with political and civil rights, sounds of alarm reach us from all quarters.” —Frederick Douglass, 1882¹

“What the American people object to,” Frederick Douglass wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton a few months after his marriage to Helen in 1884, “is not a mixture of the races, but honorable marriage between them.”² Although written in response to the outcry over his own marriage, Douglass’s evaluation of America’s stance on amalgamation reflected a long history of U.S. hypocrisy. Interracial marriage was banned in much of the nation for most of its history, but amalgamation continued nonetheless. Amalgamation in the antebellum period primarily occurred between enslaved women and their masters and became a point of contention in the debates over slavery. In the postbellum period, banning interracial marriage and raising fears of “lustful” African American men coveting white women became the means of maintaining racial order and domination. Political expediency therefore demanded proponents of equal rights avoid the issue for fear of provoking a backlash. Especially after Reconstruction, white supremacists increasingly maligned the collective character of African Americans and terrorized them. As their prospects in the U.S. diminished, some African Americans rejected the possibility or desirability of ever being accepted by white society and sought separatist

¹ Frederick Douglass quoted in Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 668.

² Douglass, “Letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, May 30, 1884,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 694-5.

solutions. Interracial unions therefore became a target of African American race pride advocates.

Colonial and Antebellum Amalgamation

Fearing that white servants and black slaves might band together, colonial Virginia enacted the first prohibitions against interracial marriage in 1662.³ The same statute condemned children to follow “the condition of the mother,” thereby encouraging slaveholders to have illicit relations with their female slaves, as any offspring would be considered slaves.⁴ Slaveholders could thus increase their wealth via coerced amalgamation.⁵ As New England states began emancipating their slaves after the American Revolution, interracial marriage bans were strengthened to “maintain racial castes even after slavery ended” according to Karen Weierman.⁶ Only Pennsylvania repealed such a ban as the state began the slow process of freeing its slaves in 1780.⁷

Despite these Colonial and Post-Revolutionary prohibitions, interracial sexual contact likely peaked during this period, according to sociologist Aaron Gullickson, due to a large population of white indentured servants toiling alongside slaves, a shortage of

³ Karen W. Weierman, *One Nation, One Blood: Interracial Marriage in American Fiction, Scandal, and Law, 1820-1870* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 126.

⁴ William Walter Hening, comp., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia (1619-1792)*, vol. 2. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), 260.

⁵ White women, in contrast to their male counterparts, were fined or given five years of indentured servitude for having “a bastard child by a negro, or mulatto,” Hening, *Statutes at Large*, vol. 3, 447; For a discussion of the consequences of this sexualizing of race, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 187.

⁶ Weierman, *One Nation*, 136.

⁷ Iowa and Kansas also bowed to abolitionist pressure in the 1840s and 1850s and repealed or allowed their bans on interracial marriage to lapse. See Weierman, *One Nation*, 140.

females, and notions of racial difference not yet firmly established.⁸ Interracial marriage might have been officially banned, but interracial relations—consensual or otherwise—continued, often with society’s tacit consent. Some communities were surprisingly tolerant of such unions, legal prohibitions notwithstanding. Certain areas, like Charleston and New Orleans, contained substantial populations of interracial couples and pockets of the North had small numbers as well.⁹

Most interracial sexual contact, however, occurred between female slaves and their owners. This coerced interracial contact—as by slavery’s very nature consent could not be freely given—was only rarely accompanied by legal or social repercussions. Slavery did not allow enslaved women control over their own bodies and left enslaved males powerless to protect their wives and daughters.¹⁰ The growing population of mixed-race slaves and the travel logs, diaries, divorce petitions, and slave narratives that mention forced amalgamation indicate its frequency.¹¹ Therefore, to slaves, amalgamation served as reminders of slavery’s brutality. For slave owners, it illustrated their complete domination over their chattel.

Abolitionists decried the rape of slave women as one of the institution’s worst aspects. Interracial marriage between free people, however, was a different matter. Most

⁸ Aaron Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage Trends, 1850-2000,” *Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America* (2006), 2.

⁹ Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage,” 4.

¹⁰ Hannah Rosen shows that laws in slaves states considered slave women to be simultaneously incapable of consent or refusal as they lacked both “the will and honor” to do so. Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 10.

¹¹ One traveler reported that “almost every Southern planter has a family more or less numerous of illegitimate colored children.” Another held that the rape of female slaves and the sale of the resulting offspring, “instead of being very rare,” was “unhappily very general!” Fanny Kemble quoted in Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 133; J.S. Buckingham quoted by Rothman, *Notorious*, 133.

abolitionists were reluctant to address it for fear of producing a backlash against their cause and dividing their ranks. While some abolitionists opposed interracial marriage and cowered at the question: “Would you let your daughter marry a negro?,” others tried to downplay the matter so as not to injure their cause. A radical few—William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and Henry Highland Garnet—openly argued “that interracial marriage was part of God’s plan and an essential component of a strong national character.”¹² Yet, such direct advocacy proved to be impolitic; few other issues inspired backlash like the “threat” of amalgamation and abolitionists struggled to counter white anxiety about it.

Despite its rarity in the antebellum North, pro-slavery forces used fears of interracial marriage as a “red herring” to distract from slavery by equating support for emancipation with a desire for amalgamation. Mobs erupted in New York City in 1834 and Philadelphia in 1838, in part, from charges that emancipation would bring about amalgamation.¹³ Abolitionist Angelina Grimké believed that the fear of amalgamation was the root of Northern opposition to abolition, while an editorial in the *Colored American* deemed it “the battering ram of the pro-slavery party.”¹⁴

The power of amalgamation as a wedge issue is exemplified in *Practical Amalgamation: The Wedding* (Figure 2). Much to abolitionists’ consternation the popular print depicted an exaggerated account of the ramifications of abolition. Mirroring the dehumanizing depictions of African Americans in minstrel shows, it illustrates the

¹² Weierman, *One Blood*, 102.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9915/pg9915.html>; “Amalgamation,” *Colored American*, June 23, 1838.

“practical” consequences of emancipation and race mixing to its logical extreme—a beautiful white woman, the paragon of feminine virtue, marrying a buffoonish African American. Political expediency, therefore, demanded abolitionists avoid the issue of interracial marriage.



Figure 2: Edward Williams Clay’s *Practical Amalgamation: The Wedding* (1839).¹⁵

Interracial marriage, however, was an entirely different matter than the interracial sex and procreation that primarily occurred between slaves and their masters. All abolitionists could oppose forced amalgamation under slavery, even if they differed on the propriety of interracial marriage. Abolitionists therefore sought to turn the tables on slavery’s supporters by accusing them of being amalgamationists. Lydia Maria Child held

¹⁵ Edward Williams Clay, *Practical Amalgamation: The Wedding*, (c 1839) American Antiquarian Society <http://catalog.mwa.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=153051>.

the sexual exploitation of slave women to be an integral component of slavery and that only “universal emancipation” would “*stop* amalgamation.”¹⁶ Several abolitionist newspapers contended Southern amalgamation occurred with such frequency that not only would all slaves “very soon become white,” but that “you will scarcely have a single drop of pure, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ blood, in all the South.”¹⁷ The lithograph, *Beauties of the Extension of the Area of Slavery* (Figure 3), illustrates this line of reasoning. Portraying a beautiful biracial slave and her mother nobly pleading to her white father not to sell her, *Beauties* humanized slaves and showed the plight of the enslaved children of white masters. Far from condoning amalgamation, then, even the most radical of abolitionists accused their opponents of being amalgamationists.

When proponents of interracial marriage addressed its ban, they were typically careful to confine their reasons to matters of principal and to avoid advocacy for actual instances. For example, Child, in a campaign to remove Massachusetts’s interracial marriage ban, avoided arguing for amalgamation itself. Instead, she argued that the law was a “useless disgrace.” The law proved itself useless, in her estimation, because if there was a “natural antipathy between the races, the antipathy [would] protect itself” and therefore did not require the force of law. She considered it a disgrace as it impinged private choice, bastardized children, violated equality, and was “strongly tinged with the

¹⁶ Lydia Maria Child, “Anti-Slavery Catechism,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 14, 1841, 74. Child’s *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) was the first print denouncement of the rape of slave women. See Leslie Harris, “Abolitionist Amalgamators to ‘Rulers of the Five Points’” in Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 195. Similarly, school reformer Horace Mann questioned, “why those who are so horror-stricken at the idea of *theoretic* amalgamation should exhibit to the world, in all their cities, on all their plantations, and in all their households, such numberless proofs of *practical* amalgamation.” “From the Speech of Mr. Horace Mann,” *The North Star*, May 18, 1849, 1.

¹⁷ “Amalgamation at the South—Some of the Consequences,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, December 8, 1854, 1; “Amalgamation,” *Colored American*, June 23, 1838.

vile system of slavery.”¹⁸ Abolitionists could therefore attack the bans without supporting interracial marriage itself.

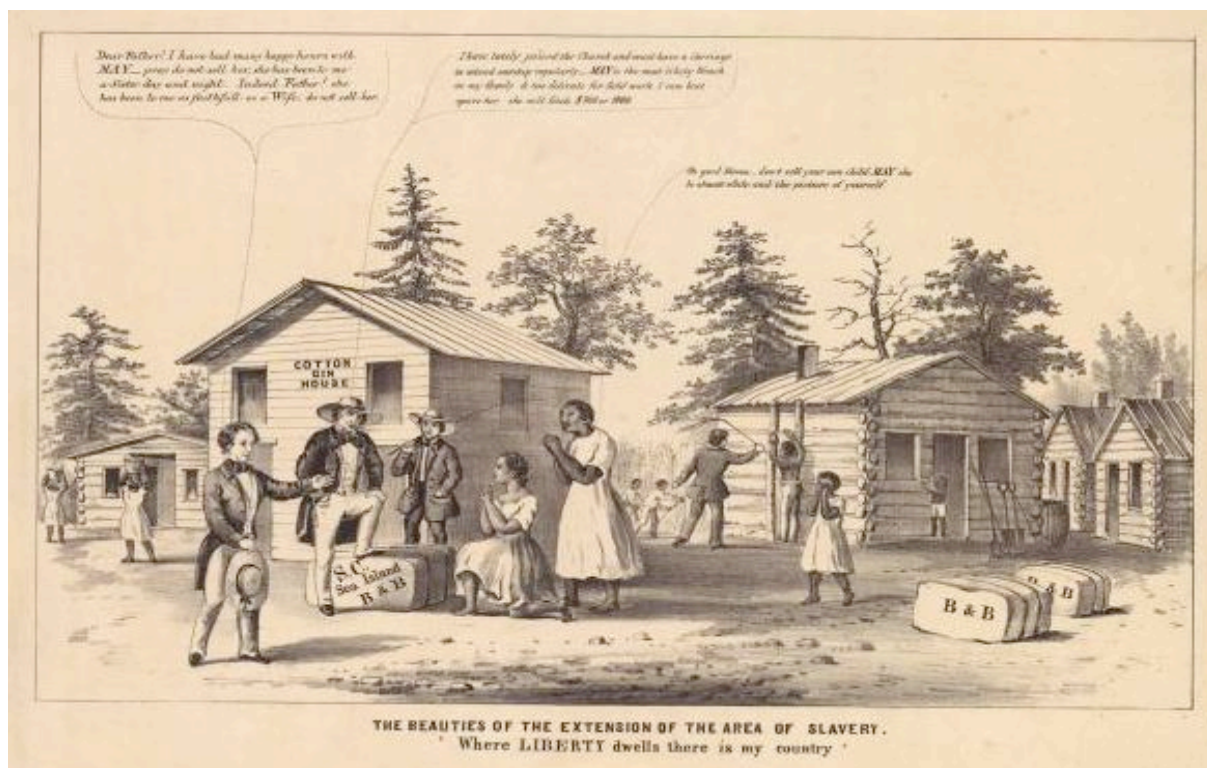


Figure 3: *The Beauties of the Extension of the Area of Slavery* (c1850). The text also insinuates that a further danger of amalgamation under slavery is the potential for unintentional incest. Captions, from left to right, read: “Dear Father! I have had many happy hours with May—pray do not sell her, she has been to me a sister day and night. Indeed Father! she has been to me as faithfull [sic] as a wife, do not sell her”; “I have lately joined the church and must have a carriage to attend worship regularly—May is the most likely wench in my family & too delicate for field work I can best spare her. She will fetch \$900 or 1000”; “Oh good massa—don’t sell your own child May she be almost white and the picture of yourself.”¹⁹

African Americans, in particular, denied a desire for actual acts of amalgamation.

David Ruggles, an African American abolitionist, argued, “abolitionists do not wish

¹⁸ Child, “Anti-Slavery Catechism,” 74.

¹⁹ Unknown author, “The beauties of the extension of the area of slavery,” (c 1850) American Antiquarian Society, <http://catalog.mwa.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=152686>.

‘amalgamation.’ I do not wish it, nor does any colored man or woman of my acquaintance.”²⁰ David Walker, while demanding in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) that interracial marriage bans be repealed as a matter of principal, declared: “I would not give a *pinch of snuff* to be married to any white person I ever saw in all the days of my life.”²¹ A contributor to the *Colored American* wrote that choosing spouses was “a matter of taste” and “refined and intelligent colored men, greatly prefer a shaded complexion with intelligence, virtue and refinement, to a fair skin, *without* them.”²² Thus, both white and African American abolitionists attacked the bans all while arguing a “natural antipathy” would discourage amalgamation.²³

The “threat” of interracial marriage that resulted from abolishing slavery, however, continued to serve as a wedge issue amongst anti-slavery advocates and as an accusation to be endured. The matter even became a point of contention in the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858. Stephen Douglas forced then-Senate candidate Abraham Lincoln into responding to such an accusation. Lincoln protested: “I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife.”²⁴ Some abolitionists simply sought the removal of interracial marriage bans because they considered them unjust. African Americans in particular were careful to maintain—either for pragmatic concerns or racial pride—that they did not desire to marry

²⁰ David Ruggles quoted in H. Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973), 149.

²¹ David Walker, “*One Continual Cry*”: *David Walker’s “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World”* (1829-1830), ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 72.

²² “Amalgamation,” *Colored American*, June 23, 1838.

²³ Child, “Anti-Slavery Catechism,” 74.

²⁴ “Fourth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858,” in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed. *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858* (New York: The Library of America, 2009), 637. Lincoln further pledged to stand by the interracial marriage bans and joked that as Douglas so feared their removal, his only impediment to marrying an African American must be the bans.

whites. Only the most radical abolitionists openly argued that interracial marriage was natural and potentially beneficial. Lincoln probably represented a more mainstream view among both abolitionists and anti-slavery advocates.²⁵

White resistance to amalgamation was fueled in part by the growing field of ethnology—a branch of anthropology that compares the characteristics of different groups of people. In the nineteenth century in particular, ethnology blended religious and scientific thought to argue that those of African descent were a separate and inferior race. Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century, however, explained human differences through environmental factors that produced variation in pigmentation, and perceived mental, moral, and psychological differences. These explanations began to erode by 1800, but “persisted as a respectable ethnological doctrine until the 1830s and 1840s.”²⁶ As slavery became a more contentious issue, this burgeoning ethnology offered slavery’s defenders non-environmental explanations for racial difference and the supposed permanent inferiority of people of African descent.

Ethnologists such as Drs. Samuel Morton and Josiah Nott and social theorist George Fitzhugh provided arguments to substantiate self-serving assumptions of racial difference and the inferiority of those of African descent.²⁷ The products of

²⁵ “The outer limits” of “a viable abolitionist position,” according to George Frederickson, remained only a “qualified defense of intermarriage as something allowable but not to be recommended” George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 173.

²⁶ Frederickson, *The Black Image*, 2.

²⁷ See Samuel G. Morton, *Crania Americana: Or a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839); Morton, *Aegyptiaca: Or, Observations on Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and the Monuments* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1844); Josiah C. Nott, *An Essay on the Natural History of Mankind: Viewed in Connection with Negro Slavery* (N.p.: Thomas Dade, 1851); George Fitzhugh, *Sociology of the South, Or the Failure of*

amalgamation received particular attention. Nott argued in 1843 that “mulattos” were “a degenerate, unnatural offspring,” less intelligent than whites, but physically weaker than those of only African descent.²⁸ Nott and George Robins Gliddon’s *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (1857) further argued that even long after mixed-raced individuals were absorbed into the white population, their presence showed in “malformations—modifications of the skull, stature and intelligence.”²⁹ So long as the offspring of amalgamation remained enslaved and outside of “respectable family circles,” many whites could dismiss fears about the growing mixed-race population. Emancipation, however, changed the nature of the debate.

Postbellum Amalgamation

Immediately after the Civil War a fragile period of acceptability for interracial marriage ensued as “the political climate of Reconstruction offered some protection to interracial couples.”³⁰ Interracial marriage bans in place before emancipation or added in the Black Codes of 1865 and 1866 were revoked for a time by Reconstruction legislators in seven of the eleven former Confederate states and the courts of three more upheld

Free Society (Richmond: A Morris Publisher, 1854); and Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!, or Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A Morris Publisher, 1857).

²⁸ Josiah C. Nott, “The Mulatto, a Hybrid,” *American Journal of Medical Science* (1843) as quoted by Nancy Stepan, “Biology: Races and Proper Places,” in J. Chamberlin and Gilman eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 107.

²⁹ J. Aitken Meigs, “The Cranial Characteristics of the Races of Men,” in J.C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, eds., *Indigenous Races of the Earth, or, New Chapters of Ethnological Enquiry* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857), 53.

³⁰ Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage,” 13.

individual marriages.³¹ The war created skewed sex ratios of white women to white men and produced what Randall Kennedy termed “a brief flurry of mixed marriages between white women and black men.”³² According to Joel Williamson, white communities condoned these pairings as economic necessities in the war-weary South.³³ John Blassingame found these marriages so common that in post-war New Orleans, “white females competed openly with Negro women for the sexual attentions of black males.”³⁴ This openness extended to the North’s statute books as well. By 1887, Indiana was the only Northern state east of the Mississippi that had not repealed its interracial marriage bans.³⁵ This tenuous openness, however, lasted only a short time.

It did not last because amalgamation and interracial marriage became the means with which to perpetuate white domination after emancipation. Finding the existing terminology inadequate, Democratic journalists posing as Republicans in 1863 created a new term—the more scientific-sounding “miscegenation,” derived from *miscere* (mix) and *genus* (race)—for interracial liaisons and wrote a pamphlet alleging that interracial sex and marriage were part of the Republican platform and a central goal of the war. The hoax fooled a few abolitionists into endorsing the pamphlet and the new term became a major campaign issue. The term rooted itself into America’s racial lexicon and became, according to Peggy Pascoe, the “rhetorical means of channeling the belief that interracial

³¹ Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law—An American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 69-93; Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40.

³² Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 19.

³³ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 89.

³⁴ John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 203.

³⁵ Weierman, *One Blood*, 140.

marriage was unnatural into the foundation of post-Civil War white supremacy.”³⁶

Despite the actual meaning of the term’s Latin prefix, it has a negative connotation which “suggests that sexual contact between blacks and whites is an abomination that sullied ostensibly pure gene pools and endangers the body politic,” according to Michele Mitchell.³⁷

The Civil War also marked a turning point because of the nature of freedom for ex-slaves. Before emancipation, white males were incentivized to procreate with their female slaves, but afterwards such acts “threatened an emerging biracial order.”³⁸ After emancipation, categories of slave and free no longer served to demarcate the races and racial ambiguity became problematic for whites bent on imposing racial castes. Free black populations had always existed, but their rarity made them an abnormality too small to threaten the status quo. Without slavery, the products of interracial unions—children with an indefinite racial status—could not easily be classified and a clear delineation between the races disappeared. The existence of mulattos, octoroons, and quadroons—prized on the auction block during slavery—only served as a threat to white supremacy after emancipation for their ambiguous status jeopardized an imagined racial purity. Legal interracial unions and legitimate heirs to white wealth further stretched the bounds of white supremacy as it allowed social mobility for what was intended to be a permanent underclass.

³⁶ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 2.

³⁷ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), xxi.

³⁸ Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage,” 4.

Sexual relations between white women and African American men were highly discouraged and disapproved of before emancipation, but afterwards, according to Martha Hodes, “the majority of the white South became enraged about this particular category of illicit sex” and “explicitly conflated black men’s alleged sexual misconduct toward white women with the exercise of their newly won political rights.” What had been grudgingly tolerated before became the most hated crime. With “newfound urgency,” whites sought to regain their dominion over the political, economic, social, and sexual lives of African Americans.³⁹ Raising fears of predatory African American men and the “threat” of amalgamation became effective tools for post-emancipation oppression.

Ethnology too became “ever more urgent” after emancipation as African American males were granted the same rights as white men.⁴⁰ As white Southerners regained power after Reconstruction’s demise, their self-serving ethnology—reenergized with the language of the emerging natural and social sciences—cast African Americans as bestial and inferior beings. African Americans males were depicted as sexual predators with uncontrollable lusts for white women and incapable of maintaining respectable marriages. Their supposed desire for white women meant they were a threat to white men and imperiled “virtuous” white women. Their supposed inability to fulfill the obligations of marriage, as a symbol for the “norms, customs, and legal codes of a liberal society,” meant they were unfit for freedom as they were “devoid of private and thus public

³⁹ Martha Hodes, *White Women Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 6, 147.

⁴⁰ Nancy Stepan, “Biological Degeneration: Races and Proper Places,” in J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Degeneration*, 101.

‘virtue.’”⁴¹ Likewise, African American women were portrayed as sexually depraved and immoral creatures—a depiction that allowed some white males to rationalize their rape. This mentality was crystallized in the Memphis Riots (1866) in which at least five African American women were raped and forty-eight African Americans were killed.⁴² Mary Renda termed this a “cultural vehicle” to condone white-on-black rape.⁴³ Thus, African Americans were increasingly disenfranchised, segregated, and terrorized because of a narrative that allowed white supremacists to justify violence and other repressive measures.

White supremacists feared the consequences of extending civil and social rights to African Americans, namely the dissolution of a binary, racial power structure. Amalgamation, as the epitome of such a breakdown, became inextricably linked with the extension of rights. Allow equal rights, many whites declared, and African American men would soon seek white wives. Not satisfied with only arguing that such racial blending would be harmful, many contended that African Americans and their white allies had an amalgamation agenda. President Andrew Johnson warned that “of all the dangers which our nation has yet encountered, none [were] equal” to the forces seeking to “Africanize” the South.⁴⁴ Echoing this, Francis P. Blair Jr., the 1868 Democratic Vice Presidential candidate, alleged that Republican rule would cause “racial intermixing [that] would reverse evolution, [and] produce a less advanced species incapable of

⁴¹ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 7.

⁴² Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 62.

⁴³ Mary A. Renda, *In Talking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 15. See also Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 179-222.

⁴⁴ Andrew Johnson quoted in Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1867* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 87.

reproducing itself.”⁴⁵ To some, banning interracial marriage, therefore seemed a necessary measure to protect (the white) public’s health.

Meanwhile, many African Americans remained cautious on the subject of interracial marriage. Newly freed slaves demanded the right to marry legally, but not the legalization of interracial marriage. African American delegates to post-war “colored men” conventions between 1865 and 1868 avoided raising the sensitive issue as urging for the repeal of interracial marriage bans could endanger alliances with white Republicans and threaten their attainment of other rights. When put to a vote, however, African American representatives and delegates overwhelmingly voted to legalize interracial marriage for it removed a prejudicial prohibition, provided a path for African American women to hold white men responsible for their offspring, and allowed inheritance rights.⁴⁶ When new interracial marriage bans were debated, “some tried to defuse the issue by insisting they and their brethren had so little interest in marrying White women that they had no objection to passage of the laws,” according to Pascoe.⁴⁷ They maintained, however, that white males were primarily responsible for amalgamation.⁴⁸

As with the abolitionists before them, who reversed the charges and accused their opponents of being the true amalgamationists, African American politicians attempted to change the topic from interracial marriage—as it “raised public fears of predatory Black

⁴⁵ Francis P. Blair quoted in Weierman, *One Blood*, 160.

⁴⁶ Rosen argues this was a particular area of concern to white Southerners as it allowed social mobility for the offspring of interracial marriage. What some objected to was not interracial procreation, but legitimacy for interracial relations. See Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 133-178.

⁴⁷ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 32.

