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Frederick Douglass's Lost Cause: Lynching and the Body Politic in "The Lessons of the Hour"

Randy Prus

There is a lesson to be learned from "The Lessons of the Hour," Frederick Douglass' final attempt to redress systemic racial violence in the United States. Douglass presented "The Lessons of the Hour" on several occasions beginning in 1892, before publishing it as a pamphlet in 1894 (Andrews 339). Between the years 1882 and 1901, no fewer than 107 people were lynched in a given year. As with his essay "Lynch Law in the South," published in the North American Review in 1892, "The Lessons of the Hour" directly confronts the ritualized violence of lynching taking place in the South, and the apologists who condoned the violence throughout the country. Douglass understood lynchings to be symbolic acts reflective of southern nationalism and its long history of persecuting blacks. For Douglass, lynchings are connected to the disfranchisement of black men taking place in the early 1890s. Both lynch law and disfranchisement constitute a disavowal of the black citizenship that had been gained during Reconstruction. The failure to recognize black citizenship threatens the basis of the republic as Douglass hoped and imagined it to be.

Although "The Lessons of the Hour" does not match the rhetorical power of Douglass's earlier work, the pamphlet re-visits the issues of black self-reliance and his hope for political and cultural assimilation. Unlike his earlier work, however, "The Lessons of the Hour" takes a distancing, utopian turn, both hopeful about assimilation...
ilation, and hopelessly resigned to the inevitable formation of Jim Crow. By the 1890's, in the wake of Reconstruction, racial politics in the United States had taken on a regressive, savage inequality. Coincidentally, by the 1890's, Douglass's voice in the national dialogue on race had been muted, giving way to the younger voices of such diverse figures as Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, and Pauline Hopkins. No longer center stage and armed with a disempowered rhetoric, Douglass warns an audience against the acceptance of southern nationalism as part of the terms for national reconciliation. Unfortunately, southern nationalism, by the 1890's, had been re-written into the mythos of the national narrative.

I. The Wake of Reconstruction

The years immediately following the Civil War witnessed the passage of the most radically progressive civil rights legislation in the history of the nation, through the leadership of the radical Republicans who dominated Congress during Reconstruction. In December of 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was ratified. In July of 1868, the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment extended national citizenship to everyone, overriding attempts by individual states to limit citizenship by imposing "black codes." In March of 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended voting rights to black males, was ratified. Then, in 1875, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed racial segregation. These legislative acts transformed the political structure of the republic, and they define the basis of Douglass' nationalism. Douglass was a firm believer in the Constitution, and in the hope for social, political and economic assimilation such legislative acts provided for blacks in America. However, over the next twenty years the civil rights gained in Reconstruction were to be overturned by a series of further political and judicial actions.

By the 1890s, the white imagination perceived the black male as a particular problem. This anxiety was shaped by political, economic, and cultural events: with the failure of Reconstruction on a national level, political issues were returned to the state level; meanwhile, the early 1890s witnessed an economic recession which turned into a depression by 1894, with the southern economy especially hard hit. Along with this shift in politics and the stagnant economy, came a cultural revision of the Civil War, known as the "Lost Cause."

After the disputed election of 1876, Reconstruction at the federal level began to fall apart and Rutherford B. Hayes, the newly and fraudulently elected president, agreed to remove the army from the south as part of the compromise. The corruption of the previous Grant Administration had transformed the Republican party into the party of big business and the party of the Gilded Age, and it abandoned the causes of Civil Rights. In 1883, the Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875. With the task of Reconstruction left to the states, and the
annulment of Civil Rights at the federal level, racial politics became a disaster. In 1890, Mississippi altered its Constitution to disfranchise blacks, and after 1892, Virginia, Alabama and Georgia also enacted codes to limit voting rights. By the turn of the century, all southern states restricted voting rights based on some combination of literacy tests, property rights, and poll taxes, essentially nullifying the Fifteenth Amendment. These events would lead eventually to Plessy versus Ferguson in 1895, which would cement the "separate but equal" Jim Crow social structure for the next seventy years.

