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

I. Introduction

In the “Editor’s Preface” to Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the editor publishes a letter from Douglass that states his purpose in penning a second autobiography: “Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial.”¹ Douglass observes that public discourse about the legitimacy of slavery inevitably turns to whether enslaved and free Black people are members of the American moral and political community. One main purpose of *Bondage* is to address the challenge posed by the trial of the enslaved, and establish that enslaved and free Black people are full members of the American polity.²

In this paper, I develop an account of one form of political argument that Douglass uses to address the trial of the enslaved: declaration. Declaration is a form of argument that compels an audience to acknowledge the declarer as possessing some normative status (moral, political, or legal standing). Douglass uses declaration to compel audiences subject to and often implicated in the production of white supremacist ideology to acknowledge him as a citizen.³

In developing this account of declaration, I will spell out how Douglass understands citizenship and acknowledgement, and how acknowledgement of one’s standing as a citizen can

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² Douglass’s assumption of integration as an aim for antislavery politics derives, on my view, from his assessment that the means for integration are more viable than the means for separatism. It is not that Douglass thinks that integration is necessary, and so there must be means to achieve it. Rather, Douglass thinks that there are viable means for achieving integration— and these means are more viable than the means for achieving separatist aims— so abolitionists ought to adopt integration as an aim. By contrast, separatists like Martin Delany think that there are viable means for achieving separatism— and these means are more viable than the means for achieving integration— so abolitionists ought to adopt separatism as an aim. On this picture, the strands of integrationism and separatism in antebellum Black emancipatory politics share a fundamentally pragmatist orientation toward emancipation: the shape of liberation is going to be informed in part by the viable means that are available in pursuit of liberation. See Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois : Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5–9; [citation removed for anonymous review]
³ Subjection to white supremacist ideology impedes acknowledgement of Douglass’s political standing as a citizen. For the sake of scope, I focus here on the role of declaration in establishing acknowledgement of political standing. Douglass also uses declaration to prompt acknowledgement of his moral standing as a person.
be compelled. For Douglass, one’s standing as a citizen is constituted by the enactment of commitments to the fundamental principles of a polity. Importantly, on this conception of citizenship one’s standing as a citizen is not conferred by the wider polity. Instead, the other members of the polity relate to one as a citizen through acknowledgement. Acknowledgement, for Douglass, consists in comporting oneself in ways responsive to the standing of another. Acknowledging someone as a citizen in particular involves responsiveness to her commitment to the fundamental principles of the polity. Declaration compels acknowledgement by evincing dignity in a way that induces respect, and thereby acknowledgement.

II. Douglass’s Conception of Citizenship

In deploying declaration as a form of political argument, Douglass promotes the political standing of enslaved and free Black people in the US as citizens. It’s worth spelling out in a bit more detail what Douglass takes citizenship to consist in. Douglass understands citizenship as a normative status, which justifies one’s claim to specific political and legal rights. Douglass is especially concerned, for instance, with securing claims to the right to assemble, the right to testify in court, and the right to rebel against tyranny, because these rights are integral to a viable antislavery strategy that avails itself of the political mechanisms of the US.4

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

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slavery and white supremacy.\textsuperscript{5}

We often think of citizenship as a status \textit{constituted} by the possession of specific political and legal rights. Kymlicka and Norman call this the concept of “citizenship-as-legal-status.”\textsuperscript{6} We sometimes say that when someone is deprived of a particular right—e.g., the right to vote—she is deprived of her citizenship. But on the conception of citizenship I attribute to Douglass, Douglass maintains that one can be a citizen even if one is deprived of specific political and legal rights. (We should say in such cases that she is a citizen wrongfully deprived of her citizenship rights.) Instead, for Douglass, one is a citizen in virtue of enacting a commitment to the principles of the polity. Douglass’s view is a species of what Kymlicka and Norma call the conception of “citizenship-as-desirable-activity,” on which “the extent and quality of one’s citizenship is a function of one’s participation in that community.”\textsuperscript{7}