⁴⁸ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 164-6.

men”—to interracial sex—as it “raised suspicions of predatory White men.”⁴⁹ For example, William H. Grey, an African American delegate to Arkansas’s Constitutional Convention, lobbied for an amendment to be added to the proposed interracial marriage ban that held “if any white man shall be found cohabiting with a negro woman, the penalty shall be death.”⁵⁰ No such provision resulted as the convention only issued a recommendation that amalgamation, in or outside of marriage, be banned.⁵¹ Yet, “by daring White men to marry rather than just consort with Black women,” African American representatives sought “to brand White men with the moral stigma of illicit sex” and thereby elevate their moral stature in comparison.⁵²

Nevertheless, as in the antebellum era, supporters of equal rights were derided as covert amalgamationists. Unsatisfied with the strength of the state prohibitions, or at least exploiting fears of amalgamation, opponents of African Americans’ rights charged that the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 would overturn state prohibitions on interracial marriage. As African American delegates had during Arkansas’ Constitutional Convention, supporters tried to combat this by denouncing their opponents for the hypocrisy of condemning amalgamation while tolerating the unchecked sexual aggression of white males. Congressman Joseph Rainey, the first African American to serve in the House of Representatives, asserted that:

If the future may be judged from the result of the past, it will require much effort upon the part of the colored race to preserve the purity of their own households from the intrusions of those who have hitherto violated and are now violating with

⁴⁹ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 32.

⁵⁰ Grey quoted in John G. Price, ed., *Debates and Proceedings of the Convention...to Form a Constitution for the State of Arkansas* (Little Rock: J.G. rice, 1868), 363.

⁵¹ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 149, 164.

⁵² Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 32.

ruthless impunity those precious and inestimable rights which should be the undisturbed heritage of all good society.⁵³

Thus, Rainey rhetorically reversed the charges as to who the true interracial aggressors were. Nevertheless, white-on-black rape continued unabated and a narrative of predatory African American men arose.⁵⁴

With the end of Reconstruction and the ascendancy of Redeemer Democrats, however, the tenuous openness for interracial marriage ended and the “threat” of amalgamation became firmly linked to African American political rights. Alabama (1877), South Carolina (1879), Mississippi (1880) passed intermarriage bans, while Georgia (1868), Tennessee (1873), Delaware (1874), Arkansas (1876), North Carolina (1876), Texas (1879), Maryland (1884), Florida (1885), and Kentucky (1893) enhanced their existing prohibitions or enshrined bans into their constitutions. New or reinforced bans, white supremacy, the threat of and actual violence, and segregation diminished instances of interracial intimacy. As a result, interracial marriage reached an all-time low by the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ “Extreme racism” and “Negrophobia” became the norm and interracial marriage became unthinkable throughout most of the nation.⁵⁶

Black Nationalism

In 1883, a white Maryland physician, E. W. Gilliam, predicted how African Americans would respond to such treatment. He argued that although African Americans were inferior to whites, they were “an improving race.” As such, individual African

⁵³ Joseph Rainey quoted in Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*, 253.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 214.

⁵⁵ Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage,” 4.

⁵⁶ Frederickson, *The Black Image*, 221.

Americans, he contended, would advance to the verge of equality, but would be turned away by whites for fear of amalgamation. Rejected thusly, African Americans, he expected, would cultivate race solidarity and develop collective strategies to attain equal rights. Such pursuits, however, would unavoidably result in a race war unless African Americans were suppressed and disenfranchised. Their “advancement,” Gilliam concluded, “becomes a menace to the whites. No two free races, remaining distinctly apart, can advance side by side, without a struggle for supremacy.”⁵⁷ Gilliam’s forecast was undermined by the fact that the trends of which he spoke were already underway. To combat white supremacy, many African Americans had already turned to cultivating race solidarity and strategies for collective uplift.

To do this, African Americans turned to black nationalism—the idea that “blacks should organize themselves on the basis of their common experience of oppression as a result of their blackness, culture, and African heritage.”⁵⁸ Black nationalism began as a response to slavery as the shared oppression offered grounds for union. It first manifested itself in reversals of the racial hierarchies created by white ethnologists and desires to emigrate or build separate institutions. Before black nationalism arose, however, African Americans largely sought to illustrate their common origins and equality with whites. Faced with continued white discrimination and violence, however, many African Americans came to believe whites would never accept them on terms of equality. Black nationalism and separatist solutions therefore arose as viable alternatives to integration.

⁵⁷ E.W. Gilliam, “The African in the United States,” *Popular Science Monthly*, XXII (February, 1883), 438-440; “The African Problem,” *North American Review*, CXXXIX (October, 1884), 417-430.

⁵⁸ Raymond Hall, *Black Separatism in the United States* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1978), 1.

Pursuing assimilation and integration, however, began as a drive to reject notions of the inferiority of those of African descent and contentions that they were a foreign element in the U.S. In response to the advent of the American Colonization Society, which sought to “return” free African Americans to Africa, African Americans in the 1830s began emphasizing their unity with whites in the form of a doctrine of universal brotherhood. Thus, “the central tenet of nineteenth-century black ethnology,” according to Mia Bay, was that “God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, environmental explanations for racial difference were orthodoxy among African American thinkers and the “vast majority” of African Americans supported this position.⁶⁰ Therefore, many believed amalgamation and the environment would eventually produce a homogenous race in the U.S. and end discrimination.

African American works of ethnology asserted these environmental explanations and maintained a shared humanity across races. For example, the first African American to earn a medical degree and the author of the preface to Douglass’s second autobiography, James McCune Smith, argued in the 1840s that climate and environment distinguished races and governed physical and intellectual development. He rejected the idea of the innate superiority of any race, holding that racial difference would disappear as the environment of North America was causing all inhabitants to “rapidly [assume] the

⁵⁹ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2000), 65.

⁶⁰ Bay, *The White Image*, 81.

physical type of the Aboriginal inhabitants of this continent.”⁶¹ The effects of environment, combined with amalgamation, would soon result in a homogenous society in Smith’s estimation.

Douglass entered the ethnological fray with “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” (1854) and asserted “the common brotherhood of man.”⁶² Echoing Smith, Douglass held that climate and environment—not separate origins—explained physical differences between the races. He affirmed the idea of biologically distinct races, but, holding to a doctrine of universal human brotherhood, thought that little followed from such an admission.⁶³ He held the white ethnological view of separate origins for the races to be false, contrary to biblical explanations, a distraction to malign those of African descent, and an attempt to justify separate moral imperatives. Instead, he advocated the idea of one human creation. Douglass’s support for this reflected ideals from the Enlightenment and as such he derived support from several white ethnologists.⁶⁴

Thus, to Douglass, Smith, and other adherents, eventual acceptance into American society seemed inevitable as the environment alone would eventually remove all racial distinctions in the U.S. In the interregnum, however, slavery and discrimination connoted

⁶¹ James McCune Smith, “Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances,” in J.L. Stauffer, ed., *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 256.

⁶² Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches*, 287.

⁶³ Ibid., 296. He believed “human rights stand upon a common basis; and by all the reason that they are supported, maintained and defended, for one variety of the human family, they are supported, maintained and defended for *all* the human family.”

⁶⁴ One such ethnologist, Reverend Dr. Samuel Smith, while not a racial egalitarian, provided a vigorous defense of a common origin and environmentalism in his *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787). Douglass also found support for environmentalist explanations in James C. Prichard’s *Natural History of Man* (1843), John Bachman’s *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Human Race Examined on the Principles of Science* (1850) and R. G. Latham’s *Man and His Migrations* (1851).

a badge of inferiority and created inequality. Once the low circumstances in which most African Americans subsisted were overcome, environmentalists believed color prejudice would cease. John Rock, one of the first African Americans to earn a medical degree, held that color prejudice would disappear “when the avenues of wealth” were opened to all.⁶⁵ Douglass argued similarly—“with a hundred thousand dollars...I could make a black man very white.”⁶⁶ Reformers therefore sought racial uplift to contradict white accusations of inferiority.

By the 1850s, however, the future for African Americans in the U.S. appeared bleak and emigration seemed a desirable alternative to a growing faction. The Fugitive Slave Law (1850) imperiled all African Americans, even freeborn ones residing in the North as they could be mistaken for slaves. Thus Wilson Moses argued that “1850 was a crucial point in the development of American black nationalism; it was a point at which many black Americans despaired of ever finding a place within American society and culture and turned to various emigration schemes.”⁶⁷ Even Douglass began to despair for African Americans’ futures and briefly flirted with emigration in 1860.⁶⁸

African American ethnology reflected this emerging black nationalism and sought to simultaneously maintain equality among the races while allowing for the possibility of difference between them. Hosea Easton was one such African American ethnologist who epitomized these simultaneous notions of equality and difference. His 1837 treatise on

⁶⁵ John Rock, *Liberator*, March 12, 1858.

⁶⁶ Douglass, *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, July 22, 1853.

⁶⁷ Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 9.

⁶⁸ Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 74.

the subject railed against the concept of separate races and deemed all differences in complexion or hair texture to be “casual or accidental.”⁶⁹ Yet, he also presented blacks and whites as possessing separate temperaments, pasts, and destinies. Easton held that whites were descended “from a savage race of men” while those of African descent were a sort of “redeemer race” that would rise to greatness once “all that slavery has taken away from them has been restored.”⁷⁰ In Easton’s account, like many subsequent African American works of ethnology, “the gentle virtues of black people stood in marked contrast to the aggressive and domineering spirit of the white race.”⁷¹

Henry Highland Garnet eventually followed Easton’s lead, but he initially dismissed even the existence of distinct races. In the 1840s he held that “there was but one race, as there was but one Adam” and considered intermixing rampant to the point where it was impossible to “draw the line between the Negro and the Anglo-Saxon.”⁷² Nevertheless, as the battle over slavery intensified, he came to believe in a special destiny for those of African descent. In 1858, he created the African Civilization Society to encourage migration to Africa. Thus, as the possibility for their full inclusion in the U.S. appeared bleak, an ethnology arose amongst some African Americans that maintained the equality of those of African descent, but racial differences nonetheless. Increasingly, some began to suggest a hierarchical dimension to the differences that reversed the order of white ethnology’s racial hierarchies.

⁶⁹ Hosea Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the United States; and the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them: with a Sermon on the Duty of the Church To Them* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 5.

⁷⁰ Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character*, 52.

⁷¹ Bay, *The White Image*, 50.

⁷² Henry Highland Garnet, *The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny of the Colored Race: A Discourse Delivered on the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Female Benevolent Society of Troy, New York* (Troy, N.Y.: Steam Press of J.C. Kneeland and Co., 1848), 6, 26.

Considered the father of black nationalism, Martin Delany, went further than all prior African American ethnologists and pronounced in 1854: “we are a *superior race*.” He argued for a common origin of the races, but held that the environment had created physical and mental differences to the point where the two races were incompatible. He believed the superiority of those of African descent should be acknowledged and their race’s talents developed “in their purity.”⁷³ He therefore took great pride in his purely African heritage and opposed amalgamation, as it would dilute the race. Delany’s contentions prompted Douglass to accuse Delany of going to the “same length in favor of blacks, as the whites have in favor of the doctrine of white superiority. He stands up so straight that he leans back a little.”⁷⁴

The Civil War, however, changed everything as it offered the possibility of full rights. Douglass’s momentary flirtation with emigration ceased completely and even committed emigrationists like Delany and Garnet, redirected their efforts to domestic matters. Both Delany and Garnet recruited African American troops and Delany served as a major and as an agent of the Freedman’s Bureau after the war.⁷⁵ African American thinkers predicted that their service to the Union would vindicate their race and they would achieve full acceptance. The black nationalism that had begun in the 1850s languished during Reconstruction and its adherents instead committed “to effecting compromises whereby whites and blacks could live together peaceably but with dignity

⁷³ Martin R. Delany, “Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent, 1854,” in Robert S. Levine, ed., *Martin Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 15, 251.

⁷⁴ Douglass quoted in Leonard T. Sweet, *Black Images of America, 1784-1870* (New York: Norton, 1976), 114; He added: “I thank God for making me a man simply; but Delany always thanks him for making him a *black man*.” Douglass quoted in Bay, *The White Image*, 66.

⁷⁵ Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 299; Moses, *Golden Age*, 88.

for both.”⁷⁶ The period was one of “cautious optimism” among African Americans where progress, integration, and assimilation seemed possible, according to Mitchell.⁷⁷

Yet, in the period to follow, “the fortunes of black women, children, and men became decidedly less certain” as their status “was in constant flux” and seemingly for the worse.⁷⁸ Although Black Codes, which limited the civil rights and liberties of African Americans, were passed almost immediately in some Southern states, Reconstruction ensured a degree of freedom. When Reconstruction perished, so did much of the economic gain and social progress African Americans had made after the war. So too did the belief that economic progress would curtail discrimination. Self-improvement doctrines had been heralded as the means to challenge white prejudice. By the end of Reconstruction, however, the idea that economic self-improvement would combat prejudice, according to Bay, “appeared increasingly unfounded as black people continued to be the subject of intense color prejudice despite the emergence of a class of propertied blacks.”⁷⁹

By the late 1870s, “the spirit of exodus was again asserting itself” and emigration rose in popularity.⁸⁰ Steven Hahn holds that this emigrationist sentiment began in the first decade after emancipation, but did not peak until 1879 and 1880. It was strongest in “areas with large and numerically dominant black populations that had experienced political gains during Reconstruction, but that also saw explosions of paramilitary violence and then concerted attacks on black rights and protections once Redemption was

⁷⁶ Moses, *Golden Age*, 89.

⁷⁷ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 7.

⁷⁸ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 7.

⁷⁹ Bay, *The White Image*, 82.

⁸⁰ Moses, *Golden Age*, 89.

achieved.”⁸¹ In other words, emigration and separatist doctrines primarily gained currency in the rural South where initial optimism was resoundingly crushed. Select areas, like Washington D.C., which created an emerging African American middle and upper class because of federal employment, remained somewhat immune to the increasingly repressive and violent environment. The masses’ growing distrust in America’s promise, however, is exemplified in the Black Exodus, in which, starting in 1879, tens of thousands of African Americans migrated from the South to Kansas. Emigration to Liberia experienced a boom as well. Hahn argues this emigration was a grass roots movement that indicates a sense of “incipient popular nationalism” among the African American poor. Not only was it a drive for protection from dire economic circumstances and fear of paramilitary violence, but also “the articulation of a deep sense of identity...and of a desire for social separatism.”⁸²

Much of this was prompted by the constant threat of violence from white vigilantes. The period was “one of the most violent eras in U.S. history,” as white Southerners tried to reverse African Americans’ newly gained political rights.⁸³ Common targets were those African Americans who most visibly represented the changes brought about by emancipation and the white South’s defeat in the war—Union soldiers, teachers, preachers, and those in economic competition with whites. With the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) came additional targets: Republican leaders, Union League members, African American voters, and their families. As the violence was both

⁸¹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 331.

⁸² Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 333.

⁸³ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 129.

indiscriminate and targeted, even those not directly affected faced constant fear of it. As federal troops left the South throughout Reconstruction, the limited protection they had provided ceased. In response, black nationalism reemerged.⁸⁴

This arising black nationalism, however, was far from simply a response to oppression and a desire to uplift people of African descent. Religious and secular forms of racial pride were involved as well. The religious form, commonly referred to as Ethiopianism, derived from Psalms 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” Thus, Ethiopianism held that divine providence ordained the rise of Africa to dominance on the world stage. The more secular iteration reversed racial hierarchies and repurposed racial characteristics created by white ethnologists.⁸⁵

Delany, using both religious and secular versions of black nationalism, issued a clear statement on his belief in permanent differences between the races in his *Principia of Ethnology* (1879). He maintained common origins, but argued color variation reflected character differences that could not be altered by race mixing. The African race, he argued, was endowed with “inherent faculties, designed by the Creator as essential to the divine plan for civilization.” Amalgamation would therefore dilute the African race and deprive them of “a higher and holier mission” ordained by God.⁸⁶ While not as pronounced as Delany, Alexander Crummell believed in the “destined superiority of the

⁸⁴ Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 181.

⁸⁵ Moses, *Golden Age*, 25.

⁸⁶ Martin Delany, *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of the Races and Color with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian and Egyptian Civilization from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry* (Philadelphia: Harper & Brother, Publishers, 1879), 100, 89.

Negro.”⁸⁷ He held the Anglo-Saxon race, in contrast to the “gentle” virtues of the African race, to be “excessively aggressive.”⁸⁸ Thus, postbellum African American ethnology maintained the original unity of humanity as they had in the antebellum era, but in the face of increasing degradation from whites, many revisited the question David Walker first asked in 1829: were whites “as good as ourselves?”⁸⁹ With this question unsettled in the minds of many African Americans, some looked upon interracial marriage with suspicion and emigration grew in popularity.

As black nationalism and separatist schemes gained momentum, African American integrationists were losing further ground to Jim Crow. In October of 1883, in the largest blow yet to African American progress, the Supreme Court “effectively dismantled what Douglass, and other black integrationists, had worked for since the end of the war” by overturning the Civil Rights Act of 1875.⁹⁰ Adding insult to injury, voter intimidation ensured Congress lacked African American members that year. Lynching, mass slaughters of African Americans, and the Ku Klux Klan added further terror.⁹¹ With the Compromise of 1877 and the erosion of civil rights to follow, confidence waned among some African Americans about their future in the U.S. Thus, integrationist hopes transformed into separatist plans for both protection and race pride. Interracial

⁸⁷ Alexander Crummell, “Destined Superiority of the Negro: A Thanksgiving Day Discourse, 1877” in *Destiny and Race: Selected Writings*, ed. Wilson Moses (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 198.

⁸⁸ Bay citing Crummell, *The White Image*, 100.

⁸⁹ David Walker, “*One Continual Cry*,” 72.

⁹⁰ John Muller, *Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.: The Lion of Anacostia* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 134.

⁹¹ For example: the Opelousas massacre in Louisiana (1868), the Colfax Massacre in Louisiana (1873), Coushatta massacre in Louisiana (1874), the Clinton Massacre in Mississippi (1875), Race riots in South Carolina (1876), the Carrolton Massacre in Mississippi (1886), and the Thibodaux massacre in Louisiana (1887).

intimacies—as they risked retaliation, confirmed stereotypes of “lustful” African American men, and impinged race solidarity—seemed both impolitic and improper to a growing contingent.

African American Views on Amalgamation

White opposition to interracial marriage between Reconstruction and the turn of the century has been well documented. African American views on the matter, however, are less known. Pre-and post-war evidence for African American views on interracial marriage is “lamentably limited” according to Kennedy.⁹² Before emancipation, it paled in comparison to the more pressing issue—abolishing slavery. After emancipation, few considered it an issue worth supporting as it might trigger a white backlash that would impinge more pressing needs—such as political rights, economic opportunity, and education. Furthermore, fighting the laws could also play into accusations that African Americans desired to marry whites. With the rise of lynching, often fictitiously justified as necessary for the protection of white women against “lecherous” African American men, raising the issue could even imperil lives. Interracial marriage’s low priority and its avoidance among African Americans to limit white backlash, however, obscures their views on it. Paul Spickard holds that until recently, interracial marriages have met with consistent responses: “near-hysterical disapproval from the majority of White people and a grudging acquiescence from Black people.”⁹³

⁹² Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*, 247.

⁹³ Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 283.

Kennedy unpacks this “grudging acquiescence” further by grouping African American views on interracial marriage into three categories, which he contends transverse the post-emancipation period to the end of the Civil Rights Era. One group considered amalgamation a positive good as it inhibits segregation, fostered open-mindedness, built white allies, elevated African Americans’ status, and empowered African American women. An agnostic camp, which Kennedy considers the majority opinion, deemed amalgamation neither a good nor an evil, but simply a private choice. This stance allowed African Americans to oppose interracial marriage bans, while denying a personal aspiration to marry interracially. Kennedy especially considers this to be the case for the latter reason as such a stance helps to refute “the not infrequent assumption among whites” that African Americans “would like nothing better than to be intimate with whites.” The third camp condemns interracial marriage on the grounds of race loyalty, believing it “implies disapproval of fellow blacks; impedes the perpetuation of black culture; weakens the African American marriage market; and fuels racist mythologies.”⁹⁴ Yet they also find infringements on the right to interracial marriage discriminatory because it brands African Americans as an inferior caste from which whites should be protected. The idea of this third camp, according to Kennedy, has been “the principal basis of black opposition over the years.”⁹⁵ A related objection centers on the charge that African American men fetishize light-skin and thus interracial marriage, and even intra-racial marriage with light-skinned African American women, weakens the position of dark-skinned African American women on the marriage market.

⁹⁴ Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*, 109, 110.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

The history of forced amalgamation under slavery created additional distaste for amalgamation, especially among the children of such forced couplings, according to Jacqueline Moore.⁹⁶ The continued abuse of African American women by whites after emancipation further alienated many from interracial marriage and encouraged desires for emigration. Some cited as specific motivations for emigration the sexual exploitation of African American women. A correspondent to the American Colonization Society, James Dubose complained in 1891 that African American men were powerless to protect their wives and daughters; “Why,” he queried, should “the collord people...stay in the South[?]...Can we Raise our Doughters hear with no law to pretec them[?]”⁹⁷ Thus, under the surface of emigration and other race solidarity schemes were often efforts to protect the integrity of African American families and women against forced or illicit amalgamation.

As African American activists increasingly turned to reform efforts to improve the moral, mental, and physical condition of their race, interracial unions became their targets as such associations not only challenged race solidarity, but also had important consequences for dynamics within the African American community. According to Mitchell, “post-emancipation black activists [were] concerned that concubinage and miscegenation were among the legacies of slavery that compromised the race’s moral progress.”⁹⁸ As many states banned interracial marriage, romances across the color line were forced to be illicit and therefore sinful in the eyes of moral reformers. Thus, legal

⁹⁶ Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation’s Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 190.

⁹⁷ James Duboise to William Coppinger, February 12, 1891, *The American Colonization Society Papers*, quoted in Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 43.

⁹⁸ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 11.

prohibitions could create additional objections to such unions as they had to remain outside of wedlock.

Amalgamation represented a further challenge to building race pride as it spawned divisions between light- and dark-skinned African Americans. Some feared that light-skinned African Americans would seek to escape the rising discrimination by separating themselves from dark-skinned African Americans. Speculation about the proportion of African Americans who possessed white blood grew as their continued loyalty was questioned. The 1890 Census—which also attempted to parse for the first and last time between mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons—classified nearly fifteen percent of African Americans as mixed, but many other approximations were offered. Charles Chesnutt held that over half were “of mixed blood,” journalist T. Thomas Fortune contended thirty percent, and novelist Pauline Hopkins held that “no such thing as an unmixed black on the American continent” remained.⁹⁹ Further amalgamation would only add to this population and consequently create more intra-racial divisions.

Despite these reasons to oppose interracial marriage, African Americans vigorously fought states’ efforts to legally ban it. They could disapprove of interracial marriage, but oppose its prohibition on principle because it curtailed personal rights and legitimized an illiberal distinction, thereby enshrining inequality. Further still, banning such marriages denied African American women a measure of protection. Regardless of a state’s position on the legality of interracial marriage, African American men were

⁹⁹ Charles Chesnutt, “What is a White Man,” May 30, 1889, in William L. Andrews, ed., *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 459; Thomas Fortune quoted in Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 212; Pauline E. Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston: The Colored Co-operative Publishing Co, 1900), 151.
http://books.google.com/books?id=HupWTh9C_EEC&q=unmixed#v=onepage&q&f=false

largely prevented by the threat of lynching from interracial relationships. The bans, therefore, only served to ensure that interracial relationships between white males and African American females remained illegitimate and therefore outside of inheritance rights for themselves or their offspring. Most contended the bans “had no intention of protecting black women” as only marriage, not sexual relationships were targeted. Rather than “restricting the desires of black men,” the bans “actually maintained the sexual exploitation of black women by white men.”¹⁰⁰ The bans were therefore largely condemned and opposed, but such unions—in or out of wedlock—were discouraged for a multiplicity of reasons.

Conclusion

Over the course of the nineteenth century, society’s toleration for interracial marriage fluctuated. White views, backed by racial science, generally saw it as a threat to their dominance, yet often overlooked amalgamation’s products when they were the results of white males and African American females outside of wedlock. Given this history of exploitation and the growing sense that only race solidarity would assist them, many African Americans had tremendous reservations about interracial marriage. As white supremacy increased, some African Americans turned to black nationalism to mitigate discrimination, to which interracial marriage did not conform.