As the political order was being remade, the "radical redeemers" began to dominate the cultural narrative of the south. According to Joel Williamson in his important study, The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation, the redeemers held militant white supremacist views, and were largely responsible for ritualized lynchings. The "redeemer" ideology was especially appealing to lower class whites who were feeling the pains of the economic recession that hit the southern agrarian economy hard. C. Vann Woodward has noted the price of cotton, in 1894, was 4.6 cents a pound compared with 14.1 cents a pound in 1873 (185). For the most part, it was lower class whites who performed lynchings under the guise of a "mob," but their ideology was supported by intellectual and cultural narratives as well.

White supremacist ideology found support in the scientific, religious, and cultural discourses. Joel Williamson elaborates in detail the pervasiveness of racist thought in the United States in the 1890s. For example, Nathaniel Southgate Shuler, a professor of Harvard, argued in an article in the Atlantic Monthly in 1884 that blacks were basically imitative, and that, once freed from the civilizing influence of slavery, they would regress into a savage state (Williamson 119). This theme was echoed by Phillip Alexander Bruce in his 1889 book, The Plantation Negro as Freeman (Williamson 121). Leonidas Scott, a layman who would achieve a high rank in the Southern Baptist Church, wrote in 1894: "The people of the South had better become emancipated from the negro, and practice and not preach White Supremacy" (qtd. in Williamson 128). Rebecca Latimer Felton, a leading journalist and politician in Georgia addressed the State Agricultural Society in 1897 and defended the lynchings, saying "if it takes lynching to protect woman's dearest possession from drunken, ravenous beasts then I say Lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary" (qtd. in Williamson 128). Earlier, she had led a movement to arrange an exhibit at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair that depicted an idyllic plantation scene, with two black slaves, Aunt Jinny and Uncle Jack, as counter-propaganda to the Fair's tribute to Harriet Beecher Stowe and her Uncle Tom (Williamson 124-127).

The political acts that overturned Civil Rights were supported, in part, by a cultural re-writing of the Civil War. This revision constituted the myth of the "Lost Cause." As an effort to reconcile the split in the nation, the Civil War became culturally re-imagined as a war of passionate intensity, and even though the south lost, its cause was accepted
as a noble one. Emancipation and the civil rights blacks had achieved with the post-war Amendments were ostensibly erased from this narrative. David Blight describes the "Lost Cause":

Historians have defined the Lost Cause in at least three different ways: one, as a public memory, shaped by a web of organizations, institutions, and rituals; two, as a dimension of southern and American civil religion, rooted in churches and sacred rhetoric as well as secular institutions and thought; and three, as a literary phenomenon, shaped by journalists and fiction writers from the die-hard Confederate apologists of the immediate post-war years, through the gentle romanticism of the "local color" writers of the 1880s, to the legion of more mature novelists of the 1890s and early twentieth century who appealed to a national audience eager for reconciliation.

(228-9)

In short, the "Lost Cause" re-introduced southern nationalism into the national narrative. As the new social order in the south was forming, led by the radical redeemers, the old order became increasingly romanticized — the figure of Robert E. Lee, for instance, re-appears as a martyred, Christ-like figure. The United Confederate Veterans were organized in 1889, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1895 (Woodward 156). The new order, as with the old, was contingent upon the white race mastering the black race, and as C. Vann Woodward has observed, "southern romanticism was highly contagious" (156). Both the new and the old orders, however, constructed identities that went beyond individual state identification, and became a recurring southern nationalism. With the acceptance of southern nationalism, the Civil War was revised in the emerging national narrative as a temporary, yet centralizing disruption, while post-war amendments and civil rights bills were erased from memory.

