

Frederick Douglass in the United Kingdom: From the Free-Soil Principle to Free-Soil Abolition

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When Frederick Douglass embarked for the United Kingdom from Massachusetts in August 1845, he was, by and large, a faithful Garrisonian abolitionist. As a confidant of William Lloyd Garrison and a member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass preached disunionism, practiced an anti-political come-outerism, and embraced moral suasion as a means of changing hearts and minds.¹ Soon after Douglass's return to the U.S. in April 1847, the personal affinity that Douglass and Garrison had built over the 1840s broke down during a lecture tour of the Midwest, and in the months following, their schism took on explicitly ideological and geographic registers, as Douglass moved from Massachusetts, the center of Garrisonian abolition (the "old organization"), to the burned-over district of western New York, where he quickly partnered with members of the "new organization," a distinctly political abolitionism that was growing in reach and influence.² Once he had settled in western New York in late 1847, Douglass further signaled his break from Garrisonianism by founding his own newspaper and by attending political conventions. By 1851, Douglass was ready to formally announce his "change of opinion" with regard to a central component of Garrisonian abolition: that the U.S. Constitution was inherently pro-slavery and that any attempt to seek abolition through political means was doomed to failure. Writing in the *North Star*, Douglass claimed instead that "it is the first duty of every American citizen . . . to use his *political* as well as his *moral* power" to seek the overthrow of the Slave Power.³ Whereas most scholarship on Douglass's departure from Garrisonianism and his embrace of political abolition attends to the years following his trip to the U.K.,⁴ this article joins

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¹ See, for instance, David W. Blight, "Garrisonian in Mind and Body," chap. 3 in *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 116–37. For scholarship that identifies the ways in which Douglass challenged or otherwise resisted Garrisonian ideology and practice during the years prior to his trip abroad, see Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 23–28, and Gary S. Selby, "The Limits of Accommodation: Frederick Douglass and the Garrisonian Abolitionists," *The Southern Communications Journal* 66, no. 1 (2000): 52–66.

² Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

³ "Change of Opinion Announced," *North Star*, 15 May 1851.

⁴ For scholarship that presents the personal schism with Garrison as precipitating Douglass's political shift, see Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), viii–ix, 70–79; Philip S. Foner, "Frederick Douglass," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, vol. II: Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850–1860* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 48–66; William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Boston Garrisonians and the Problem of Frederick Douglass," *Canadian Journal of History* 2, no. 2 (1967): 29–48; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 26–58; John R. McKivigan, "The Frederick Douglass–Gerrit Smith Friendship and Political Abolitionism in the 1850s," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 205–32; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 146–62; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1998), 371–74.

work by Paul Giles and James Oakes in approaching the trip to the U.K. as not simply the beginning of the end of Douglass's Garrisonianism, but also as the start of Douglass's investment in political abolitionism.⁵ While it is apparent that Douglass chafed under the paternalism of British Garrisonians,⁶ it is also apparent—though far less recognized—that Douglass, during his U.K. tour, started to take seriously political abolition.

I argue in what follows that Douglass's speeches and writings from his trip abroad articulate foundational elements of Free-Soilism, which, at its core, presented "free soil" as not simply landscapes free from bondage but also, and more importantly, as the means by which to destroy the Slave Power. Free-Soilism was the central ideological position of political abolition in the 1840s and 1850s, the banner of which was carried by the Liberty Party, the Free-Soil Party, and ultimately, the Republican Party. In general, Free-Soilers argued that the Slave Power controlled the federal government, which in turn propped up what Free-Soilers recognized as an unsustainable system that would collapse without federal support for its territorial expansion.⁷ As Walter Johnson explains, the decreasing productivity of soils in the Old and Deep South, coupled with enslavers' increasing debts, meant that "in order to survive, slaveholders had to expand."⁸ Free-Soilers, therefore, organized and agitated around ending the federal government's facilitation and encouragement of the Slave Power's growth, operating from the position that whereas the government was incapable of abolishing slavery in states where it was protected by state law, it could nonetheless stop slavery's growth into western territories. If the Slave Power were fully surrounded and hemmed in by free soil, and were thus unable to find a lifeline in the western territories, then—Free-Soilers believed—its thorough destruction would be imminent.⁹

Douglass's arrival in the U.K. came at the precise moment that free soil became a geopolitical flash-point within the struggle over slavery. The U.S. had just invaded Mexico, an

⁵ Giles argues that Douglass's thinking about politics became far more sophisticated during his time in the U.K., in part through the influence of distinctly political abolitionists in the U.K. Paul Giles, "Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture," *American Literature* 73, vol. 4 (2001): 779–810. See also Giles, "Douglass's Black Atlantic: Britain, Europe, Egypt," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Maurice Lee (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 132–45. Oakes claims that Douglass likely recognized during the U.K. trip that he had to take his message beyond the realm of Garrisonians in large part because the war against Mexico sparked an interest in politics that had previously lain dormant. James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: Norton, 2007), 13–16.

⁶ As Douglass's biographers have documented, Douglass resented the extent to which his U.K. hosts and handlers sought to influence his public message and keep it in line with Garrisonianism. See Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 142–49.

⁷ See David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) and Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

⁸ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 14. See also Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) and Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 11–70.

