

**“That Strange, Mysterious, Indescribable”  
The Powers of Soul in Frederick Douglass’s Political Philosophy**

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When Thomas Jefferson and the other signers of the Declaration of Independence declared that “All men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” they left two questions unanswered, indeed unthought: what exactly *is* a “man,” and what is it about “men” that their creator would have seen fit to endow them with certain inalienable rights? In other words, what exactly are human beings, and what specific qualities or attributes do they have such that they, alone in all of creation, merit certain rights? The signers of the Declaration failed to raise or answer these questions because, I would suggest, no one had ever questioned their humanness, that is, their status as human beings; and while their right as human beings to hold certain rights was a relatively new idea, they did not feel obliged to articulate exactly *why* human beings have this right. It was enough, for the moment, to claim that they were “endowed” with it.

This was not the case for Frederick Douglass when he began to assert that the enslaved also merited these rights; nor was it the case when he asserted that free Blacks living in the North were endowed with such rights. Indeed, he had to argue against the widespread view, so famously expressed in 1857 by Chief Justice Roger Taney, that Blacks had no rights which whites were bound to respect. That view was based on two assumptions many white Americans held about Blacks: that they were not fully human in the ways that whites were human, and that they therefore lacked the specific kinds of human worth that merit acknowledgment and protection by the protocol of human rights embodied by the Declaration. In order to advance thoroughgoing arguments on behalf of Black rights, therefore, Douglass believed that he had to address and refute both of these assumptions. And to do that, he had to answer the two questions left unanswered by the Declaration: what is a human being, and what is it about human beingness—what is its value or worth—such that one can assert that humans have a distinctive worth that should be recognized and protected by rights? As Douglass put the matter in an 1848 speech: “Sir, we have in this country, no adequate idea of humanity yet; the nation does not feel that these [blacks] are men; it cannot see through the dark skin and curly hair of the black man, anything like humanity, or that has claims to human rights.”<sup>1</sup>

In seeking to answer these questions and thereby to provide Americans with “an adequate idea of humanity,” Douglass availed himself of all the resources at his disposal: his conversations with colleagues in the abolitionist movement, his fellowship in the AME church, his voracious reading, especially in political philosophy, and his own experience of life as a Black man. Significantly, however, he claimed in 1867 that it was this last resource, his

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<sup>1</sup> Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1950–1975), 5:79. All further references to this source will be abbreviated as *LW*. To a considerable degree, Douglass’s conviction that his times required a more adequate idea of the human anticipates Sylvia Wynter’s belief that “the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.” ed with the dignity and interdependence of the human species than with its “cognitive and behavioral autonomy.” Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, after Man—an Argument” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3: 3 (Fall 2003), 260.

*experience* of life as a Black human being, that most crucially shaped the political philosophy he developed in order to make his political activism more effective: “From this little bit of experience, slave experience,” he declared, “I have elaborated quite a lengthy chapter of political philosophy applicable to the American people.”<sup>2</sup> Douglass believed, then, that his political activism was underwritten by a political philosophy that drew upon, but also made radical supplements to, the political philosophy enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and widely taken to epitomize the main principles of U.S. liberal democracy then and to this day. That supplement derived from his own Black experience.

In what follows, I will first provide a brief summary of Douglass’s answers to these two questions and suggest that they form the core of his own political philosophy. I will then develop at some length a surprising but crucially important aspect of his answers: his conviction that aesthetic sensibility provides a crucial component of the human worth, or dignity, that makes humans merit human rights. Seeking to express, or name, what this human sensibility is and does, he frequently turned to what I will be calling “soul” language—language that depicts the crucial worth of human beings as residing in part in our capacity to respond with awe and joy to the beauties of the natural world and the infinite majesty of creation. As we shall soon see, he was not the only or the first Black American of his time to experience a linkage between aesthetic experience and human rights, but he was the first to develop this insight into a core component of a Black political philosophy that aimed to correct the deficiencies of white Americans’ understanding of the principles of their democracy.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Providing U.S. Political Philosophy with “An Adequate Conception of Humanity”***

What knowledge did Douglass feel he had acquired from his personal experience of enslavement (and later from his experience of anti-Black racism) that could address and remedy the above-mentioned omissions of U.S. political philosophy in his time? To answer briefly: he had learned that to be human is to possess certain “faculties” or “powers,” and that our possession and exercise of those powers is what gives us human worth, in our own eyes and in the eyes of others.<sup>4</sup> “Man’s right to liberty,” he declared in “God’s Law Outlawed” (1851), “is written upon all the *powers and faculties* of man.”<sup>5</sup> Three years later, he repeated himself almost verbatim in a January 1854 speech: “the great truth of man’s right to liberty is written on all the

