

FORGED BY WOMEN: REVISITING THE SELF-MADE MAN IN *DOUGLASS' WOMEN* BY JEWELL PARKER RHODES

HATICE BAY
hatice.bay@kapadokya.edu.tr
Cappadocia University

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ABSTRACT: Numerous works have celebrated Frederick Douglass as a self-made abolitionist, orator, writer, and advocate for women's rights and have associated him with ideals of manhood. Employing critical masculinity studies, Africana womanism, and the female gaze, this article argues that Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women* (2002) destabilizes Douglass's masculinity and restores the voices of Anna Murray Douglass (his first wife) and Otilie Assing (his German translator and intellectual companion). The novel reimagines how Douglass's legacy relied on Anna's fiscal, emotional, and logistical help and on Otilie's multifaceted support as an editor, translator, confidante, and lover. By restoring these women's voices and drawing attention to the unequal gender relations at the heart of the famous reformer's self-representation as an autonomous man, Rhodes's work reveals the deep dependence of Douglass and the wider anti-slavery leadership on women.

RESUMEN: Numerosas obras han ensalzado a Frederick Douglass como abolicionista, orador, escritor y defensor de los derechos de la mujer, y como hombre hecho a sí mismo, y lo han asociado con los ideales de la masculinidad. Recurriendo a los estudios críticos sobre la masculinidad, el womanismo africano y la mirada femenina, este artículo sostiene que la novela *Douglass' Women* (2002), de Jewell Parker Rhodes, desestabiliza la masculinidad de Douglass y devuelve la voz a Anna Murray Douglass (su primera esposa) y a Otilie Assing (su traductora alemana y compañera intelectual). La novela reimagina

cómo el legado de Douglass dependía de la ayuda económica, emocional y logística de Anna, y del apoyo multifacético de Otilie como editora, traductora, confidente y amante. Al devolver la voz a estas mujeres y llamar la atención sobre las relaciones de género desiguales que subyacen a la auto-representación del famoso reformador como hombre autónomo, la obra de Rhodes revela la profunda dependencia de Douglass y del liderazgo antiesclavista en general respecto a las mujeres.

INTRODUCTION

Frederick Douglass is, as Litasha Dennis observes, “oddly, known and unknown” (xxxi). This contradiction stems from the immense scale of his life as well as the specific silences and omissions surrounding it. This essay examines Jewell Parker Rhodes’s 2002 historical novel, *Douglass’ Women*, to provide a fuller account of Douglass and his legacy. The novel presents a speculative interpretation that invites the reader to reconsider Douglass’s image of self-sufficiency and masculinity as well as the broader narratives through which he is remembered and celebrated. This essay argues that Douglass’s carefully curated image as a self-made man relies on the critical roles played by women, particularly Anna Murray Douglass and Otilie Assing.

Douglass formed his “self-made” masculine identity over the course of his life, although the process was never without contradiction. As Maurice O. Wallace puts it, “Man-making [...] is scarcely a different enterprise than image-making in either the private lodges or public lives of black men” (82–83). R. W. Connell clarifies how masculinity takes shape over time, observing that “even physical masculinity is historical, rather than a biological fact [...] [It is] constantly in process, constantly being constituted in actions and relations, constantly implicated in historical change” (30). Douglass’s project of self-making was, therefore, a strategic performance rather than a natural trait. For instance, although in his 1845 autobiography he acknowledges key male ally David Ruggles for his “vigilance, kindness, and perseverance” (109), Douglass repeatedly presents himself as an unmarried, solitary man. Similarly, in a chapter of his final autobiography, *Life and Times*, titled “Honor to Whom Honor,” he praises white and Black abolitionists, including women who

supported him (566–574), yet he fails to mention Anna and Ottilie, the two women most central to his personal, intellectual, and public life. This rhetoric of autonomy is striking in his account of personal hardships, such as the 1872 fire described in *Life and Times*. Despite being married at the time, Douglass refers to the lost property in Rochester as “my house” (327) and later notes the proximity of a seminary to “my house in Alexander Street” (331). His narrative of solitary selfhood appears most clearly in his “Self-Made Men” lecture, delivered the year of the fire, in which he declares that successful individuals are “indebted to themselves” for overcoming adversity through determination alone.