⁹ James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: Norton, 2013). For more on Free-Soilism ideologically and the third-parties that supported it, see Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848–54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Richard H. Sewall, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837–1860* (New York: Norton, 1980); and Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

event which made apparent the Slave Power's territorial appetites as well as government support for its expansion, thereby necessitating that antislavery activists scale-up their attempts to circumscribe that growth. Douglass thus demonstrates an interest in Free-Soilism, in particular, at a time when, according to Jonathan Earle, "free soil took on far greater significance as a political movement devoted to barring slavery from the new territories."¹⁰ As this essay seeks to demonstrate, Douglass repeatedly invokes and interrogates two of the main pillars of the movement: the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom. A theory and a tactic, respectively, the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom were central to Free-Soilism in so far as they presented certain topographies as antithetical to bondage and presumed that if such territory surrounded the Slave Power that it would be incapable of expanding and would quickly collapse. In what follows, I demonstrate that Douglass—during the first half of his trip, especially—repeatedly alludes to both the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom in ways that show surprising approbation from a Garrisonian.¹¹ But rather than simply supporting Free-Soilism during his time abroad, Douglass's invocations of the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom reveal a distinct ambivalence about antislavery politics, ambivalence that should be recognized not simply as lingering Garrisonian hostility to antislavery politics but rather as a commitment to transform Free-Soilism so as to make it more thoroughly abolitionist and anti-racist. Douglass's interests in and distinct articulations of the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom during his time in the U.K., I argue, should be recognized as far more than initial and preliminary moves along Douglass's journey toward political abolition. Instead, we can see in Douglass's treatment of both of these foundational elements of Free-Soilism a commitment on Douglass's part to radicalize Free-Soilism, replacing its decidedly antislavery goals and liberalism with the antiracism, transnationalism, immediatism, and revolutionary horizon of abolition.¹² This commitment becomes especially visible in the 1850s, when Douglass publicly identifies as a political abolitionist while also explicitly critiquing the movement, a position which, this essay suggests, Douglass held from the very beginnings of his departure from Garrisonianism.¹³

The Case of James Somerset and the Free-Soil Principle

In October 1769, Virginia merchant and slaver Charles Stewart sailed from Boston to London, accompanied by James Somerset, who was born in West Africa and had been enslaved by

¹⁰ Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 14.

¹¹ For more on Douglass's time in the U.K., see Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (Liverpool, Eng.: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Tom Chaffin, *Giant's Causeway: Frederick Douglass's Irish Odyssey and the Making of an American Visionary* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

¹² This definition of abolition comes from Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), 1–5.

¹³ As has been extensively documented, many Free-Soilers, especially former Democrats, were racist antislavery moderates. See, especially, Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990), 195–201, 227–68, and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2007), 43–92. Douglass, himself, was certainly clear-eyed about the reactionary elements of the movement, writing in the *North Star* in the wake of the 1848 presidential election, "These men after all are not Abolitionists, and are not to be relied on as the leaders of the Anti-Slavery movement of this land." "The Presidential Campaign," *North Star*, 10 November 1848.

Stewart for approximately eight years.¹⁴ Two years into their stay in England, Somerset escaped from Stewart's control and fled into London. Stewart, who had hired kidnappers before to track down fugitives in the U.S., immediately ordered the pursuit of Somerset, who was recaptured after fifty-six days. As demanded by Stewart, Somerset was incarcerated aboard the *Ann and Mary*, which was anchored in the Thames in anticipation of sailing for Jamaica, where Stewart planned to sell Somerset as punishment for escaping. Immediately after Somerset's incarceration, however, and before the ship departed, three British citizens—Thomas Walkin, Elizabeth Cade, and John Marlow—submitted an appeal to Chief Justice William Murray, Lord Mansfield, for a writ of *habeus corpus*, which Lord Mansfield granted. In a court case that would instantly reshape the transatlantic debate about slavery, Somerset's lawyers argued that because bondage violated natural law, an enslaved person who moved beyond jurisdictions where slavery was positively established could no longer be held legally in bondage. Somerset's lawyers presumed that people could be enslaved only in territories where bondage was protected by positive law and claimed that because freedom was humans' natural condition, that as soon as an enslaved person reached free soil, they could no longer be enslaved. Lord Mansfield upheld this position and ruled that Stewart had no claim on James Somerset. His ruling stated explicitly that slavery went against English common law and that Virginian law could not supersede U.K. jurisprudence. "The state of slavery," he explained, "is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political. . . . It's so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law."¹⁵

Mansfield's decision in the *Somerset* case thus formally established in British law what was known as the free-soil principle, which stipulated that certain territories or regions are themselves constitutive of liberty and thus hostile to bondage. The free-soil principle presumes that as soon as an enslaved person sets foot on such territory—or even breathes its air—then they are instantly transformed into a free subject.¹⁶ Popular throughout Europe, the free-soil principle had a particularly long history in England. William Harrison, for example, writing in 1593, explains that "such is the *privilege* of our cuntry by the *especiall* grace of God, and bountie of our princes, that if any come hither from other realms, so soone as they set foot on land they become so free of condition as their masters, whereby all note of servile bondage is utterlie removed from them."¹⁷ Similarly, Sir William Blackstone, writing in his *Commentaries* around the time of the *Somerset* decision, hailed the "spirit of liberty . . . so deeply implanted in our constitution, and rooted even in our very soil, that a slave or negro, the moment he lands in England, falls under the protection of the laws, and so far becomes a freeman."¹⁸ In grounding his decision so explicitly in the tradition of the free-soil principle, Lord Mansfield echoed the appeals of Somerset's lawyers, one of whom, prominent antislavery activist Granville Sharp, had argued in *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery* (1769),

¹⁴ This and the following information on Somerset come from Steven M. Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that Led to the End of Human Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2005), 1–11.

¹⁵ Quoted in William R. Cotter, "The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery in England," *History* 79, no. 255 (1994): 35.

¹⁶ See Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, "Free Soil: The Generation and Circulation of an Atlantic Legal Principle," *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011): 331–39, and Stephen Alsford, "Urban Safe Havens for the Unfree in Medieval England: A Reconsideration," *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no. 3 (2011): 363–75.

¹⁷ Quoted in Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22. As bondage disappeared from the British Isles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (while the practice expanded in its colonies), the British often sought to celebrate their entire territory as free soil.