Douglass, I claim, understands political relations as constituted and maintained by participation in a political community. In the midst of recounting various forms of resistance by slaves on the planation, Douglass makes the following assertion:

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

\textsuperscript{5} Enacting a citizenship-constituting commitment, for Douglass, involves cultivating social bonds with others. On Douglass’s conception of American citizenship in particular, one enacts a citizenship-constituting commitment by resisting oppression in ways that cultivate bonds of trust, loyalty, and solidarity with others. This social bond constraint isn’t essential for spelling out Douglass’s conception of declaration, but it helps explain why enacting resistance against oppression halfway across the world does not make one an American citizen, on Douglass’s view.


\textsuperscript{7} Kymlicka and Norman, 353.
The right of rebellion Douglass has in mind here, I think, is not a reversionary right to forcefully break from a polity that radically harms one’s interests. Rather, Douglass’s right of rebellion empowers slaves— as well as free Black Americans— to resist the tyranny and oppression to which they are subjected as members of the polity. This is to say that Douglass’s right of rebellion is the right of a citizen; it a right that empowers one to participate in the politics of polity, in the same sense that the right to vote empowers.

Thus, according to the above passage, insofar as slaveholders (inadvertently) assert slaves’ rights of rebellion by commending the ‘fathers of this republic,’ they also assert the political standing of slaves as American citizens, since the right of rebellion is, for Douglass, a right of citizens. Slaveholders assert the political standing of slaves as citizens because, in commending the fathers of the republic, slaveholders implicitly affirm that resistance to tyranny and oppression is a fundamental principle of the American polity. The principle is fundamental in the sense that enacting the principle is to enact a commitment to the polity in a way that renders one a citizen. Throughout the chapters immediately preceding and following this passage, Douglass outlines various forms of resistance in which slaves engage on the plantation. In particular, Douglass describes in detail how he organized a covert Sabbath school on the Freeland plantation to teach other slaves to read, and how he and other central members of this school went on to organize an (ultimately unsuccessful) run-away plot.

Gooding-Williams observes that in the above passage “Douglass suggests that, in acting

\[8\] Douglass, 165.
\[9\] This is not to say that Douglass denies that slaves have a right of rebellion in the Lockean reversionary sense; it is only to say that Douglass also thinks that enslaved and free Black people in the US have a claim to participate in American politics through rebellion.

Thanks to XXX for helpful discussion on this point.
to assert their rights of rebellion, he and his fellow conspirators imitated the founding fathers” in enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression.10 Douglass emphasizes, for instance, in the Fifth of July speech that the founders enacted a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression through the Declaration of Independence, and in so doing forged the American polity.11 In engaging in antislavery resistance on the plantation, on Gooding-Williams’ reading of Douglass, slaves imitate the founders by enacting their own commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, and in so doing work towards reforging the American polity.

It is worth emphasizing that Douglass’s view of the American founders in (for instance) the Fifth of July speech is pointedly ambivalent. While he lauds the founders’ commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, he of course also notes that “[t]he point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable.”12 Douglass plainly does not think a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression is the only principle guiding the political practices of the American polity. The narrative of American decline Douglass deploys in the Fifth of July and other contemporary writings clearly implies that other oppressive commitments undermine the realization of a principle of anti-oppression.13 But this is precisely why, for Douglass, antislavery resistance serves a central role in reforging the American polity. To the extent that American political practices have become detached from a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, Douglass thinks that antislavery resistance— and especially varieties of resistance like declaration— will help to recenter a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression as a fundamental principle of the polity, and help to bring American political practices into accord with this principle.

10 Gooding-Williams, In the Shadow of Du Bois, 192.
11 Frederick Douglass, Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 190–92.
12 Douglass, 192.
In essence, just as the American founders render themselves citizens by forging a polity through the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, enslaved and free Black people render themselves citizens by reforging the same polity through the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. For Douglass, plantation politics—and Black-led abolitionist politics more generally—is a politics of antislavery resistance through which slaves render themselves citizens with a rightful claim to the political practices of the polity, including rebellion.