These tensions in Douglass’s self-presentation have not gone unnoticed. Mary Helen Washington, for instance, remarks that Douglass portrayed his escape “as though he were a solo artist—self-initiating, self-propelling, and self-sustaining—making the plunge into the dark night of freedom alone and unassisted” (8). Similarly, David Leverenz contends that Douglass’s preoccupation with manliness led him to “erase any self-representation linking him to women, family, and intimacy, as well as to lower-class black people” (341). Other scholars approach these silences by situating them within the social and historical pressures of the nineteenth century. Mar Gallego links them to the rigid nineteenth-century norms of manhood, which were white, patriarchal, and excluded women (13). Leigh Fought suggests they were motivated by concerns for women’s safety (39) and by societal expectations of women’s respectability (40). However, these explanations raise further questions; for example, it is unclear why concern for safety and respectability would lead Douglass to publicly celebrate the British abolitionist Julia Griffiths while systematically erasing Ottilie Assing and his wife. One could also argue that his acknowledgment of Griffiths unsettles his performance of manliness.

Douglass’s selective self-representation and the resulting exclusion of key women collaborators have profoundly shaped his legacy. Most biographers replicate his marginalization, relegate women to traditional roles, and only fleetingly acknowledge their importance (Fought 2). While there are revisionist works, such as Maria Diedrich’s *Love across Color Lines: Ottilie Assing and Frederick Douglass* (1999), Rose O’Keefe’s *Frederick & Anna Douglass in Rochester, New York: Their Home Was Open to All* (2013), M. Nzadi

Keita's *Brief Evidence of Heaven: Poems from the Life of Anna Murray Douglass* (2014), and Fought's *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (2017), they are outliers among persistent assertions that Douglass "rose through his own efforts to become one of the nation's foremost intellectuals" (Sandefur xii). David W. Blight, in his Pulitzer-winning *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (2018), perpetuates this myth, noting that "by the 1850s, Douglass's public image was of a virile man of the world, holding audiences in rapt control with words as well as charisma" (209). Blight's vivid description of Douglass's portrait reinforces the self-crafted narrative about Douglass that this analysis challenges: "The fiery eyes, prominent nose, striking features, goatee surrounding prominent lips seemingly about to burst into eloquence, and that lion's mane of hair, carefully brushed and parted, all provided an image of a *man* for a heroic age" (209). Although Blight acknowledges Anna as Douglass's "ultimate 'helpmeet,'" he then emphasizes that "Douglass sustained his inner psychological standing in part by the sheer force of will and what he called his 'pen and tongue'" (195). This sequence again centers Douglass. Although Blight credits Otilie's contributions, his characterization of her as "emotionally volatile," "a freethinking atheist," (291) and "always self-serving" (513) minimizes her efforts. In contrast, this essay argues that Douglass's masculinity and reputation were established through his relationships with women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Drawing on critical masculinity studies, Africana womanism, and the female gaze, this analysis challenges the myth of Douglass's self-made manhood. Although these vantage points are anachronistic, in conjunction with Rhodes's (2002) fictional account of Douglass, they reveal the complexity of Douglass's self-reliant persona. These frameworks destabilize rigid male-female divisions and portray male vulnerability not as a flaw but as a vital aspect of manliness influenced by context. They also demonstrate that women function as a constitutive factor (rather than a secondary support) of male subjectivity. In line with these perspectives, the analysis presented in this essay shows that Douglass depended heavily on women's

validating gaze and domestic, emotional, financial, and intellectual support.