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<sup>2</sup> John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, 5 vols., (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 4:160. All further references to this source will be abbreviated as *Douglass Papers*. Douglass’s political philosophy is the subject of two excellent book-length studies, both of which argue that it is a form of natural rights liberalism. See Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 2008), and Nick Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). I am also indebted to two superb intellectual histories of Douglass: Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), and David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). Robert-Gooding-Williams argues, by contrast, that Douglass’s political thought is best understood as an expression of republican political philosophy. Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Much of what follows is a condensation of the arguments I advance in *The Powers of Dignity: The Black Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Myers was the first to notice Douglass’s use of this phrase, but he does not allow it to trouble his argument that Douglass was fundamentally a natural-rights liberal whose major political value was freedom. In his analysis of the phrase, he argues that the two words (“powers” and “faculties”) mean significantly different things to Douglass. Myers, *Frederick Douglass*, 53–57.

<sup>5</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:261 [emphases added].

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*powers and faculties* of the human soul.”<sup>6</sup> Six months later, in his important lecture “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” he again referred to human faculties and powers. “To know whether [a] negro is a man,” he begins, “it must first be known what constitutes a man.” And what constitutes a man, he argues, are certain faculties and powers: “Man is distinguished from all other animals, by the possession of certain definite *faculties and powers*, as well as by physical organization and proportions.”<sup>7</sup> In an 1866 editorial on women’s suffrage, he expands on these ideas: “If woman is admitted to be a moral and intellectual being, possessing a sense of good and evil, and a power of choice between them, her case is already half gained. Our natural powers are the foundation of our natural rights; and it is a consciousness of powers which suggests the exercise of rights. Man can only exercise the powers he possesses, and he can only conceive of rights in the presence of powers.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Douglass believed that if we become “conscious” of our “natural powers” through the exercise of them, we prepare ourselves as well for the “exercise of rights.” Conversely, if we are denied opportunities to exercise our rights, and show them to ourselves and others, our consciousness of them dims and our lowered self-esteem discourages us from claiming our rights. He brings all these threads together in another speech on woman’s suffrage rights:

But whatever may be thought as to the consequences of allowing women to vote, it is plain that women themselves are divested of a large measure of their natural dignity by their exclusion from such participation in Government. . . . To deny woman her vote is to abridge her natural and social power, and to deprive her of a certain measure of respect. . . . Woman herself loses in her own estimation [of herself] by her enforced exclusion from the elective franchise just as slaves doubted their own fitness for freedom, from the fact of being looked down upon as fit only for slaves.<sup>9</sup>

How did Douglass come to perceive these linkages among human nature, human powers, consciousness of powers, dignity, and rights? On the one hand, while enslaved he had felt the force of the slavery system bearing down upon him in ways that seemed designed specifically to prevent him and other enslaved persons from becoming conscious of and exercising the powers that affirmed and produced their human worth, or dignity. He had also felt within himself, and observed in the behavior of other enslaved persons, a fierce determination to cling to those powers and to maintain some awareness of them even while the slavery system—and later Northern racism—strenuously sought to prevent their exercise and demonstration of those powers. “Dark as is the lot of the slave, yet he knows he is not a beast, but as truly a man as his master. Nothing can make the slave think that he is a beast; he feels the instinct of manhood within him at all times.”<sup>10</sup> This “instinct of manhood,” I would suggest, is the enslaved person’s not quite fully conscious sense of his own humanity and his worth. A more complete and confident sense of self-worth would be produced by his “putting forth” his natural faculties and

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<sup>6</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:454–55.

<sup>7</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:501, 502.

<sup>8</sup> Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1950–75) 4:232–33. All further references to this source will be abbreviated as *LW*.

<sup>9</sup> *LW*, 4:236, 237.