Thus, for Douglass, one is an American citizen inasmuch as one is engaged in political resistance against tyranny and oppression (i.e., resistance that enacts a commitment to the polity). Because, on this reading of Douglass, plantation politics is ubiquitous (because political resistance is ubiquitous among slaves, as reflected in the bonds of trust and solidarity they cultivation among one another in resistance) enslaved Black people in the US are already American citizens with a rightful claim to rebellion.

Given this account of citizenship, declaration helps promote the political standing of enslaved and free Black people in the US in two ways. First, when performed by agents subject to oppression, declaration is a form of political resistance. Such acts of declaration are thus themselves enactments of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. By enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression in a polity where such resistance is a fundamental principle, declaration helps constitute and maintain the declarer’s standing as a citizen. Second,

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14 In a polity where resistance against tyranny and oppression is a fundamental principle, it is not possible for oppressors to declare their standing. No form of political action an oppressor engages in (qua oppressor) will qualify as the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. But, in a polity with different fundamental principles, it is conceivable that oppressors could declare their standing as citizens through the enactment of a commitment to oppressive principles. (Indeed, one could argue that oppressors (qua oppressors) can declare their standing as citizens in the American polity by enacting other, oppressive principles fundamental to the polity. Since our focus is on the role of declaration in Douglass’s antislavery politics, and Douglass doesn’t take up this question directly, I won’t pursue the point further here.)
declaration calls attention to itself as action that constitutes and maintains the declarer as a citizen. In this way declaration contrasts with other, covert forms of antislavery resistance. By calling attention to itself in this way, declaration compels acknowledgement of the declarer as a citizen: in seeing an act of declaration as a citizenship-constituting act, an audience sees the declarer as constituting herself as a citizen. It is this characteristic, moreover, that articulates the potential of declaration to contribute to the reforging of the polity. Declaration not only helps constitute one’s political standing as a citizen, but also compels acknowledgement of such standing by the wider polity, and in so doing reorganizes the polity’s self-conception of its fundamental principles.

III. Two Examples of Declaration

Now that we have a sense of Douglass’s conception of citizenship, which declaration is meant to promote, I will outline two examples of declaration in My Bondage and My Freedom. The first is Douglass’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” speech, an excerpt of which is attached as an appendix to the original edition of Bondage. The second is Douglass’s fight with the ‘slave breaker’ Edward Covey.

A. Fifth of July Speech

On July 5, 1852, Douglass takes the stage in Rochester before an audience of (predominately white) Republicans. He acknowledges that he has been invited to speak about American independence. But while Douglass pays (pointedly ambivalent) homage to the American Founders, he uses the podium to decry American hypocrisy and slavery:

I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation
seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.\textsuperscript{15}

What, to the American slave, is your 4\textsuperscript{th} of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.\textsuperscript{16}

As Douglass shames his audience for asking him to celebrate this day, he notes that some would say he should “argue more, and denounce less” in order to promote the aims of antislavery effectively. Douglass plainly refuses to do so: “But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued.”\textsuperscript{17} The moral and political standing of the enslaved is not something “to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation,” for “[t]he time for such argument has passed.” Instead, what is needed is a tone of “scorching irony.”\textsuperscript{18}

The biting, ironic tone of Douglass’s speech expresses a refusal to argue over his political (and moral) standing in the polity.\textsuperscript{19} But this refusal to argue itself an act of political resistance: Douglass disrupts the trajectory of reasonable political discourse when faced with disagreement— to weigh the arguments on each side. In refusing to argue, Douglass is refusing to treat proponents of slavery and white supremacy as his political peers; he is thereby engaged