In her introduction to *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, Judith Kegan Gardiner notes that contemporary masculinity scholars such as R. W. Connell and Michael Kimmel accentuate the disadvantages of a dominant model of manhood:

It narrowed their options, forced them into confining roles, dampened their emotions, inhibited their relationships with other men, precluded intimacy with women and children, imposed sexual and gender conformity, distorted their self-perceptions, limited their social consciousness, and doomed them to continual and humiliating fear of failure to live up to the masculinity mark. (5-6)

Reflecting this pressure, in the pre-Civil War era, when Black men in the United States faced degrading circumstances that aimed to deprive them of their humanity and masculinity, they still asserted their manliness. As Sergio A. Lussana notes, these enslaved men often engaged in “drinking, gambling, wrestling, and hunting” to sustain their sense of manhood (6-7). He explains:

In slave communities, men claimed these activities as masculine preserves. It was here, in an all-male world, they constructed markers of status, identity, and masculinity and forged lasting friendships. It was here, together, that they fought the humiliating, degrading, and emasculating features of their enslavement. In this homosocial world, they became men. (7)

While the homosocial activities Lussana depicts can foster self-confidence and self-esteem, they also show how enslaved men were caught up in the structure of patriarchy.

Read anachronistically, these insights illuminate how nineteenth-century constructions of masculinity, even within the slavery context, were organized around narratives of independence and self-mastery that were detrimental to the male individual. Drawing on scholars such as Calvin Thomas, Gardiner explains that we cannot view men as generic humans. Instead, we must see them as “gendered male persons” whose emotions, physical experiences, and sexuality are central to understanding them (10). In addition, Gardiner disputes the idea that male identity is undisputable and

fixed. She argues that despite the “appearance of permanence, stability, and naturalness,” masculinities are “contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed, changeable and constantly changing, variously institutionalized, and recreated through media representations and individual and collective performances” (11). This perspective suggests that Douglass’s masculinity was a display of strength sculpted by vulnerability, restraint, and survival under the conditions of slavery.

Similarly to contemporary critical masculinity studies that question rigid notions of manhood, *Africana womanism* offers a lens for examining how Douglass’s public persona and prominence were co-constructed with his Black wife, Anna—his partner of forty-four years and the mother of his five children. Coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the mid-1980s, the term ‘*Africana womanism*’ specifically refers to women of African heritage (17). However, despite its name, *Africana womanism* is not a woman-centered framework. As a family-oriented and collective theory, it focuses equally on men of African heritage. It depicts women’s and men’s challenges and identities as deeply intertwined (70), reflecting the lived realities, difficulties, desires, and activism of women and their male partners in their shared struggle against racial hierarchy (113).

According to Hudson-Weems, the *Africana womanist* has eighteen defining characteristics. She is a self-namer and self-definer (38, 40) who asserts her identity on her own terms. She is family-centered (41), prioritizing “the family and its needs” (42), and strong (45), demonstrating “her strength and steadfastness in protecting the vulnerabilities of her family” (46). Her nurturing nature creates a secure, loving environment for her family (51). As a figure “in concert with her male counterpart,” she seeks harmonious relationships with men (46) and cooperates with Black men in the fight for racial and social equality (43), while remaining “whole and authentic” (48). While her ambition compels her “to realize her goals and objectives in life” (50), she is adaptable, requiring “no separate space for nourishing her individual needs and goals” (50). She is flexible and unbound by fixed gender roles; she “has never been restricted or limited to the home and household chores, and her male counterpart more often than not has shared the role as homemaker, particularly when he found it difficult to hold a job for an extended period of time” (44). To maintain her self-

esteem and self-worth (47), she demands “both respect of her person and recognition of her humanness” (48). She draws strength from her faith and her cultural inheritance, and she is respectful toward her elders, honoring their wisdom (49). In Rhodes’s (2002) novel, Anna embodies these traits; she is presented as a powerful woman who supports and sustains Douglass’s public career.