Douglass, however, could not abide the ascendancy of white supremacy or black nationalism. Against the charges of white ethnologists and supporters of discrimination, Douglass sought racial vindication, not race pride. Holding to older, Enlightenment views

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 216, 215.

on the commonality of humanity, Douglass saw the hypocrisy in whites' rejection of interracial marriage, but continuing acts of amalgamation. To advocates for African American black nationalism, he saw "no benefit to be derived from" it and thought it instead a "positive evil" and a "false foundation" as it was of the very same nature of that which African Americans were fighting against—"an assumption of superiority upon the ground of race and color."¹⁰¹ It was the same "wolfish idea," to Douglass, "that elbows us off the sidewalk and denies us the rights of citizenship."¹⁰² As will be seen, he was not alone in this objection to separatist doctrines and his support for interracial marriage.

¹⁰¹ Douglass, "The Nation's Problem," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 730.

¹⁰² "African Civilization Society," *Frederic Douglass's Paper*, January 14, 1859, 2.

CHAPTER 2: AMALGAMATING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

“There is but one destiny, it seems to me, left for us, and that is to make ourselves and be made by others a part of the American people in every sense of the word. Assimilation and not isolation is our true policy and our national destiny. Unification for us is life: separation is death.” —Frederick Douglass, 1883¹

In the 1880s, Frederick Douglass was deeply troubled about a problem of “universal and palpable concern” that had become the focus of science, philosophy, and history. Not even in the battle over slavery had he seen “a fiercer and more serious discussion.” Worse yet, opposition stemmed not only from “open foes,” but also under “the guise of sympathy and friendship.” Known as the “Negro problem,” Douglass rejected such terminology as “a misnomer,” holding instead that the Reconstruction Amendments had “settled forever” the debate over African Americans’ future.² His contemporaries, however, would not comply with his wishful thinking. In the racially charged post-Reconstruction period, the “Negro problem” persisted and race remained a divisive category.

Predicated upon the idea that whites and blacks could never coexist in equality, the “Negro problem” endured. Yet, to Douglass, the issue was decidedly “an American problem and not a Negro problem.” As constituent members of the “body politic,” Douglass considered African Americans’ place and future beyond debate. Even discussing the “Negro problem,” Douglass believed, proved harmful as it gave credence to the notion that African Americans were inferior or foreign elements instead of full

¹ Frederick Douglass, “The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free, April 16, 1883,” in Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 668.

² Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem, speech delivered before the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, Washington D.C., April 16, 1889,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches*, 726, 728, 727.

members of the nation. For Douglass, “the real question, the all-commanding question, [was] whether American justice, American liberty, American civilization, American law, and American Christianity [could] be made to include and protect alike and forever all American citizens in the rights which...have been guaranteed to them.”³ Nevertheless, discussion of the “Negro problem” continued, much to Douglass’s consternation.

Three outcomes were typically suggested as possible resolutions to the “Negro Problem” after Reconstruction: extinction, emigration, or assimilation. Even before emancipation, nineteenth century race science held the extinction of the African American population to be a distinct possibility. Douglass believed this to be the fate of American Indians, but clung to the results of the 1880 Census to dismiss this possibility for African Americans as their numbers were increasing, not shrinking.⁴ Emigration, initiated by whites before emancipation, had recently become a popular idea amongst many African Americans. Like extinction, however, Douglass dismissed this as both impractical and unjust.⁵ Instead, Douglass believed assimilation, and by extension amalgamation, to be the destiny of African Americans.

Not only did he think assimilation and eventual amalgamation natural and inevitable, both were also the only complete solutions to racism in his estimation.

³ Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 729, 727, 728.

⁴ Douglass believed American Indians would die-off because they refused to assimilate; “The Indian wraps himself in gloom, and proudly glories in isolation—he retreats before the onward march of civilization... and dies of a broken heart.” In contrast, Douglass believed African Americans had shown their ability and desire to assimilate; “Work him, whip him, sell him, torment him, and he still lives, and clings to American civilization.” Douglass, “The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States, speech delivered before the Emancipation League in Tremont Temple, Boston, February 5, 1862,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 485.

⁵ Douglass, “The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 668.

Complete, because the union of whites and blacks would create a third race—a uniquely American race—and remove racial distinctiveness and thereby prejudice. To accomplish this, Douglass maintained that all rights should be extended to African Americans, as they were American by both culture and birthright; “the American Negro is American. His bones, his muscles, his sinews, are all American.”⁶ They must therefore be treated as and act like the full members he considered them to be. Moreover, Douglass believed, the U.S. would benefit from the full inclusion of all of its members as he held great nations to be a product of the comingling of numerous cultures and lineages. Douglass therefore pushed for the assimilation and integration of African Americans into American society and opposed the rise of both Jim Crow and black nationalism.

Hesitant to feed the charges that proponents of equal rights desired amalgamation, however, Douglass was far more circumspect in his expressions of support for this contentious issue. He supported amalgamation because he believed it to be a natural outgrowth of equality and that it would benefit the nation. Yet, his opponents on both sides of the color line increasingly believed such mixture, social or biological, would weaken them.

Douglass’s views remained relatively constant throughout his long career, but his emphasis reflected society’s changing views on race. Thus his assessments and prescriptions both mirrored and were responses to works of ethnology and appeals for race pride that evolved as the U.S. moved from slavery to freedom to Jim Crow segregation. Beholden to Enlightenment explanations for the differences between the

⁶ Douglass, “Why the Negro is Lynched, 1894,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 768.

racism, one predicated on environmental causes, Douglass remained opposed to the increasingly prevalent racial chauvinism among whites and African Americans alike. He consistently countered these notions of racial difference by advocating for the doctrine of universal human brotherhood and by calling for assimilation and integration.

Douglass's interracial marriage, therefore, aligned with his philosophical position. He considered marrying a woman he had long known and with whom he had much in common only natural. Personally, Helen's skin color was of no consequence to Douglass. Politically, however, he knew the ramifications he would face for his personal choice. He therefore took pains to downplay the attention the marriage received and denied its unpopularity and its long-term effects on his public stature. Although by the 1880s, his views stood against the trends of the times, he was not without allies who believed similarly.

A Composite Nationality

Douglass feared the growing race pride from both whites and African Americans would imperil the nation by impeding assimilation. Discussions of the "Negro problem" amongst whites, for Douglass, implied that they believed African Americans were "diseased" and "abnormal."⁷ To combat this, Douglass contended that African Americans and whites must integrate in order to align the interests of the races. African Americans, he maintained, "should distribute ourselves among the people, build our houses, where if they take fire other houses will be in danger. Common dangers will create common

⁷ Douglass, "The Nation's Problem," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 727.

safeguards.”⁸ Only through uniting interests, would white Americans remember their duties to and commonalities with African Americans. Only by ensuring “that the destiny of the colored man is bound up with that of the white people of this country,” would African American interests “be subserved by a generous care for the interests of the Nation at large.”⁹

Racial pride in the form of white supremacy was dangerous in Douglass’s estimation, but so too was it amongst African Americans. He believed African Americans’ own racial vanity to be counterproductive (as he held all such racial vanity to be), detrimental to interracial alliances, and ineffective, as it would do little to thwart the advancement of white supremacy. Indeed, denying the interrelatedness of all Americans, he feared, would only further arm white supremacists’ arguments. Preserving racial distinctiveness, by self-segregating and building separate institutions, Douglass maintained, only furthered the belief that African Americans and whites could never coexist, thereby preserving racial prejudice.¹⁰

Not only did he believe self-segregation harmful, but its isolation also hindered African American advancement. African Americans, he held, could not “afford to draw the color line in politics, trade, education, manners, religion, or civilization” as their

⁸ Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 732. This had long been Douglass’s policy. In 1869 he declared: “Our salvation, the salvation of every race in this country, is in becoming an integral part of the American government, becoming incorporated into the American body politic, incorporated into society, having common aims, common objects, and common instrumentalities with which to work with you, side by side.” Douglass, “Let the Negro Alone: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1869,” in John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 206.

⁹ Douglass, “The Destiny of Colored Americans,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 148; Douglass, “The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 668.

¹⁰ Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 732.

tenuous and rapidly evaporating rights were too weak a foundation from which to form separate organizations. Deprived through slavery of educational and cultural opportunities, further isolation would only perpetuate the “manners, morals, and customs peculiar to our condition and to our antecedents as an oppressed people.” Thus, Douglass believed in complete equality between the races, but equality at this juncture was only *potential* and not *actual*. African Americans possessed complete potential for equality with whites, he was careful to maintain, but they would not achieve actual equality without exposure to “those whose advantages have been superior to ours.”¹¹ If denied such contact by whites or through self-segregation, African Americans would only propagate white prejudice and deprive themselves of the opportunity for cultural uplift.

Despite being a racial egalitarian and thereby dismissing racial hierarchies, he embraced cultural hierarchies and believed in the superiority of Western culture.¹² Unlike most whites, however, Douglass perceived it, not as a permanent feature or evidence of inherent racial superiority, but as a temporary condition of environment and a result of cross-cultural diffusion. Thus he celebrated the achievements of the ancient Egyptians—from whom he argued, a “direct relationship may be claimed by the Negro race”—which spurred the rise of Western civilization by inspiring the Greeks and Romans.¹³ Through this line of reasoning, Douglass could show both the equality of those of African

¹¹ Douglass, “The Nation’s Problem,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 732, 733.

¹² Ronald Sundstrom, “Frederick Douglass’s Longing for the End of Race,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012) <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frederick-douglass/>.

¹³ Douglass, “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered, address delivered at Western Reserve College, July 12, 1854,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 292.

descent—as the achievements of the ancient Egyptians were beyond dispute—and the benefits of cultural transmission through interracial collaboration.¹⁴

Civilization, in Douglass's opinion, had advanced and would continue to advance through cross-cultural diffusion. He believed African Americans would therefore benefit from similar transmissions and so would all Americans as:

Nations, however dissimilar, may be united in one social state, not only without detriment to each other, but, most clearly, to the advancement of human welfare, happiness and perfection. While it is clearly proved, on the other hand, that those nations freest from foreign elements, present the most evident marks of deterioration.¹⁵

He saw evidence for this across the globe, as he deemed flourishing nations to be the result of amalgamation and floundering nations to be marked by isolation; “In the Highlands of Scotland the boast is made of their pure blood, and that they were never conquered, but no man can contemplate them without wishing they had been conquered.”¹⁶ Thus, England ruled the world because it had mixed with successive invaders. Nearby Scotland, in contrast, remained backward because of its isolation. Therefore, the United States, in Douglass's estimation, would only succeed if its various races assimilated into a “composite nationality.”¹⁷

¹⁴ White ethnologists often went to great lengths to demonstrate that ancient Egyptians were Caucasians and not African as to allow otherwise would concede the credit of Egypt's wonders to Africans and thus reverse their racial hierarchies. Douglass, in response to claims from the white ethnologist—Dr. Samuel Morton—that ancient Egyptians were not Africans, sarcastically retorted that Morton's own description of Egyptians ensured that “a man, in our day, with brown complexion, ‘nose rounded and wide, lips thick, hair black and curly,’ would...have no difficulty in getting himself recognized as a Negro” Douglass, “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 288.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁶ Douglass, “Our Composite Nationality: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 7 December 1869,” in Blassingame and McKivigan eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4, 254.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

True assimilation to Douglass, however, included biological amalgamation. In his 1869 address, “Our Composite Nationality,” he declared the U.S. “the most fortunate of nations,” as it was “abundant in all the material essential to further national growth and greatness” whereas other nations have “exhausted the conditions essential to their further growth.”¹⁸ Composite nations were superior, he believed, as they were blessed with the qualities of multiple races. Believing in the Enlightenment concept of unique racial gifts, while still maintaining equality across all races, Douglass held that “all great qualities are never found in any one man or in any one race.”¹⁹ Some races possessed superior faculties for reasoning, music, courage, physical vigor, and so forth. United, these qualities would “temper, modify, round and complete the whole man and the whole nation.”²⁰ The U.S., with its abundant races—“the material essential to further national growth and greatness”—had immense potential in Douglass’s estimation.

Yet, for a nation to flourish, all of its members must be granted equal rights. Once in such a state, he considered amalgamation inevitable. When political and social equality allowed African Americans to advance, the impediments to amalgamation—which he considered artificial—would fall to “the natural forces impelling amalgamation” as he declared “the tendency of the age [was] unification, not isolation; not to clans and

¹⁸ Douglass, “Our Composite Nationality,” in Blassingame, and McKivigan eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4, 241.

¹⁹ Ibid., 255. While granting the unique racial gifts, Douglass reiterated his belief in equality and the universal brotherhood: “man is man the world over...the sentiments we exhibit, whether love or hate, confidence or fear, respect or contempt, will always imply a like humanity. A smile or a tear has no nationality” [257].

²⁰ Ibid., 255.

classes; but to human brotherhood.”²¹ He decried the forced amalgamation under slavery, but believed that after emancipation, amalgamation would only increase. Despite the degraded condition of slaves, Douglass argued, “they were sufficiently attractive to make possible an intermediate race of a million.” If it occurred with such “odious barriers,” amalgamation would surely increase once African Americans became “educated and prosperous.”²² After emancipation he could look with awe upon the creation of a race that once “stood at opposite extremes of ethnological classification,” but “now, between these two extremes, an intermediate race has arisen,” that was “constantly increasing.”²³ A composite nation was therefore not only beneficial in Douglass’s mind, but was already underway as the environment and amalgamation homogenized the nation.

Avoiding Avowing Amalgamation

Douglass believed amalgamation to be inevitable, beneficial, and natural. Like other abolitionists who believed similarly, however, he hesitated to declare his open support for it. Even after emancipation, Douglass remained circumspect on the issue, as he believed advocating for amalgamation would paradoxically retard its advance. Having been physically attacked for socializing with white women, Douglass knew that even the appearance of interracial intimacies could cause white hysteria, and believed that such irrational fears could not be overcome by “any theory of the wisdom of such blending of

²¹ Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 167; Douglass, “The Future of the Negro,” *North American Review*, July 1884, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mfd:1:/temp/~ammem_bLBb:.

²² Douglass, “The Future of the Negro,” *North American Review*.

²³ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

the two races.”²⁴ In fact, he considered its support “a cruel hoax calculated to provoke a racist backlash,” according to Douglass biographer Waldo Martin.²⁵ Instead, he thought, only “the fullness of time” and the granting of equal rights would allow amalgamation to “be so adjusted to surrounding conditions as hardly to be observed” and to occur “without shock or noise.”²⁶ Amalgamation was a result, not a solution to Douglass, as, under freedom, it could only occur naturally after assimilation.

While Douglass demurred from an outright endorsement of amalgamation, his advocacy for a composite nationality and his declarations of amalgamation’s naturalness and inevitability leave little doubt about his views. Even in the midst of the Civil War, Douglass all but directly stated his support for amalgamation. Directing his comments to what he considered the central question of the age, he asked: “Can the white and colored people of this country be blended into a common nationality?” To which he answered: “most unhesitatingly, I believe they can.”²⁷

Less such pronouncement be construed as just cultural and political assimilation and not biological amalgamation, an 1866 article by Douglass in the *North American Review* makes it clearer that his blended nation would be the result of biological mixing. He declared his “strongest conviction as to the future of the Negro” to be that “he will be

²⁴ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

²⁵ Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 221.

²⁶ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591. Likening the degraded position of slaves to the Irish, Douglass also listed—in a seeming tangent to his address—the harsh and unjust laws under which the Irish once languished. The last of the “barbarous and inhuman laws” he lists is the prohibition on marriages between Protestants and “Papists.” These laws were eliminated and so too should the “present barbarous laws against the free colored people,” he argued, “share the same fate.”

²⁷ Douglass, “The Present and Future Condition of the Colored Race in America,” *Douglass Monthly*, June 1863, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=777>.

absorbed, assimilated, and will only appear finally, as the Phoenicians...in the features of a blended race.” Given the issue’s delicacy and potential for retaliation, however, Douglass claimed that he was not advocating interracial marriage; “I am not a propagandist, but a prophet. I do not say that what I say, *should* come to pass, but what I think is likely to come to pass, and what is inevitable.” He added, however, “while I would not be understood as advocating the desirability of such a result, I would not be understood as deprecating it.”²⁸ Despite his claims of impartiality on interracial marriage, Martin holds that Douglass’s misleading claim of neutrality “was an unsuccessful attempt to avoid identification with the advocacy of two social heresies [interracial marriage and miscegenation] that offended black race pride in addition to white racism.” Regardless of his denial, Martin continues, in Douglass’s worldview “assimilation, miscegenation, and interracial marriage constituted progressive developments.”²⁹ Likewise, Peter Myers finds Douglass’s neutrality disclaimer “understandable in a context in which exigencies of legal and political reform required deference to the distinction between civil and social equality.”³⁰ Given the political climate, Douglass’s disclaimer was a savvy attempt to obscure his true position on a controversial matter that, he believed, would only be hindered by directness.

Perhaps feeling more confident with Congressional Reconstruction underway and the Fourteenth Amendment ratified, Douglass’s most explicit comment on amalgamation came a few years later in a speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1869. In

²⁸ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

²⁹ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 220-1.

³⁰ Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism*, 168.

response to the charge that African American suffrage would lead to amalgamation, contrary to standard abolitionist denials, Douglass boldly proclaimed: “It will lead just there. Don’t be afraid.”³¹ He made another, albeit veiled, gesture of support for amalgamation when he declared that when African Americans were incorporated “completely into the American body politic...you will soon begin to find that Mr. Bluebeard’s beard is not quite so blue after all.”³² In referencing the fictional character of French folklore who was despised and shunned because he had a blue beard, Douglass implied that with political and social equality would come the lightening of African Americans and the darkening of Caucasians and thereby the removal of the original cause of strife. The admission did not go unnoticed; the *New York Herald* claimed Douglass would not be satisfied with the “recognition of the legal and political rights of the negro...[rather] amalgamation is the ultimatum of Fred. Douglass.”³³ Although he declined to explicitly advocate for it, he was labeled an amalgamationist nevertheless.

Personal Motivations

In his 1948 study, Benjamin Quarles, concluded that Douglass took pleasure in “stirring up a hornet’s nest” with his “gesture of social defiance.”³⁴ Undoubtedly, Douglass gained a degree of satisfaction from challenging conventions against interracial

³¹ Douglass, “Let the Negro Alone: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1869,” in Blassingame and McKivigan eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4, 205. Douglass, illustrating a typical debate between an abolitionist and a Democrat, suggested that “The Democrat said, ‘The right to vote means amalgamation.’ The Abolitionist said, ‘No, that don’t follow.’ ‘It will dissolve the Union.’ ‘No it won’t.’ ‘It will lead to amalgamation.’ ‘No, it won’t.’ But it will lead just there. Don’t be afraid.”

³² Ibid., 208.

³³ *New York Herald*, 14 May 1869, quoted in Blassingame and McKivigan eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4, 199.

³⁴ Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Atheneum, 1948), 301.

marriage. Yet, his primary motivations for marrying Helen lay elsewhere and he would have gladly avoided agitating the public, as he believed it would not promote societal acceptance of interracial marriage. He perceived himself taking part in the natural blending of peoples and hoped to only point out what was naturally underway, but not yet socially acceptable. Amalgamation was his “ultimatum,” but he considered it a result of equality of conditions and not a cause. Thus, it would occur naturally and need no prodding, save assimilation. Indeed, he would have preferred to have no “hornet’s nest” as it would indicate societal acceptance. Douglass’s marriage to Helen, therefore, seems to have been primarily motivated by personal reasons instead of social agitation. Throughout his life he found solace and companionship among well-educated white women and he thus found it only natural that he should choose a wife from among these ranks.

Douglass and his first wife, Anna Murray—a freeborn African American housekeeper and laundress five years his elder—met the year before he escaped from slavery. Her hard work proved instrumental to Douglass’s escape from slavery and his success in life. They were married for forty-four years and had five children together, four of whom survived into adulthood. Nevertheless, throughout their marriage Douglass craved an intellectual companion that he could not find with his illiterate first wife.

Douglass and Anna grew apart as his involvement in the abolitionist movement took him into elite circles in which Anna felt uncomfortable due to her limited education. A letter from Douglass to his sister in 1846 elicits the mounting differences between Douglass and Anna. He warned: “It would spread a dark cloud over my soul to see you

marry some ignorant and unlearned person. You might as well tie yourself to a log of wood as to do so.”³⁵ He could have simply been playing the part of an overprotective big brother, but the voracity of Douglass’s reaction suggests a partial self-reference in giving such advice. Douglass hired a teacher for Anna in 1849, but to no avail.

Anna remained removed from Douglass’s world and spurned by many of his abolitionist colleagues. Leigh Fought found that “most of his white associates expressed disdain for her, at their most generous referring to Anna as a poor intellectual match for her husband, and treated her like a servant in her own home.”³⁶ Douglass’s contemporary, Fredrika Bremer described Anna as “dark, stout and plain.” Another wrote that guests often mistook Anna, who had a penchant for wearing a “dark cotton dress and a red bandanna on her head,” as Douglass’s housekeeper.³⁷ Many biographers of Douglass have arguably been even harsher than contemporaries in their assessment of her and their belief that she and Douglass were ill-suited for one another.³⁸

³⁵ Douglass, “Letter to Ruth Cox, 18 August 1846,” in John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series Volume 1 of The Frederick Douglass Papers: Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 157.

³⁶ Leigh Fought, “Anna Murray Douglass,” *AfriGeneas Genealogy and History Forum* (February 21, 2007). <http://www.afriGeneas.com/forum/index.cgi/md/read/id/61784>.

³⁷ Fredrika Bremer, Mary Howitt, trans., *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* Vol. I (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1853), 585; Minnie Blackall Bishop to Charles H. Wiltsie, 1929, quoted in Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 101.

³⁸ William McFeely depicts her as “ill and inarticulate.” Arna Bontemps callously described Anna as a “helpless old woman who had never been beautiful...but from whom the most brilliant and handsome Douglass had somehow drawn strength.” Benjamin Quarles bluntly termed Anna “totally indifferent to the world of ideas.” Rosetta Douglass Sprague, Douglass and Anna’s eldest child, however, offered a very different assessment of her mother. Rosetta described Anna as decidedly within the bounds of the nineteenth century notion of the “Cult of Domesticity.” Arguing that Douglass’s accomplishments were “made possible by the unswerving loyalty of Anna,” she celebrates a woman with keen financial savvy. In contrast to biographers of Douglass who dismiss Anna’s involvement in matters outside the home, Rosetta holds Anna “was a recognized co-worker in the [Anti-Slavery] Societies of Lynn and Boston.” Substantiating Rosetta’s account of her mother, Ida B. Wells, notes that African American women continued to refer to Douglass’s D.C. home as Anna’s home long after her death, although this practice could have been intended more as a slight against Helen than an honor upon Anna. William McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 137; Arna Bontemps, *Free At Last: The*

Regardless of contemporaries and historians' assessments of Anna, when she died in the summer of 1882, Douglass fell into a depression "almost to the point of a breakdown."³⁹ Days after her death, Douglass wrote to a friend that Anna was "the center of my house and held us together."⁴⁰ He considered moving to Europe to "become a wanderer," but decided, "upon reflection," he was too old for such pursuits.⁴¹ Instead, a month after Anna's death, Douglass traveled to Honeoye, New York to deliver a lecture, which Helen attended as she too was visiting Honeoye, her hometown. Julie Nelson suggests that they might have traveled there together and that the visit, so soon after Anna's death, illustrates the close bonds between Douglass and the Pitts family, which he had known since an anti-slavery lecture first brought him to the Pitts home in 1846.⁴²

That Douglass found solace after his wife's death in the company of Helen and her family is unsurprising given his long association with white abolitionists, particularly females. For most of his life, Douglass had found acceptance and companionship among well-educated white women. They had long been his allies and intellectual companions in his most cherished causes—abolitionism, temperance, and women's suffrage. According to Gregory Stephens, white women "provided the sort of intellectual stimulation that he

Life of Frederick Douglass (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1971), 272; Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, 101; Rosetta Douglass Sprague, "Anna Murray Douglass, My Mother as I Recall Her" *The Journal of Negro History* 8 (January 1923): 95-6; and Ida B. Wells, Alfreda Duster ed., *Crusade For Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1992), 74.