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Douglass, \textit{My Bondage and My Freedom}, 285.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Douglass, 288.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Douglass, 286.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Douglass, 287.
\item \textsuperscript{19} It is tempting to discount Douglass’s refusal to argue in the Fifth of July speech— after all, Douglass offers a number of arguments throughout this section of the speech. But it’s important to be attuned to the specific points Douglass argues for: he does provide a series of arguments to establish that is absurd to ask him to justify his moral and political standing, but he does not argue for his standing directly. For instance, in a passage we’ll consider below, Douglass argues that the legal code of Virginia, which imposes the death penalty on Black people for 72 crimes, implicitly acknowledges their standing as persons bearing moral responsibility. But Douglass does not move from this point to the conclusion that enslaved and free Black people are persons; Douglass moves to the conclusion that the moral standing of Black persons is not genuinely contested: “The manhood of the slave is conceded.” For Douglass, the antebellum legal code of Virginia is not evidence that Black people are persons— let us not confer such dignity upon a slave code— it is instead evidence that there is no good-faith debate to be had over the matter.
\end{itemize}
in resistance against tyranny and oppression. Douglass, moreover, enacts this political resistance before an audience. Through the scorching irony of his biting rhetoric, Douglass compels his audience to attend to his speech as an act of political resistance, and to himself as a citizen. This is to say that Douglass’s audience comes to see (i.e., acknowledge) that Douglass is wrongly denied the rights of a citizen— in particular, rights that would secure his full participation in American political institutions.

Douglass’s Fifth of July speech is an act of political resistance that compels its audience to attend to the act as such, and thereby acknowledge Douglass as an American citizen deprived of political rights. Crucially, Douglass does not establish this inconsistency by justifying his standing as a citizen— he refuses to engage in argument on this point; Douglass establishes his citizenship by enacting it through declaration.

**B. The Fight with Covey**

In August 1834, Douglass falls ill while processing wheat on the planation of the ‘slavebreaker’ Edward Covey.\(^{20}\) Covey, in response, beats Douglass badly; Douglass flees to his owner’s plantation (who had conscripted Douglass out to Covey), asking that he be hired out elsewhere. Douglass’s owner, however, instructs him to return to Covey’s plantation the following day.\(^{21}\)

After returning to Covey’s plantation, Douglass is eventually ambushed by Covey while working in the stables. Douglass, in response, springs into resistance, “remember[ing] my pledge to stand up in my own defense,” which Douglass made to himself while returning to Covey’s plantation. Ultimately, after a two hour (!) struggle, Covey gives up on his attack, without having

\(^{20}\) Slaveowners in eastern Maryland would hire out “disobedient” slaves to Covey cheaply, and in exchange he would discipline them through violent and brutal means.

“whipped me [Douglass] at all.”22 Douglass asserts that his fight with Covey “was the end of the brutification to which slavery had subjected me.”23

Gooding-Williams characterizes Douglass’s fight with Covey as Douglass’s “first declaration of independence.”24 Douglass presents his fight with Covey as “the beginning of a revolution that aims to reconstitute the American nation” paralleling the role of the Declaration of Independence in (a certain intuitive mythology of) the American Revolution.25 In the fight with Covey, as through the Declaration of Independence, Douglass secures a certain (and certainly tenuous) degree of autonomy from a tyrant, altering the way in which Covey comports himself in relation to Douglass. The fight with Covey thus gives us a sense of what sort of acknowledgement declaration compels, and how it compels such acknowledgement.

Important for our purposes, Douglass describes his experience in standing up for his own defense “as though [Covey and I] stood as equals before the law.”26 Douglass articulates his own forceful resistance as constituting not only an act of self-defense, but also an expression of a rightful claim to self-defense when attacked by another. Douglass sees his resistance as expressing a rightful claim to self-defense, I claim, because he sees it as enacting his political standing as a citizen. In fighting back against Covey, Douglass is not only avoiding physical harm, but “repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant.”27 Douglass thus sees himself as engaged in resistance against tyranny and oppression, and thereby a citizen with equal standing before the law, which he asserts by enacting a right to self-defense.