The concept of the female gaze can be used to clarify the power dynamic between Douglass and Otilie Assing, Douglass’s companion for twenty-eight years. Through this lens, Otilie is portrayed as a woman with unique agency rather than one defined exclusively by her relationship with Douglass. The female gaze is frequently discussed in relation to the male gaze, which entails achieving “pleasure in looking” and positions women as passive objects “simultaneously looked at and displayed” and “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey 11). Within this framework, the female gaze permits women to claim agency and authority through the act of looking at men. However, this is not simply the male gaze in reverse. As Suzanne Moore claims, “If a female gaze exists it does not simply replicate a monolithic and masculinised stare, but instead involves a whole variety of looks and glances – an interplay of possibilities” (59). In other words, the female gaze is dynamic and fluid and covers a spectrum of looks, from desire to empathy, judgment, or intellectual curiosity. In “How Do We Define the Female Gaze in 2018?” Tori Telfer highlights the complexity of the female gaze:

It’s emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than to objectify. (Or not.) It’s respectful, it’s technical, it hasn’t had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it’s feminine and unashamed, it’s part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back.

In politics and art, the female gaze is a tool used to redefine power, subjectivity, and desire. In literature, it is also used to contest traditional power structures. According to Kathryn Hemmann, “female characters exercising narrative privilege, as well as the writers who write them, the artists who draw them, and the readers who read them, can also turn a female gaze onto male-dominated narratives, thus reconfiguring stories at a contextual and metatextual level” (3).

This approach highlights women's influence and allows masculinity and heterosexual relationships to be explored from a female perspective.

THE UNMAKING AND REMAKING OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS IN DOUGLASS' WOMEN

Douglass' Women, set during the antebellum and Civil War eras, features Anna and Otilie as alternating narrators. This dual perspective interrogates Douglass's grandiose image and creates space for the two women's counter-narratives. The novel begins with Anna's chapter, "Narrative of the Life of Anna Murray Douglass, a Free Woman of Color (1813–1882)," which places her at the center of the story. She reflects on "the Africans that never made it to slavery" and declares that "we've got to live the lives they lost. Otherwise no sense for living at all" (Rhodes 31), while frequently reciting her mantra, "love, love be true" (128). These aspects reveal Anna's Africana womanist identity, her devoted and radical love, and the oral wisdom handed down by her parents, which preserves the memory of the Middle Passage. Anna's nurturing and empathetic nature and devotion to her community highlight the main differences between her and her husband. She prioritizes familial stability and demonstrates deep commitment to her husband and her family. These values were instilled in her through her mother's emphasis on "deeds, not words" (128) and through witnessing her parents' enduring bond: "until Pa died, he never left Mam for even a night" (135). In contrast, Anna's husband focuses on individual achievement, public recognition, and travel, "visit[ing] the finest houses [and] currying favor with politicians, lords and ladies" (179). While he embarks on long speaking tours, Anna remains the bedrock of his life and the regenerator of Black futures. She affirms, "I be carrying his child. I be the best wife, mother. I be the harbor, the safe home for when he grew tired of glory" (72). Anna fulfills her roles as provider, caregiver, and supporter—a demanding task, as she describes herself: "[He] gone most times. Me, alone in a cold house. Left to raise four children. Bury one. Left to rebuild when the house burnt down" (8). This example shows that Douglass's liberation depends on the domestic foundation Anna maintains.

From the opening chapters of the novel, Rhodes positions Anna as the central pillar of Douglass's success. Born free, Anna asserts her economic power: "[He] thinks reading and the sight of white-masted ships free him. But I freed him. Me and my bones" (9). Her claim is rooted in "years of sweat, mending my dresses, not buying myself pretty things" and "laundering other folks' clothes" (32). Their daughter, Rosetta, in *Anna Murray Douglass: My Mother as I Recall Her*, testifies to her mother's resourcefulness, claiming that "the little that they possessed was the outcome of the industrial and economical habits that were characteristic of my mother" (Sprague 9). Moreover, Anna applies her tailoring skills and knowledge of logistics to navigate and resist the constraints of the slave system. For example, she expertly sews and irons a sailor's outfit for her husband to facilitate his escape (Rhodes 35).