³⁹ McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 313.

⁴⁰ Douglass to Doctress S. M. Logune, August 12, 1882, quoted in Phillip Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1969), 337.

⁴¹ Douglass quoted by McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 312.

⁴² Julie Nelson, "Have We A Cause: The Life of Helen Pitts Douglass, 1838-1903" (Master's thesis. Shippensburg University, 1995), 102, 33.

could not find with his [first] wife.”⁴³ Douglass and reform-minded white women also shared similar roles in society; both were educated and capable, but lacked societal acceptance.

Douglass seems to have turned to white women almost by default. From white male allies, like William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith, Douglass faced paternalism, and in African American males he saw potential competitors for prominence.⁴⁴ While African American women could also be competitors, they were underrepresented in reform movements and thus Douglass rarely associated with them. Race and gender scholar Gloria Watkins explains this dearth of African American women in abolitionist circles with the charge that “black men were more accepted in white reform circles than black women” because of “prevailing racist-sexist stereotypes that portrayed black women as morally impure.” Fearing for their status as ladies, white women were reluctant to associate with African American women. Ironically, the same stigma did not apply to African American men.⁴⁵ This racist-sexist exclusion perhaps explains Anna’s limited role in her husband’s circles and his associates’ dismissive characterization of her. Wilson Moses maintains that only late in life did Douglass develop a close intellectual friendship with an African American woman, Ida B. Wells.⁴⁶ Thus, out of

⁴³ Gregory Stephens, *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 99.

⁴⁴ See Eric Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New York: University of Cambridge, 1990), 4; and John R. McKivigan “The Frederick Douglass-Garritt Smith Friendship and Political Abolitionism in the 1850s,” in Sundquist, ed., 207 for evidence of white male paternalism. See Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-17 for analysis of Douglass’s conflicts with other African American males.

⁴⁵ Gloria Jean Watkins, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 130, 131.

⁴⁶ Moses, *Creative Conflict*, 50.

circumstance, compatibility, and fear of competition, Douglass long identified and worked closely with white women.

Douglass's fondness for white women was far from one-sided. Over six foot two, broad shouldered, well read, with a penchant for fine dress, refined manners, and eloquent and carefully cultivated speech patterns, Douglass's allure did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. One described Douglass as possessing "an unusually handsome exterior."⁴⁷ British abolitionist John Estlin found the attention Douglass garnered during a tour of England shocking: "You can hardly imagine how he is noticed,—*petted*, I may say, by ladies." Estlin even worried over Douglass's "future domestic comfort" as "after associating so much with white women of education and refined taste and manners, he will feel a 'craving void' when he returns to his family."⁴⁸ Even late in life, Douglass earned compliments for his looks and demeanor. In 1874, American actress Celia Logan, suggestively recounted: "the dignity of his attitude [and] the majesty of his stature made Frederick Douglass look every inch a man" while "the play of his fine features made a little thrill run through me."⁴⁹ His long-time support for women's equality and his passion for abolition and temperance, which were female-dominated reform issues, undoubtedly earned him the favor of progressive women too.

Several held very prominent roles in his life. It was a white woman, Sophia Auld, who taught him to read and treated him with a kindness the eight-year old slave had never experienced from a white person before.⁵⁰ Years later, two white women—the British

⁴⁷ Bremer, *Holmes of the New World*, 585.

⁴⁸ Estlin quoted in Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 43.

⁴⁹ Logan quoted by Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 42-3.

⁵⁰ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 215.

abolitionists and sisters Ellen and Anna Richardson—raised the funds to ensure his freedom.⁵¹ Another British reformer, Julia Griffiths, became Douglass’s intellectual companion and the financial savior of *The North Star* in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Phillip Foner contends that Douglass “owed much of his literary precision to Miss Griffiths’ blue-penciling.”⁵² David Blight concurs and described her as “perhaps the single most important personal influence in his life” and “his most cherished friend.”⁵³ The two were rumored to have been more than intellectual companions, but no consensus has emerged.⁵⁴

When Griffiths returned to England in 1855, the void she left was partially filled by Otilie Assing, a German-Jewish journalist. Maria Diedrich and others have made a case for a romantic relationship that lasted from 1856 to 1881 between Assing and Douglass.⁵⁵ Regardless of the veracity of this contention, they were indisputably close and she provided Douglass with an intellectual outlet. Assing, who allegedly called herself Douglass’s “natural wife,” lived in Douglass’s house on and off for over twenty-two

⁵¹ While Douglass escaped from slavery in 1838, the publication of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* imperiled his safety. In part from fear of capture he went to Great Britain on a speaking tour, where his freedom was ensured by his purchase and manumission by the Richardsons.

⁵² Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, 87.

⁵³ David Blight, *Frederick Douglass’s Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 19.

⁵⁴ Janet Douglas, “A Cherished Friendship: Julia Griffiths Crofts and Frederick Douglass,” *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 2 (2012): 267-268.

⁵⁵ For other scholarship substantiating the affair between Assing and Douglass, see: T. H. Pickett, “The Friendship of Frederick Douglass with the German, Otilie Assing,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73 no. 1 (Spring 1989); Christopher Lohmann, ed., *Radical Passion: Otilie Assing’s Reports from America and letters to Frederick Douglass* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000); McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 185.

years despite the clear disdain she held for Anna. She translated Douglass's works into German and coauthored many editorials.⁵⁶

After his marriage to Helen, Douglass even acknowledged his long association with whites and therefore the naturalness of his marriage to a white woman:

Circumstances have during the last forty years thrown me much more into white society than in that of colored people. While true to the rights of the colored race my nearest personal friends owing to association and common sympathy and aims have been white people and as men choose wives from friends and associates, it is not strange that I have so chosen my wife and she has chosen me.⁵⁷

Thus, Douglass believed his marriage to Helen was essentially unremarkable and mirrored the full assimilation into American society he hoped for all Americans.

Douglass was no stranger to controversy over his relations with white women. In 1849, a group of ruffians attacked Douglass with a cane for walking arm-in-arm with two white women—the reformers and sisters Julia and Eliza Griffiths—through the streets of New York City. Afterward, a vulgar and crass depiction of the “Nigger Douglass” with the Griffiths sisters vying for his affections circulated in Boston.⁵⁸ When Julia Griffiths

⁵⁶ Diedrich maintains that Assing's derision of Anna “was based less on notions of race than on a pronounced European sense of class as well as on her attitude toward education and her belief in cultural hierarchy.” Anna's illiteracy in Assing's mind was a violation of “a sacred obligation—to strive for perfection of the mind.” Diedrich, *Love Across the Color Lines*, 190, 186. According to Diedrich, Assing believed Douglass would leave Anna once slavery was abolished and he no longer needed to be a public figure. In 1876, hoping Douglass would join her en route, Assing traveled to Europe. When Anna died in 1882, Douglass did not write Assing or inform her of his marriage. When Assing learned the news—and after being diagnosed with breast cancer—Assing killed herself. Her will left a substantial fortune, allocated in semiannual installments, to Douglass. It further instructed that her correspondence with Douglass be burned. See also Diedrich, *Love Across the Color Line*; Lohmann ed., *Radical Passion*; and McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*. Countering the idea of an affair, the Princess Helene von Rocowitza of Wallachia wrote in her autobiography that her friend, Assing, “respected the bonds of wedlock, but no doubt hoped that when death released him from his coloured spouse, he would lay his freedom at her feet.” She insinuates that the “real reason” for Assing's suicide was Douglass's marriage to Helen. Helene von Rocowitza, *Princess Helene von Racowitza: An Autobiography* (London: Constable and Company, 1910), 371.

⁵⁷ Douglass to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, May 30, 1884, in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 694.

⁵⁸ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 43.

moved into the Douglass household in 1848 to assist with the fledgling *The North Star*, he was warned that Rochester was “full of scandalous reports.”⁵⁹ By 1851, the rumors grew into a sparing war in the conflict with William Lloyd Garrison. Griffiths was referred to in the *Anti-Slavery Standard* as “a Jezebel” and labeled by Garrison himself as the cause of “much unhappiness in [Douglass’s] household.”⁶⁰ By the next year, rumors pressured Griffiths into moving out and forced a denial from Anna.⁶¹

Despite the many years Assing spent living in the Douglass household, her presence never inspired the same rumors as Griffiths’ residence had. This could have been a result of less rancorous relations between the Garrisonians and Douglass. Garrisonians fueled the Griffiths’ allegations as many considered her the “principal cause for Douglass’s alleged defection from their ranks.”⁶² Another factor could have been the differences between Griffiths, a middle-class and well-educated Anglo-Saxon, and Assing, a bohemian German-Jew. Douglass’s interracial liaisons were considered scandalous and outrageous with an Anglo-Saxon woman, but might have been tolerated, or at least ignored, with a Jew. Notwithstanding this exception, Douglass’s socializing with white women often brought him condemnation and imperiled his safety. Yet, as Douglass’s repeated associations with white women show, he considered such connections natural and a personal right, despite the tremendous scandal such

⁵⁹ Samuel D. Porter quoted in Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, 136.

⁶⁰ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 24, 1852; Garrison, *Liberator*, November 18, 1853 as quoted in Foner, 145.

⁶¹ Anna reportedly wrote: “It is not true, that the presence of a certain person in the office of Frederick Douglass causes unhappiness in his family.” Anna Douglass quoted by Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, 146; Garrison, even after Griffiths moved out, swore he “could bring a score of unimpeachable witnesses to Rochester to prove” his allegations, but in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s condemnation of the attacks as “unwarranted, improper, and ‘unfortunate,’” Garrison wrote a muddled retraction. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 44.

⁶² Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 42.

associations ignited. Nevertheless, these experiences ensured Douglass knew his private life was subject to public scrutiny. The experiences also sensitized him to the hysteria that such displays of “social equality” would generate amongst many whites.

Douglass, however, strategically used portions of his private life for political advantage in his autobiographies while futilely trying to assert a division between his private and public life. Responding to charges over his alleged infidelity with Griffiths, Douglass furiously wrote that Garrison has invaded “my household” and destroyed “the just limits of public controversy” for a “man’s wife and children should be spared the mortification involved in a public discussion of matters entirely private.”⁶³ In response to physical attacks for openly socializing with white women, Douglass nursed his bruises but continued to associate with them as he held it his personal prerogative to do so.

With the scandal over his second marriage, Douglass sought to erect the same boundaries to little avail. Although his interracial marriage conformed to his political beliefs, Douglass argued marriage was merely a private matter. Indeed, faced with criticism for it, he asked: “What effect then can the affairs of my private life have upon my principles of justice?”⁶⁴ By nineteenth century standards, Douglass’s division between public and private domains was apt, however, this was an ideal, not reality for most African Americans. The same conventions did not hold for them as they were subject to additional scrutiny that sought to collectively judge the race. Under slavery,

⁶³ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, December 9, 1853. In response to his marriage to Helen, Douglass offered the sentiment: “It seems that the newspapers would present to the eye of public curiosity my private affairs, and those, too, which every man holds most dear and sacred, the affairs of the family.” “Fred Douglass on His Marriage: He is Neither an African nor a Caucasian and has no apology to Offer: From the *Washington Post*,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1884.

⁶⁴ “Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 3.

rights to privacy were inherently unavailable given slavery's nature. Afterward, white racism and the political implications tied to African American marriages continued to make privacy an elusive goal. Marriage possessed political implications for African Americans as they were widely thought incapable of fulfilling private duties. Supposedly lacking private virtue, they were alleged to thereby lack the public virtue required of republican government. For African Americans subject to extra scrutiny, the personal was the political, despite Douglass's hopes.

Helen and Family Responses

While many contemporaries and later historians found Douglass and Anna ill-suited for one another, close friends of Douglass and Helen believed the new couple was well-matched. By all accounts, their marriage was a happy one; they shared many interests and a deep mutual respect. Throughout Douglass's first marriage, he sought an intellectual companion. In Helen, it seems, he found just that. As the product of progressive abolitionists, Helen was raised to see African Americans as equals and—before her marriage—her family treated Douglass as such. Helen's childhood minister, William Goodell, even advocated interracial marriage.⁶⁵ They first met when he stayed at her parents' home repeatedly between the 1840s and 1870s. They were reacquainted in the late 1870s when she moved to D.C. and lived with her uncle, Douglass's next-door neighbor. They “developed a relationship based upon common interests and mutually-

⁶⁵ William Goodell, *The American Slave Code* (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853; New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1969), 383.

satisfying conversation” according to Nelson.⁶⁶ When Helen moved to Indiana to teach in 1878, Douglass and Helen began a correspondence that illustrates their shared interests; in one brief postcard alone they discussed Shakespeare, public lectures, sermons, and mutual acquaintances.⁶⁷ Douglass had long had a passion for Shakespeare and joined D.C.’s Uniontown Shakespeare Club. He complained during his first marriage, however, that he had “no one at my house to go with me, and I often fancy I am losing one-half of the happiness on such occasions because in such matters I am alone.”⁶⁸ In Helen, he had an eager Shakespeare companion. Weary of teaching, Helen moved back to her uncle’s and clerked at the federal pension office until a position in Douglass’s office became available in the summer of 1882.

Details of Helen and Douglass’s courtship are unknown, as few knew of their relationship until they married. A relationship appears to have begun in the fall of 1883, after Douglass returned to work following a doctor-recommended convalescence after Anna’s death.⁶⁹ Helen’s one-time boss, the editor of the feminist newspaper *The Alpha*, told a reporter after the wedding that, she supposed Helen and Douglass had “been thinking about taking this step for some time past,” and she “[did] not believe it [was] hasty on their part.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Nelson, “Have We a Cause,” 24, 96.

⁶⁷ Frederick Douglass Papers, Container 12, Item 2840, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

⁶⁸ Douglass quoted in Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, 337.

⁶⁹ McFeely holds that “in the summer of 1883, Douglass appears to have been depressed almost to the point of a breakdown. He was under the care of a physician, who prescribed complete rest.” McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 313.

⁷⁰ Caroline Winslow quoted in “Fed Douglass’s Wedding Creates A Great Deal of Talk,” *The Cincinnati Commercial Gazette* January 26, 1884, 2.

Douglass and Helen met immediate resistance from family members over their union. Douglass's children—most of whom were only a few years younger than their new stepmother—did not receive the news well. Save his eldest child, Rosetta, who learned via a reporter, Douglass only told his children about the engagement hours before the ceremony and none attended. Only one relative, Douglass's granddaughter, met the newlyweds upon their return from the ceremony. His children reportedly never reconciled to the marriage and treated Helen coldly.⁷¹ Rosetta's sister-in-law, Helen Louise Sprague, who had been living with the family for over a decade, immediately moved out and sued Douglass for \$1,965 in alleged back pay for housekeeping. Douglass claimed he never hired Sprague as she lived with his family “not as a hireling, but as an equal member of it.”⁷² The family dispute waged in newspapers for weeks. It turned especially rancorous when Douglass's son-in-law, who was assisting in his sister's suit, declared in an interview that he had “nothing to say” to Douglass about the marriage “except that I sincerely trust that your white wife will experience more justice and consideration at your hands than you ever gave your worthy colored wife.”⁷³ Without commenting on his son-in-law's last point, Douglass dismissed the charges and termed the suit mere exploitation of “the supposed unpopularity of my recent marriage.”⁷⁴ The suit was eventually dropped without resolution, but not before his domestic life had a thorough public airing.

⁷¹ These tensions did not diminish, even after Douglass's death. His children successfully contested his will, which left his estate to Helen but lacked a required third witness, and the estate was split between Helen and the children. Helen wanted to preserve the house as a memorial to Douglass, but his children wanted to sell it. Helen mortgaged her share and bought the house from the children. See Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 72-75.

⁷² “Fred. Douglass's Answer to Nathan Sprague,” *State Journal* (PA), February 16, 1884, 1.

⁷³ “Fred Douglass. The Brother of His Housekeeper Addresses a Very Pointed Letter to the Colored,” *Cleveland Gazette* February 16, 1884, 3.

⁷⁴ “Fred. Douglass's Answer to Nathan Sprague,” *State Journal* (Harrisburg, PA) (2-16-1884), 1.

Helen too faced resistance from her family. Her father and uncle disowned her. She was written out of her father's will and the two never spoke again. Her uncle, despite now being her neighbor, followed suit.⁷⁵ One of Helen's sisters, however, remained loyal and eventually brought her mother around. Several newspapers alleged that Helen's family sought an annulment, although no evidence substantiates this allegation—especially as this contention arose before her family knew of the marriage.⁷⁶

The reasons for their families' objections are uncertain. Both families might have been offended at the short notice (or none at all in the case of Helen's family). If this was the sole cause, however, seemingly they would have eventually been forgiven—so perhaps this was the case with Helen's mother. The chilly relations between Douglass's children and Helen could be stereotypical tensions between adult children and a stepmother—especially given the short lapse between their mother's death and the marriage. The small age differential between Helen and the children likely hindered relations too. They could have also been upset that Douglass married Helen instead of the woman they reportedly had long been close to—Assing.⁷⁷ The comment of Douglass's son-in-law, however, suggests a racial component to the antipathy.

Helen's father and uncle's objection appear to be racially derived as well. Douglass had long been a welcomed and honored guest in the Pitts' home. When the couple sought

⁷⁵ Nelson, "Have We A Cause," 107.

⁷⁶ See, for example, "Fred Douglass Married a Literary Young White Lady the Bride" *New York Herald*, January 25, 1884, 3. Helen's family all learned of the marriage in newspapers the morning after the wedding and thus could not have provided their objections and annulment plans the papers reported that day. Nelson, "Have We A Cause," 107.

⁷⁷ Diedrich holds that Assing "became something like a second mother to [the Douglass children], in the one realm where Anna Murray, they all felt, could not compete: education... Assing read to them, tutored them, encouraged their intellectual pursuits, and was familiar with everything they learned." Rosetta and Assing, according to Diedrich, were especially close and corresponded regularly when Assing was not living in the Douglass home. Diedrich, *Love Across the Color Line*, 193, 194, 196.

to visit a few weeks after their marriage, however, they were turned away. Despite his long support for abolition, Helen's father seems to have drawn a racial line at his daughter's hand. Her uncle, despite cordial relations beforehand, never spoke to either Helen or Douglass again.⁷⁸ The newlyweds, however, had far more to contend with than just family opposition.

Diminishing the Fallout

Given their families' objections, Douglass and Helen's decision to keep their families in the dark was understandable. Given the racial climate of the era, the decision to keep the pending marriage a secret from the public was downright savvy. Douglass expressed surprise at not only the public interest in the marriage, but also in the opposition it garnered.⁷⁹ His claims of surprise, however, ring false. "I don't see why there should be any comment," Douglass replied to a reporter the day after the wedding, as "its certainly not an event of public comment. I have simply exercised the right which the laws accord to every citizen."⁸⁰ Nevertheless, aware of the outcry raised against amalgamation, Douglass would have known what to expect. This public pretense of shock at the controversy contradicts Douglass's intelligence, his awareness of detractors, and his private statements undermining this public pretext. Unwarranted as they might have been, he faced public condemnation multiple times for his relations with white women and knew the likely response. Douglass's faux surprise even contradicts his own

⁷⁸ Nelson, "Have We A Cause," 107.

⁷⁹ "Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action," *Cleveland Gazette* February 2, 1884, 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Illustrating his supposed surprise as the extent of the interest, Douglass told a reporter: I am astonished that a city so large as I considered Washington to be should become at once so small."

actions to maintain secrecy ahead of his marriage. Therefore, aware that “surrounding conditions” had not yet “adjusted,” Douglass’s strategy for managing the outcry against his marriage appears to have been to try to demonstrate amalgamation’s occurrence “without shock or noise.”⁸¹

Feigning surprise at the reaction to his marriage and minimizing the extent and longevity of the scandal, Douglass not only strove to keep what he believed a personal matter as private as possible given its notoriety, but also to serve his philosophical aims. His secrecy ahead of the wedding and his actions afterwards indicate Douglass intended to mitigate the political costs and, if possible, turn them to his advantage. He aspired for the pretense that the interracial aspect of the marriage was of little public interest and merely a personal matter. He thought drawing attention to his interracial marriage only served to reinforce assumptions that there was a “Negro problem.” As such, Douglass avoided responding to criticism; “What would you have me say? I can give no explanation. I can make no apology.”⁸²

Contemporaries’ assessments as well as Douglass and Helen’s responses testify to the couple’s awareness of the reaction their union would garner and their attempts to avoid it. A friend of Helen’s concluded after the wedding that Douglass and Helen knew what they would face: “They both are intelligent enough to have foreseen that it would cause widespread comment.”⁸³ The privacy of their courting and their failure to inform or invite family or friends—save Grimké and the Bruces—also testifies to their awareness

⁸¹ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

⁸² “Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 3.

⁸³ O. H. Stevens in an interview with a *Rochester Herald* reporter, January 1884 as quoted by Nelson, “Have We A Cause,” 112.

of the consequences. Even on the day of the marriage, Douglass sought to keep the pending nuptials clandestine as he requested that the clerk issuing the marriage license maintain “the strictest secrecy.”⁸⁴ His own words—in a letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton written four months after the marriage—further demonstrate his precognition of the enmity his marriage would create. “I could never have been at peace with my own soul or held up my head among men,” Douglass wrote Stanton, “had I allowed the fear of popular clamor to deter me from following my convictions as to this marriage.”⁸⁵ Helen wrote a similar sentiment to a friend.⁸⁶

Publicly, Douglass maintained his interracial marriage was of no consequence and that he and Helen encountered little hostility. In private, however, he sometimes admitted to the troubles they endured. Writing a letter of thanks to Stanton for her support of his marriage, he expressed his admiration for his wife’s bravery in the face of “the assaults of popular prejudice” and “the storm of opposition.”⁸⁷ Helen especially faced ongoing social slights. She was treated so poorly that Douglass thanked Ida B. Wells for being “the only colored woman save Mrs. Grimké who has come into my home as a guest and has treated Helen as a hostess has a right to be treated.” Well’s autobiography recounts several other instances of “sneers and discourtesies heaped upon them.”⁸⁸ Douglass also expressed frustration at the public’s seeming obsession with Helen’s color—“What business has the

⁸⁴ “A Black Man’s Bride—Frederick Douglass Married Last Night to Miss Helen Pitts—The Woman Young, Attractive, Intelligent, and White,” *National Republican* January 25, 1884, 1.

⁸⁵ Douglass to Stanton, May 30, 1884, in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 694.

⁸⁶ Helen remarked similarly about the need for courage in the face of expected condemnation: “Love came to me, and I was not afraid to marry the man I loved because of his color.” Helen quoted by Nelson, “Have We A Cause,” 126.

⁸⁷ Douglass letter to Stanton, May 30, 1884, in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 694.

⁸⁸ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 72, 73.

world with the color of my wife?” he asked an old friend in frustration seven months into their marriage.⁸⁹ While Douglass outwardly espoused a position of nonchalance and maintained his marriage caused little disruption, he kept a scrapbook of outraged letters and newspaper articles that suggests he held otherwise in private.⁹⁰

Douglass also claimed that his marriage had “not diminished the number of invitations” he received for lectures.⁹¹ If newspaper reports are to be believed, however, the attendance and his reception at speeches were indeed diminished.⁹² Like his response to his son-in-law, Douglass would not admit to even the unpopularity of his marriage or that it damaged his career. Despite assertions that they met “not a single repulse or insult,” the interracial couple continued to face displeasure from family members and the wider public.⁹³ Douglass was well aware of the reaction his marriage would produce and endured its “storm of opposition” with little public complaint as to do so served his philosophical position that the interracial character of such unions was inconsequential. Publically emphasizing the private discrimination they faced would only reinforce the notion of interracial marriage’s unnaturalness.

When pushed to offer an explanation, Douglass turned to his belief in a composite nationality and emphasized his biracial status—“I am not an African...I am not a

⁸⁹ Douglass letter to Amy Post, August 27, 1884, The Gilder Lerman Collection, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/48528326/Frederick-Douglass-complains-to-Amy-Post-about-people-gossiping-about-his-marriage-1884>.

⁹⁰ One such clipping was the complaint of an Atlanta reverend against President Cleveland for inviting Douglass and Helen to dinner. He could excuse Cleveland for “getting the nigger into his house for supper,” but could not abide by the extension of the invitation to “the low wife.” Reverend Sam Small quoted in McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 365.