22 Douglass, 151.
23 Douglass, 152.
24 Gooding-Williams, In the Shadow of Du Bois, 176. Nothing in interpretation hangs on this in fact being Douglass’s first declaration, although I agree with Gooding-Williams that Douglass invites this claim.
25 Gooding-Williams, 180. By an ‘intuitive mythology,’ I mean that the Declaration of Independence is a tractable starting point in the narrative of the American Revolution, although in that document the founders are reacting, and giving shape, to extant revolutionary efforts.
26 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 149.
27 Douglass, 151.
Douglass’s resistance, moreover, brings about a long term change in his relationship with Covey on the plantation. Whereas before the fight, Douglass observes that he “remained with Covey for one year, (I cannot say I lived with him),”28 after the fight Douglass remarks that he “lived with Covey,” for Covey “never again laid on me the weight of his finger in anger.”29 Douglass, I claim, interprets this change in Covey’s behavior as acknowledgement of Douglass’s right to self-defense, and thereby (partial) acknowledgment of his political standing as a citizen.30 Covey acknowledges Douglass insofar as after the fight, Douglass comes to live with Covey. Of course, this also implies that acknowledgement of one’s standing as a citizen does not necessarily consist in consciously affirmed recognition of this standing. Douglass notes that Covey never attacks him again, nor calls the authorities to detain Douglass, at least in part because Covey worries that talk about the fight would harm his reputation as a slavebreaker.31 Covey’s acknowledgement is manifest in his behavior, not in his consciously affirmed attitudes. But because Douglass emphasizes the change in his relationship with Covey, however— from remaining to living with— he clearly takes this change in Covey’s behavior to have some significance.

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

**IV. Compelling Acknowledgement**

28 Douglass, 133. Emphasis his.
29 Douglass, 151.
30 The acknowledgment that Douglass secures from Covey is plainly partial, as Covey continues to ‘own’ Douglass and exploit his labor.
At this point we’ve seen how two examples of declaration establish Douglass’s standing as a citizen: they are enactments of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression which compels an audience to acknowledge them as such. In this section, I spell out the sense of ‘acknowledgement’ involved in declaration, and the sense in which declaration compels such acknowledgement.

Acknowledgement, for Douglass, is a capacious category. It is a weaker condition than formal recognition, because acknowledgement needn’t be explicitly conferred: neither Douglass’s audience in the Fifth of July speech nor Covey are asked to affirm that Douglass is a citizen or has a rightful claim to self-defense. Moreover, as we saw in our discussion of the fight with Covey, acknowledgement needn’t manifest in conscious attitudes. Douglass makes no claims about the beliefs Covey holds about Douglass; Douglass only emphasizes the impact that the fight had on the way that Covey behaved towards Douglass after the fight —never laying a finger in anger on Douglass again, thereby enabling Douglass to live, rather than remain, with Covey.

Douglass discusses acknowledgement explicitly in his Fifth of July speech, in connection with the antebellum legal code of Virginia:

The slaveholders themselves acknowledge [that the slave is a man] in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the state of Virginia which, if committed by a black man… subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of these same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being.\(^{32}\)

Douglass argues that the legal code of Virginia, in subjecting slaves to punishment,

\(^{32}\) Douglass, 286.
acknowledges slaves as “moral, intellectual, and responsible” beings. Punishment is distinguished from the mere infliction of suffering because punishment responds to (actual or perceived) violations of one’s moral responsibility. An act punishment thus expresses a responsiveness to the moral responsibility, and thus moral standing, of the person subject to punishment.33

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

One might object at this stage by claiming that the legal code and its authors do not respond to the moral standing of the punished, but rather confer such standing. But it seems quite implausible to attribute to Douglass the view that slaves acquire moral standing in virtue of the way in which they are treated by the legal code. In particular, Douglass clearly holds that, in spite of slaveholders’ implicit acknowledgement of slaves’ moral standing, slaveholders fail to treat slaves in accord with the moral standing they possess. But if another’s standing is brought into being by one’s acknowledgement, it is unclear how one could acknowledge another’s standing in ways that fail to accord with her standing— that is, to treat her as a moral agent, but treat her wrongly as a moral agent. In order to preserve the structure of Douglass’s claim— that the actions of slaveholders acknowledge the standing of enslaved and free Black people, but

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33 Note that here we are discussing moral standing in order to elucidate Douglass’s conception of acknowledgement, as Douglass discusses acknowledgement explicitly in connection with moral standing in this passage.
these actions fail to accord with the standing they acknowledge—Douglass must understand
acknowledgement as responsive to normative statuses we already possess, rather than as
conferring or constituting such statuses.