¹⁸ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1884), 126.

a treatise that Jeannine Marie DeLombard has hailed as “a sort of brief for the *Somerset* case,” that “a Slave therefore, on his coming to England, must be absolutely *free*, and not subject to any ‘claims whatsoever of *perpetual service*,’ on account of his former Slavery.”¹⁹ And another of Somerset’s lawyers, Francis Hargrave, moreover, argued in the trial itself that England had “too pure an air for a slave to breathe in.”²⁰

As multiple scholars have noted, the *Somerset* decision inspired and empowered antislavery activists across the Atlantic for decades. Many interpreted the *Somerset* decision expansively, arguing that the ruling had effectively abolished slavery in England and across the British empire, presenting the free-soil principle as now coterminous with British territory.²¹ T. B. Macaulay, for instance, in arguing for abolition in the West Indies, claimed that “there is freedom in the respiration of its air, and in the very contact of its soil!”²² Although Lord Mansfield’s decision did not in reality strike down slavery across the British empire, his ruling did help to intensify antislavery sentiment in both England and the North American colonies.

Antislavery factions in the U.S. would invoke Lord Mansfield’s decision in debates over slavery’s status, and enslaved people who had come into contact with territory where slavery was not protected by positive law petitioned—in the spirit of James Somerset—courts in both the North and South for their liberty.²³ *Commonwealth v. Aves* (1836), for example, freed the enslaved girl Med after her slavers brought her from New Orleans to Massachusetts, a decision which Paul Finkelman has described as “virtually a total application of *Somerset* to Massachusetts.”²⁴ Whereas Southerners and slavery’s apologists claimed that *Somerset* did not apply to the Northern U.S., many Free-Soilers argued not only that Northern courts should treat *Somerset* as precedent but also that the free-soil principle shaped the topographies of both the Northeast and the West. To give a couple examples out of many, Senator Charles Sumner praised the North for being “free as its bracing air,”²⁵ and Jermaine Loguen, who fled bondage in Kentucky and joined the political abolitionist movement in upstate New York, bemoaned the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as an “[endangerment to] the liberty of an American citizen who, for twenty years before it was enacted, has stood upon free soil, inhaling and exhaling the air of freedom.”²⁶

¹⁹ Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4; Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery; or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England. In Four Parts* (London: Benjamin White, 1769), 158.

²⁰ Francis Hargrave, *An Argument in the Case of James Sommersett, a Negro, Lately Determined by the Court of King’s Bench* (London: F. Hargrave, 1772), 45, quoted in Edlie L. Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits, and the Legal Culture of Travel* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 28.

²¹ Peabody and Grinberg, “Free Soil,” 336; Wise, *Though the Heavens*, 193; Drescher, *Abolition*, 102–7; Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*, 19–21.

²² *Report of the Committee of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions* (London: Richard Taylor, 1824), 78, quoted in Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*, 21.

²³ Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*, 27–28. See also Paul Finkelman, “*Commonwealth v. Aves* (1836),” in *Abolition and Antislavery: A Historical Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, eds. Peter Hinks and John R. McKivigan (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2004), 85–87, and Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 101–25.

²⁴ Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union*, 113.

²⁵ Charles Sumner, “Antislavery Duties of the Whig Party, Speech at the Whig Convention of Massachusetts, in Faneuil Hall, Boston, September 23, 1846,” in *The Works of Charles Sumner* 1 (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1875), 304.

²⁶ J. W. Loguen, “Letter to Governor Hunt,” *Liberator*, 14 May 1852.

Douglass and the Status of Free Soil in the U.S. North

Frederick Douglass was certainly familiar with the *Somerset* decision and the free-soil principle prior to his trip, but it was not until he reached the U.K., as far as I have been able to determine, that he made public reference to either. This is not surprising, when one considers that Douglass, as he recounts in his *Narrative*, certainly did not feel as though his status was instantly transformed upon reaching the North, nor that Northern territory was thoroughly distinct from plantation topographies: he portrays New York City as perceptively hostile to Black people and New Bedford as providing only a “degree of safety.”²⁷ Were the North, in Douglass’s mind, free soil that transformed his legal status, moreover, Douglass would not have had to travel to the U.K. following the publication of his *Narrative* and the increased precarity that followed. Thus, it is in the U.K. that we see Douglass’s first explicit reference to the *Somerset* decision, and, as this section details, it is from Britain that Douglass speaks back to readers in the Northern U.S. to insist that their territory lacks essential characteristics of truly free soil.

Douglass’s first public allusions to the *Somerset* decision and the free-soil principle come in Limerick, just over two months after reaching the U.K. and as part of a speech in which Douglass explains that that he crossed the Atlantic because, as a fugitive, he is not safe anywhere in the U.S. It seems quite likely, therefore, that the story of James Somerset took on newly personal resonance for Douglass as he himself stepped on British soil and breathed its air. More pragmatically, when Douglass cites the *Somerset* decision and presents Britain as free soil, he engages in what Alan J. Rice describes as “strategic Anglophilia,” a celebration of Britain that simultaneously critiques the U.S.²⁸ Douglass’s presentations of Britain as free soil, this is to say, make explicit that the Northern U.S. is decidedly not free soil. As the reconstruction of his speech in the *Limerick Reporter* presents it, Douglass argued on 10 November 1845 that whereas “there was nothing like American slavery on the soil on which he now stood, . . . there was no one spot in all America upon which he could stand free.”²⁹ Douglass continues by noting that an acquaintance of his had to flee to British-controlled Canada, “where alone on the American continent he could be safe.”³⁰ Douglass and his friend, therefore, both recognized that free soil did not exist in the U.S. and thus, in the spirit of James Somerset, they sought freedom or protection in British territory.

From the free-soil principle, Douglass’s Limerick speech then turns to the *Somerset* decision more directly, leaving behind his own anecdotal accounts and instead citing legal precedent. In doing so, he switches from the personal and the testimonial to a more legalistic approach, a rhetorical style that Jeannine Marie DeLombard has identified in Douglass’s speech onboard the *Cambria* as he approached the U.K. and that would characterize his time abroad.³¹ This legal mode is particularly evident in Douglass’s Limerick speech when he includes a quotation from Irish nationalist John Philpot Curran, who was, notably, part of James Somerset’s defense team. As Douglass explains,

²⁷ John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 2: Autobiographical Writings*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 1:77.