⁹¹ Douglass letter to Amy Post, August 27, 1884.

⁹² See for example A.L.M. “Our Baltimore Letter,” *Grit* March 3, 1884, 2 and “Wait and See,” *Washington Bee*, April 14, 1888, 2.

⁹³ Douglass letter to Amy Post, August 27, 1884.

Caucasian” he declared in an interview the day after his wedding. He further noted that had he married a darker woman, rather than a lighter one, “there would have been nothing said about it.”⁹⁴ He also insisted that as his first wife was darker than he, that marriage could have been classified as an interracial marriage as well. Indeed, he held that an honest assessment of marriage in the U.S. would find most marriages interracial as European races mixed freely. Why then, he contended, not so with Africans, Asians, and American Indians, mixing with Europeans?⁹⁵ As with the “Negro problem,” Douglass found the discussion of his interracial marriage with a white woman, instead of what he argued could also be considered an interracial marriage with a black woman, specious.

He likewise took to joking that his marriage proved his impartiality—“my first wife was the color of my mother, and the second, the color of my father.”⁹⁶ Douglass used his biracialism, and occasionally his multiracialism—as he believed he possessed American Indian heritage as well—as a means to mock the illogic of racialism. He argued that racially he “occup[ied] a middle position” and could therefore “speak more impartially” regarding “the merits of the two races.”⁹⁷ From his self-proclaimed position of neutrality, Douglass argued that the two races “should go together: one cannot get along without the other.”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ “Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 3.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Douglass quoted in Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 100.

⁹⁷ Douglass, “Measuring the Progress of the Colored Race: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 22 May 1886,” John Blassingame and John McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, V (Yale University Press, 1992), 240.

⁹⁸ Douglass, “Measuring the Progress of the Colored Race,” in Blassingame and McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, V, 240.

Even before his marriage, as the son of a white man and a potentially multiracial woman, Douglass considered himself the embodiment of a composite nationality. To Douglass, the options were either to retain a binary concept of race (through segregation or emigration) or to transcend race. As his protestation of biracialism testifies to, he sought the latter, especially as a binary racial division had already been destroyed by prior amalgamation. Nor was this a new argument for Douglass, although it was more explicit than past statements. “Two hundred years ago there were two distinct and separate streams of human life running through this country,” Douglass declared in 1866. Once at “opposite extremes of ethnological classification,” there was now “an intermediate race” that defied binary definitions of “Caucasian” or “Ethiopian.”⁹⁹ After his marriage, he repeated these same words almost verbatim and only added: “You may say that Frederick Douglass considers himself a member of the one race which exists.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the numerous challenges and setbacks African Americans had experienced since the Civil War, Douglass was still committed to and believed in the inevitability of assimilation and amalgamation. He saw the extensive amalgamation that had occurred under slavery and thought it could only increase under freedom. The environment and amalgamation, he believed, would soon produce his homogenous, composite nationality and he embraced his amalgamated lineage.

For Douglass, as racial distinctions were merely technical, race did not—or at least should not—matter. Maintaining racial distinctions, especially as one was marked by its

⁹⁹ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

¹⁰⁰ “Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 3.

association with slavery, could only perpetuate race's unreasonable stigma. As he told an audience in 1886:

A painter was painting me today and insisted on showing my full face, for that is Ethiopian. Take my side face, said I, for that is Caucasian; though you try my quarter face you would find it Indian. I don't know that any race can claim me, but, being identified with slaves as I am, I think I know the meaning of the inquiry.¹⁰¹

Emphasizing a monolithic racial identity only reinforced stigmatized and illegitimate barriers to Douglass. He celebrated his multiracial status for he believed it to be the future and a progressive development that would move the nation away from its injurious history with slavery and to national success as a composite nationality.¹⁰² As his protestations of multiracialism, claims of racially impartiality, and the anecdote about the painter show, he considered maintaining claims of racial partiality, with so much amalgamation already, to be an affectation and a harmful one at that. With nearly a quarter of African Americans possessing white blood, in his estimation, Douglass declared in 1889: "When a colored man is charged with want of race pride, he may well ask, What race?"¹⁰³ One day, Douglass insisted in 1866, "they will not pervert and sin against the verity of language as they now do by calling a man of mixed blood, a Negro; they will tell the truth."¹⁰⁴ Nearly twenty years later, Douglass still referred to himself as a Negro, but proclaimed his composite status and hoped others would too.

¹⁰¹ Douglass, "Measuring the Progress of the Colored Race," in Blassingame and John McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, V, 240.

¹⁰² "It is not only the plain duty," Douglass asked, "but also the interest of us all, to have every colored man take the place for which he is best fitted by education, character, ability, manners, and culture. If others insist on keeping him in any lower and poorer place, it is not only his injury, but our universal loss." "The Nation's Problem," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 735.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 731.

¹⁰⁴ Douglass, "The Future of the Colored Race," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 592. Similarly, Douglass declared in 1889: "When a colored man is charged with want of race



Figure 4: Douglass, Helen (seated), and her niece Eva (standing).¹⁰⁵

As such, Douglass's interracial marriage was both a personal and a political act. On a personal level, Douglass and Helen appeared to be well-matched with much in common and a deep mutual respect; Douglass held Helen to be "steady, firm and strong" and he admired "her heroic bearing."¹⁰⁶ Mary Church Terrell described Helen as "very much in love with her husband" and "that she admires and is proud of him is plain to see."¹⁰⁷ Helen's devotion can also be discerned from a photograph of Douglass, Helen, and her

pride, he may well ask, What race?" Douglass, "The Nation's Problem," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 731.

¹⁰⁵ National Park Service Frederick Douglass National Historic Site District of Columbia, FRDO 3912, <http://www.nps.gov/frdo/photosmultimedia/Douglass-and-His-Family.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Douglass to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, May 30, 1884, in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 695.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Church Terrell, "I Remember Frederick Douglass," *Ebony*, September 12, 1953.

niece (Figure 4). By all contemporaries' accounts, even from those who had expressed displeasure at their marriage, the couple was happy together.¹⁰⁸ Douglass especially took joy in having "a wife who can read and write, and who can as Margaret Fuller says cover one in all his range."¹⁰⁹ When they were not traveling together, the pair spent many afternoons accompanying one another, Douglass on his beloved violin, Helen on the piano.¹¹⁰

Yet, on a philosophical level, Douglass's marriage was, in the words of a cotemporary of Douglass, "marvelously harmonized with the broad philanthropical doctrines which he has been preaching these many years."¹¹¹ Douglass insisted he did not seek to set an example by his marriage, but despite these protestations, he "clearly viewed his second marriage as both a personal and a symbolic act" according to Stephens. He argues that Douglass's interracial marriage was a "mediatory symbol"—an action symbolic of his commitment to the creation of a multiracial society.¹¹² In the face of growing racial chauvinism from both white and black Americans, Douglass's marriage could serve as a symbol that racial barriers could be transcended and that interracial cooperation remained viable. Pursuing an interracial marriage for its own sake would have been a perversion of Douglass's beliefs that race was of little consequence. Yet, by being open to all races, he found a woman with whom he could be happy, who happened

¹⁰⁸ Terrell, despite expressing her opposition to the marriage, concluded after a visit to the Douglass household: "It is not strange that Douglass should have wished to marry this woman somewhat his equal intellectually." Terrell, "I Remember Frederick Douglass."

¹⁰⁹ Douglass to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, May 30, 1884, in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 695.

¹¹⁰ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 99.

¹¹¹ "Washington: Great Example of Miscegenation. Building Better than he Knew. The Old Man Eloquent Takes a White Bride. Views of Our Correspondent—Prof. J.M. Gregory," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

¹¹² Stephens, *On Racial Frontiers*, 95.

to be white. Knowing the political ramifications, however, Douglass sought to shape his responses to complement his aims of a composite nation.

His union with Helen then served multiple aims. First and foremost, on a personal level Douglass found a mate with whom he could share his intellectual endeavors and passions. On a symbolic level, Douglass's life—with his rise from the depths of slavery to the heights of wealth—illustrated the ability to transcend race. Convinced skin color was of no genuine importance and that assimilation and amalgamation were inevitable, but facing an increasingly hostile environment—on both sides of the color line—to such a stance, Douglass's marriage could serve as a bold gesture of defiance and assertion of principle. He did not marry Helen to make such a stance, but aware of the public reaction to expect, he could appreciate its significance and sought to make the best of the public reception. He would have preferred to avoid “stirring up a hornet's nest,” but he stoically received their stings to marry the woman of his choice and he minimized the wounds to serve his philosophy.

Supporters

While Douglass's marriage and its accompanying views faced public condemnation, he was not alone in his stance or even his marriage. A handful of other prominent African Americans married across the color line in the years surrounding Douglass's marriage and untold numbers of lesser-known individuals did as well.

William S. Scarborough, president of Wilberforce University (1881); Garnet Baltimore, the first African American engineer (1891); Leondus Wilson, a prominent attorney (date

unknown); John S. Durham, an engineer, teacher, journalist, and diplomat (1897); and Archibald Grimké, a lawyer, intellectual, and diplomat (1878), were all prominent African Americans who married white women. Charles B. Purvis, a respected African American physician, married two white women (1871 and around 1900). While none garnered as strong a backlash as Douglass's marriage, none went unscathed for their choice of marriage partner.¹¹³

Fortunate for Douglass, however, he had more supporters than just those who also crossed the color line in matrimony. His supporters tended to be notable feminists, elite African Americans, and abolitionist friends. One such supporter, wrote Douglass that although the marriage had “startled the public...it had set it to thinking, and a happy result of your union will do more to harmonize the ‘races,’ than all constitutional amendments, civil rights laws and judicial decisions.”¹¹⁴ Other letter writers expressed similar jubilation at the example they believed Douglass's marriage had set. Lucy Coleman, a feminist friend, wrote Douglass that she had “always favored miscegenation” and she “knew that it should begin (to be successful) with the intelligent.” She added, however, that she saw the “marriage as a public matter, not as a private one, as in that

¹¹³ Randall Kennedy reports that there were twenty-five to thirty interracial couples in Fort Mills, South Carolina in the 1870s. Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 71; While researching his seminal study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), W.E.B. Du Bois found “thirty-three cases of mixed marriages” in a single ward of Philadelphia and estimated there were 150 in the entire city. W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 364-5. Interracial couples in the Midwest were numerous enough in the 1890s to form an organization, the Manasseh Society, for interracial couples of “high moral and intellectual standing.” A clergyman associated with the organization claimed it had 700 members at one point. Wilard Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 177.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 694.

case there would be very little significance in it.”¹¹⁵ Thus, like Douglass, Coleman held interracial marriage to be a private choice. Yet, as a public act as well, she applauded its example.

Congratulatory notes to Douglass tended toward the position that interracial marriage was a positive good. Few, however, made this argument in public forums like newspapers. Public defenders of Douglass’s marriage tended to either offer terse remarks about marriage being a private matter or lengthy and systematic defenses of interracial marriage in general. Michelle Mitchell found that such “coolly rational” approaches to the topic, like these defenses of Douglass, reflected “an important trend” wherein supporters of intermarriage “attempted to approach the matter through the methodologies and language provided by emerging sciences.”¹¹⁶ This detached style of writing offered Douglass’s supporters distance from a taboo subject and mirrored works of ethnology.

Two mainstream New York papers, however, openly celebrated the marriage. Joseph Pulitzer’s *The New York World* issued a long defense of interracial marriage, of Douglass and Helen’s character, and asked “Is it not time these prejudices against race should cease?”¹¹⁷ The *New York Independent* went even further in its’ praise for the marriage:

It is one of the best things that could happen for the race in America. A man whose color is marked, a man of culture and ability, and one of the first of his race to achieve social standing in the very capital of his country where he is known and honored, has taken to wife a worthy white woman. It is miscegenation in Washington. It is an example which will be followed, and which must be

¹¹⁵ Frederick Douglass Correspondence, Lucy Colman to Douglass, March 6, 1884, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Box 53, Folder 7.

¹¹⁶ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 209.

¹¹⁷ *The New York World* quoted in the *Washington Bee*, February 2, 1884, 2.

followed before the prejudice against color will die out... We are heartily glad that such an event has taken place.¹¹⁸

Few other papers, on either side of the color line, were so bold in their advocacy of interracial marriage.

A few African American newspapers congratulated Douglass, praised his courage, or defended his position. The *Indianapolis Leader* seemed unsurprised and unperturbed: "Mr. Douglass has simply put into practice the theories of his life."¹¹⁹ Chicago's *Conservator* "wish[ed] him many years of married felicity."¹²⁰ Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder* thought the marriage indicated that Douglass "had the courage to tell the country, both white and black, that he would marry the lady that pleased him, and we laud him for it."¹²¹

Several African Americans emphasized their belief that interracial marriage was a personal choice. Former Congressman Joseph Rainey, William E. Matthews, Captain O.S.B. Wall, and John F. Clark all were reported to hold that "marriage is a question to be determined by the contracting parties."¹²² Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church similarly considered interracial marriage to be a private choice as he quipped with a reference to the Civil Rights Cases four months prior: "I

¹¹⁸ *The New York Independent* as quoted in "Mr. Douglass," *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Indianapolis Leader* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

¹²⁰ *Chicago Conservator* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

¹²¹ *Christian Recorder* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

¹²² "[No Headline]" *New York Globe*, February 2, 1884, 2. Similarly, Thomas Fortune told an interviewer: "it seems to me that matters of this kind are private and personal, rather than public," "Romance of Douglass's Wedding," *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, January 27, 1884, 1.

would not have married the lady, but I am glad he did. I would like to see that infernal Supreme Court decide that unconstitutional.”¹²³

Others, however, went further and expressed support for Douglass’s action and his argument that it was natural. For example, George L. Ruffin, a Democrat and the first African American graduate of Harvard Law School, vehemently defended Douglass’s marriage and emphasized the inevitability of amalgamation. Holding that “the negro must go,” he contended that African Americans would “be swallowed up and merged in the mass of Southern people.” He admitted that African Americans, who sought to vindicate the race, would dislike this but “the merging” was “inevitable” in Ruffin’s estimation.¹²⁴ An article in an African American weekly, *The New York Globe*, argued that criticism of Douglass’s marriage by African Americans was hypocritical as the race was “always prating about the unreasonable prejudices of other people.” The article further contended—in words that easily could have been spoken by Douglass twenty years prior—interracial unions are “not only natural but are likely to be more frequent occurrences in the future.”¹²⁵ Both Douglass and the article’s author believed amalgamation would only increase. Professor J.M. Gregory, in a lengthy article in the *Cleveland Gazette* went further than Douglass when he erroneously attributed a bold declaration in support for amalgamation to Douglass:

In his great speech at Lincoln Hall not quite a year ago Mr. Douglass said: “I do not believe in isolation, I do not believe in emigration, but I do believe in amalgamation, in the assimilation of races; and I tell you, fellow citizens, the power that rocks the cradle of civilization to-day is amalgamated power.” Assembled thousands agreed with Mr. D. in toto then, but as soon as he has set

¹²³ “Tidings of Comfort and Joy,” *Cleveland Gazette*, March 1, 1884, 3.

¹²⁴ George L. Ruffin, “A Look Forward,” *A.M.E. Review*, II (July, 1885), 29.

¹²⁵ “[No Headline]” *New York Globe*, February 2, 1884, 2.

the example by his own worthy action the ignorant prejudiced masses are insulted and enraged.¹²⁶

While the words Gregory attributes to Douglass do not appear in any of his speeches, he accurately captures the sentiment, if not the directness, of Douglass's position. Gregory again evokes Douglass's philosophy and argumentation style in a passage that reads like a summary of Douglass's 1869 address, "Our Composite Nationality":

In our free Government, where the Irish is converted into the American, the German, Spaniard, Greek and French likewise, why not totally Americanize the colored man? We are Americans all. We are a composite nation. Let us maintain our composite uniformity.¹²⁷

Another supporter relied less on reiterating Douglass's philosophy, instead focusing on some of the specific critiques to which Douglass had been subject and disputed the idea that interracial marriage was "a bad thing for the race from a social standpoint." Despite being the "acknowledged leader of this race," the author held Douglass had the right to follow "the bent of his inclination." The author also mocked the idea that African American men would "follow" Douglass's example "as so many sheep over a fence" and that "every marriageable lady...had a claim on him for a husband" and were thus insulted by his choice. Douglass's choice, the author held, "cast no great gloom over" African American women as "we can charitably suppose he would have married Miss Pitts just as quickly had her complexion been something else."¹²⁸ Thus, some maintained it was a private choice made without regard to color and not a detriment to African Americans.

¹²⁶ Presumably, Gregory is referring to Douglass's "The Civil Rights Case, speech at the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting held at Lincoln Hall, Washington, D.C., October 22, 1883"; "Washington: Great Example of Miscegenation. Building Better than he Knew," 2.

¹²⁷ "Washington: Great Example of Miscegenation. Building Better than he Knew," 2.

¹²⁸ D.E.A., "Wilberforce" *Cleveland Gazette*, March 8, 1884, 3.

Even without mentioning the marriage, supporters could defend it. Four months after Douglass's marriage, Professor Wiley Lane of Howard University addressed a prestigious African American debate club on the "Vexed Question" of the "Destiny of the Negro." The address, which Douglass could have easily lifted for his 1889 "The Nation's Problem" speech, spoke—without referencing Douglass's marriage—to the matter the marriage's controversy centered upon. Surpassing the language Douglass would use, Lane swapped assimilation for amalgamation when he asserted there were three possible outcomes to the presence of two races in the U.S.: "extermination, emigration, or amalgamation." Lane supported the latter and used historical examples to argue that amalgamation was inevitable. He acknowledged this would be resisted, but he saw it as a progression that began with Douglass's 1883 address, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free":

Two years ago Hon. Frederick Douglass from a public platform in this city advanced the proposition that the Negro race is to be assimilated. Tonight you do not ask me to use any stronger term than the word absorbed. Not many years hence no word will be proper to express the relation between the races but the word amalgamated. The process has already begun and has made considerable progress. The races are already amalgamated to a very great extent.¹²⁹

Thus, Lane believed amalgamation to be inevitable, but spoke of the resistance to this notion and the progression of language that was required as a result. Douglass began with the term "assimilated," Lane used "absorbed," and in the future, he believed, "amalgamated" would finally be accepted. In a rhetorical scale from assimilation to

¹²⁹ "The Destiny of the Negro. Prof Wiley Lane Discusses the Vexed Question—Subjection, Absorption, or Colonization—Looked at in the Light of the Contact of the Races in this Country," *New York Globe*, July 5, 1884, 2. While Lane refers to a speech of Douglass's from two years prior, he could have only been speaking of Douglass's 1883 "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," speech. No major Douglass address from 1882 given in Washington, D.C. used the word "assimilation," so Lane must have been mistaken about when the speech occurred.

absorption to amalgamation, all reduced—in Lane’s estimation—to one incontrovertible result that was already underway. Collapsing the meanings of amalgamation and assimilation into one allowed the use of less incendiary terminology as assimilation could entail only cultural and social mixing. To amalgamation’s supporters, however, the result was the same, as the one inevitably led to the other. Mitchell also found that proponents of interracial marriage tended to use “‘race absorption,’ ‘race assimilation,’ ‘intermarriage,’ or even ‘social equality’ and ‘amalgamation’” interchangeably, despite their separate meanings.¹³⁰

Still others offered qualified support, although this too remained aligned with Douglass’s beliefs. A writer in the *New York Globe* held that amalgamation would not end prejudice, as it was an acquired and not innate trait, but amalgamation would result “as a natural consequence” once “it is universally established that ‘a man is a man’”—a turn of phrase to which Douglass was also partial.¹³¹ Nevertheless, the writer held that “intermarriages of races should serve as a weather-cock to show the course of the wind rather than a means of changing that course.” As such, the author condoned Douglass’s marriage “if such a marriage represents the state of American sentiment,” but “if it is a means to shape such sentiment, the method has been badly chosen.” Allowing only a political not a private role for interracial marriage, the writer only supported Douglass’s marriage if it was not an attempt on Douglass’s part to shape views, but a reflection of existing support. The writer similarly held that pursuing intermarriage, instead of allowing it to occur naturally, would be harmful to African Americans as the tendency

¹³⁰ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 201.

¹³¹ See, for example, Douglass’s use of the phrase “a man’s a man for a’ that” in Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

would be for marriages to be between upper-class African Americans and whites of a lower social rank. Instead, the author held that “if assimilation must come, let it be as equals with equals.” Only once African Americans were accepted as equals, should they “be assimilated in the great composite body of the future America.”¹³² Thus, amalgamation was not a solution to this writer, but the signal of prejudice transcended.

Douglass was of the same mind. Believing amalgamation would not result from its advocacy, his claims that he did not intend his marriage as an example for others to follow corresponds to this supporter’s contentions that interracial marriage should passively occur and not be intentionally sought out. Indeed, in 1883, in response to a reporter’s question as to whether amalgamation could solve the “Negro problem,” Douglass offered a resounding no and described the question itself as “the child of mental and moral confusion.”¹³³ He held that amalgamation was natural, but he believed it could not resolve the central dilemma: white racism. Thus, assimilation should be pursued in Douglass’s estimation, but amalgamation could “not be reached by any hurried or forced process.”¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Douglass was not alone in his views as his concept of a composite nationality saturated the beliefs of many of his supporters.

¹³² Consistency, “Methods of Assimilation,” *New York Globe*, March 29, 1884, 2.

¹³³ Douglass quoted in Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 221.

¹³⁴ Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 591.

Conclusion

“The further we get apart,” Douglass observed in 1869, “the more we are hated; the nearer we come together, the more we are loved.”¹³⁵ He had long believed that the solution to racial strife was not isolation and separate institutions, but assimilation and inclusion. Once African Americans were granted full rights and united interests with whites through assimilation, he believed, amalgamation would naturally and inevitably occur, as the barriers to it were artificial. Having long been friends and colleagues with whites, Douglass therefore found it only natural that he should chose to marry a white woman.

Much nineteenth century ethnology, due to its presumption of racial hierarchies, served to divide humanity in Douglass’s mind. As he believed “God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth,” he could not accept the racial restrictions ethnologists or the laws sought to draw on a relation he thought a private matter and a right open to all.¹³⁶ Further still, emigration movements and segregated institutions perpetuated the idea that white Americans and African Americans could never coexist in equality and deprived the latter of their native land, the United States. Outside of these debates, however, Douglass believed that homogenizing forces were working towards a common destiny for all Americans. Facing opponents seeking a binary division of the races, he emphasized his multiracialism as an alternative vision for the nation’s future. His views, however, were losing ground to the ascendancy of both white

¹³⁵ Douglass, “Let the Negro Alone: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1869,” in Blassingame and McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* V. 4, 206.

¹³⁶ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2000), 65.

supremacy and black nationalism. He considered the “Negro problem” solved by the Civil War, but as will be seen by the opposition to his interracial marriage, the debate continued. Although Douglass downplayed the controversy surrounding his marriage and denied it was an example for others to follow, Douglass’s marriage still serves as a bold gesture of his commitment to the creation of a multiracial society even though he maintained he “simply exercised” the private right “which the laws accord to every citizen.”¹³⁷ Indeed, he married Helen for personal reasons, but knowingly and conscientiously faced its political repercussions. Despite his protestation that his private affairs could not affect his political principles, his marriage to Helen united his personal desires with his political beliefs. As will be seen, many who reacted to the marriage, however, believed his personal action impinged his political duty.

¹³⁷ “Mr. Douglass Interviewed. A Statement of His Action,” *Cleveland Gazette* February 2, 1884, 3.

CHAPTER 3: THE REACTION

“Fred Douglass has married a red-headed white girl, thirty-three years old. Goodbye, black blood in that family. We have no further use for him as a leader. His picture hangs in our parlor; we will hang it in the stable.” —*The Pittsburg News*, 1884¹

Deemed “the all-absorbing theme of newspapers and almost everyone you meet,” discussions of Douglass and Helen’s marriage filled newspapers for months.² Francis Grimké received a death threat for performing the ceremony.³ A Virginia newspaper called Douglass “a lecherous old African Solomon.”⁴ Newspapers disparaged Helen’s appearance and character. Some papers focused on innocuous details such as the bride and groom’s attire or joked about the couple’s age differential—which was far smaller than most reported.⁵ Few, however, refrained from commenting on the interracial character of the marriage, the political implications of it for the foremost African American, and the meaning this held for the rest of his race. Attention on the couple and reverberations from their marriage continued for years.