The discourses of the "Lost Cause" and the white supremacy endemic to them form the basis of the emergent national narrative. With the elision of the post-war amendments and civil rights bills from the national narrative, blacks were abrogated from the body politic, however brief and marginal their participation was in the decade or two following the Civil War. The intrinsic violence of southern nationalism, in turn, allowed for the ritualized performance of violence against black bodies by lynching. To accommodate southern nationalism, the national narrative readily accepted the double violence against the black body and the black body politic. Douglass understands the ritualized violence to be systemic, and hence, discursive, part of an on-going cultural narrative.

Etymologically, lynching has always been a part of the southern American experience. The word "lynch" is derived from the name Lynch, an American vigilante during the Revolution. "Lynch law" described Lynch's method of dealing with the Tories in Virginia, and yet
in its earliest recorded usage, the pillaring of Tories was equated with the pillaring of blacks. The Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles includes a citation of the term “Lynch’s law” with the reference from 1782 in a letter from C. Lynch to W. Hay, 11 May: “They are mostly torys & such as [Capt.] Sanders has given Lynches Law too for Dealing with the Negroes &” (1462). In this early formulation of “lynch’s law,” the pillaring of Tories received its justification because they were equated with “negroes.” As specific terms, “lynch law” and “lynch” enter the American lexicon in the years 1811 and 1836, respectively (Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles 1462). In the early part of the nineteenth century, periodic panics over slave insurrections broke out among white southerners, which led to the more intense policing of slave society. According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, two of the years of panic were 1811 and 1835, years that coincide with the appearance of the terms “lynch law” and “lynching” in the lexicon (407).

Initially lynching might include acts of public humiliation, such as tarring and feathering, and did not necessarily end in death for the victim. However, the lynchings that erupted in the 1890s were fatal acts of racism. The victim—usually a black male—would often be accused of violating a white woman. The resulting violence was designed to punish the victim and to terrorize the black population. With these intentions, lynchings projected a double order of violence: on one hand, they were punitive, convicting and executing the victim outside the law and social restraints; but on the other hand, they were ritualized, symbolic acts, and hence, very much a part of the social order, an extension of lynch law, residing in the culture of southern nationalism. The social institutions formed within this cultural narrative recognized the punitive violence of the lynchings, but were blinded to their symbolic violence as a central part of its imaginary.

The fact that these lynchings were social rituals and symbolic acts is evident both in the events themselves and in the reporting of the events. The numbers are indicative of the pervasiveness, both geographically and temporally, of the events. Between 1882 and 1927, a reported 4,951 people were lynched, the majority of them occurred in the former Confederate states. The highest number of lynchings occurred between 1891 and 1893, with reported counts of 195, 235, and 200 respectively. These were the years Douglass was working on “Lynch Law in the South,” and “The Lessons of the Hour,” as well as the revision of Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. The victims were for the most part black men, although black women and whites were lynched as well.

These lynchings took the form of hanging and/or burning the victim alive, but they also included other gruesome acts. Reports indicate the use of corkscrews in the flesh, decapitation, the removal of digits as souvenirs, and at times castration of the victim. Lynching events were premeditated and well-organized. Large crowds, including women and children, witnessed them, although, in a good many the names of the participants were reported “unknown” to local authorities. As alarming as the events themselves were, so too was the circulation of the lynching
narratives throughout the cultural economy. The fact that large crowds appeared so suddenly attests to the power of the oral tradition of southern culture. Detailed reports were circulated in the southern, as well as northern, press. Lynchings were also photographed and circulated as postcards throughout the nation. James Allen’s recent exhibit Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in American gathers a wide collection of these photographs and bears witness to lynching as a signifier of southern nationalism. Lynching, in effect, replaced slavery as the peculiar institution of the south.

II. The Body of the Text and Discursive Bodies

For Frederick Douglass, the lynchings that occurred in the early 1890s were part of the systemic “lynch law” that defined the new order in the South. Douglass’s essays, “Lynch Law in the South” (1892), and “The Lessons of the Hour” (1894) address the problems of lynching by attacking the culture that produces the “lynch law.” While “Lynch Law in the South” addresses the problems of a specific southern nationalism, “Lessons of the Hour” addresses the problems of the lynch law as well as its influence upon the entire country. Douglass’s rhetoric, in both essays, but especially in “The Lessons of the Hour,” assumes the counter-position of a transcendent United States nationalism that bridges the North-South divide. He speaks in both essays as a citizen of the republic, granted rights by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments — the same Amendments that are abrogated by the emergence of southern nationalism in the national narrative.

