

BOOK REVIEW

*The Powers of Dignity: The
Black Political Philosophy of
Frederick Douglass*

Nicholas Knowles Bromell.
Durham, NC: Duke University
Press, 2021.

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Frederick Douglass (1817?–1875) is a monumental American figure. As a runaway slave and leading black thinker, speaker, and writer in the abolitionist movement and during Reconstruction and its tragic collapse, his legacy in American history is singular. His ideals and scorching criticisms have marked American political thought about democracy, religion, race, racism, liberty, and equality. American political parties claim him, especially the Republican Party, with which he has an early connection and which has used his figure as cover for their less than egalitarian projects, as do different ideological camps. One can find accounts of Douglass as an existentialist, revolutionary, proto-libertarian, liberal, civic republican thinker. His North Star continues to guide those who welcome its light, although it may lead them down different political-ideological paths.

In all of this, one can imagine that those not familiar with the details of Douglass's narratives and deeds might, in the context of all of that national hagiography, lose track of the fact that he was a black man. Frederick Douglass was a black man born into slavery, survived that brutal regime for twenty-one years, and then escaped and became a principal leader of the American abolition movement and leading black political thinker.

Shortly after escaping slavery, he wrote his first famous autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and subsequently two more, in addition to volumes of speeches, articles, and a novel. It is as if his monumentality, like marble, alabaster, or bronze—the stuff of civic memorials—would obscure that irreducible fact in its grand monotones.

Nick Brommell's *The Powers of Dignity: The Black Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass* reminds readers that that irreducible fact is a non-trivial, essential element of Douglass's life and work. Bromell argues that this includes the political theory, a product of Douglass's black political philosophy that runs through it all. He contends that Douglass argued for an inclusive conception of personhood and active citizenship, which America's founding public philosophy, distorted by white supremacy, purposefully did not. Its elements include a defense of the moral personhood of blacks and their full and equal citizenship and a view of political community enlivened by group solidarities and active citizenship in defense of justice.

In the course of his analysis, Bromell, a literary theorist, draws on an assortment of contemporary philosophical, rhetorical, and political theories, all of which have a critical theoretical bent, to explicate Douglass's ideas. This method bears fruit in an instructive analysis of the rhetorical structure of Douglass's writings and speeches, especially his arguments. Brommell's analysis of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* usefully explains how it stands out, not only in terms of updated autobiographical details, but also style and analytical and argumentative intent. This is a reading that other scholars have pioneered, but his rhetorical analysis fleshes out, for example, the role of moral sentiments, care, and intimate and social relations in Douglass's narrative.

A central feature of Bromell's analysis is that Douglass employs what he and others call a "fugitive rhetoric" that comprises an emphasis on the perspective of his and other black Americans' standpoints, the holding of opposite ideas in tension, and the use of the rhetorical technique "chiasmus," where a statement is repeated in reverse order in successive phrases or clauses. It is an illuminating analysis, but Bromell goes further by claiming that Douglass was committed to the tenets of contemporary standpoint epistemology. Douglass certainly referenced and employed his experience and viewpoint as a black man and former slave in his work, just as he directly addressed the viewpoints and interests of black Americans. However, whether this means that Douglass was *committed* to

the set of ideas that we now call standpoint epistemology is another matter. This concern applies to Bromell's reading of Douglass's method of holding seemingly contrasting ideas in tension and his use of chiasmus. Contemporary philosophical theories of chiasmus carry particular metaphysical and epistemological implications, and those theories might shed light on Douglass's political projects. However, their incidental utility does not mean they definitively describe Douglass's intent or public philosophy. This is a specifically important point because those theories lead to subjective conceptions of truth, especially relating to ethics and politics, while Douglass, as Bromell recognizes, repeatedly and emphatically endorsed what he took to be universal normative truths.

In the same vein, Bromell makes several additional claims regarding the conceptual distinctiveness of Douglass's view of power, dignity, rights, and citizenship. Douglass employed conceptions of each and other important ideas specific to his style, approach, and ends. As other black political thinkers did before him, he used these concepts to condemn slavery, racism, and the hypocrisy of American Republicanism and Christianity to assert the equal moral personhood and dignity of blacks and demand equal rights and citizenship. Bromell rightly emphasizes the role of "power," as an individual capability, in Douglass's view of natural rights, moral dignity, and citizenship. It is an emphasis that is in keeping with both Douglass's personal narrative and his national political projects. Douglass did not think that Americans—that Black Americans or abolitionists—should passively wait for deliverance from either God or national political leadership. Likewise, Bromell is correct to push back on reductions of Douglass's views to Lockean, Rousseauian, or Kantian interpretations. Douglass is more than an incarnation of standard deontological, liberal, or civic republican philosophy. As a nineteenth-century black radical thinker, he stood in relation and contributed to those moral and political philosophical traditions. However, Bromell's claim that Douglass's conceptions of power, natural rights, and citizenship are *conceptually* distinct from the large host of major philosophical, theological, and political theoretical accounts that preceded him and influenced those ideas in his time is suggestive but not decisive.

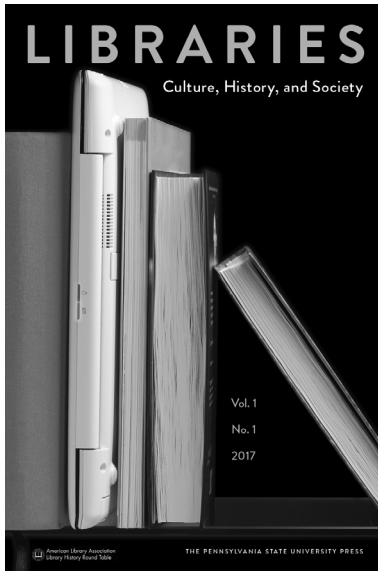
Like other writers and theorists before him, Bromell offers us *another* Douglass—as a black critical political theorist. This is a testament to the fecundity of Douglass's black political-philosophical legacy. It is a legacy that leads to competing interpretations of him; all the same and for all their

differences, his scorching prophetic vision of liberty, equality, citizenship, and progress unites them all.

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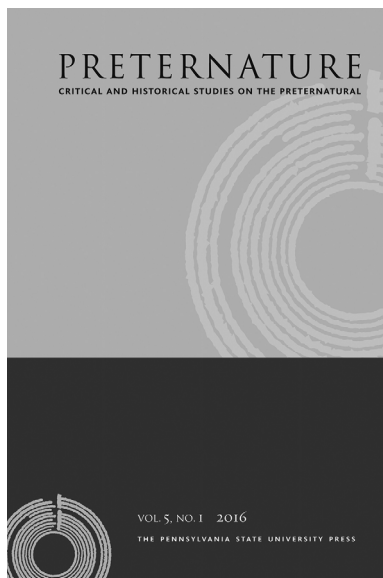
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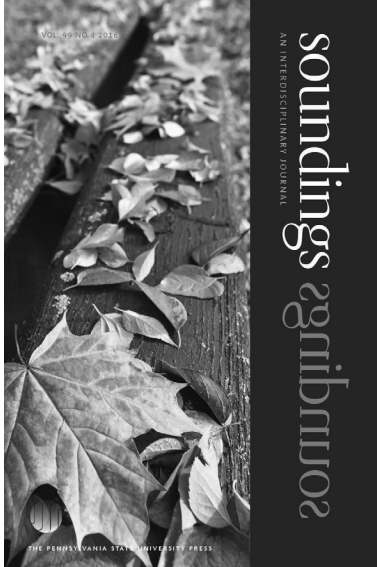
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