In the novel, Anna provides the financial means for Douglass to pursue his intellectual work and growth. She enables his first autobiography by purchasing writing supplies, including "a candle, a quill, an inkwell, and vellum" from the local store (130). She also provides encouragement, telling him, "write your book. Your story should be written down. I'll work" (130). These efforts reflect an African American womanist vision of partnership that accentuates cooperation between men and women, demonstrating "the collective nature of the coexistence of the male and female" (Hudson-Weems 78). Anna's pride in her partner's work further exemplifies her emphasis on collaboration: "I was proud of him, proud for him. He worked for something bigger than himself. I saw he worked for our baby's future" (Rhodes 119).

However, Douglass's self-centered and patriarchal attitude upsets this balance. Even his apparent praise for his wife—"Anna, I'm lucky to have you"—quickly shifts to self-promotion: "I went from a life with no joy to one where white men listen, respect me, where I have a home of my own" (57). Thus, Douglass erases his wife's presence and labor in establishing that home. Anna notes that he becomes increasingly hypermasculine over time: "It was like Freddy grew rigid as he came into himself, a free man. Like his *self* became the center of all things [...] He didn't care about my feelings. He forgot I helped him to escape" (208). In this way, Douglass's newfound freedom becomes the very force that limits Anna's. His disregard for their mutuality is

evident when he derides his wife's intellectual influence on their daughter, asking, "Have you taught her Plato, the text of my books, how to write a letter? [...] Have you given her anything to think about other than your small domestic arts? Have you given her wisdom and ideas to think and dream about?" (246–247). In his analysis of the novel, Michael Lackey observes that Douglass's preoccupation with his own freedom and intellect causes him to overlook Anna's vital material contributions. This oversight stems from a Western ideology that values grand intellectual acts and disregards the everyday (330).

This fictional portrayal of the couple's private life sharply contrasts the historical Douglass's public promotion of gender parity; in his speech on "The Rights of Women," delivered at Seneca Falls, he states that "all that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman" and "right is of no sex" (1848). However, Rhodes's novel presents Douglass as a man who does not apply these principles at home.

The consummate carer Anna, ever affectionate, nurturing, and patient, turns sharply critical when confronted by her husband's thanklessness and disloyalty. As a self-respecting Africana woman, betrayed and undervalued by his affairs with Otilie and Griffiths (as dramatized and hinted at, respectively, in the novel), Anna claims authority in their relationship: "You forget. I found you. You didn't find me, Mr. Douglass, ex-slave man" (Rhodes 248). As a self-definer and self-namer, she disrupts her husband's iconic status by refusing to be pigeonholed based on her relationship to him. She states determinedly, "Moving day everybody be my friend. Nobody wanted me to move. But I was tired of living in somebody else's house. I'd make my own home. Make my own friends too" (169), and adds, "I picked [Lynn] because it had a woman's name—Lynn" (169). With these acts, she claims her own life and identity, separate from her husband.

Anna defies her husband's self-importance by calling him "Freddy" instead of his preferred "Frederick" (59). This rebellion grows when she questions his surname: "*Frederick Douglass*. Where Douglass come from? Did he pull the name from air? Where'd he get it from? My name, Anna Murray, be real. Douglass, not so real. But my vows be true" (125). With her authentic name, Anna contests his invented one and refuses to let him control the narrative of his identity.

She also critiques the rhetorician's renowned speaking skills, recounting how, "in time, Freddy's voice became noise. His babble mingled with the boy's rough games" (271). Thus, within her home, she diminishes his fame as a great orator. Furthermore, her intergenerational storytelling skills—as revealed in her account of her Mam and Mam's Mam [250]—offer a powerful counterpoint to Douglass's polished oratory. They highlight her Africana strengths, including her spirituality, cultural authenticity, and reverence for elders. Her narrative underscores her affinity for the natural world and ancestral knowledge:

I was thinking of my Mam. She taught me love was "little things." Not big words or books of poetry but fresh-baked bread, a hand on your back. A kind word. A good laugh. Taught me the earth brimmed with learning. Soil that healed, nurtured food and flowers. But it was the sea, said my Mam, that brimmed with the spirit-bones, lost souls who never had a chance at life or love. (337)

Anna's deep connection to her parents' wisdom and ancestral memory is part of her Africana womanist worldview. Her poetic and emotional voice contrasts with Douglass's "cool and controlled narration" and "strong, unique, commanding presence" (Gibson 551). Anna is equally eloquent and serves as Douglass's vernacular and ancestral oratorical counterpart.