From this position, Douglass is able to confront southern nationalism as a discursive issue, maintained by religious, legal, political and social discourses. Douglass, addressing the term “negro problem,” writes in “Lessons of the Hour”:

I say at once, I do not like or admit the justice or propriety of this formula. Words are things. They certainly are such in this case, and I may say they are a very bad thing, in this case, since they give us a misnomer and one that is misleading. It is a formula of Southern origin, and has a strong bias against him. It has been accepted by the good people of the North, as I think, without investigation. It is a crafty invention and is in every way, worthy of its inventors.”

(LH 360)

Waldo Martin has documented Douglass’ lifelong confrontation with race and color prejudice. As Martin makes clear, Douglass understood prejudice as a psychopathology, especially in the white imagination, as it pertained first to slaves in the ante-bellum period and then to the freedmen following the war. In identifying prejudice as a problem in language, Douglass is exposing the discursive formation of racial preju-
dice, and, in locating the discourse as one of “southern origin” infecting the north, Douglass contains prejudice within the “new” order of the south, even as it replicates the “old” order.

Economically and politically the “new” order differed from the “old” order, yet shared a basic economic similarity: colonialism. The break-up of the old plantation system, after the war, brought about a system of sharecropping and tenant farming. This system was based upon the production of a single crop that was dependent upon world markets. C. Vann Woodward writes: “The immemorial pattern of colonialism – the dependence upon the sale of cheap raw materials on a world market and upon buying back manufactured goods from protected industrial and commercial areas – continued to hold sway in the South despite the much-vaunted ‘industrial revolution.’” (Woodward 186). While the colonial system effected the white, as well as black, sharecropper economically and politically, it especially led to the construction of the black man in the south as a colonial subject.

Douglass raises the issues of figural representation in “The Lessons of the Hour.” Within the discourse of southern nationalism, black males were culturally represented in two distinct and opposing ways: one, as an aggressive, sexually licentious, ravaging beast, preying upon white women, and two, as a docile, ignorant, humble and humiliated member of the lower class in service to dominant white authority. Both cultural representations of black men serve to limit their political representation. The figure of the sexually aggressive black man became the focus of many of the lynchings, at least putatively so, and the figure of the ignorant black man became the focus of the disfranchisement of black men in the southern states as they reportedly could not pass literacy tests necessary to vote or hold property. Homi Bhabha identifies this construction of a double-stereotype as systemic to a colonial discourse:

[T]here is another scene of colonial discourse in which the native or Negro meets the demand of colonial discourse; where the subverting ‘split’ is recuperable within a strategy of social and political control. It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces. In each case what is being dramatized is a separation – between races, cultures, histories, within histories – a separation between before and after that repeats obsessively the mythical moment or disjunction.

(82)
Bhabha reads colonial discourse as a systematic deployment of stereotypes against a certain group of people that allows the colonizer to maintain authority and power over that group of people. As the "new" order of the south emerges in the 1890s, it replicates the "old" order by repeating the south's mythical past as the authorizing agency of whites over blacks. At this scene of identification, the "Lost Cause" appears as an obsessive disjunction erasing the rights gained by blacks during Reconstruction, and becomes the basis for the "new" order of southern nationalism.