<sup>10</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:327.

powers, but the slaveholder has denied and appropriated these. The enslaved person, “as a mental, moral, and responsible being,” was “blotted out from existence . . . and ranked with the beasts of the fields [because] all his powers were in the hands of another.”<sup>11</sup>

Certain distinctively human powers, then, are what constitute humanness itself. Awareness, exercise, and recognition of those powers (by oneself and others) is what constitutes the human dignity that makes human beings deserving of certain rights.<sup>12</sup> As the passages I have quoted suggest, Douglass frequently asserted that two of the powers that most plainly constitute our humanness are our “mental” or “intellectual” power (the capacity to reason), and our “moral” power (our ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to be “responsible” for our actions). But Douglass also frequently suggested—and in one lecture explicitly stated—that humanness is constituted by another power also. This is our capacity to respond aesthetically to the world we are in, to perceive and appreciate beauty, to imagine and to create, to transform spaces into places, and to behold the infinitude of the universe, to sense its vastness and to stand in awe of it. As Douglass recalls in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, his own experience of this uniquely human power of responding aesthetically and spiritually to the world entered into his boyhood’s self-conception and helped form his conviction that he was a being with a dignity that deserved recognition and freedom and political rights. In later texts such as “Pictures and Progress” and “It Moves,” he elaborated further on this insight, and in so doing he introduced the “soul” language that I aim to call our attention to in this essay. I will try to show the ways this human capacity for aesthetic and spiritual response and creativity entered (as Douglass recalled in *My Bondage and My Freedom*) into his self-conception and helped form his conviction that he was a being of dignity who deserved recognition and protection from universal human rights.

### ***Aesthetic Responsiveness and Soul Language***

Douglass was not the only or the first Black American to express the view that human rights are based on a sense of human dignity that derives in part from aesthetic and spiritual experience. In 1849, Douglass stood in his *North Star* office in Rochester and read a remarkable letter he had just received from Martin Delany, briefly his co-editor of the newspaper and for some time one of its occasional correspondents. Describing a recent journey he took through the Allegheny Mountains, Delany writes:

The soul may here expand in the magnitude of nature, and soar to the extent of human susceptibility. Indeed, it is only in the mountains that I can fully appreciate my existence *as a man* in America, my own native land. It is then and there my soul is lifted up, my bosom caused to swell with emotion, and I am lost in wonder at the *dignity of my own nature*. I see in the works of nature around me, the wisdom and goodness of God. I contemplate them, and conscious that he has *endowed me with faculties* to comprehend them, I perceive the likeness I bear to

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<sup>11</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:9.

<sup>12</sup> Dignity has generally been overlooked as a key word in Douglass’s political philosophy. One notable exception is Nick Buccola, “‘The Essential Dignity of Man as Man’: Frederick Douglass on Human Dignity,” *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2015), 228–58. See also Robert Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois–Washington Debate and the Idea of Dignity,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, eds., Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 2018), 19–34.

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him. What a being is Man! . . . created in the impress image of his Maker; and how debased is God, and outraged his divinity in the person of the oppressed colored people of America!<sup>13</sup>

According to Delany, then, a definite logic linked his perceptions of the natural world, his belief in his own human dignity, and his determination to resist any oppression that denies his possession of such dignity. He begins by observing that only when he is in a beautiful natural setting like the mountains—away from the scorn heaped upon him by whites—can he truly feel like “a man.” This powerful feeling of his human personhood comes into being as he “contemplates the works of nature,” causing him to “become conscious” that he is “endowed . . . with faculties to comprehend them and in turn this consciousness of his aesthetic “faculties” of appreciation causes him to “be lost in wonder at the dignity of [his] own nature.” There is something unquestionably worthy—or in “the image of god”—in this distinctively human ability to respond so fully to the “works of nature.” Filled now with this sense of his own “dignity,” he cannot but believe that God must be outraged that such a being as he now knows himself to be routinely denied his rightful dignity “in America” merely because of the color of his skin. When Delany writes that God is “debased” by racism, he means that whites’ anti-Black racism has degraded God by denying the divinity, or human worth, that resides in all humankind. Both he and God are thus indignant that his humanity and dignity as a Black man are so thoroughly denied by the white racist order. And he implies that this outrage, accompanied by his belief in the justice of his outrage, will energize and drive his determination to resist such oppression.

With its words like “soul,” “expand,” “magnitude,” “soar,” “wonder,” and “dignity,” Delany’s letter to Douglass draws heavily on Romantic ideas and tropes circulating at the time in U.S. culture, but it makes quite distinctive use of these when it puts them to work to assert Black dignity and overturn white racism. As I hope to show, it is not at all surprising that Douglass decided to publish this letter in the *North Star*, for it expressed a view that he maintained and elaborated somewhat more philosophically than Delany throughout his long career.