²⁸ Alan J. Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 172–87. For more on how England symbolized broadly within abolitionist discourse, see Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 178–246.

²⁹ John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, 5 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 1:78, 79.

³⁰ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:81, 1:85.

³¹ DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 103.

So true was it that the slave must leave his native soil to be free. In the language of Curran, their own orator—"I speak in the spirit of the British law which makes liberty commensurate with, and inseparable from British soil; which proclaims even to the stranger and sojourner, the moment he sets his foot on British earth, that the ground upon which he treads is holy, and consecrated by the genius of *universal emancipation*."³²

Douglass here quotes from a 1794 speech of Curran, which itself invokes the free-soil principle in demanding emancipation for Irish Catholics.³³ The sentence that Douglass quotes, however, makes no reference to that specific context but instead speaks to the immediate emancipatory power of British soil, earth, and ground.

The effect of these references to the free-soil principle and to Curran, specifically, is not only to celebrate British antislavery or Anglo jurisprudence, but also to use the *Somerset* decision to bring into relief the extent to which the U.S. is decidedly not free soil. Douglass's references to *Somerset*, hard upon his arrival in the U.K., serve both to justify his own departure from the U.S. and to puncture the U.S. North's self-presentation as distinctly different from the slave states to the south. To emphasize this point, Douglass states, immediately after quoting Curran, that "if an American ever came among them speaking of the liberty of his country, let them make his cheek crimson by telling him that there is not a single spot in all his land where the sable man can stand free."³⁴ Despite decisions such as *Commonwealth v. Aves*, Douglass decidedly rejects the idea that *Somerset* applies to Massachusetts or that the free-soil principle reflects conditions in the U.S. North more generally. So long as the U.S. protects slavery anywhere within its boundaries, Douglass implies, truly free soil cannot exist.

In a letter to Garrison, written in Belfast on 1 January 1846, just prior to leaving Ireland for Scotland, Douglass again invokes the free-soil principle at the foundation of the *Somerset* case. In this instance, writing to readers of the *Liberator* about his time in Ireland, Douglass is even more explicit in stating that free soil does not exist in the U.S. Although he admits that he experienced instances of anti-Black racism in Ireland, he nonetheless contrasts the land and the people entirely favorably with the U.S. He notes that in Ireland he lived free from fear of being captured and rendered back to bondage, echoing the point he argued in Limerick that leaving the U.S. effected a complete transformation. "Behold the change!" writes Douglass. "Eleven days and a half gone, and I have crossed three thousand miles of the perilous deep. Instead of a democratic government, I am under a monarchical government. Instead of the bright blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man."³⁵ Douglass here invokes the presumption at the core of the free-soil principle, that a certain sort of "air makes free."³⁶ As he explains to readers of the *Liberator*, it is the first breaths of British air that transform him in a manner akin to his famous fight with Covey. But whereas in the context of the U.S. the fight with Covey is presented as an exceptional act, freedom is the normative condition of British topographies, embedded in the ground and contained within the air.

³² Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:85.

³³ *The Speeches of the Right Honorable John Philpot Curran. Complete and Correct Edition. Edited, with Memoir and Historical Notes, by Thomas Davis, ESQ., M.R.I.A., Barrister-At-Law* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1845), 161–211.

³⁴ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:86.

³⁵ Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, Dublin, 1 January 1846, in John R. McKivigan, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series 3: *Correspondence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 1:74. Douglass would reprint this letter in both *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

³⁶ Alsford, "Urban Safe Havens," 363.

The letter for American readers contains another comparative element that further emphasizes Douglass's point that free soil does not exist in the U.S. Ireland, explains Douglass, is characterized by "the entire absence of every thing that looked like prejudice against me, based on the color of my skin."³⁷ Douglass also describes the Irish as "animate[d] with a spirit of freedom," showing Black people "deep sympathy," "warm and generous co-operation," and "kind hospitality," while expressing "strong abhorrence of the slaveholders."³⁸ The free soil of Ireland, in Douglass's presentation, differs in noticeable ways from standard portraits of England. Beyond the free-soil principle, with its presumption that liberty is inherent to certain spaces, Ireland is marked by a populace whose sensibilities and actions create or further affirm free-soil conditions. Douglass, to this point, emphasizes expressions of sympathy and hospitality across the color line, coupled with desires to co-operate and thereby work together to advance freedom, as well as a perceptible hatred of enslavers. This is not simply liberty in a negative sense, or, put differently, free soil that merely lacks formal protection for slavery. It is particularly interesting that Douglass locates this decidedly positive example of free soil in Ireland, and not England. The Irish were, at the time of Douglass's visit, reeling from the Great Hunger, and many of the activists with whom Douglass came into contact in Ireland helped him to recognize that the famine was not simply a natural disaster but was more broadly an effect of what he would later identify as the "injustice and oppression" wrought by England on its colonial subject.³⁹ The Irish, it seems, subject to occupation and oppression themselves, recognize the imperative of creating the conditions of freedom. Douglass, moreover, in celebrating the Irish to his readers in the U.S., seems to reject the Anglo-Saxonism that shaped New England and that presented a commitment to liberty as the foremost feature of English people. As Nell Irvin Painter has demonstrated in *The History of White People*, the Anglo-Saxonism popular in the antebellum North, while it aligned with antislavery, also reflected anti-Blackness and the presumption that the English are the "natural rulers of other races."⁴⁰ Douglass's celebration of the Irish, in particular, refuses the exceptionalism of England and English people as naturally suited to liberty. In Ireland, this is to say, Douglass instead articulates a vision of truly free soil that is not only free of slavery but also free from the violence of Whiteness.