In "The Lessons of the Hour," Douglass addresses both stereotypes of the black male, and in doing so, confronts the discourse of southern nationalism. Douglass argues against the inherent rapacity of the black man in the "new" order by negating its presence in the "old" order:

I reject the charge brought against the negro as a class, but all through the late war, while the slave masters of the South were absent from their homes in the field of rebellion, with bullets in their pockets, treason in their hearts, broad blades in their blood stained hands, seeking the life of the nation, with the vile purpose of perpetuating the enslavement of the negro, their wives, their daughters, their sisters and their mothers were left in the absolute custody of these same negroes, and during all those four years of terrible conflict, when the negro had every opportunity to commit the abominable crime now alleged against him, there was never a single instance of such crime reported or charged against him.

(346)

Douglass counters the stereotype of the rapacious black man with the historical evidence of the Civil War. Black slaves were left home alone with the white women of the south, and yet, during the four years of the war, there were no accusations – real or imagined – of rape or attempted rape. More importantly, in demystifying this stereotype Douglass is also refuting the claim of southern nationalism that the "new" order is based on the "Lost Cause" of the "old" order. In doing so, Douglass disrupts the national narrative that relies on a belief in tradition, however fictional that tradition might be.

Douglass also confronts the stereotype of the black man as the docile, subservient figure:

Even when American art undertakes to picture the types of the two races it invariably places in comparison not the best of both races as common fairness would dictate, but it puts side by side in glaring contrast the lowest type of the negro with the highest type of the white man and calls upon you to "look upon this picture then upon that."

When a black man's language is quoted, in order to belittle and degrade him, his ideas are put into the most grotesque and
unreadable English, while the utterances of negro scholars and authors are ignored. A hundred white men will attend a concert of white negro minstrels with faces blackened with burnt cork, to one who will attend a lecture by an intelligent negro.

(352)

Here Douglass is countering the stereotype of the ignorant, subservient black figure that repeats itself in the cultural representation of the plantation mythology – a scene in which the social order is represented by whites taking control of the racial divide. As he dispenses with the stereotype, Douglass himself becomes a performative figure. His language and his advancement from slave to citizen undermines the stereotype by representing the cultural advances of blacks made possible by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments which give black males citizenship and voting rights. More importantly, Douglass' rhetoric undermines the myth of the “Lost Cause” and its insistence that the “new” order is a return of the “old” order. Douglass embodies the advances made by blacks through the post-war Amendments and Civil Rights legislation, and by calling attention to himself as an “intelligent negro,” he counters the stereotype of the minstrel. In demythologizing the cultural double stereotype of black males, Douglass provides for himself a basis upon which to address the failures of political representation inherent in southern nationalism as they relate to lynching law and the disfranchisement of black males.

As a symbolic act of violence, lynching was symptomatic of the deeper psychopathology of white supremacy embedded in southern nationalism and the discourses which it produced. In “The Lessons of the Hour,” Douglass identifies and names this social imaginary the “south.” For Douglass, the whole issue of race relations throughout the country becomes a “southern question" as he writes: “You must not, therefore, be surprised if my version of the Southern question shall widely differ from both the North and South...” (340). Douglass articulates a position that is both and yet neither north and south, a position of transcendent nationalism. The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees that no state shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Douglass understands that the Fourteenth Amendment affords him a position that superseded Southern law and culture. From this position, he speaks as both citizen — “Friends and fellow citizens” (340) — and as a black man — “I proposed to give you a colored man’s view” (340). For Douglass, southern nationalism becomes an opposition, not to northern identities, but to a national identity, which includes the rights of black men as voting citizens. Because he is a product of Enlightenment humanism as well as romantic nationalism, Douglass foregrounds his critique of southern nationalism on the ideals of the second republic as defined by the civil rights legislation of Reconstruction.
In “The Lessons of the Hour,” Douglass repeatedly identifies lynch law as a product of southern nationalism. In addition to the terms “south” and “southern,” he deploys the term “the late rebellious States” (341) as if to remind his audience of the Civil War, which by 1892 is a generation past. The justification of lynch law, according to Douglass, is rightly termed an “effective justification of Southern barbarism” (349). The crime of lynching is committed by “the Southern mob” (351). Perhaps his most telling condemnation of lynch law as part of southern nationalism occurs when he writes:

We must remember that these people [Southerners] have not now and have never had any such respect for human life as is common to other men. They have had among them for centuries a peculiar institution, and that peculiar institution has stamped them as a peculiar people. They were not before the war, they were not during the war and have not been since the war in their spirit or in their civilization, a people in common with the people of the North.