Whites seemed especially concerned about the legal aspects of the marriage and, as time wore on, about the “great many airs” that Douglass supposedly exhibited since

¹ *The Pittsburg News* quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

² Africanus, “That Marriage: Some Very Sensible Reasons Why Frederick Douglass Should Have Selected a Wife from His Own Race,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 16, 1884, 1.

³ Francis Grimké, “The Second Marriage of Frederick Douglass,” *The Journal of Negro History* (1934), 325.

⁴ [“No Headline,”] *Gazette* (Franklin, Virginia), February 1, 1884.

⁵ Almost all papers took years off of Helen’s age and added years to Douglass’s. The *Arkansas Mansion* subtracted the most as the paper described her as “not many years out of her teens.” Junius, “Washington Letter,” *Arkansas Mansion*, February 2, 1884, 5. Only two papers correctly list Helen’s age as forty-six. See “No Headline,” *New York Globe*, February 2, 1884, 1; “The Marriage of Frederick Douglass,” *Jackson Citizen Patriot* (MI), February 2, 1884, 2. Like many former slaves, Douglass was unsure of his date of birth, but believed he was born in February 1817. Long after his death, scholars with access to his ex-master’s logbooks determined he was born in February 1818—making him almost sixty-six at the time of his second marriage. Dickson J. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 8.

marrying “a white wife.”⁶ Amongst African Americans, however, the marriage ignited a long simmering debate—was amalgamation beneficial or harmful for the race? Indeed, African American forensic clubs literally sparred over the resolution: “the marriage of Fred Douglass was a detriment to the colored race.”⁷ Douglass was not alone in his views that amalgamation was a natural and inevitable result of assimilation. A more common view among African Americans, however, was to consider it a private matter, but one with undesirable political implications, especially for a leader such as Douglass. “Political suicide,” his life’s “fatal error,” his “one grand mistake,” and “a national calamity” were just a few monikers that African American newspapers used to describe and criticize his marriage.⁸ One crestfallen commentator mourned that “the Negroes’ idol has fallen,” while another contended in a bold headline that “The Life of Frederick Douglass [Could] Now Be Written,” as “the once great Douglass” was finished.⁹ The reaction to Douglass’s marriage amongst African Americans elicits numerous fears and concerns. Interracially, many feared the repercussions from whites over the prominent marriage and took pains to deny the idea that all African Americans desired such unions. Intra-racially, many questioned Douglass’s ability to represent them, disliked the marriage’s ramifications for race solidarity and pride, and bemoaned the class fissures the marriage exposed.

⁶ “A Beggar on Horseback Fred Douglass Wants the Earth,” *St. Louis Republic*, September 26, 1889, 9.

⁷ See, for example, “Wyndotte Items,” *Western Recorder* (Lawrence, KS), May 2, 1884, 3.

⁸ [“No Headline,”] *Weekly Nevada State*, February 2, 1884, 1; *Grit* (D.C.) quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe* February 9, 1884, 2; *Pilot* (Birmingham, AL), quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; *Grit* (D.C.) quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁹ *Southern Tribune* (Petersburg, Virginia) quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; “The Life of Frederick Douglass Can Now Be Written,” *Western Recorder* (Lawrence, KA), February 1, 1884, 2.

Despite the growing hysteria among some whites about the “threat” amalgamation posed to “racial purity,” newspapers almost universally contended that the marriage “has brought out much more criticism from men of Mr. Douglass’s color than from the whites.”¹⁰ The *New York Times* characterized the general white sentiment of Douglass’s marriage as “ill-advised,” but “a matter concerning themselves alone.” In contrast, the paper portrayed African Americans as unhesitant to “denounce the conduct of their leader as almost a direct insult to their race.”¹¹ African American papers similarly assessed the disparity in sentiments. The African American weekly, the *Cleveland Gazette*, for example, declared the marriage had provoked “the most unparalleled excitement and the most unfavorable comment” amongst African Americans, but reported no such mass disfavor from whites.¹² Douglass’s biographers followed suit and deemed the African American reaction “particularly intense.”¹³

The strength of the opposition from African Americans took some by surprise. The *Boston Daily Globe* pondered “the queerest imaginable changes in public sentiment” that could have provoked such a seeming reversal in outrage over interracial marriage:

It isn’t long since there would have been a howl of horror from North to South because a white woman had married a negro. Now the greatest comment and disturbance made about it come from the colored people themselves, who think that Douglass did wrong to marry a white woman.¹⁴

¹⁰ “Fred Douglass’s Marriage,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1884.

¹¹ Ibid. For another example expressing similar assessments see *Philadelphia Times* quoted in “Fred. Douglass not Denounced,” *Washington Bee*, February 2, 1884, 2.

¹² “Washington. Great Example of Miscegenation,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

¹³ Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 99; See also: Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1969), 337-8; Booker T. Washington, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Argosy-Antiquarian LTD, 1969), 189; Benjamin Quarles, ed., *Great Lives Observed: Frederick Douglass* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 161; John Muller, *Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.: The Lion of Anacostia* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 141.

¹⁴ [“No Headline,”] *Boston Daily Globe*, January 27, 1884, 4.

The *Boston Daily Globe*, however, mistook African Americans' reaction against and whites' relative nonchalance toward Douglass's marriage as representing their positions on interracial marriage in general. African Americans seemed to evoke stronger reactions to this marriage than whites, but this should not be taken to suggest that they, *en masse*, were more opposed to interracial marriage than whites. While Douglass's marriage generated debate, anger, and praise on both sides of the color line, the issue that seemed to cause the greatest consternation amongst African Americans was not *an* interracial marriage, but *the* interracial marriage of their most prominent figure. Long accused and persecuted for supposedly desiring white women, many African Americans reacted with more vehemence than some whites because of the example the marriage set and the connotations to which it lent itself. As one commentator noted, "if Mr. Douglass was a man of little note, his marrying a white woman would not have been noticed."¹⁵ Yet, as "the acts and doings of men are measured by their prominence," Douglass faced severe censure from African Americans as "the burden of disclaiming his act [was] now upon them."¹⁶ Douglass's marriage, therefore, was an exceptional case. Its prominence provoked a unique reaction that carried with it far reaching implications. Nevertheless, the outcry against the marriage illuminates views on interracial marriage and the status of race relations during a crucial period of flux.

¹⁵ "Fred Douglass's Fatal Leap! His Marriage Ventilated! The Golden Egg Crushed!," *Savannah Weekly Echo*, February 10, 1884, 4; Others, such as the *Arkansas Mansion* argued similarly: "Douglass's case was an exception on account of his being a leader of the people. We think at present that it is a bad example for him to set." "Maj. Bankston Returned," *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 1.

¹⁶ *Greencastle Banner* (IN) quoted in "Fred Douglass," *Danville Hendricks County Republican* (IN), February 7, 1884, 4; "Fred Douglass's Fatal Leap!," 4.

“Among the whites,” in striking contrast to the serious discussions Douglass’s marriage prompted amongst African Americans, one paper held that “the marriage is a topic of mere amusement.”¹⁷ Despite the fierce animosity and violence from some whites towards even the suggestion of interracial intimacy, the reaction in the mainstream press was far more muted than one would expect. The grudging respect Douglass garnered from many whites probably softened the outcry. The “danger” to white purity the marriage supposedly imperiled was likewise presumably mitigated by newspapers’ use of a mocking tone and the debasement of Helen’s character. White responses seem especially muted because where white opposition would presumably be fiercest—the South—there were few mainstream papers that reported the marriage.¹⁸ As the example of Helen’s father encapsulates, however, even some of the most progressive white abolitionists had little tolerance for interracial marriage when it came to their daughters. His voice against the marriage remained silent, as probably did many other whites who shuddered at the idea of their daughters marrying African Americans.

Legality

Whites’ muted response could even be a function of a disbelief that such an interracial marriage was even possible given numerous state prohibitions. Mainstream

¹⁷ [“No Headline”], *Goshen Daily News* (IN), January 26, 1884, 3.

¹⁸ Perhaps following the antebellum tradition of avoiding publishing news of abolitionists for fear the reports would make it to African Americans and thus inspire rebellion, mainstream newspapers in the South seemed loath to report the marriage for fear of its example. The largest reaction appeared to be in response to a defense of Douglass’s marriage in the *New York World*. Alabama’s *Mobile Register* chastised the *New York World* for its support of Douglass’s marriage and threatened that if they continued, the paper “must not be surprised if it soon comes to be considered an improper paper to be introduced into a Southern family circle.” Apparently, deeming even knowledge of the marriage “improper” for Southern families, few other papers mentioned it. *Mobile Register* quoted in “Not Their Kind of a Democrat,” *New York Herald*, February 10, 1884, 10.

press coverage therefore focused primarily on legal issues and the disapproval of Helen's parents. Some questioned the marriage's lawfulness, as both Virginia's ban on interracial marriage and "an old Maryland law still in force" were proposed as measures that invalidated the union.¹⁹ The *New York Herald*, the daily with the highest circulation in New York, speculated about the legality of interracial marriage in D.C. Oblivious to its legality there, the paper declared that Douglass, "after securing legal advice, decided to take the consequences" as "several other marriages of this kind have taken place" in D.C. without any prosecutions.²⁰ Still others mused over the possibility of an old D.C. statute that attached a fine of 5,000 pounds of tobacco to interracial marriage and some reportedly wanted Douglass arrested and fined "just for fun."²¹

The high-profile marriage even prompted the introduction of bills prohibiting interracial marriage in Maryland and D.C.²² Congressman Risdan Bennett, a North Carolina Democrat, introduced D.C.'s bill in the House.²³ Despite Bennett being "zealous in the cause of connubial reform," both the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on D.C. pigeonholed his bill. The freshman legislator managed to force it to the floor a few times, yet it was "quietly but firmly suppressed."²⁴ The *Cleveland Gazette* argued that the bill failed because Democrats feared "the wrath of the colored vote."²⁵

Regardless as to whether the African American vote actually concerned Democrats, banning interracial marriage certainly concerned African Americans.

¹⁹ "The Marriage of Fred Douglass Said To Be illegal," *Boston Daily Journal*, January 25, 1884, 1.

²⁰ No such statute existed as interracial marriage was never banned in D.C. "Fred Douglass Married a Literary Young White Lady the Bride" *New York Herald*, January 25, 1884, 3.

²¹ "Discovered District," *Jackson Citizen*, February 19, 1884, 7.

²² "Washington Letter," *Jackson Citizen*, February 19, 1884, 9.

²³ "Passing Events," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 9, 1884, 2.

²⁴ "Bennett's Anti-Miscegenation Bill," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 5, 1884, 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

Importantly, nearly all accounts of the marriage in African American newspapers explicitly asserted the right to interracial marriage.²⁶ Few seemed to approve of Douglass's marriage, but none seemed willing to deny he had a right to it. One paper assessed the general opinion: "Although the colored people in general do not look upon the intermarriage of the races with favor, they do not propose to tolerate any *further* abridgment of their personal liberties."²⁷ Interracial marriage, as disagreeable as some African Americans might have found it, was still a personal right to be protected in the opinions of many. Few accepted the arguments that the laws were racially neutral as bans only proscribed interracial marriage between whites and non-whites. No provisions were concerned with interracial marriage between different non-white races. Further still, legal interracial marriage could offer protection to African American women.

As such, African Americans responded unfavorably to the proposed interracial marriage bans that Douglass's marriage prompted. African American newspapers disparaged the D.C. bill's sponsor, but tended to blame Douglass as its instigator. For example, one African American weekly derided the "crank Bennett," but told readers they could "charge this up to the account of Fred Douglass."²⁸ An African American

²⁶ For examples of African Americans newspapers disagreeing with Douglass's marriage but holding that he had every right to marry whomever he pleased, see: "The Navy Disgraced," *Cleveland Gazette*, October 5, 1889, 2; "Fred Douglass's Fatal Leap! His Marriage Ventilated! The Golden Egg Crushed!," *Savannah Weekly Echo*, February 10, 1884, 4; *Ohio Weekly Review* (Springfield) in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; *Sentinel* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; *Arkansas Mansion* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 2, 1884, 2; *Gate City Press* (KA) quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; *New Era* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 2, 1882, 2; *Hub* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; *Atlanta Pilot* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

²⁷ "Bennett's Anti-Miscegenation Bill," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 5, 1884, 2.

²⁸ "Bennett; Columbia; Fred Douglass," *State Journal* (PA), February 9, 1884, 2.

weekly, the *Arkansas Mansion*, similarly reported, “Mr. Douglass marrying a white woman has alarmed the national legislature.”²⁹ Thus, many believed Douglass’s prominent marriage brought unwanted attention to a matter they thought well left alone as the tide had turned from the Reconstruction years when laws were repealed or overturned. Instead of being removed, only new bans were passed. Furthermore, as a response to an environment “where mob violence sought to castrate black men figuratively and literally,” Michele Mitchell argues, some African Americans proposed “ostracism for those black women and men who crossed the sexual color line.”³⁰ On the defensive by the 1880s, many African Americans did not tolerate Douglass’s action as it highlighted assumptions of African American men preying on white women and imperiled not only the legality of such unions, but the safety of all subject to the “myth of the black rapist.”³¹

To combat the idea that all African Americans coveted interracial marriage, many emphasized their disdain for such unions by distancing themselves from Douglass. For example, the African American weekly, *The New York Globe*, stressed that “as a rule, intermarriages between the races are not desirable to black or white.”³² Many other articles on either the Bennett bill or Douglass’s marriage made it a point to mention African Americans’ general disfavor toward interracial marriage.³³ Like their abolitionist

²⁹ “Mr. Douglass; Mr. Bennett,” *Arkansas Mansion*, February 9, 1884, 1.

³⁰ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 214.

³¹ The “myth of the black rapist” is the idea that African American men have been methodically portrayed as sexual predators to justify white violence against them. Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983), 185.

³² “The National Capital,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 1.

³³ See, for an example, “Fred Douglass’s Fatal Leap! His Marriage Ventilated! The Golden Egg Crushed!,” *Savannah Weekly Echo*, February 10, 1884, 4.

and Reconstruction forbearers, many believed denying their supposed desire to intermarry with whites the best approach.

Character and Class Assessments

Not only did many African American newspapers stress interracial marriage's undesirability, they joined whites in a common narrative—that whites who entered into interracial unions were of the lowest sort. As such, Helen's character and appearance became fodder for newspapers to condemn. A few papers, such as one near Helen's hometown, defended her, but many others—on both sides of the color line—suggested she was low class or morally dubious.³⁴ A contributor to the *Arkansas Mansion*, for example, considered Helen inherently beneath Douglass's dignity, as “no white woman of the higher order of American society would marry a colored man.”³⁵ Mainstream newspapers were of the same mind and sought to depict Helen as such. Michigan's *Jackson Citizen Patriot* reported that Helen had been fired from teaching “on account of her violent temper.”³⁶ The *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* insinuated that Helen married Douglass for his “considerable property.”³⁷ Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* described Helen as

³⁴ Some coverage spoke of Helen in a gracious manner describing her as “handsome,” “a fine-looking lady,” or “beautiful and cultured.” “Frederick Douglass Remarried: Choosing a White Wife,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 25, 1884; “The Marriage of Frederick Douglass,” *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, February 9, 1884, 2. A paper near Helen's hometown, Rochester's *Democrat* described her as “a very intelligent lady of spotless character” *Rochester Democrat* quoted in “General News in Brief,” *State Journal* (PA), February 2, 1884, 1.

³⁵ “[No Headline],” *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 1.

³⁶ “Washington Letter,” *Jackson Citizen Patriot* (MI), February 15, 1884, 2. Julie Nelson's Master's Thesis on Helen makes no such reference to Helen being fired for such causes. Instead, Nelson holds she disliked teaching. Julie Nelson, “Have We A Cause: The Life of Helen Pitts Douglass, 1838-1903” (Master's thesis. Shippensburg University, 1995), 102.

³⁷ “Fred. Douglass Marries: His Second Wife a White Lady, a Clerk in His Office—This Creates Quite a Sensation,” *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, January 25, 1884, 2. Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* insinuated similarly by announcing Douglass's marriage along with a highly inflated figure of his salary—“about

“a white spinster...almost as round as she [was] long.”³⁸ Perceptions of how class and race interacted therefore shaped responses to the marriage from both whites and African Americans.

Erroneous as these depictions of Helen might be, few readers would know otherwise and could therefore assume that Douglass used his class status to gain the racial status of a white spouse while Helen traded her racial status for Douglass’s class status. Later termed “status exchange theory” by sociologists, this theory predicts that African Americans of wealth and achievement will marry whites of a lower social station.³⁹ Thus, African Americans could worry that their most successful members would degrade themselves by marrying a white person of a lower social or economic position for the perceived value of their skin color. As Helen was actually from a prominent family and of a relatively high class, such a theory only applies to the public perception of the marriage.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, these depictions of Helen point to one of the reasons some African Americans might have protected the legal right to interracial marriage, but despised its actual practice. Many African Americans perceived it—like many whites did—as a union between affluent African Americans and low-class whites. Indiana’s mainstream

\$12,000 a year”—and an estimate of his net worth—\$200,000. “Washington Notes and Gossip Fred Douglass,” *Plain Dealer*, February 1, 1884, 1.

³⁸ “Washington Notes and Gossip Fred Douglass,” *Plain Dealer*, February 1, 1884, 1.

³⁹ Robert K. Merton, “Intermarriage and the Social Structure: Fact and Theory,” *Psychiatry* V 4 no. 3 (1941): 361-374; Kingsley Davis, “Intermarriage in Caste Societies” *American Anthropologist* V 43 (1941): 376-395. Status exchange theory has been challenged by scholars, but the criticism of it is on the applicability of it to describe interracial couples, not on the perceptions of such couples. See Michael J. Rosenfeld, “A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection,” *AJS* V 110 no. 5 (March 2005): 1284-1325.

⁴⁰ Helen was well educated, from a wealthy and respected family, and a descendant of passengers on the Mayflower. Nelson, “Have We A Cause,” 107.

newspaper, *The Recorder*, for instance, argued in 1899 in favor of a repeal of the state's interracial marriage ban in order to "abolish race distinction." The paper held, however, that "white women are not expected to make a grand rush for Negro husbands like Fred Douglass's white wife who went after his money and got it."⁴¹ Even while fighting to remove legal prohibitions, whites who entered such unions were disparaged. Doing so eased whites' concerns over amalgamation as they could maintain only the most morally dubious whites entered such unions. Similarly, African Americans claiming the same narrative could reiterate their general aversion to it.

These perceptions could prove detrimental to Douglass as considerations of class posed a double-edged sword, especially amongst the African American elite—primarily those with education, family respectability, and steady and above average incomes, in which Douglass was decidedly of the "upper strata."⁴² Acutely sensitive to the loss of social rights, elite African Americans were the fiercest advocates of "freedom of marriage."⁴³ Yet, elite African Americans rarely breached the color line in matrimony as to do so often violated, or had the appearance of violating, their class-consciousness. Even if a mate were of an equal status, the African American elite often rejected them as they were presumed to be socially inferior.⁴⁴ Even in "those very circles of Negroes who have a large infusion of white blood, where freedom of marriage is most strenuously advocated," W.E.B. Du Bois noted of elite African Americans, "white wives have always

⁴¹ "Repeal the Black Laws," *Recorder* (IN), January 21, 1899, 3.

⁴² Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁴ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 117.

been treated with disdain bordering on insult, and white husbands [were] never received on any terms of social recognition.”⁴⁵ Elite African Americans were therefore the fiercest protectors of the *right* to interracial marriage, but were often harsh critics of the *practice*.

According to a biographer of Douglass, however, he was “beyond the reach of social ostracism” due to “his many long-standing friends and acquaintances in both races.”⁴⁶ Indeed, despite the outcry, widespread condemnation, and reported loss of support, Douglass appears not to have lost any *close* friends over the matter. Some friends maintained he should have married an African American but remained supportive nevertheless. In fact, his marriage to a woman’s rights advocate renewed long dormant friendships with prominent suffragists.⁴⁷

Beyond close friends and those who shared Douglass’s views on interracial marriage, however, Douglass and Helen were not well received. The *New York World*, among others, reported that D.C.’s white society no longer associated with Helen and “hightoned [sic] colored people” no longer associated with Douglass.⁴⁸ Even Sunday church services became an opportunity to express dissatisfaction at either the couple or Helen’s perceived status. The *Washington Bee* reported that Douglass and Helen were snubbed at Grimké’s predominantly African American Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, not for their interracial marriage, but because Helen was considered of a lower station than Douglass. Their reception at the church was described as “a cold one” with

⁴⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), 359.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Atheneum, 1948), 300.

⁴⁷ “Douglass letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton,” May 30, 1884, in Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 694-5. See also Diane L. Barnes *Frederick Douglass: Reformer and Statesman* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 125.

⁴⁸ *New York World* quoted in “New York; Mrs. Frederick Douglass,” *Washington Bee*, May 10, 1884, 2.

“indignant” African American women glaring at “the old man and his bride as if they were two dangerous animals.” The *Bee*’s society columnist and a church member opined: “While I have no objections to him marrying whom he pleased, I do object to him forcing his bride upon our society.”⁴⁹ When the couple switched to the predominantly white First Presbyterian Church of Washington, President Cleveland’s place of worship, the pews reportedly became emptier every week. The cause of “this fashionable hegira,” according to the mainstream *Saturday Union* of Massachusetts was “the presence of Fred. Douglass and his white wife.”⁵⁰ The mainstream *Kansas City Times* ensured readers that Douglass’s “presence caused a sensation, not so much from his color as on account of the prejudice against his marriage.”⁵¹ Thus, perceptions of class shaped many reactions among African Americans, while whites seemed more mindful of the interracial union itself.

Social Airs and Perceptions of African American Women

Periodic comments about Douglass and Helen’s outings arose in newspapers in the years after their marriage, but when Douglass was appointed Minister to Haiti in 1889, his marriage provoked renewed debate and criticism from both sides of the color

⁴⁹ “Louisa To Clara,” *Washington Bee*, March 1, 1884, 3. The *Washington Bee*’s society column spoke in depth of the indignation that accompanied the newlywed’s attendance at Sunday church services: Douglass “and his bride were at the Presbyterian Church last Sunday. Well, Clara, you should have been there; it would have been a treat. Our girls were perfectly indignant. They stood off and eyed the old man and his bride as if they were two dangerous animals. I really felt sorry at the rebuke they received from our girls. There were only three persons greeted them and one of them was Miss B[ruce?], a very intimate friend. The reception of Mr. D. at 15th Presbyterian Church last Sunday was a cold one. While I have no objections to him marrying whom he pleased, I do object to him forcing his bride upon our society. [I] don’t consider her, socially, the equal of our Washington society, and she should be treated just the same as other persons who marry below their station.”

⁵⁰ S.W. Foss in the *Saturday Union* (Mass.) quoted in “Fred Douglass and His Wife,” *Washington Bee*, June 13, 1885, 2; “Washington,” *New York Herald*, February 25, 1885, 4.

⁵¹ “The President and Fred Douglass at Church,” *Kansas City Times*, June 7, 1884, 12.

line. Whites seemed primarily offended by the social “airs” they believed Douglass displayed since marrying Helen and held that Douglass would be ineffective in his post because of his controversial marriage. Many African Americans, however, were angered by the economic and symbolic affronts they believed Douglass caused by bringing with him his white wife and a white secretary.

After a Naval vessel was commissioned to take Douglass and Helen to Haiti, because no passenger vessel would accommodate him in a manner befitting his position, mainstream newspapers complained about the “great many airs” and the penchant “for social distinction” that Douglass had supposedly exhibited since marrying “a white wife.”⁵² Papers further complained that Douglass’s marriage caused him to be ineffective in his post as he had been “severely ostracized” since his marriage and it was considered poor form to appoint a minister with “an objectionable social reputation.”⁵³ Many also wondered how Haitians would receive his white wife. The *New York Herald* especially recoiled at Douglass’s appointment, as the paper perceived it as an official endorsement of interracial marriage. The paper predicted his diplomatic career would “probably be very short, unless the administration has resolved publicly to avow its approval of intermarriage.”⁵⁴ While reports of Douglass and Helen’s social outings arose periodically, Douglass’s new public position greatly renewed attention to his private affairs and some whites questioned his behavior and abilities because of it.