It is in *My Bondage*, that Douglass first describes some of the varied ways he exercised and became conscious of having this particular human power. He recalls, for example, some moments of dreamy reflectiveness he enjoyed as a small boy and suggests that these eventually made possible his political awakening and resolve to resist oppression. He writes that “in a little valley, not far from grandmammy’s cabin, stood Mr. Lee’s mill. . . . It was a water mill; and I shall never be able to tell *the many things thought and felt*, while I sat on the bank and watched that mill, and the turning of its ponderous wheel.” He writes further that, “the sloop and mill were wondrous things, full of thoughts and ideas. A child cannot well look at such objects without *thinking*.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the things young Frederick Bailey (for that was his actual name at the time) found himself thinking about was the painful fact of his enslavement:

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 47 [emphasis added].

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 161 [emphases added]. All further page references will appear in the text.

As I grew older and more thoughtful, I was more and more filled with a sense of my wretchedness. . . . There are thoughtful days in the lives of children—at least there were in mine—when they grapple with all the great, primary subjects of knowledge, and reach, in a moment, conclusions which no subsequent experience can shake. I was just as well aware of the unjust, unnatural and murderous character of slavery, when nine years old, as I am now. Without any appeal to books, to laws, or to authorities of any kind, it was enough to accept God as a father, to regard slavery as a crime. (209)

We should note the juxtaposition here of the “great, primary subjects of knowledge” and the conviction that “slavery [was] a crime.” These relate to each other in two ways. His thinking about these “subjects” leads him to think about his enslavement, and, just as importantly, his *awareness* of his ability to think about “the great, primary subjects of knowledge” instantly reveals to him that it is criminal to hold a being, who is capable of such grappling, in a condition of enslavement. The logic here is exactly the logic we saw earlier—and spelled out more explicitly—in Delany’s letter.

We find essentially this logic at work in the pages in *My Bondage* in which Douglass recounts his discovery of the true nature of the slavery system. The young Fred Bailey asked the enslaved persons most recently brought from Africa *why* they have been enslaved, and they replied that there was no theological nor moral justification for their condition: rather, they had been kidnapped by robbers. Douglass writes:

I could not have been more than seven or eight years old, when I began to make this subject [of my criminal enslavement] my study. It was with me in the woods and fields; along the shores of the river, and wherever my boyish wanderings led me; and though I was, at that time, quite ignorant of the existence of free states, I distinctly remember being, even then, most strongly impressed with the idea of being a free man some day. This cheering assurance was an inborn dream of my human nature—a constant menace to slavery—and one which all the powers of slavery were unable to silence or extinguish. (179)

Why does Fred Bailey choose to pursue his study of his condition in the “woods and fields?” And why do his ramblings there produce his conviction that he “will be a free man one day”—that is, his determination to resist and escape slavery? It is not so much because the natural world makes his own nature with its “inborn dream” of freedom visible and palpable to him, as because his ability to respond to the natural world reveals to him his own capacity or power of response, just as the Allegheny mountains would later do for Delany. Recall Delany’s words: “I contemplate them, and [become] conscious that he has *endowed me with faculties* to comprehend them.” Delany was a grown man at that time, so this transition from experience to consciousness happens easily. Not quite so for Douglass, who was still a boy. His responsiveness to the words and fields and streams did produce the strong feeling that his enslavement was a crime, but it did not quite rise to a consciousness of “the dignity of [his] own nature” as Delany puts it. For a fuller and more explicit account of this process, we must turn to a later work, Douglass’s 1861 lecture “Pictures and Progress.”

**“The Divinest of all human faculties”**

Read today almost exclusively for his views about photography<sup>15</sup>, this lecture is also one of Douglass’s more explicitly philosophical works, one that explains why one’s ability to respond aesthetically to the natural world—that is, to behold and experience the wondrousness of the world—prompts the kind of self-consciousness that leads to a determination to resist oppression. His explanation begins with this account of “the divine meditations” of a “boy of ten”:

On the hillside in the valley under the grateful shades of solitary oaks and elms the boy of ten, all forgetful, of time or place, calls to books, or to boyish sports, looks up with silence and awe to the blue overhanging firmament and views with dreamy wonder, its ever shifting drapery, tracing in the Clouds, and in their ever changing forms and colors, the outlines of towns and cities, great ships and hostile armies of men [and] of horses, solemn Temples, and the Great Spirit of all; Break in if you please upon the prayers of monks or nuns, but I pray you, do not disturb the divine meditations of that little Child. He is unfolding to himself the Divinest of all human faculties, for such is the picture making faculty of man.<sup>16</sup>