(351)

The “peculiar institution” hosted by these peculiar people to which Douglass refers is white supremacy and the oppression of blacks. In tracing the genealogy of white supremacy in the peculiar institutions of the south, he exposes the psychopathology within southern nationalism.

Douglass directs his critique at the arguments about religion, politics, and cultural reform intended to support lynch law and produced by the social imaginary. These discourses are represented in the figures of Atticus Greene Haygood, a liberal Methodist bishop, Daniel Henry Chamberlain, the former governor of South Carolina, and Frances Willard, head of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Douglass quotes all three defenders of lynch law in “The Lessons of the Hour” as follows:

Haygood: “The most alarming fact is, that execution by lynching has ceased to surprise us. The burning of a human being for any crime, it is thought, is a horror that does not occur outside the Southern States of the American Union, yet unless assaults by negroes come to an end, there will most probably be still further display of vengeance that will shock the world, and men who are just will consider provocation.”

Chamberlain: “Your [Douglass’] denunciation of the South on this point is directed exclusively, or nearly so, against the application of lynching law for the punishment of one crime, or one sort of crime, the existence, I suppose, I might say the prevalence of this crime at the South is undeniable. But I read your article in
vain for any special denunciation of the crime itself. As you say your people are lynched, tortured and burned for assault on white women. As you value your own good fame and safety as a race, stamp out the infamous crime."

Willard: "I pity the Southerner. The problem on their hands is immeasurable. The colored race . . . multiplies like the locusts of Egypt. The safety of woman, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment, so that men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof tree."

(343)

By citing these testimonies, Douglass tactically reveals the legitimization of lynch law as a cultural practice, and the act of lynching as a symbolic act formed by the culture. All three acknowledge the occurrence of lynching and identify it as a peculiarly southern institution. Significantly, all three base their defense of lynch law on the stereotype of the rapacious black male.

In quoting these three public figures, Douglass asserts the contagious effects of white supremacy and southern nationalism. Haygood, Chamberlain, and Willard were not radical redeemers; in fact, their politics toward racial issues tended to be more liberal than most in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Haygood was the author of Our Brother in Black and supported education for blacks. From 1882 to 1891, Haygood was head of the Slater Fund, which supported black higher education in the south. Yet, he was also paternalistic in his approach to racial issues, supporting segregation and seeing amalgamation between the races as an impossibility. Chamberlain was the last Reconstruction governor of South Carolina. Originally from Massachusetts and a Harvard graduate, Chamberlain moved to South Carolina after the war and became a planter. The state Constitution he helped write included universal male suffrage and removed property qualifications for office. Although he wasn't a radical Republican by northern standards, his politics were quite liberal for the south. Willard was the most radical of the three. Head of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Willard had long been an advocate for female suffrage. By 1891, she was a dedicated socialist. In February of 1891, she wrote: "Nationalism is more of a machine for grinding out civilization; Socialism the womb out of which the coming civilization we believe will be born. The machine is in danger of producing, not men, but machines. Socialism is to us the Alma Mater of healthy individuals" (qtd. in Earhart 289). Willard found in socialism a maternal metaphor for a social order that could forward her feminist agenda. While their politics varied, all three were reformers to some degree, pushing for more equitable social politics.

Their acknowledgment of the use of lynch law not only reveals the contagion of southern discourse and white supremacist politics, it also conceals the symbolic aspects of lynching as rooted in the national
unconscious. All three treat lynching as an aberration outside, and yet adjacent to the existing social order. The event of lynching is equated to, and hence justified by, the crime of (the alleged) rape. Their defense of lynching repeats, and further circulates, the stereotype of the rapacious black male.