Douglass's letter to Garrison also includes an extended apostrophe to the landscapes of the United States that begins in a manner that calls to mind Free-Soilers' encomiums to the beautiful topographies of the Northern U.S. "In thinking of America," writes Douglass, "I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky—her grand old woods—her fertile fields—her beautiful rivers—her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains."⁴¹ Douglass's litany of beautiful and sublime landscapes is so thoroughly idealized that it comes close to a parody of Romantic aesthetics, what Paul Outka has called the "normative white male experiences of the natural world."⁴² The normative discourse that Outka identifies is central to Free-Soilism, and it is not a stretch to imagine Douglass, in writing for the *Liberator's* old-organization audience, as parodying Free-Soilism's environmental aesthetics. Douglass's apostrophe echoes, in particular, "A

³⁷ McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:74.

³⁸ McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:74.

³⁹ John R. McKivigan, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 2: Autobiographical Writings*, 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999–2011), 3:401.

⁴⁰ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 175.

⁴¹ Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, Dublin, 1 January 1846, in McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:73.

⁴² Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.

Summons” by Free-Soiler John Greenleaf Whittier, whose poetry Douglass featured in the first issue of the *North Star*. “A Summons” protests the Gag Rule in a manner that suggests that the very topography of New England will resist the Slave Power:

Oh, no; methinks from all her wild, green mountains;
From valleys where her slumbering fathers lie;
From her blue rivers and her welling fountains,
And clear, cold sky;

From her rough coast, and isles, which hungry Ocean
Gnaws with his surges; from the fisher’s skiff,
With white sail swaying to the billows’ motion
Round rock and cliff;

From the free fireside of her unbought farmer;
From her free laborer at his loom and wheel;
From the brown smith-shop, where, beneath the hammer,
Rings the red steel.⁴³

Although the composition of this poem predates Whittier’s own break from Garrisonianism and his turn toward political abolition by roughly half a decade,⁴⁴ it nonetheless contains what would become an essential trope for Free-Soilers: the image of a fertile and beautiful North, whose plenty and ecological vitality are reflections of nature’s acknowledgment of the superiority of free labor. As does Whittier, Douglass delivers what is effectively a topographical roll-call, surveying a landscape that resembles the free soil of New England that Whittier celebrates.

Unlike Whittier, however, who sustains his encomium across multiple stanzas, Douglass quickly punctures the idealized image of Northern topography that he constructed:

But my rapture is soon checked, my joy is soon turned to mourning. When I remember that all is cursed with the infernal spirit of slaveholding, robbery, and wrong,— when I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers, the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten, and that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing, and led to reproach myself that any thing could fall from my lips in praise of such a land. America will not allow her children to love her. She seems bent on compelling those who would be her warmest friends, to be her worst enemies.⁴⁵

⁴³ John Greenleaf Whittier, “A Summons,” in *The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier, Volume III: Antislavery Poems and Songs of Labor and Reform* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 42.

⁴⁴ See John B. Pickard, “John Greenleaf Whittier and the Abolitionist Schism of 1840,” *The New England Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1964): 250–54.

⁴⁵ Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, Dublin, 1 January 1846, in McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:73.

As Ian Finseth has demonstrated in his analysis of this passage, the tone shifts quickly from pastoral idyll to terror so as to “[link] natural plenty to racial domination and violence.”⁴⁶ But whereas Finseth presents Douglass here subverting a distinctly Southern pastoralism by suggesting that the wealth and beauty of Southern landscapes are thoroughly corrupted by violence and exploitation,⁴⁷ I want to suggest that Douglass also addresses Northern landscapes, and in so doing simultaneously critiques the pastoralism of Free-Soilers.⁴⁸ The entire topography of the U.S., Douglass suggests with his emphasis on *all*, is “cursed,” as the related human and ecological violence of plantation slavery exceeds the boundaries of the slave states. Such a position distinguishes Douglass from White Free-Soilers who seek to compartmentalize and thereby delimit the blight of the Slave Power to spaces south of the Mason-Dixon line in the interest of preserving the North as the site of free soil. Douglass makes clear that he, by contrast, is incapable of doing so, for the North’s lack of protection for fugitives and its pervasive anti-Blackness—which White Free-Soilers either miss or ignore in their celebrations of Northern environments—make it impossible for Douglass to apprehend its landscapes as beautiful. Douglass’s revulsion, this is to say, reflects a condemnation not only of Free-Soilers’ landscape aesthetics but also of Free-Soilism’s politics more generally. The containment strategy of Free-Soilism and the presentation of Northern-style yeoman agrarianism as a solution to the problem of slavery are both rooted in the Northern exceptionalism that Douglass’s letter eviscerates. The presumption that Northern-style agrarianism will constrain and ultimately lead to the downfall of the slave system if supported by federally-mandated constrictions of the Slave Power’s growth rests upon the belief that Northern society contains none of the practices and conditions that structure plantation agronomy. More specifically, it ignores the extent to which anti-Blackness pervades Northern society and prevents Northern topographies from achieving the status of truly free soil. The containment strategy as it exists, Douglass suggests in his letter to Garrison, is an insufficient and ultimately fatally compromised response to the Slave Power, primarily because the persistence of anti-Blackness in the North demonstrates the extent to which the Slave Power has already expanded into free soil. How, therefore, can the extension of Northern-style yeoman agronomy into the West and Southwest forestall the Slave Power’s growth if it has already failed to do so in New England?

As I argue in the remainder of this essay, Douglass takes up this question in the weeks and months following his letter to Garrison, but instead of simply rejecting containment and Free-Soilism out of hand, he works to articulate a novel form of Free-Soilism, one that is capable of meeting the expansiveness of the Slave Power and, crucially, decisively destroying it and its influences. The distinct manner of containment that Douglass envisions, I seek to demonstrate, rejects Free-Soilism’s liberal reformism for something decidedly more radical that will not be satisfied with removing the Slave Power but rather commits to the creation of new modes of sociality that are free of all traces of bondage and anti-Blackness.

⁴⁶ Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 280. Finseth considers this letter’s inclusion in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and thus addresses the subversion of pastoralism in the 1855 autobiography (271–91).