Acknowledgement, for Douglass, thus consists in responsiveness to the normative standing
of another. Such responsiveness manifests in (i.e., is expressed by) an agents’ actions, as in the
attribution of responsibility in acts of punishment. These actions can be expressions of
consciously affirmed attitudes, but they need not be. Acknowledgement, for Douglass, thus
manifests in what we do in relation to others.34

This characterization of acknowledgement does not imply that bringing about a change in
consciously affirmed attitudes among members of a polity is irrelevant to promoting the political
standing of those subject to oppression (much less the aims of emancipatory politics more
widely). Rather, Douglass holds that lasting changes in opinion depend on lasting change in our
patterns of action Early on in Bondage, Douglass asserts that “[p]ublic opinion seldom differs
very widely from public practice.”35 What the public (stably) believes depends, Douglass
maintains, on what the public does, so that we reliably change public opinion by bringing about
changes in public practices/habits. Where declaration successfully compels acknowledgement, it
alters the habits of the audience so that they better comport themselves in ways that reflect the
standing of the declarer. In this way, acts of declaration lay the habitual groundwork for changes
in public opinion, even when they do not immediately bring about a change in consciously held
attitudes.

Declaration compels acknowledgement of the declarer as a citizen by evincing (political)

34 Acknowledgement is a variety of expressive action in Hominh’s sense, because acts of acknowledgement are acts
that expresses attitudes of the agent performing the act, but not necessarily intentional or conscious attitudes of
35 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 45.
dignity. Douglass expresses this view when he claims in describing his fight with Covey that “A man without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity.”36 While in this context Douglass is referring to physical force, it is plausible to extend his claim to other forms of force, like forceful rhetoric— so that the claim also applies to the Fifth of July speech. Gooding-Williams observes that dignity, expressed through force, is important for Douglass:

not because a human being cannot be a human being without it, but because he cannot induce respect without it—either the respect of others or self-respect. In short, he cannot achieve his humanity in the eyes of others or in his own eyes. The essential dignity of humanity is an apparent, manifest dignity that human beings require—that all the members of humanity require—to acknowledge one another as human.37

Through the use of (rhetorical or physical) force, declaration evinces the dignity of the agent and thereby induces respect in the audience. Dignity evinced induces respect because it is manifest: it is present to the audience in a way that compels them to attend to it. Force, for Douglass, is the means by which, or the medium through which, dignity manifests and compels the attention of the audience.38 Respect manifests where one comports oneself in ways that reflect the standing of another: my respect or disrespect for you manifests in the way I comport myself in relation to you. This is to say that in respecting another one acknowledges another. Thus, declaration induces acknowledgement of the declarer’s standing by evincing the declarer’s dignity.

To be clear, the claim here is that respect is sufficient for acknowledgement, not that respect

36 Douglass, 151.
37 Gooding-Williams, In the Shadow of Du Bois, 181.
38 This points towards a functional characterization of forcefulness in Douglass's account of declaration. We needn't assume that there is anything distinctive about physical force in this regard, except that in certain circumstance physical force may be the most effective means of compelling an audience to attend to the dignity evinced in an act of declaration. Ultimately, on Douglass's picture, ‘force’ seems best characterized as a public exercise of one’s political (or moral) agency that reliably commands the attention and response of one’s audience.
and acknowledgment are identical states. As we’ve seen above in Douglass’s remarks about the antebellum legal code of Virginia, one can acknowledge another’s standing in ways that disrespect the latter’s standing. In order keep in view the distinctive form of disrespect Douglass identifies in cases like the legal code of Virginia, we have to see them as responding to the standing of their targets, in ways that undercut, rather than affirm, such standing. This is to say actions can acknowledge, but disrespect, the standing of another.