African American newspapers defended Douglass’s travel accommodations as a result of Jim Crow segregation. Some papers denounced Douglass, however, for his

⁵² “A Beggar on Horseback Fred Douglass Wants the Earth,” *St. Louis Republic*, September 26, 1889, 9.

⁵³ “A Miscegenation Administration,” *New York Herald*, October 3, 1888, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

white, female traveling companions.⁵⁵ Their presence, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported, was evidence that “colored women [were] not held in very high esteem by Mr. Douglass.”⁵⁶ Choosing a white secretary, and a white female at that, many African Americans held, both deprived their race of a patronage position and made a statement about the competence and abilities of African American women.

Douglass’s choice of a white wife, compounded by taking a white secretary to Haiti, had hit a raw nerve with some African Americans. Many African American newspapers expressed displeasure at the commentary on African American women they believed Douglass’s choice indicated. African American women had long been depicted as “licentious and immoral” and were not thought to possess the “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” of white women.⁵⁷ Many African American women, particularly the elite, who had internalized the values of the Cult of True Womanhood, “were outraged over the persistent attacks on their character and the refusal of the larger society to recognize their womanhood,” according to Beverly Guy-Sheftall.⁵⁸ Non-elite African American women were especially imperiled by these stereotypes that were used to justify their rape and abuse at the hands of whites.⁵⁹

African Americans sought to correct these derogatory depictions, but many contended Douglass’s choice of bride reinforced the hated stereotype by suggesting no African American woman was worthy of the eminent Douglass. As such, many African

⁵⁵ See, for example, “Mr. Douglass,” *Freeman* (Indianapolis, IN), October 19, 1889, 4.

⁵⁶ *Philadelphia Tribune* quoted in “Some Race News,” *Cleveland Gazette*, October 19, 1889, 1.

⁵⁷ Gloria Watkins, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 130-1; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1990), 6.

⁵⁸ Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow*, 12.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 185.

American newspapers thought his choice reflected poorly “upon the colored ladies of the country.”⁶⁰ Topeka, Kansas’ *Tribune* was explicit on just what they believed that choice reflected:

When we recollect that it is common for white men to allege that chastity, and other refined virtues which make ladies are not found in our race, we think that if consulted about it we would have advised Mr. D. to hunt a little further before strengthening this malicious libel by going among another race for a wife.⁶¹

Likewise, the *Arkansas Mansion* believed Douglass’s choice “reverse[d] the labors of his life” as it “branded” African Americans “inferior to the white race.”⁶² This resentment continued into Douglass’s waning years. For instance, after Thomas Fortune praised Douglass by declaring, “We all love him,” the *Cleveland Gazette* could not contain its wrath:

There are thousands of our ladies and many of the men folk who do not love him, for one reason or another. Some of them, doubtless, thought he might or ought to have married a lady of the race instead of his present (white) wife.⁶³

Douglass married Helen, in part, because he had long been colleagues and friends with white women. The same stereotypes that kept African American women out of reform movements, and therefore largely out of Douglass’s life, however, compounded reactions to his marriage as many thought Douglass only reinforced these notions of African American female inferiority.

⁶⁰ Baptist quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2; “Fred Douglass not Denounced,” *Philadelphia Times* quoted in the *Washington Bee*, February 2, 1884, 2; “Fred Douglass,” *Critic-Record*, January 28, 1884, 2.

⁶¹ Topeka Tribune quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁶² *Arkansas Mansion* quoted in “Mr. Douglass’s Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press,” *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁶³ “Hon. Fred Douglass,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 25, 1891, 2.

Safety

Along with the stereotypes affecting perceptions of African American women, stereotypes of African American men, namely the “myth of the black rapist,” served as an omnipresent backdrop to responses to Douglass’s marriage. Lynching would not peak until 1892, but at least fifty-one African Americans were lynched the year Helen and Douglass married.⁶⁴ According to Angela Davis, the formation of the “myth of the black rapist” was already underway in the 1880s and becoming “an essential ingredient of the postwar strategy of racist terror.”⁶⁵ The 1870s were marked by the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and similar terrorist groups. The 1880s and onward, however, were decades of lynching—public acts of mutilation, castration, burning, skinning, hanging, and shooting with occasionally thousands of witness-accomplices. Sometimes souvenirs were sold and railroads offered special excursion rates to attendees. The widespread press coverage and the brutality of the lynchings produced a chilling effect on African Americans that both deterred them from having interracial liaisons and induced them to denounce aspirations for such acts.⁶⁶

Safety, therefore, was often an unspoken undercurrent in the reaction to Douglass’s marriage. Indeed, in an article summarizing recent news events, the “general disapproval” of African Americans toward Douglass’s marriage was reported alongside word of the brutal slaying of several African American men by whites and the rape of a

⁶⁴The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive, “Lynchings, by Year and Race, 1882-1968,” http://faculty.berea.edu/browners/chesnutt/classroom/lynching_table_year.html.

⁶⁵ Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 185.

⁶⁶ Martha Hodes, *White Women Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 177, 207.

ten-year-old African American girl in Tennessee.⁶⁷ Douglass and Ida B. Wells would later battle fiercely against the excuses for lynching African Americans as being necessary to protect white women. The prominent example of an African American man and a white woman, however, could cause some to fear it would provoke retaliation from whites and fuel beliefs that *all* African American men sought white women. Similarly, Douglass's "insult" against African American women by choosing a white wife could be construed as contributing to a narrative that African American women lacked morality and genteel qualities, which was used to justify their rape.

While these implications primarily remained unspoken, a few reports were more direct. A mainstream Indiana paper proclaimed that Douglass, "for [African American's] sake should have restrained himself."⁶⁸ The *New York Graphic*, implying that African American men would want to follow Douglass's example, warned that

black men of minor importance had better be a little careful how they assume questionable matrimonial responsibilities, [as] there are a large number of white men who are continually in the ditch, from whiskey and other causes, and they are extremely sensitive with regard to the dignity of the noble Caucasian.⁶⁹

The paper derided the character of those who would perpetrate such retribution against African Americans, but carried the warning nonetheless. The African American weekly, *The Grit*, responding to the *Graphic* raged against the presumption that African American men would follow Douglass's example and that such unions were desirable to them. Rather, the paper held that "moral depravity" was "at the bottom" of most interracial

⁶⁷ Ham Hannible, "A Bloody Indictment," *New York Globe*, February 16, 1884, 1.

⁶⁸ *Greencastle Banner* (IN) quoted in "Fred Douglass," *Danville Hendricks County Republican* (IN), February 7, 1884, 4.

⁶⁹ *The New York Graphic* quoted in "Scissorizing," *Grit* (D.C.), February 16, 1884, 2.

unions.⁷⁰ While *The Grit* did not respond directly to the threat of white males angered by interracial marriage, by redirecting the topic to African American's disinterest in it and the low morality of those engaged in such unions, *The Grit* replicated long-used strategies to try and repel such allegations.⁷¹ Concern for safety therefore provoked a strenuous reaction from some African Americans as they felt the full "burden of disclaiming his act."⁷² Douglass's act was seen as more dangerous due to his stature, which magnified the reaction and its perceived consequences.

Leadership

Douglass's prominence made the marriage something to be condemned by African Americans not wanting to be associated with such a taboo and dangerous matter. Douglass's decision to cross the color line in matrimony, however, caused many to call his leadership into question. Even among those who tolerated interracial marriage, such a union seemed an improper act for a race leader. Much coverage therefore questioned Douglass's continued ability to be a recognized leader as his marriage threatened race solidarity and exposed class fissures. As a public figure, many African American commentators argued, Douglass should not have exercised his private right to marry someone who would imperil his public role. With a blaring headline declaring "His Strong Grasp on the Negro Race as a Party Leader Lost Eternally!," the African American *Savannah Weekly Echo* held that the marriage caused him to lose "all claim" to

⁷⁰ "Scissorizing," *Grit* (D.C.), February 16, 1884, 2.

⁷¹ Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 190.

⁷² *Greencastle Banner* (IN) quoted in "Fred Douglass," *Danville Hendricks County Republican* (IN), February 7, 1884, 4

leadership.⁷³ Ohio's African American *Weekly Review* contended, "from a private stand point" Douglass was entitled to his choice, "but viewed through the public lens it is contrary to everything one would imagine."⁷⁴ Douglass denied that the public and private dimensions of his life should be connected, but as a public figure, few agreed this division applied.

Undoubtedly some African Americans questioned Douglass's continued ability to lead because they assumed he would lose the respect and patronage of whites or they feared the ramifications from whites of supporting a leader who violated such a taboo. Remarks, however, dwelled on his loss of stature among African Americans, as they believed his interest no longer aligned with the race. Under the provocative headline "A Leader Wanted," Texas's *Austin Citizen* clamored that "we are without a leader for the colored race" as Douglass "jumped the race" by marrying a white woman.⁷⁵ Several papers argued that Douglass should lose his leadership position for the same reasons a

⁷³ "Fred Douglass's Fatal Leap! His Marriage Ventilated! The Golden Egg Crushed!," *Savannah Weekly Echo*, February 10, 1884, 4; Others, such as the *Arkansas Mansion* similarly argued, "Douglass's case was an exception on account of his being a leader of the people. We think at present that it is a bad example for him to set." "Maj. Bankston Returned," *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 1; Likewise, the *Pilot* held Douglass "forfeited his claim to the leadership of his race" by marrying a white woman. *Pilot* (Birmingham, AL) quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁷⁴ *Weekly Review* (Springfield) in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2. Likewise, the *Gate City Press* placed Douglass in an impossible situation wherein the paper held, "as a matter of duty to himself Mr. Douglass should have married the woman of his choice." Yet, if "his duty to his race" was "paramount to that he owes to himself," then the "his miscegenation [was] baneful." The paper left the question as to whether Douglass owed greater allegiance to himself or his race unanswered, but regardless, Douglass was either betraying himself or harming his race in the *Gate City Press*'s estimation. *Gate City Press* (Kansas City, MO) quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁷⁵ *Citizen* (Austin, TX) quoted in "A Leader Wanted," *Arkansas Mansion*, March 3, 1884, 1.

white politician would lose his if he were to marry interracialy.⁷⁶ Many therefore questioned Douglass's continued ability to lead, as they suspected his loyalty to the race.

More doubted, however, the race's persistent loyalty to Douglass. The *Cleveland Gazette* put Douglass's future leadership prospects thusly:

It will be many *many* years, if at all, before he will be the popular man he was a few weeks ago... We question no man or woman's right to marry whom they please; but we do question the wisdom of a leader of a people who enter into relations that will take from him the good will, support and respect of a large portion of his followers.⁷⁷

With his leadership undermined by his diminished support from African Americans, even those tolerant of interracial marriage could resent Douglass's marriage because it "destroy[ed] his usefulness for their good."⁷⁸ Even five years after the marriage, the *Cleveland Gazette* insisted, "the greatest mistake of Douglass's life was made when he married a white woman." Continuing, the paper held "Douglass the Afro-American leader did not do the proper thing in taking unto himself a *white* wife" as it has "lowered him very materially in the estimation of our people."⁷⁹ The *St. Louis Republic* similarly reported that many African Americans had been "opposed to him since he took unto himself a white wife with red hair."⁸⁰ Douglass's marriage therefore garnered far more

⁷⁶ A despondent one-time admirer of Douglass wrote a letter to the *Cleveland Gazette* arguing that much as President Arthur, a widower, would lose his position were he to marry an African American woman, so too must Douglass for marrying a white woman. Africanus, "That Marriage: Some Very Sensible Reasons Why Frederick Douglass Should Have Selected a Wife from His Own Race," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 16, 1884, 1]; *Western Recorder* (Lawrence, KA) likewise commented that "the colored people of this country will not take kindly to the marriage of Douglass, no more than the white people would honor the marriage of [Senator George] Edmunds, [Senator William] Allison or [Senator John] Logan, to a black woman." "There is No Use to Attempt to Conceal it," *The Western Recorder* (Lawrence, KA), February 1, 1884, 2.

⁷⁷ "That Marriage," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁷⁸ "An Impolitic Course," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁷⁹ "The Navy Disgraced," *Cleveland Gazette*, October 5, 1889, 2.

⁸⁰ "Washington Gossip," *St. Louis Republic*, June 29, 1889, 12.

criticism from African Americans than it would have were he not a leader as many believed his public role impinged upon his private right.

Mainstream coverage also questioned Douglass's ability to lead, not because of white resistance, but because of African American opposition.⁸¹ Mainstream newspapers held that Douglass "placed himself in a position which will alienate all his colored friends."⁸² The *Times* of Troy, New York reported that Douglass dismissed "the threat of the negroes that they will disown him" as "he cares but little."⁸³ A few mainstream newspapers, such as an editorial in the *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, however, insinuated that African Americans had better reject Douglass; "the thoughtful and godly of his people will find in this crystallized miscegenation just grounds for deserting him socially."⁸⁴ White expectations, therefore, held that Douglass had abandoned his race and that African Americans should likewise abandon him to disavow amalgamation.

Despite these continued slights, Douglass, like all unelected leaders, possessed only an ephemeral leadership. He could be railed against in newspapers and his speeches could suffer from low turnout, but his nearly fifty years of prominence could not evaporate overnight. His position as Recorder of Deeds, however, was more tangible and was therefore threatened by both his marriage and the election of a Democratic administration in November of 1884. As the new president filled government positions with Democrats, the *Cleveland Gazette* ran a story about "designing men" who were petitioning for

⁸¹ A few mainstream papers, however, suggested Douglass should lose his government position. For example, when Douglass and Helen started attending the First Presbyterian Church of Washington, the *Montgomery Advertiser* contended, "the President will have to turn this man out of office yet."

Montgomery Advertiser quoted in *New York Herald-Tribune*, June 5, 1885, 4.

⁸² [No Headline], *Weekly Nevada State Journal* (Reno), February 2, 1884, 1.

⁸³ Em, "Washington Letter," *Times* (Tory, NY), February 7, 1884, 1.

⁸⁴ "The Marriage of Frederick Douglass," *Patriot*, February 9, 1884, 2.

Douglass's office. The petitioners purported that "Douglass was no longer regarded as a leader of the colored race, on account of his marriage relation."⁸⁵ African American Democrats, however, also petitioned—to no avail—to fill former Senator Bruce's position as Registrar of the Treasury.⁸⁶ When President Cleveland finally sought to replace Douglass in 1886, Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* reported that African American voters in the North were pleased as "Washington colored men...have drawn a line on Fred Douglass since he married a white wife."⁸⁷ That Cleveland kept someone in office who both campaigned for his opponent and had a controversial marriage, however, speaks to either the tremendous prestige Douglass still carried or to Cleveland's magnanimity.

Race Solidarity

African American opposition to Douglass's marriage, however, was about far more than fearing that whites would transfer their wrath against Douglass to others or doubting his continued allegiance. To many, interracial marriage in general was considered harmful as they thought it damaged race pride and solidarity. Douglass viewed the

⁸⁵ "Hon. Fred. Douglass," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 21, 1885, 1.

⁸⁶ "A Negro Democrat After Mr. Bruce's Position," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 21, 1885, 1.

⁸⁷ "Cleveland; Fairly," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), March 6, 1886, 4; Even without his marriage, Douglass would have lost his position as he had actively campaigned for Cleveland's opponent, James G. Blaine. That Cleveland kept a political opponent, and a controversial one at that, in office so long is remarkable. Cleveland risked condemnation for this, especially as he paid Douglass "all the social consideration due" a man of his office. He invited Douglass and Helen to all social functions befitting Douglass's position as the Recorder of Deeds despite the critical coverage that followed such occasions. Douglass made it a point to credit Cleveland for this consideration in the revised version of his third autobiography: "When President Cleveland came to Washington, I was under a considerable cloud not altogether free from angry lightning. False friends of both colors were loading me with reproaches." Douglass, *Life and Times*, 961. For an example of coverage critical of Douglass and Helen's attendance at a White House reception, see: "Mr. Douglass at the Reception," *The Washington Critic*, February 13, 1886, 1.

creation of an intermediate race between the extremes of white and black as a sign of progress and movement towards his vision of a composite nationality. Many others, however, viewed it as a threat to race solidarity—the creation of a color line, within the color line. Fearing the repercussions of Douglass’s example being followed by others, a letter to the *Cleveland Gazette* raised the specter of intra-racial division in Haiti: “where the feuds and hatreds have caused so much bloodshed between the blacks and mulattoes to see what a state of things he proposes to introduce among us.”⁸⁸ Concluding, the letter writer held: “The only way to manhood is to look upon ourselves as a race as the equals of all other races, and to have as much love for our race as any other race has for its race.”⁸⁹ Thus, where Douglass saw interracial alliances as the path to advancement and the only means of ensuring the protection of rights, others saw it as conducive towards intra-racial division and detrimental to the race’s capacity for uplift.

Douglass’s allegiance to African Americans was further doubted after he asserted in a widely reprinted interview that he was “not an African.” The remark became the all-consuming focus of the African American press. “GOD FORBID,” the *Cleveland Gazette* responded bitterly, “that any man from our ranks should lead us or our race, in whom there is not race pride enough to own he is a Negro.”⁹⁰ The paper held that Douglass’s leadership was all but lost after this admission. Still furious a week later, the paper continued:

When men who claim to be representatives of our race, men who upon all occasions should hold high the banner of *race respect*, can so forge themselves as

⁸⁸ Africanus, “That Marriage: Some Very Sensible Reasons Why Frederick Douglass Should Have Selected a Wife from His Own Race,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 16, 1884, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “The Douglass Marriage,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

to trail it in the dust of humiliation, we say let them loose their hold upon identification with the race and the benefits accruing therefrom.⁹¹

Douglass's remarks reflected his vision of a composite nationality and his rejection of terming "everyone, however nearly connected with the white race, and however remotely connect with the Negro race, a Negro."⁹² The *Cleveland Gazette* and many other newspapers, however, could not abide by his claims of multi- or biracialism as they viewed it as only a source of division and disrespect.⁹³

Even four years after Douglass's marriage, some African Americans were still making their resentment of it known and rejecting Douglass's notion of a composite nationality. The Reverend Emanuel King Love of Georgia, for example, disapproved of "amalgamation whether legal or illegal" and believed Douglass's marriage in particular set a poor example. He feared it would cause successful African Americans to believe that their accomplishments entitled them to a white wife. Instead, he contended a "sensible" African American should seek nothing more than "to marry his own women [as] they are good enough for him." More than "good enough," Love celebrated that African American men had "a garden with a larger variety from which to choose the flower of life's joy" for they "can get a wife...as black as dye, as white as they are made and of the various colors all between."⁹⁴ Douglass celebrated a composite nationality, but some of his detractors celebrated the race's variety and upheld the "banner" of race pride

⁹¹ "Passing Events," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 9, 1884, 2.

⁹² Douglass held that "the motive is not a desire to elevate the Negro, but to humiliate and degrade those of mixed blood; not a desire to bring the Negro up, but to cast the mulatto and the quadroon down by forcing him below an arbitrary and hated color line." Douglass, "The Future of the Colored Race," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Speeches and Writings*, 592.

⁹³ "The Douglass Marriage," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

⁹⁴ Emanuel King Love, "Oration Delivered on Emancipation Day, January 2, 1888" *American Memory*, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lcrbmrpt0c07div3\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field(DOCID+@lit(lcrbmrpt0c07div3))).

they believed Douglass had dropped by his marriage. As such, a contributor to the *Arkansas Mansion* argued in reference to Douglass's marriage: "If the law of nature and of decency, enjoins upon the white man the duty to preserve the purity of his race, I hold, that it enjoins the same duty upon the colored man."⁹⁵ Martin Delany had died a few years before the marriage and Alexander Crummell remained silent, perhaps because of a "mutually high regard" between Douglass and Crummell.⁹⁶ Lesser-known black nationalists, however, rejected Douglass's example as detrimental to race purity and race pride.

Class Divisions

An important aspect of this rejection of Douglass's vision of a composite nationality was the very real fear that it would not only weaken race solidarity, but actually fracture the race along class lines—class lines which correlated significantly with differences in skin color. Past amalgamation had ensured that the divisions between elite and non-elite African Americans surpassed just economic, social, educational, and cultural differences. Skin color played a role in delineating classes. "Indisputably," according to Willard Gatewood, "the overwhelming majority" of elite African Americans were light-skinned.⁹⁷ While not a sufficient or even necessary quality for gaining admittance into the African American elite, color had long played a significant role in

⁹⁵ ["No Headline,"] *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 1.

⁹⁶ Wilson Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228.

⁹⁷ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 153.

determining an individual's social status.⁹⁸ More than a proclivity for a particular shade, it had roots in the preferential treatment light-skinned African Americans received from whites and the white ethnology that argued that those with Caucasian blood were intellectually superior to those of only African descent.⁹⁹ As a result, "by the turn of the century," Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall note, "this mulatto elite had clearly emerged as the intellectual and political leaders of the Black community."¹⁰⁰

A few years after Douglass's marriage a white sociologist contended that "one of the most fateful questions for the American negro" at this juncture was whether mixed-race individuals would "attempt to regard [themselves] as an intermediate race between white and black" or continue to accept the white imposed identification. "This is the deepest issue within the higher negro classes today," he concluded, but held that "upon this issue race leaders are divided."¹⁰¹ This divide, however, was not just between African American leaders, but also between African American leaders and their constituents. As Steven Hahn argues, in respect to an "incipient popular nationalism" among the African American masses, "relations between leaders and led were being renegotiated" during this period as their priorities differed.¹⁰² This divide and the question of mixed-race individuals' place in society, and thereby its association with interracial marriage, played a prominent role in the reaction to Douglass's marriage.

⁹⁸ John G. Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture: American Attitudes and Images 1865-1918* (n.p.: UMI Research Press, 1979), x.

⁹⁹ This preferential treatment stemmed from both family connections and the belief among whites that mixed-race individuals were more intelligent than those without Caucasian blood, which allowed greater economic and social opportunities to mixed-race individuals.

¹⁰⁰ Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 31.

¹⁰¹ H. Paul Douglass, *Christian Reconstruction in the South* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), 85.

¹⁰² Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 333, 345.

The socioeconomic differences, between light- and dark-skinned African Americans fostered jealousy and accusations of intra-racial discrimination. According to Joel Williamson, free mixed-race individuals *en masse* aligned themselves with whites prior to 1850. Over the course of the decade leading to the Civil War, however, social pressures exerted by Southern whites caused a shift in their alliances. Southern whites' semi-acceptance of free people of color transformed into outright rejection and several states sought to expel them. In the face of such pressures, "the mulatto elite gave up white alliances and picked up black alliances."¹⁰³ This continued after the war, but became strained as some members of the elite sought to distinguish themselves from the masses as Jim Crow advanced in the 1880s. Williamson terms the period 1850 to the turn of the century the "grand transition in race relations" as white Americans moved from overlooking "some blackness in a person," to classifying anyone known to have one "iota of color" as African American.¹⁰⁴ The transition of elite African Americans' support to the African American masses remained a contested and unsettled issue. In the face of increasing white discrimination and segregation, these alliances became fraught as non-elites feared elites would abandon them.

Critics held that these elite African Americans were trying to draw a color line within the color line and by so doing were "intent upon transforming itself into a separate caste that would win immunity to the proscriptions being placed on all Negroes."¹⁰⁵ Interracial marriage only compounded these fears as many saw it as a divisive force that

¹⁰³ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 62.

¹⁰⁴ Williamson, *New People*, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 154.

fueled color-consciousness and thereby created intra-racial divisions. As such, the *Arkansas Mansion* held that Douglass's marriage "only means to divide the colored race, which is calculated to weaken and keep us behind."¹⁰⁶ These tensions between elite light-skinned and non-elite dark-skinned African Americans only heightened as whites drew ever more strictures in the color line. Opponents of the preferential treatment light-skinned African Americans received and the discrimination they purportedly practiced against dark-skinned African Americans grew increasingly vocal in the 1880s.¹⁰⁷ This was especially the case after 1883 when the *Washington Bee* started "exposing what it perceived as the drawing of the color line by the 'white Negroes' of Washington's 'upper crust.'"¹⁰⁸ Thus, many saw Douglass's marriage "as the most visible evidence of his having 'sold out.'"¹⁰⁹ Indeed, some suggested Douglass's marriage to a white woman indicated he "wanted to be of the 'blue vein'"—a reference to elite African American social clubs that allegedly restricted membership to those with very light-skin.¹¹⁰

Although African American elites rarely crossed the color line in matrimony, interracial marriages by elites only heightened these ongoing anxieties. So too did the seeming preference of African American men for light-skinned wives. This color-consciousness had especially shown itself in reactions to Senator Bruce and his wife

¹⁰⁶ "Mr. Douglass," *Arkansas Mansion*, February 16, 1884, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 154.