⁴⁷ Douglass makes a similar move in his 1845 *Narrative*. See Michael Bennett, “Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery,” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 195–210.

⁴⁸ John M. Grammer has identified rhetorical similarities between the republicanism of Southern agrarians and Free-Soilers. *Pastoral and Politics in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 9.

The Cordon of Freedom

Just prior to Douglass's voyage to the U.K. and the period in which he most intensively references the free-soil principle, the U.S. annexed the Republic of Texas and prepared to invade Mexico, a series of geopolitical moves that Douglass and other abolitionists recognized as a bald attempt to extend the Slave Power's territory and increase its political hegemony. While abroad, Douglass closely followed the news from the U.S., and commentary on Texas and Mexico appears frequently in his speeches, especially at the outset of his trip. As James Oakes has suggested, Douglass's interest in antislavery politics was sparked by the invasion of Mexico and the political resistance that met it.⁴⁹ That political resistance manifested itself in Free-Soilers' calls for the slave states to be surrounded by a "cordon of freedom" that would, in the words of Thaddeus Stevens, "[prevent] the extension of slavery into free soil."⁵⁰ Free-Soilers, accordingly, rallied behind a proposed rider—first introduced in August 1846 by Democratic congressman David Wilmot and subsequently known as the Wilmot Proviso—that stipulated that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part" of the territory acquired from Mexico.⁵¹ As an antislavery tactic, the Proviso was decidedly gradualist, and Wilmot's own anti-Blackness led many to consider it a "white man's proviso," reserving western territories for White, yeoman farmers.⁵² Douglass would offer a partial endorsement of the Wilmot Proviso in June 1848, arguing that while he did not place much hope in its bringing down the Slave Power, he nonetheless saw it as an encouraging prospect: "While we regard it as a step in the right direction and hail it as a most hopeful sign of the times, it is but a *sign*—a mere *sign*—of a radical principle, which must one day force itself into practice. To that principle we must cling."⁵³

Over two years before he published his qualified support of the Wilmot Proviso, Douglass proposed a similar tactic of containment, thereby providing another example of his engagement with Free-Soilism during his trip to the U.K. Speaking in Belfast in January 1846, Douglass identifies extension as the lifeblood of the Slave Power and argues that the Slave Power's goal is not simply expansion into Texas but rather growth as a means of sustaining itself. Stalling its growth, therefore, would ramify far beyond the borders of the Republic of Texas, precipitating a contraction that would ultimately destroy the Slave Power. "If kept within narrow limits," Douglass explains, "we should soon be rid of it."⁵⁴ Douglass here invokes the cordon of freedom in a manner that reflects the same conclusion that U.S. Free-Soilers themselves reached: that the Slave Power would come to its demise if surrounded by territory that is hostile to bondage. Although Douglass does not specify, in his Belfast speech, precisely how the Slave Power will be "kept within" its current territory, he does suggest that it involves the U.S. federal government to a certain extent, for his speech constitutes a broad attack on the annexation of Texas and the Slave Power's territorial appetites for northern Mexico. Douglass goes on to praise the forty thousand

⁴⁹ Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 15–16.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Oakes, *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Norton, 2014), 23.

⁵¹ *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st Sess., 1217.

⁵² Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 123–43. See also, Frederick J. Blue, "Neither Slavery nor Involuntary Servitude: David Wilmot and the Containment of Slavery," in *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 184–212.

⁵³ "John Van Buren," *North Star*, 16 June 1848.

⁵⁴ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:122.

signatories in Massachusetts who petitioned Congress not to annex Texas unless it immediately abolished slavery.⁵⁵

Douglass's Belfast speech thus represents a fascinating example of his move from Garrisonian anti-politicism toward the Free-Soil position that the federal government could be mobilized to combat the Slave Power, an example that predates his "Change of Opinion" by five years. The Belfast speech departs from Garrisonianism, as well, in its presentation of the Slave Power as ecologically destructive, a foundational tenet of Free-Soilism. Right after claiming that the Slave Power must be "kept within its narrow limits," Douglass explains that "the cry of slavery is ever 'Give, give, give!' . . . It goes on, leaving a blighted soil behind—leaving the fields which it found fertile and luxuriant, covered with stunted pines. From Virginia it has gone to North Carolina, and from that to South Carolina, leaving ruin in its train, and now it seizes on the fertile regions of Texas."⁵⁶ Douglass's emphasis on blight and soil exhaustion and his suggestion that the growth of slavery from Virginia to points south and west together precisely index Free-Soilers' presentation of the Slave Power as an ecologically unsustainable system, whose downfall could be precipitated by a cordon of free soil.

At the same time as he demonstrates his investment in Free-Soilism, Douglass retains commitments that have more in common with Garrisonianism, as evidenced by a letter to Garrison from the spring of 1846. Writing from Glasgow in April, Douglass exclaims, "Let slavery be hemmed in on every side by the moral and religious sentiments of mankind, and its death is certain."⁵⁷ At first glance, we see an additional example of Douglass's investment in the cordon of freedom. But the specific references to moralism and a thorough distinction between slavery and what lies at its borders seem to demonstrate Douglass's presumption that neither geopolitical distinctions between North and South, nor free-labor conditions in and of themselves, are sufficient means by which to create a firewall capable of stalling the Slave Power's expansion. In this example, Douglass's cordon of freedom is inflected by Garrisonianism's investment in the public shaming of slavers and their supporters. The means by which to establish the particular cordon of freedom that Douglass envisions are disunionism and come-outerism, those central tactics of Garrisonianism, and most certainly not the Federal Government's institution of a Wilmot-Proviso style ban on slavery's growth. Thus, Garrisonianism is an essential element of, rather than the alternative to, Douglass's newly found investment in Free-Soil-style containment. Despite his newfound interest in the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom, therefore, Douglass would continue to insist, for some time to come, that he remained firmly within the Garrisonian camp.⁵⁸

Around the same time as the letter from Glasgow, and again in correspondence with Garrison, this time from London, Douglass returns to the cordon of freedom. As he does in the Glasgow letter, Douglass presents a series of prophetic statements that are both invocative and binding: "Let [American slavers] be hemmed in on every side. Let them be placed beyond the pale of respectability, and standing out separated, alone in their infamy, let the storm gather over them, and its hottest bolts descend."⁵⁹ The first two statements directly call for the sort of antislavery cordon that Douglass invoked in the Glasgow letter. The third ratchets up the already highly pitched tone by calling for divine intervention. Rather than the legal instrumentalism of Free-

⁵⁵ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:124.