We should take acknowledgement, rather than respect, as the primary explanatory concept for declaration. Plainly, in the face of declaration an audience can fail to respect the standing of the declarer. When confronted with the declarer’s dignity, the audience can contort themselves in ways that obscure their perception of her dignity, or attack the declarer and her dignity directly. But even in such contortion or attack, which plainly disrespects the declarer, we should say that the audience acknowledges the declarer— they are comporting themselves in a way that is responsive to the standing of the agent. The emancipatory potential of declaration, I claim, consists primarily in its ability to bring about acknowledgement, both when acts of declaration go well (induce respect) or go poorly (fail to induce respect). When declaration goes well, acknowledgement is secured through the inducement of respect. But even when declaration goes poorly, acknowledgement can manifest in disrespect— through an active refusal to comport oneself in ways that reflect the normative standing of the declarer. It is in this sense that declaration reflects a fundamental political capacity of persons (i.e., it is not a capacity conferred by the attitudes of others), since acknowledgment can manifest both in the inducement of respect and in the failure to induce respect (i.e., in disrespectful responses by one’s audience).

This is not to deny that declarers typically seek to secure acknowledgement by inducing respect. In order to keep this point in view, I deny that declaration is a success term— one can

39 Thanks to XXX for helpful discussion on this point.
declare even if one fails to secure proper uptake of one’s intention (i.e., to be respected as possessing a particular normative status). We should understand cases in which declaration fails to induce respect— but nevertheless induces acknowledgement— as cases of what Samia Hesni characterizes as illocutionary frustration: “the phenomenon of a hearer treating a speaker as though she does not have the standing to perform the speech act she intends to perform.”

Illocutionary frustration contrasts with illocutionary silencing, on which the failure to secure uptake in fact deprives the speaker of the ability to perform the act (e.g., if my audience does not recognize my refusal as a refusal, on the illocutionary silencing picture I have not in fact refused). Treating a speaker as though she does not having the standing to perform an act does not necessarily deprive her of the capacity to perform the act. Hesni takes refusal which is not respected as a paradigmatic case of illocutionary frustration (as opposed to illocutionary silencing): when I refuse, and you fail to respect my refusal, this doesn’t mean that I have not refused— this is not a capacity of which you can deprive me in virtue of the attitudes you take towards me. My capacity to declare is fundamental in this sense. This is because, whether you take an attitude of respect or disrespect towards me in response to my declaration, you acknowledge my standing— this is because you comport yourself in a way that responds to my standing, even when you seek to undermine this standing. Your disrespect counts as disrespect precisely because it compromises my standing, and is in that way responsive to my standing.

Thus, declaration compels acknowledgment in two senses. First, declaration forces the audience to attend to the action and its agent, and thereby confront the agent’s dignity evinced in the action. Second, through this confrontation with the agent’s evinced dignity, declaration (typically) induces respect, and thus acknowledgement of the agent as possessing a certain

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normative status. Where the dignity evinced is political, as in Douglass’s Fifth of July speech and fight with Covey, declaration induces acknowledgment of the agent’s political standing, because what is manifest to the audience is the agent’s enacted commitment to the fundamental principles of the polity.

V. Conclusion

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

The episodes of political resistance Douglass recounts in Bondage do not supply evidence from which the audience ought to infer that free and enslaved Black people have a rightful claim to American citizenship. Rather, the episodes of political resistance recounted in Bondage are manifestations of slaves’ political dignity, because they illustrate ways in which slaves enact a commitment to resist the tyranny and oppression of slaveholders. By evincing dignity in this way, the narrative episodes induce respect and acknowledgement of slaves’ political standing as citizens. Bondage itself, thus, is an instance in which one can promote the political standing of others through declaration. The narrative not only promotes Douglass’s political standing, but also that of the other slaves whose resistance Douglass recounts. Douglass’s narrative confronts his readers’ with slaves’ citizenship enacted. To the extent that Douglass’s narrative is effective, he compels acknowledgement of slaves’ citizenship, and thereby addresses the trial of the enslaved.