Haven’t we already met this child in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, where he was the boy who gazed at the sloop and windmill and found them and himself “full of thoughts,” the boy who walked along the river and grappled “with all the great, primary objects of human knowledge?” In any case, Douglass goes on to explain how this child’s dreamy reflections give rise to what he calls the “divinest of human faculties,” which he now calls a “power”:

It [the picture-making power] lies, directly in the path of what I conceive to be a key to the great mystery of life and progress. The process by which man is able to invert his own subjective consciousness, into the objective form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of man[’]s nature. All that is really peculiar to humanity—in contradistinction from all other animals[—]proceeds from this one faculty *or power*. The world has no sight more pleasant and hopeful, either for the child or for the race, than one of these little ones [that is, children] in rapt contemplation. . . . The process is one of *self-revelation*, a comparison of the pure forms of beauty and excellence without, with those which are within.<sup>17</sup>

This complex passage must be examined step-by-step. First, Douglass takes the “picture-making power” of dreamy meditation—which is, I would suggest, an *aesthetic* faculty or power—to be the one power that most decisively distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals and thus most assuredly constitutes our humanity. The reason for this, he posits, is that this

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example: Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012); John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, eds., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century’s Most Photographed American* (New York: Liverwright Publishing Corp., 2015); Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African Americans* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:460.

<sup>17</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:461.

power is the primary means through which we become self-conscious: responding aesthetically to the world is “the process by which man is able to invert his own subjective consciousness, into the objective form.” Then he goes one step further and attributes to this faculty our dawning *consciousness* not just of ourselves as *persons* but as persons of some *worth*. He writes that when a child is in “rapt contemplation,” what’s happening inside him or her is a “process . . . of *self-revelation*, a comparison of the pure forms of beauty and excellence without, with those which are within.” In other words, children dimly realize that their ability to see and respond to beauty and excellence in the world (and in art) testifies to their own beauty and excellence. Only because they have something within them (“soul” will become Douglass’s word for it) that *corresponds* to nature’s beauty and magnificence can they *respond* to it aesthetically. Thus, we are back to the letter from Delany, who wrote: “I contemplate [the works of nature], and conscious that [God] has *endowed me with faculties* to comprehend them, I perceive the likeness I bear to him.” The only difference is that Douglass’s language here is more plainly philosophical. Douglass leaves out the “God” language and sees human aesthetic experience as the primary producer of both human self-consciousness and human consciousness of human worth (or dignity).<sup>18</sup>

This shift from theological and transcendent to more secular and immanent language reflects the trajectory of Douglass’s own development as a thinker. In 1855, Douglass took this capacity for wondrous reflection and imaginative response to be the essence of humanness itself, and when he described it he blended soul language with more conventional language about “God:” Humanness is a state of being “endowed with those mysterious powers by which man soars above the things of time and sense, and grasps with undying tenacity, the elevating and sublimely glorious idea of God.”<sup>19</sup> By the early 1860s, if not earlier, he was expressing the same belief but without any “God” being present. For example, in an 1863 address, he declared that there is “in man, deep down, and it may be very deep down, in his *soul* or in the truth itself, an elective power, or an attractive force, call it by what name you will, which makes truth in all her simple beauty and excellence, ever preferred to the grim and ghastly powers of error.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in his remarks in 1870 at the final meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he said: “I want to express my love to God and gratitude to God, by thanking those faithful men and women, who have devoted the great energies of their *souls* to the welfare of mankind. It is only through such men and women that I can get any glimpse of God anywhere.”<sup>21</sup> And in his great 1883 lecture “It Moves,” he affirmed: “What is true of external nature [its obedience to the physical laws of the universe] is also true of that strange, mysterious, and indescribable, which earnestly endeavors in some degree to measure and grasp the deepest thought and to get at the soul of things; to make our subjective consciousness, objective, in thought, form and speech.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As Simon Gikandi notes, the very project of the European Enlightenment aimed to exclude the enslaved from human status by denying their capacity for moral reflection and aesthetic response: “the act of enslavement was predicated on the exclusion of the slave from the moral and aesthetic realm.” No doubt because he wished to contest this exclusion, Douglass’s account of his childhood suggests that even an enslaved man, one who is *not* “civilized and illuminated by knowledge,” can nonetheless make such discoveries in the “objects and occurrences around him” and “recognize” himself to be an “intelligible and accountable subject”—that is, a human being who possesses certain powers and from those powers derives a sense of his self-worth. Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 238.