Ottolie Assing's fictionalized "Diary of Ottolie Assing, Beloved of Frederick Douglass (1820–1884)" provides the novel's second female perspective on the famous anti-slavery campaigner. Her maverick gaze, which destabilizes the societal and racial status quo, is shaped by her German-Jewish background, her marginalization due to antisemitism, and her parents' teachings, such as "Independent thinking. Independent heart" (84).

Her story opens in Paris, where she is desolate. She writes, "I didn't expect my life to end this way. Me, fifty-eight, sitting like a moonling wrapped in furs, trying to stave off chills. The thought of America makes my heart cold. It didn't always" (77). This profound disillusionment comes from a deep personal disappointment; Ottolie had hoped that Douglass would marry her after Anna's death, but that hope ended when she learned he had married Helen Pitts.

Her writings prior to this disappointment exhibit an ardent adoration of Douglass, at whom she gazes freely and admiringly. For instance, when he asks her opinion of his complexion (154), she responds with a lyrical, painterly vision: “I see color. As much as I see colors in the sky, the sea, in the plumage of birds. Your hand, light tan on one side and burnished copper on the other. [...] How could I fail to see beauty in these colors? I can’t lie and call myself [color]blind” (154). By celebrating Blackness, Otilie challenges the racist gazes that demean it; her perspective portrays Douglass’s Black skin as a valued and praiseworthy part of his identity.

Otilie also serves as Douglass’s intellectual mentor. She notes, “We spoke of Goethe, Shakespeare (I promised to take him to his first play)” (148). As Diedrich’s research reveals, Otilie introduced Douglass to “non-English European literature, philosophy, and social theory; she challenged him to transcend his intellectual American focus” (xxviii). In this way, Otilie disrupts the traditional notion that men provide knowledge and women receive it. She acts as the teacher, complicating the conventional link between intellect and masculinity.

Otilie also fervently supports Douglass and his cause. She recalls, “I spent my days and nights hand-lettering posters announcing the Society’s meeting and its speaker, Frederick Douglass” (Rhodes 101). In her promotion and dissemination of his work, she amplifies marginalized voices on a global scale. As a multilingualist, she has the skills to spread his ideas transnationally. She says, “I speak several languages. Douglass, you may need an interpreter if the abolitionist cause expands [...] I can translate your *Narrative*, translate your story for the European community to understand” (144). Their collaborative process unfolds as they sit “side by side, at desks, our heads bowed, our fingers busily scribbling a pen across the page. Douglass revisited his *Narrative*. I translated” (185). This contribution exemplifies Otilie’s role as the facilitator and shaper of his transnational legacy, defying his self-centered description of the book as “the tale of how my mind liberated me” (190).

In the novel, Otilie’s support for Douglass strengthens when his freedom is threatened. When he faces being recaptured by slave catchers, she makes a bold proposition: “I’ll come with you. You can pretend to be my servant, if need be. My slave, if questioned. No one

would doubt my word. No one would dare take from me what's mine” (143). Otilie's brief assumption of the role of slaveholder shows that racial and gender inequalities are performative and that such systems can be manipulated. She uses language that usually proclaims ownership as a tool for liberation. This performative act aligns with a distinct ethical framework; Otilie's gaze serves to protect and affirm life and agency. As Susan R. Bowers argues, “the female gaze does not seek to possess as does the male gaze, but lives and lets live” (231).