⁵⁶ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:122.

⁵⁷ McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:110.

⁵⁸ As Douglass explains in a letter to Maria Chapman on 29 March 1846, "I have withstood the allurements of New organization liberty party—and no organization at home—why should I not withstand the [anti-Garrisonian] London Committee?" McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:99.

⁵⁹ McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 3, 1:130–31.

Soilers or the moral suasion of Garrisonians, Douglass here presents a cordon in the jeremiadic mode. Douglass's cordon thus fits within the tradition of Black radicals such as David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, who portrayed apocalyptic punishment, seemingly from both divine and abolitionist actors, as awaiting enslavers. The cordon of freedom need not be simply an incrementalist and technocratic approach to destroying the Slave Power; it can also be immediatist, even insurrectionary.

Douglass once again invokes the cordon of freedom in June, speaking in Birmingham, and providing another example of his efforts to radicalize the cordon of freedom beyond the limits of Free-Soilism. Instead of investing hope in the nominally free soil of the U.S., the Birmingham speech shows Douglass turning to the U.S.'s neighbors, both of which had abolished slavery in recent decades. Canada and Mexico, in this formulation, become the necessary associates to create a cordon of freedom. A cordon of truly free soil, this is to say, is comprised not of Northern states and western territories but rather of Canada and Mexico, which would not only destroy the Slave Power but which would also transform the remainder of the U.S. The transnational elements of the cordon are most apparent when Douglass, speaking in Birmingham in June 1846, calls for the Slave Power to be surrounded by "Canada blazing all over with anti-slavery fires, and Mexico, once more strong in her love of freedom, on the south."⁶⁰ By gesturing to Canada and Mexico, Douglass argues that abolition is a necessary precondition for truly free soil. Abolition, therefore, as I will address in this essay's final section, is not something that is set in motion by free soil or the cordon of freedom, but is rather, for Douglass, free soil's essential, constitutive element.

Free-Soil Abolition

Free-Soilism, as noted above, is distinctly antislavery rather than abolitionist because of its commitment to free labor rather than to civil rights for Black Americans as well as its approach to reforming a slave society through the gradual, but expedited, invisible hand of liberal capitalism. By contrast, Douglass seeks to transform Free-Soilism into something akin to what W. E. B. Du Bois and Angela Davis (among others) envision when they define *abolition* as that which reflects a broad and intersectional commitment to freedom in truly comprehensive and democratic terms. For Du Bois and Davis, an abolitionist project worthy of the name is dedicated to creating and establishing new modes of sociality rather than ridding society of a symptom that in its absence will leave structural inequalities largely the same. Du Bois writes in *Black Reconstruction* that if abolition is to be both comprehensive and democratic, it must "[demand] . . . freedom, civil rights, economic opportunity and education and the right to vote as a matter of sheer human justice and right."⁶¹ For Davis, what makes a certain form of activism distinctly abolitionist is the presumption that "our present social order—in which are embedded a complex array of social problems—will have to be radically transformed." Abolition, then, continues Davis in the spirit of Du Bois, "is not only, or not even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions."⁶²

Douglass's investment in a distinctly abolitionist Free-Soilism is most apparent in a speech delivered in London, roughly a month before the Birmingham speech cited above. The London speech, which mostly addresses the Free Church of Scotland's support for the Slave Power,

⁶⁰ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:310.

⁶¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 325.

⁶² Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 69.

contains another reference to the *Somerset* case, but rather than simply presenting free soil as terrain which transforms the fugitive, Douglass instead envisions free soil as that which confronts the enslaver: “Let the atmosphere of Britain be such that a slave holder may not be able to breathe it. Let him feel his lungs oppressed the moment he steps on British soil.”⁶³ Whereas the free-soil principle presumes an atmosphere reflective of natural law, whereby the fugitive breathes free air for the first time, Douglass, in his London speech, calls for the creation of a political and social climate that is distinctly hostile, even painful, to enslavers. The creation of truly free soil requires a pervasive “atmosphere” that is decidedly hostile to the comfort, even to the basic life, of the enslaver, for who can survive, Douglass seems to suggest, when they cannot breathe? In the London speech, moreover, Douglass again invokes the cordon of freedom itself, and in a performative manner that compels his audience to join the abolitionist insurgency:

I want the slave holder surrounded, as by a wall of anti-slavery fire, so that he may see the condemnation of himself and his system glaring down in letters of light. I want him to feel that he has no sympathy in England, Scotland, or Ireland; that he has none in Canada, none in Mexico, none among the poor wild Indians; that the voice of the civilized, aye, and savage world, is against him. I would have condemnation blaze down upon him in every direction, till, stunned and overwhelmed with shame and confusion, he is compelled to let go the grasp he holds upon the persons of his victims, and restores them to their long-lost rights. Here, then, is work for us all to do.⁶⁴

As in the example from Birmingham, Douglass fuses moral suasionism with containment. At the same time, the main emphasis here is on radicalism, calling not for federal legislation and economic restrictions, but rather for a “wall of anti-slavery fire,” whereby direct action from abolitionists aflame with righteousness and jeremiadic passion will immediately overpower the “fire-eaters” of the South, fighting fire with fire, as it were.⁶⁵

In addition, Douglass pairs abolition with anti-racism and a commitment not only to emancipation but also to justice. The cordon of freedom that Douglass envisions in London dramatically exceeds the negative prohibition of bondage at the core of the Wilmot Proviso that represents the limits of U.S. Free-Soilers’ antislavery commitments. Instead, Douglass calls for an attack on the Slave Power that will, in addition to tearing down the system of bondage, also set in motion the creation of civic conditions where Black people can thrive. The “long-lost rights” that he mentions here are those foundational human rights that the Slave Power and its allies deny Black people across the nation. Black people in the North, whether fugitives or not, are themselves clearly “victims” of the Slave Power due to its reach into Northern communities and its hold over the federal government. Douglass’s cordon, therefore, seeks the simultaneous overthrow of both unfree labor, disenfranchisement, and systemic anti-Blackness.