¹⁰⁸ *The Washington Bee* quoted in Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory Stephens, *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96.

¹¹⁰ "Cleveland; Fairly," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), March 6, 1886, 4; The alleged test to become a part of such a society was possessing skin color light enough to allow the blue in veins to show through. Charles Chesnutt dismissed the idea that such a test existed and held that the name originated from an "envious outsider." Despite his denials that such a test existed, his short story, "The Wife of His Youth," was a clear call for African Americans to ignore complexional and even class differences and stand united. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," *The Atlantic* (1898).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1898/07/the-wife-of-his-youth/306658/>.

Josephine's wedding. When they married in 1878, newspapers noted the bride's light complexion with resentment.¹¹¹ Non-elites saw in such unions peril for solidarity and discrimination almost as palpable as that from whites. That Bruce and his light-skinned wife served as witnesses to Douglass's marriage—which was performed by a mixed-race minister who had a brother who had married a white woman—only compounded these fears and reinforced the notion of exclusive circles bent on leaving their darker brethren behind.

The charges against light-skinned African Americans drawing the color line were further rooted in beliefs that elite African Americans were intent on creating a separate caste for themselves that would win distinction from whites. The elite experienced the rise of Jim Crow and “were acutely sensitive to the proscriptions imposed upon them,” but its impact “on their lives was less pervasive and less brutalizing than it was on the ‘submerged masses’” according to Gatewood. “Too proud,” he added, “to go where they were not wanted or to risk moving backward, black aristocrats withdrew into a world of their own, often as separate from that of other blacks as from that of whites.”¹¹² Douglass, as he reiterated his support for assimilation and political rights in a climate of desires for race solidarity to protect against white assaults, only reinforced fears among lower class African Americans that he had different priorities.

The related practice of “passing,” a light-skinned African American assuming the identity of a white person, furthered the idea that some African Americans would abandon the race. Emphasizing this fluidity of race, Williamson holds that “the great age

¹¹¹ Josephine was described as so fair that even a “microscope” could not discern her African ancestry. *People's Advocate*, February 15, 1879, 2.

¹¹² Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 67, 37.

of passing” probably began around 1880 and purportedly one-hundred thousand African Americans a year “became” white.¹¹³ Hence, Douglass’s comments that he was “not an African” hit upon a sensitive issue. Douglass sought a third race between Africans and Caucasians, which would eventually become the homogenous American race, but in the mean time, some African Americans dreaded the potential repercussions. The 1886 advertisement “Sulpher Bitters” visually represents these fears as it suggests Douglass, at the behest of Helen, literally sought out lighter skin.¹¹⁴ Thus, while whites erected new and ever-stricter racial barriers that would exclude all with “one-drop” of African American blood, some African Americans feared the racial flexibility that allowed those light enough to leave. Amalgamation, many believed, could only create more capable of passing and thus more able to abandon the race.

These fears were not without cause as some elite African Americans were dismissive of the masses and, much like elite whites, sought to disassociate themselves from their lower-class counterparts. The divisions in opinion seemed to be both class and generational. The generation of African American leaders who came of age during Reconstruction or earlier, when racial barriers were not as stark as they were becoming and who witnessed the transformation from slavery to freedom, believed they would be permitted to assimilate into white society.¹¹⁵ Believing thusly, elite African Americans tended to reject separate institutions as their “faith in the possibility of ultimate assimilation...kept the black elite from uniting with the rest of the black community.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Williamson, *New People*, 103.

¹¹⁴ See introduction Figure 1, page 9.

¹¹⁵ Moore, *Leading the Race*, 31.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Those free before emancipation, like Douglass, or with no background in slavery were especially of this mind according to Gatewood. Further, to perpetuate their social status and gain acceptance from whites, some drew stark lines between themselves and the African American masses.¹¹⁷ Thus, many of Douglass's supporters were successful professionals who had attained some degree of acceptance, albeit limited, with whites. Many of his opponents, however, had largely been rebuffed and suppressed by whites and came of age amidst only rising discrimination.

The notion of creating a separate caste for mixed-race elites, however, was so pervasive that Thomas Fortune, the editor of the *New York Globe*, even suggested creating a separate category for elite light-skinned African Americans during an interview in response to Douglass's marriage. While he thought Douglass should have married within the race, he wondered if: "Possibly the time has come to emphasize the standing of the mulatto element, half white and half black, and place it, if deserving in other respects, on a social equality with whites."¹¹⁸ Fortune's revealing comments highlight both the goals of some elite African Americans and the fears of non-elites. Detractors to the integrationist stance believed whites would not accept African Americans—no matter their social, economic, or educational attainments. Nevertheless, they feared elite, and correspondingly light-skinned, African Americans would seek out a

¹¹⁷ Gatewood holds that "the effort of colored aristocrats to detach themselves from the black masses was perhaps most evident in the attitude they adopted toward the annual Emancipation Day celebration." Embarrassed by what some perceived as an undignified display, "upper-class blacks disassociated themselves from the Emancipation Day festivities." Douglass condemned the parades in 1886 for "thrusting upon public view a vastly undue proportion of the most unfortunate, unimproved and unprogressive class of the colored people." The withdrawal of elite African Americans from these celebrations gave further credence to the assertions of their critics that the elite shared little interest in or support for the African American masses. Douglass quoted in Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 51.

¹¹⁸ "Romance of Douglass's Wedding," *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, January 27, 1884, 1.

separate status and identity in order to escape the intensifying discrimination. To some, therefore, Douglass's marriage could be viewed as his attempt to abandon African Americans entirely.

Geography, or at least its correspondence with economic opportunity and race relations, undoubtedly played a role in responses too. African Americans in the South—who were most subject to white violence and discrimination and lacking economic opportunities—seemed widely opposed to the marriage. Hahn argued this same demographic were emigration's biggest proponents.¹¹⁹ Douglass's assimilation prescriptions, therefore, seemed an anathema to those seeking separatism as an escape from persecution. Supporters, in contrast, seemed to be primarily from urban areas in the North where they might have already gained a degree of acceptance from whites.

Elite and non-elite African Americans were further divided by their priorities. Elite African Americans primarily emphasized the importance of social and political equality while non-elites sought economic opportunity.¹²⁰ Therefore, with relationships between African American leaders and the masses already fraught, some found the marriage to be justification for past disapproval. Expressing regional and class differences with Douglass, Raleigh's *Banner-Enterprise* smugly reported that the newspaper had "repeatedly said that he does not represent the intelligent and more self-respecting colored men of the South."¹²¹ Another African American newspaper held that Douglass's marriage "proves our assertion made heretofore, that 'he had little sympathy

¹¹⁹ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 331.

¹²⁰ Williamson, *New People*, 81.

¹²¹ Raleigh *Banner-Enterprise* quoted in "Mr. Douglass's Marriage: Sentiments of the Colored Press," *New York Globe*, February 9, 1884, 2.

with his race.”¹²² For some therefore, Douglass’s marriage was but the final indication that his alliances lay elsewhere. Henry McFarland of the *Philadelphia Record* concluded in 1894 that African American leaders such as Douglass, Congressman John R. Lynch and John Mercer Langston, and Senator Bruce, had “very little to do with the mass of colored citizens.” “The colored people,” he continued, “do not feel that they are being helped very much by these leaders.”¹²³ Thus, Douglass’s marriage was not a sole cause of the burgeoning dissatisfaction with African American leadership, but indicative of a widening gulf in views concerning the future of the race.

Therefore, Douglass and Helen might have been ostracized by some members of the African American upper crust, but reports of non-elites rejecting Douglass were even more commonplace. A Kentucky newspaper reported that “a number of colored people of intelligence, if of less prominence, declare [Douglass’s marriage to be] disgraceful.”¹²⁴ A correspondent for the *Grit* noticed that Douglass “was not received [at a lecture] with the warmth and enthusiasm as our citizens were wont to show in former years.” In an obvious reference to Helen, the correspondent held it was “probably because Mr. Douglass has socially allied himself to the Caucasian race.”¹²⁵ Another contended, “try to disguise it as we may, the fact will force itself upon us, that to-day Douglass’s influence with the masses of our people is not what it was before his marriage.”¹²⁶ Even four years after the marriage, the *Washington Bee* speculated that Douglass would not be able to

¹²² The *A. Baptist* quoted in “Some Opinions. What Our Contemporaries Think of the Douglass Marriage, Pro- and Con,” *People’s Advocate* (D.C.), February 9, 1884, 2.

¹²³ Henry McFarland, *Philadelphia Record*, quoted in *Freeman* (Indianapolis, IN), March 5, 1894.

¹²⁴ [“No Headline”], *The Atchison Globe* (KA), January 29, 1884, 1.

¹²⁵ A.L.M. “Our Baltimore Letter,” *Grit* (D.C.), May 3, 1884, 2.

¹²⁶ “The Douglass Marriage,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, 1884, 2.

attract a large audience “after the insult he allowed his white wife to offer to our highly respectable and intelligent colored women.”¹²⁷ The insult of which the *Bee* spoke went unmentioned, but was presumably the act of marrying Douglass.

Many articles contained sentiments akin to this one from the *Cleveland Gazette*: “While we are liberal in our views on inter-marriage or amalgamation, yet we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the masses of our people are not educated up to that point, and will not readily acquiesce.”¹²⁸ Thus many African American newspapers claimed to espouse views tolerant of interracial marriage, but deemed lower class African Americans intolerant of it. Education might have had something to do with the different responses to the marriage, but more likely the divide originated in the disconnect between African American leaders and their constituents of which Hahn wrote. Bearing the full brunt of Jim Crow, white Southerners’ terror, and fearing abandonment by the African American elite, the African American masses found assimilation, its apex—amalgamation, and a composite nationality to be an impossibility, dangerous to propose, and undesirable.

Conclusion

Thus Douglass angered many African American elites for damaging his authority to lead and for marrying a woman they believed beneath his dignity. He angered non-elite African Americans by seemingly betraying them through his alliance with whites. Already dubious about his continued interest in the plight of non-elite African Americans, for many Douglass’s marriage indicated his decisive rejection of their cause.

¹²⁷ “Wait and See,” *Washington Bee*, April 14, 1888, 2.

¹²⁸ R.H.C., “Youngstown,” *Cleveland Gazette*, February 9, 1884, 2.

Losing the support of non-elite African Americans cast doubt amongst elites that Douglass was still up to the task of leading the race. Furthermore, the unwanted attention Douglass's marriage brought to interracial marriage threatened some and forced a reiteration of African Americans' general distaste towards interracial marriage to mitigate the threats to their safety. Unsatisfied with the explanation that his marriage was a personal matter, many African Americans rued the tremendous political implications involved.

"What effect," Douglass asked in response to the outcry against his marriage and the charge that he had abandoned the race, "can the affairs of my private life have upon my principles of justice?"¹²⁹ As the reaction to his marriage illustrates, many believed, at least for a leader like Douglass, private affairs and public principles were deeply intertwined. Douglass had long been aware of the opposition from African Americans to amalgamation. He dismissed this, however, as "the merest affectation," that would "never form an impassable barrier to the union of the two varieties."¹³⁰ He believed many racially mixed individuals had "internalized the 'One Drop' ideology," and were therefore "more noisily opposed" to it than anyone else.¹³¹ The years and many lynchings ahead, however, would prove whites were the more intransigent race toward the matter. Nevertheless, the strength of the African American opposition to Douglass's marriage

¹²⁹ "Fred Douglass on His Marriage: He is Neither an African nor a Caucasian and has no apology to Offer: From the *Washington Post*," *The New York Times*, January 27, 1884.

¹³⁰ Douglass, "The Future of the Colored Race," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 592.

¹³¹ Stephens, *On Racial Frontiers*, 105; Douglass, "The Future of the Colored Race," in Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 592.

would have a lasting influence, at least for two prominent African Americans who rejected white marriage partners with Douglass's example in mind.

CONCLUSION: AFTER DOUGLASS

“I had made up my mind definitely that I would not marry a white man.” –Mary Church Terrell, 1940¹

For some whites, Douglass’s marriage provided a convenient illustration of the dangers of social equality. Thirty-two years after the marriage and long after both Helen and Douglass’s died, the marriage served as an object lesson on the “dangers” of social equality in Alabama’s *Montgomery Advertiser*. In a full-page article in 1916, the teachings with which Helen was raised—in the form of her father accepting Douglass into his home—translated directly into her interracial marriage. While the article reported that her father opposed the marriage, it cited him as the guilty party because he taught her social equality. In so doing, the paper held, he “failed to realize the negro is a race and not a class.” By “extend[ing] all the freedom of his home to Douglass as his guest,” he “accepted him socially as his equal” and thus caused his daughter’s marriage.² The “lesson” for white Southern fathers was unmistakable. White animus against interracial marriage continued for most of the twentieth century and opponents of equal rights continued to exploit fears of interracial marriage to justify segregation, discrimination, and lynching. Race relations reached their nadir around the turn of the century and the ascendancy of white supremacy made most interracial pairings impossible. Into the middle of the twentieth century, laws prohibited such marriages in thirty states and the physical separation of segregation curtailed untold numbers of interracial romances.³

¹ M. C. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (New York: Arno Press, 1980 [1940]), 92.

² “Fred Douglass and Helen Pitts,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, March 27, 1916, 4.

³ Interracial marriage bans remained in place in thirty states until California’s Supreme Court overturned the state’s ban in 1948. Gradually, fourteen states removed their bans, but sixteen states still had bans when

The legacy of Douglass's marriage and the reaction to it among African Americans, however, is less apparent. If, as Willard Gatewood holds, African American views on interracial marriage were primarily visible through "breaches in the color line," then, in the years that followed Douglass's marriage, such views rarely emerged as few married interracially.⁴ African American views, however, can also be seen in rejected interracial marriage proposals. Douglass's marriage and the reaction to it became a formative experience for at least one future African American leader who rejected the prospect of a white spouse and perhaps influenced another to do the same.

Mary Church Terrell—a future civil rights activist—followed the newspaper coverage of Douglass and Helen's marriage with rapt attention. Pouring over the editorials on it in her college's reading room, she "was then and there convinced that no sound argument could be produced to prove that there is anything inherently wrong in the intermarriage of races." Angered by "the attitude assumed by many colored people, who criticized Mr. Douglass savagely," Terrell thought them hypocritical for "continuously clamoring for equality," but "condemn[ing] him for practicing what they themselves [had] preached." While the outcry could not persuade her interracial marriage was wrong, it convinced her "that under no circumstances would [she] marry a white man"—for, Terrell believed, "under existing conditions," interracial unions "could bring very little happiness." As such, she purportedly thrice rejected marriage proposals from white men, and offered it as proof "that some colored people are not so eager to marry white

the Supreme Court overturned them in 1968. Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

⁴ Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 177.

people.”⁵ Thus, Terrell believed interracial marriage benign, but inadvisable as “existing conditions”—African American opposition and presumably white racism too—proved to be too large an impediment. Further, she noted her rejection of white suitors as a corrective to prevailing white assumptions that African Americans desired, above all else, to marry whites.

Unlike Terrell, W.E.B. Du Bois—a senior in high school at the time of Douglass’s marriage—left no record of his reaction to the marriage. Nevertheless, given the magnitude of its coverage, and Du Bois’ voracious mind, he undoubtedly knew of the union. When studying abroad ten years later, he fell in love with a German girl. The pair seemed altar bound, but especially after white American visitors reminded Du Bois of the reception they would encounter in the U.S., he mourned, “that it could not be!” Like Terrell, he told his love that American prejudice would prevent their happiness, but continued that such a match would also be “fatal for [his] work at home” and that he “had neither property nor social standing” for such a union.⁶ Thus, his rationale reflected both the climate and financial concerns. The climate, he believed, made interracial marriage untenable—although, unlike Terrell, his statement leaves the blame ambiguous, as he could have meant white prejudice, African American disapproval, or both. Financial woes, however, seemed influential too. As a graduate student, he did not possess the means to shield himself and his would-be-bride from the discrimination they would incur.

⁵ She further lamented: “the average Caucasian in this country believes that there is nothing which colored people desire so much as to marry into their group. It seems to me it is my duty to inform those who entertain this opinion that at least one colored woman voluntarily rejected such a proposition three times.” Terrell, *A Colored Woman*, 92-94.

⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 161.

His biographer, David Lewis, maintains that Du Bois' "racial pride was as much a bar to intermarriage as" white prejudice.⁷ Regardless of the reasons, the decision seemed to have weighed on him heavily; even sixty years later, his wife recounted that his German love remained on his mind.⁸

Both Terrell and Du Bois maintained that although there was nothing inherently wrong with interracial marriage, they would not choose it personally or advocate for it.⁹ Terrell confined her reasons to public opposition, whereas Du Bois maintained it was a private choice, but held that widespread interracial marriage would be "a social calamity by reason of the wide cultural, ethical and traditional differences" between the races.¹⁰ Instead of amalgamation, Du Bois foresaw a dual identity—a "double-consciousness"—wherein those of African descent in the U.S. could retain their racial integrity while enjoying and contributing to American freedoms and culture.¹¹ Du Bois sought, "instead of antagonism between one's own sense of self and imposed contempt," to merge the "positive meanings of blackness and American."¹² He did not want to "Africanize America" or "bleach his Negro soul," but "to make it possible for a man to be both a

⁷ David Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 130. Lewis was probably referring to Du Bois' views as expressed in "Conservation of the Races" (1897), which was a strong repudiation of Douglass's prescriptions. In the "Conservation," Du Bois argued each race was striving "to develop for civilization its particular messages, its particular ideal, which would help to guide the world nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that 'one far off Divine event.'" Thus, both Du Bois and Douglass believed in unique racial gifts, but differed in how they should be used. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," (1897) in *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder, 2008), 83-95.

⁸ Du Bois' second wife recalled in her memoir of her husband the tenderness with which he told her of his German love sixty years later. Shirley Graham-Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 100-1.

⁹ Terrell professed to "have never advocated intermarriage of the races." Terrell, *A Colored Woman*, 409.

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Marrying of Black Folk," *Independent*, LXIX (October 13, 1910), 812-3.

¹¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1995 [1903]), 45.

¹² Marc Black, "Fanon and DuBoisian Double Consciousness," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* no. V (Summer 2007), 393-404.

Negro and an American.”¹³ In other words, Du Bois shared Douglass’s desire for integration, but rejected Douglass’s composite nationality for cultural pluralism.

Despite Terrell and Du Bois’ personal decisions not to marry interracially, both fought against restrictions to such marriages. In the wake of a surge in proposed bans of interracial marriage in 1913, Du Bois argued the bans must be fought, “not because we are anxious to marry white men’s sisters, but because we are determined that white men shall let our sisters alone.” Similarly, he contrasted the actions of African American men marrying white women with the behavior of white men who kept African American mistresses instead of wives.¹⁴ Ten years later, Terrell lobbied against a proposed national ban by arguing it would deprive African American women of protection and was a matter for individuals to determine, not the state.¹⁵

Thus, Terrell and Du Bois made many of the same arguments as African American opponents of Douglass’s marriage. They protected the right to interracial marriage, rejected personal aspirations to enter such unions, and placed the onus on white men preying on African American women. Neither expressed sympathy with Douglass’s beliefs in the inevitability of amalgamation or the benefits of a composite nation. While Terrell’s rationale stemmed directly from the reaction to Douglass’s marriage, Du Bois’

¹³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 45.

¹⁴ “Editorial: Intermarriage,” *The Crisis*, February 1913, 181. A surge in proposals to ban interracial marriage occurred because of the notorious interracial marriages of Jack Johnson, a boxing heavyweight champion. In 1911, after besting the so-called “Great White Hope” in a title bout, Johnson married a white woman. By most accounts a turbulent and abusive marriage, she killed herself the following year. Three months later he married another white woman, but not before being charged with violating the Mann Act for supposedly “transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes.” The case fell apart when his soon-to-be second wife refused to cooperate. The next month, however, a white woman brought renewed charges against him. In June 1913, he was sentenced to a year in prison. In reaction to the marriages, interracial marriage bans were introduced in eleven of the nineteen states without such laws. See Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164-7.

¹⁵ Terrell, *A Colored Woman*, 409.

reasons were more complex, but related to Douglass nonetheless. Despite the example of Douglass less than ten years prior, or perhaps because of it, Du Bois concluded he could not be an African American leader if he married a white woman. On the wane at the time of Douglass's marriage, acceptance of and belief in the possibility or desirability of a composite nationality and amalgamation seemed to have lost further ground by Du Bois and Terrell's ascendancy. They did not embrace separate institutions, as both of their roles in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People testify to, but they rejected a homogenous U.S.

Du Bois and Terrell were not alone, as many other African Americans seemed equally disinclined to marry interracially. In the 1920s and 1930s, Du Bois and other famed sociologists—like E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and Gunnar Myrdal—used the new methodologies of social science to study the rate of ongoing amalgamation. The scholarly consensus held that almost no amalgamation occurred past the 1890s.¹⁶ A recent study has found a corresponding decrease in interracial marriage between 1880 and 1930.¹⁷ Sociologist Caroline Bond Day concluded in 1932, after a fourteen-year study of several hundred mixed-race families, that her subjects felt “an artificially exaggerated animus against interracial unions.” She further found that African Americans in such unions were “violently tabooed by the better class of colored people.”¹⁸ The rise of Marcus Garvey—who vehemently opposed interracial marriage—must have also

¹⁶ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 115-6.

¹⁷ Aaron Gullickson, “Black-White Interracial Marriage Trends, 1850-2000” Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America (2006), 22.

¹⁸ Caroline Bond Day, *A Study of Some Negro-White Families in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Harvard University, 1932), 109-110.

played a role in this antipathy toward interracial marriage.¹⁹ Yet, as Steven Hahn holds: “Garvey tapped long-developing traditions of thought and aspiration as he tried to construct a newly expansive race consciousness.”²⁰ In other words, Garvey did not create an aversion to interracial marriage; he merely tapped into existing attitudes that were already underway at the time of Douglass’s marriage. As Day shows with elite African Americans and Hahn with rural African Americans in the South—who he concludes were Garvey’s main source of support—few African Americans embraced Douglass’s vision.²¹

Thus, within a generation after Douglass and Helen’s marriage, white supremacy—in the form of interracial marriage bans, lynching, and segregation—curtailed almost all such unions. Yet, many African Americans—with reasons ranging from race pride to safety to class concerns to antipathy toward members of the race that oppressed them—stigmatized and looked down upon such unions. By the turn of the century the racial fluidity that Douglass believed characterized the postbellum U.S. had decidedly ended. White hysteria toward even the idea of such unions and the threat many believed it posed to “racial purity” made it illegal in most states. More than just legal prohibitions, however, affected African Americans. White opposition furthered African American disapproval, as it forced many to defensively deny that they desired such unions and promoted the growth of race pride and solidarity to combat the violence and discrimination they faced from whites.

¹⁹ Garvey even met with the Ku Klux Klan in 1922 to discuss their “mutual race-purity goals.” Barbara Bair, “Remapping the Black/White Body,” in Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 404-5. See also Marcus Garvey, *Negro World*, March 24, 1922, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=743>.

²⁰ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 469.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 471.

Douglass believed widespread amalgamation would only occur “in the fullness of time” when it would be “so adjusted to surrounding conditions as hardly to be observed.”²² Given his marriage’s reception, “the fullness of time” had not yet arrived in 1884. Interracial marriage has markedly increased since the 1960s, but the nation is far from the homogeneous composite nationality he envisioned as inevitable. Instead, perhaps more from white vehemence than African American recalcitrance, Du Bois’ cultural pluralism and its heterogeneity and double-consciousness have persisted. Nevertheless, Douglass and Helen’s marriage and the reaction to it provide a window into a period of transition where the nation could have pursued an alternate path. The views expressed in response to the marriage reveal a multiplicity of concerns about what Douglass considered inevitable.

²² Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” December 1866, in Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 591.

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