<sup>19</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:255.

<sup>20</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:553 [emphases added].

<sup>21</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 4:264 [emphases added].

<sup>22</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:143.

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In all of these instances, Douglass is suggesting that our power to “grasp the deepest thought and to get at the soul of things” helps constitute our human worth, and thus crucially underwrites our claim to political rights (when we are aware of having this power) while also firing our determination to gain those rights.

### ***“That mysterious, invisible, impalpable something”***

In one of his last speeches, “The Lessons of the Hour” (1894), Douglass goes a step further and makes this claim for not just individual citizens of a democracy but the nation or polity they compose. Midway through the speech, he refers to “the soul of the nation,” and he returns to this idea at the end his lecture also:

In conclusion, let me say one word more of the soul of the nation and of the importance of keeping it sensitive and responsive to the claims of truth, justice, liberty, and progress. In speaking of the soul of the nation I deal in no cant phraseology. I speak of that mysterious, invisible, impalpable something which underlies the life alike of individuals and of nations, and determines their character and destiny.<sup>23</sup>

How do we respond today to Douglass’s soul language and to the political philosophy—a radical supplement to the Declaration’s liberal natural rights philosophy—it helped him elaborate? Do we take it to be “cant,” just a metaphor, or mere lip-service to a discredited though still potent worldview? If so, how did we respond to the late John Lewis’s own soul language as it appears in his valedictory essay published the day after his death in the *New York Times*? Lewis devotes most of the essay to paying tribute to the young people who launched the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, and he sums up by affirming that, “ordinary people with ordinary vision can redeem the soul of our nation by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.”<sup>24</sup>

In my view, we lose a great deal if we are unable to take Lewis’s and Douglass’s soul language on its own terms and instead put words like “soul” in scare quotes to distance ourselves from them. Broadly, we overlook a long history of Black Americans’ use of soul language in their efforts to rethink and restate the principles on which U.S. democracy is based. More particularly, we overlook Douglass’s effort to supplement the familiar, traditional principles of freedom and equality with a more thoughtful account of what men and women *are* (i.e., a more adequate “conception of humanity”) such that they possess a human “dignity” that deserves those rights.

Perhaps the most subtle loss incurred from thinking of soul language as mere rhetoric is that we can overlook what a number of Black poets and writers have written about Black subjectivity and resistance. Dating back at least to antebellum period, all Black activists and intellectuals have had to struggle against a racial order that seeks to categorize and simplify Black subjectivity both by rendering it as group phenomenon (to be a Black individual is in itself to share a group’s quality or experience of Blackness), and by asserting that such Blackness lacks the qualities that characterize white humanity. Some of them have responded with soul language because, with its unembarrassed embrace of the ineffable and unknowable, it sets itself against

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<sup>23</sup> *Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:191 [emphases added].

<sup>24</sup> John Lewis, “Together You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.” [Nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

simplifications of both kinds. The late Jeffrey Ferguson was thinking along these lines when he wrote in his 2008 essay, “Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance,” that, “a theme like resistance, which focuses more on the struggle against outside forces than on inner experiences, cannot give the best account of how both the oppressed and oppressor exceed the frameworks that we use to explain them.”<sup>25</sup> Ferguson’s call to rethink resistance and to look at the role of “inner experience” in Black life has now been taken up by many scholars and artists, and I will close with the words of one of them, poet and critic Kevin E. Quashie. Like Douglass before him, he is unafraid to use words like “ineffable” or “mysterious” or “impalpable,” and like Douglass he suggests that “quiet” has always been both a supplement to and a form of “resistance” in Black culture:

Quiet . . . is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world: it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet.<sup>26</sup>

The ten-year-old Fred Bailey who “look[ed] up with silence and awe to the blue overhanging firmament and view[ed] with dreamy wonder, its ever-shifting drapery . . . in the Clouds” was being very quiet. So was the eight-year-old Fred who walked “in the woods and fields and along the shores of the river” on the Lloyd plantation. So was enslaved boy for whom “the sloop and mill were wondrous things, full of thoughts and ideas.” Yet out of that quietness would emerge the incomparably energetic Black political activist, philosopher, and writer we know today as Frederick Douglass. This, I believe, was one of the crucial insights gained from his experience of enslavement that the older Douglass sought to convey in the “chapter of political philosophy” he “elaborated” and thought “applicable to the American people.”

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Ferguson, “Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance,” *Raritan* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2008), 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin E. Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 6.