Douglass counters their defense of lynching by addressing the counter-stereotype of the illiterate, ignorant black male as it leads to disfranchisement of black males:

Again I arraign the negro's accuser on another ground, I have no confidence in the truthfulness of men who justify themselves in cheating the negro out of his constitutional right to vote. The men, who either by false returns, or by taking advantage of his illiteracy or surrounding the ballot-box with obstacles and sinuosities intended to bewilder him and defeat his rightful exercise of the elective franchise, are men who are not to be believed on oath. That this is done in the Southern States is not only admitted, but openly defended and justified by so-called honorable men inside and outside of Congress.

(345)

Douglass connects lynching with disfranchisement, vis-a-vis the double stereotype. For Douglass, the violence performed against the black male body in the act of lynching is symbolic of the violence against the black male body politic in the act of disfranchisement. In making this connection, Douglass locates lynching as the symbolic act representative of the southern — as well as national — policy that disavows civil rights for black men.

Douglass views lynching and disfranchisement as part of the historical continuum that justifies the persecution of blacks in the South. The justifications for persecution, according to Douglass, fall into three periods: the first, the fear of slave insurrection, the second, the fear of black supremacy. The third, the fear of black assaults upon white women, is the period in which Douglass writes "The Lessons of the Hour," is (348). All three periods produced transformations in legal and judicial procedures in the south as well as in the nation. The fear of insurrection transformed the policing of racial subjects. Periodic panics over slave insurrection led to strict curfew laws for both slaves and free blacks in the south, and this led to the development of vigilante constabularies that would enforce the laws. The fear of black supremacy, brought about by the post-war Amendments and the Civil Rights legislation, transformed those same legislative acts through the Supreme Court decisions that would eventually lead to Jim Crow laws. The fear of black assaults upon white women brings with it lynch law and both the literal and symbolic violence against blacks. Douglass fully understands that racial policy in the form of white supremacy guides legislative and judicial action in the south, and influences the nation as a
whole. Lynching and disfranchisement eventually lead to the question of recolonization and the removal of blacks from the American soil. As he had done throughout his public career, Douglass resists recolonization, arguing, "The native land of the American negro is America. His bones, his muscles, his sinews, are all American" (358). This is an ironic re-figuring of lynching. Quite literally, in many cases, the act of lynching dismembers the bones from the muscles and sinews of the victim. The "bones," "muscles," and "sinews" of the black man define America, but it is an America that legitimizes lynch law and disfranchisement.

Douglass addresses this issue of splitting, of both the body and the body politic as represented by the double stereotype, through the work of the Rev. Morgan Godwin near the close of "The Lessons of the Hour." Godwyn, an Anglican minister, who in 1681 published The Negro's and Indian's Advocate, advocated the baptism of Africans (as well as Indians) while at the same time defending slavery. Douglass writes:

The Doctor was a skilled dialectician. He did not only divide the word with skill, but he could divide the negro in two parts. He argued that the negro had a soul as well as a body, and insisted that while his body rightfully belonged to his master on earth, his soul belonged to his Master in heaven. By this convenient arrangement, somewhat metaphysical, to be sure, but entirely evangelical and logical, the problem of negro baptism was solved.

But with the negro in the case, as I have said, the argument was not entirely satisfactory. The operation was much like that by which the white man got his turkey and the Indian got the crow. When the negro looked around for his body, that belonged to his earthly master. When he looked around for his soul, that had been appropriated by his Heavenly Master. And when he looked around for something that really belonged to himself, he found nothing but his shadow, and that vanished in the shade.