The psychological support that Otilie offers Douglass is as significant as the logistical and intellectual assistance she provides him. She is acutely aware of his inner turmoil and acts as his emotional caretaker, promising “to keep [him] safe and in good spirits” (146). Her caring attitude is a manifestation of the female gaze Eowyn Stewart describes: “Because gender is constituted, the female gaze directed on masculinity [...] can create gender fluidity by demanding constructive change, tenderness, and emotional honesty” (7). The emotional safety provided by Otilie's gaze allows Douglass to open up about his fractured sense of self. He claims, “I'm not even entitled to be called American. I'm a thing. A piece of property, Miss Assing” (Rhodes 155). Later, he asks, “Am I always to be a black man, the runaway slave, living within and without the scriptures of a corrupt society? Sometimes I think what a coward I am, hiding here abroad” (193). His struggle with what W. E. B. Du Bois termed “double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others” (9) is actively reshaped through Otilie's vision: “You're a man,” she tells him, “A beautiful man” (Rhodes 155). She continually reinforces his self-image with extravagant praise, comparing him to figures such as Aristotle (182) and performatively affirming his intellect with phrases such as “yes, Douglass” and “very interesting, Herr Douglass” (220). In this way, she fulfills the role Virginia Woolf identifies for women: that of the “looking-glass [...] possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (41). Douglass relies on Otilie's perspective to dispel his uncertainties and bring him back from the brink of psychological disintegration.

Otilie's private admiration of Douglass extends into the social sphere through her public appearances with him. She recounts proudly how they are “seen together in all the best places. Having ices

at Gunter's. Visiting Lord Elgin's marbles, the British Museum, Piccadilly. Riding in Hyde Park" (181). These outings are feminist acts of seeing and being seen that challenge the decorative and submissive roles assigned to women in the 1800s. They also defy societal expectations that white women should remain silent and complicit in racial injustice. Otilie openly defies the notion that "a white woman couldn't love a black man" (219), musing: "Black; White; German Jew; Christian Mulatto; European; African and American. Male, female. What a pair we make!" (144). The bond between her and Douglass provides an example of how men and women, Black and white, can lift each other up.

Otilie's admiration of Douglass also extends to amorous passion. She remakes Douglass into an object of her own fantasy, imagining "his hair lifting ever so slightly, haloing his head like a mane" (156). She describes his body as "burnished copper, as though the sun had lightly and continually kissed him. Just standing there, speaking no words, he seemed larger than life, as though he could command an army. Beautiful" (103). Her desiring gaze subverts the male-dominated scopophilic exchange and has a powerful effect on Douglass, who states, "Your loving made me feel I was already a free man" (196). However, Otilie's intimately loyal gaze is ultimately shattered by his relentless flirtations with other women (185).

Otilie is aware of the irony of her position; she laments, "few would know my heroism. My part in America's salvation. But I knew. Douglass knew" (353). Although she is essential to creating and circulating his self-assured image, she is omitted from the autobiographical accounts and speeches she helps him produce. Rhodes corrects this historical erasure, showing that Douglass's legacy was forged not only by Anna's Africana womanism but also by Otilie's desiring, educational, financial, emotional, and editorial gazes.

CONCLUSION

Frederick Douglass's fame and legendary masculinity were products of more than just his relentless work. *Douglass' Women* posits that his notable achievements emerged from a masculinity that was relational, porous, and sustained through his reliance on

women—in particular, his dependence on the Africana womanism of Anna and the female gaze of Otilie, a white German Jewish woman. Anna's domestic work has often been portrayed as private, marginal, or insignificant, yet the distinguished reformer's public career relied on the security provided by her homemaking. It also depended on the financial stability she achieved through her earnings and the cultural resilience upheld by her preservation of the memory of the Middle Passage and her parents' oral histories. This perspective reframes the narrative concerning Douglass by depicting the private realm of an Africana woman as essential to his public political activism. Furthermore, the novel traces how Otilie's monetary, psychological, emotional, and intellectual support strengthened Douglass's abolitionist work and extended it to a wider audience. Thus, the novel gives credit to Anna and Otilie as architects of the civil rights legacy they helped Douglass build.

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