What Douglass’s London speech demonstrates, especially when considered alongside the other examples addressed in this essay, is the extent to which Douglass recognizes that the foundations of U.S. Free-Soilism—the free-soil principle, the *Somerset* decision, and the cordon of freedom—are antislavery and reformist rather than radical and abolitionist. Douglass’s position

⁶³ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:296.

⁶⁴ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 1:295.

⁶⁵ Eric H. Walther traces the term “fire-eater,” referring to extreme defenders of slavery and the South, back to 1851. *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1992). As such, it is not entirely clear to me whether Douglass invokes this specific connotation.

thus anticipates that of Du Bois, who writes in the opening chapter of *Black Reconstruction* that Free-Soilism and Garrisonianism represented two distinct but related labor movements, the first dedicated to destroying the Slave Power so as to improve the condition and earning power of White laborers, whereas the second group sought the emancipation of Black workers so that they could sell their own labor. “Labor-Free Soil, and Abolition,” according to Du Bois,

exhibited fundamental divergence instead of becoming one great party of free labor and free land. The Free Soilers stressed the difficulties of even the free laborer getting hold of the land and getting work in the great congestion which immigration had brought; and the abolitionists stressed the moral wrong of slavery. These two movements might easily have coöperated and differed only in matters of emphasis; but the trouble was that black and white laborers were competing for the same jobs just of course as all laborers always are. The immediate competition became open and visible because of racial lines and racial philosophy and particularly in Northern states where free Negroes and fugitive slaves had established themselves as workers, while the ultimate and overshadowing competition of free and slave labor was obscured and pushed into the background.⁶⁶

Across his many references to Free-Soilism during his U.K. tour, Douglass, too, underscores the anti-Blackness in Northern states, suggesting in particular that White supremacy and a lack of moral urgency weaken Free-Soilism’s ability to confront and ultimately defeat the Slave Power.

Over the next decade, Douglass would publicly grapple with the limitations of Free-Soilism, especially after his own break from Garrisonianism.⁶⁷ From the late 1840s through the 1850s, Douglass’s statements on Free-Soilism ranged from support to condemnation. To give just a few examples, when Douglass attended the inaugural Free-Soil Party convention in Buffalo, N.Y., held in August 1848, and where, Martin Delany reports, he was recognized from the stage “as one of the great instruments by which this event was brought about,”⁶⁸ Douglass’s throat problems prevented him from delivering a speech, though he did manage to say “God speed your noble undertaking.”⁶⁹ In May of 1849, by contrast, writing in the *North Star* under the headline “What Good Has the Free Soil Movement Done?” Douglass answers his own question by stating “It promised much and has performed little. . . . It promised to be a progressive movement. It has not even been a standstill one, but has actually proved a retrograding movement.”⁷⁰ In the summer of 1852, however, Douglass’s paper would endorse the Free-Soil presidential ticket and he would self-identify in a speech to Garrisonians as both a “Liberty party man” and as a Free-Soiler.⁷¹

As David Blight has argued, Free-Soilism “offered [Douglass] little satisfaction, and he took every opportunity to expose its deficiencies. But simultaneously he found it impossible to resist the appeal of a broad coalition that could discredit slavery, even if it fell short of calling for

⁶⁶ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 20, 21–22.

⁶⁷ Studies that consider Douglass’s interest in Free-Soilism in the 1850s include Lance Newman, “Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave,’” *American Literature* vol. 81, no. 1 (2009): 127–52; Cristin Ellis, “Amoral Abolitionism: Frederick Douglass and the Environmental Case against Slavery,” *American Literature* 86, no. 2 (2014): 275–303; John R. McKivigan and Rebecca A. Pattillo, “Autographs for Freedom and Reaching a New Abolitionist Audience,” *The Journal of African American History* 102, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 35–51.

⁶⁸ Martin Delany, “The Buffalo Convention, Report of Proceedings,” *North Star*, 11 August 1848.

⁶⁹ Oliver Dyer, *Phonographic Report of the Proceedings of the National Free Soil Convention at Buffalo N.Y. August 9th and 10th, 1848* (Buffalo: Derby and Co., 1848), 21.

⁷⁰ “What Good Has the Free Soil Movement Done?” *North Star*, 25 May 1849.

⁷¹ Blassingame and McKivigan, *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:389, 2:395.

complete abolition and equal rights for blacks. Douglass was learning to be a realist and an opportunist, while also trying to preserve the moral integrity of his abolitionism.”⁷² Attention to the specific ways in which Douglass invokes and reformulates both the free-soil principle and the cordon of freedom across his time in the U.K. reveals that Douglass was attuned to the movement’s limitations from the start of his engagement with its ideas and tactics. But rather than treating his investment in Free-Soilism as an example of pragmatism or realism, with their connotations of concession, or as something that he worked toward over the course of the 1850s, I instead see Douglass’s investment as a sustained attempt to radicalize the movement and its tactics, attempts that would extend throughout the lifespan of the Free-Soil movement, and one that began—in the very spirit of the free-soil principle—as soon as he set foot on the shores of the U.K. and breathed its air.

⁷² Blight, *Frederick Douglass’s Civil War*, 47.