(364)

Douglass recognizes Godwyn's political position as a liberal one by seventeenth-century accounts. Yet, Douglass also recognizes Godwyn's attempt to reconcile baptism and slavery as a splitting of the black subject, and by extension a justification of oppression and paternalism. This splitting performs the double stereotype of the black figure. On the one hand, he is a savage and his enslavement is justified; on the other, he is capable of conversion through the guidance of the paternalistic white master through baptism. As we have seen in his critique of Haygood, Chamberlain, and Willard, Douglass understands the relationship between figural and political representation. The figural representation of the double stereotype leads to lynch law and disfranchisement. In the end, as Douglass argues, the black subject is reduced to shade and shadow.
In “The Lessons of the Hour,” Douglass presents an apocalyptic view of the nation. As David Blight has argued, Douglass’ apocalyptic writings take the literary form of the jeremiad, a form which "provided a means for a black intellectual like Douglass to vent his frustration and rage while still preserving his hope, attack the United States government while at the same time demanding a place in its future” (Blight 119). Douglass expresses both his rage and his hope when he writes:

I hope and trust all will come out right in the end, but the immediate future looks dark and troubled. I cannot shut my eyes to the ugly facts before me ... Rebel rule is now nearly complete in many States and it is gradually capturing the nation’s Congress. The cause lost in the war, is the cause gained in peace, and the cause gained in war, is the cause lost in peace.

(356)

For Douglass, the struggle for civil rights is a civil war. While maintaining an optimism for the future of blacks in the body politic, he is rightly concerned about the dismembering of the body politic through lynch law and disfranchisement. Douglass identifies, once again, the problem as one of “rebel rule,” as southern nationalism and its systemic white supremacy invading the national political discourse. For Douglass, southern nationalism divides the republic in the 1890s just as it did in the 1860s. Douglass re-figures the split in the double stereotype of the black man into a split within the republic. This is his lesson of the hour.

Notes

3. For a fuller account of the depression, see Woodward, 175-204.
4. For a detailed reading of Frederick Douglass’ resistance to the Lost Cause, see Blight’s Chapter 10, “Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War.” Blight focuses on Douglass’ speeches and other writings, but doesn’t address “The Lessons of the Hour.”
5. Cutler gives a more varied and speculative account of the terms “lynch-law” and “lynching,” but remains convinced it originates in the American south.
6. According to Williamson, “A study published in 1905 indicated that of the 2,060 blacks lynched in the twenty-two years, 1881-1903, only 34.3 percent were accused of assaults or attempted assaults upon females” (529 n11). For a detailed reading of the psycho-sexual dynamics of
lynching, and the white male fear and envy of black male sexuality, see Wiegman, pp. 445-67.
7. For detailed accounts of lynchings see Litwack "Hellhounds" in Allen; also White, Wells-Barnett, Harris, and Cutler. The details I present are drawn from their accounts.
8. See Martin: "It stood to reason, Douglass argued in a postwar speech, that 'the superior intelligence of the whites, the former subjection of the blacks, the habit of bearing rule of the whites, and the habit of submission by the blacks, make black supremacy in any part of our country utterly impossible.' The white outcry and retaliation against the alleged threat of black domination, therefore, was absurd as well as irrational. By scapegoating the Negro, this racist white overreaction functioned as a smoke screen to cloak deep-seated white problems" (121).
9. Wells-Barnett makes a similar claim in "A Red Record" (63-64).
10. Douglass expresses his belief in the Enlightenment and in the nation in the following sentence: "The South, which has been compelled to keep step with the music of the Union, will also be compelled to keep step with the music of the nineteenth century, which is preeminently a century of enlightenment and progress" ("Lynch Law in the South" 21). For a fuller account of Douglass' nationalism, see Martin, chapter 8, "A Composite American Nationality," pp. 197-224.
11. See Mann, especially chapter 11, "Dr. Haygood and Negrophilia," (182-197).
12. See Guess, 264-279.
15. It is curious that Douglass varied the spelling and is off by ten years with regard to the publication of Godwyn's work. Albert Bushnell Hart was a noted professor of History at Harvard in the 1890s, and in 1897 published a collection American History told by Contemporaries (NY: Macmillan, 1897) in which a portion of Godwyn's work appears. It is my speculation that Douglass came to Godwyn's work through the work of Hart, quite possibly a lecture, which would account for the spelling and dates.

Works Cited


