

Frederick Douglass
at the Emancipation Memorial

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“IT MUST be admitted, truth compels me to admit, even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man”: Frederick Douglass spoke at the unveiling ceremony of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington’s Lafayette Square in April 1876, stunning the crowd with this deeply ambivalent assessment of Lincoln’s character and the effectiveness of his intervention into the lives of black Americans. This monument, cast in bronze and set upon a plaque-bearing granite plinth, featuring life-size figures of Lincoln—standing erect with his hand upon a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation—and an unbound freedman—struggling to rise to his feet—remained, until the completion of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922, the principal commemorative of Lincoln’s presidency in Washington D.C. White visitors evidently viewed the representation of Lincoln to be its most salient feature. It is less clear whether they were attentive to the memorial’s celebration of Emancipation itself, or, as the plaques reveal, that the funds to erect it were contributed by freedmen and women from the bounty of their newly compensated labor. Douglass was presciently and immediately alive to the essential ambiguity of the monument’s significance. Indeed, the art historian Kirk Savage has demonstrated that the originating impulse behind the monument was itself clouded and contradictory, as Douglass undoubtedly knew, and white popular opinion quickly deemed it the “Lincoln Memorial” until the real thing appeared.

In the spring of 1876, Douglass struggled to constrain his rage at this foregone appropriation of what might have become a singularly material and public demonstration of black American aspirations,

but I shall undertake in this account to broaden our understanding of what was at stake for Douglass personally as he viewed the monument from the speaker's platform and why it so particularly troubled him. Reconstruction was waning—amid the tumult, the fruit of Union victory withered on the branch. Douglass, the *Washington Post* recently tells us, was the “great orator and abolitionist” of his time, who “commanded audiences across the world with his dignified poise and intellect,” and he did not approve of the memorial, nor, as it eventually transpired, does the city of Boston, which has just removed its copy from public view. David W. Blight, in his admirable biography of Douglass, further distills our modern sense of Douglass the man: “He was the Negro with intellect, a most unusual character to the imaginations of white-supremacist America. He was the ornament, the object, a former piece of property who could speak and write, who could match wits and logic with even his most determined critics, a youthful, beautiful brown man who made people think.” None of this is wrong, of course, yet it is not quite right either. Douglass was all of this, but the young man who sprang into public view in the 1840s was first a hard-handed workingman, a manual laborer. The two identities are far from mutually exclusive. Indeed, for the young Douglass, the mind and the hand were inextricably linked. Identity arises from interplay between the physical world and one's ability to shape it deliberately. His rejection of the memorial has a history, and I wish to relate it here.



Forty years ago, the sociologist Orlando Patterson described slavery as an instrument of murder, not in the literal sense, although it could be that, but in the metaphorical sense that it subjected its victims to a form of “social death.” Slavery had only one end: to coerce men and women to work for the purpose of creating wealth for those who owned their bodies. The point of slavery, then, in this coldest of summaries, was to “kill” black men and women even as it preserved the value of their labor. The Middle Passage, the auction block, and the disciplinary regimen of the plantation and related enterprises were all connected elements of a global system, frighteningly modern

in many of its features. As one might today follow the manufacture and assembly of, say, a washing machine from the mining in Argentina of the ores that yield its steel body to the final assembly of its component parts in a small plant in central Illinois, one might in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries trace the gathering of free Africans from the interior and coasts of the continent to their final diaspora as slaves to cities, to plantations, to the cotton fields of Georgia, or to a farm along the Wye River in Maryland. The system was rational and endlessly adaptable, subject, as all commercial enterprises are, to the vagaries of the economy and the market, and should we wish to view it as an industry, then we do, indeed, witness a process of “refinement.” Only slightly to paraphrase Frederick Douglass, we see how men are made into slaves, which is to say, we see how men and women become the stuff of commerce and exploitation, mere *hands*.

This part of the story is easy because this is the world that the slaveholders made, the one that they fervently explicated and justified. One may command the loyalty of a dog or a horse, John Taylor of Caroline, Virginia, writes in *Arator* (1813), by treating it with “kindness.” Will not a slave respond to similar blandishments? The College of William and Mary’s Thomas Roderick Dew acknowledged in 1852 the threatening presence of a “race of people, different from us in color and in habits, and vastly inferior in the scale of civilization.” He urged the creation of something very like a police state to “patrol” this potentially dangerous “race,” appealing, pointedly it would seem, to fears expressed by another Virginian but a scant decade before in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. After remarking that “Negroes grow more vicious in a state of freedom,” the editorialist invited readers to imagine a world in which blacks might be free, “suddenly turned loose in Virginia. . . all sympathy on the part of the master to the slave ended; the white population employed in vigilantly guarding their own property. . . where should we find Penitentiaries for the thousands of felons? Where lunatic asylums for the tens of thousands of maniacs? Would it be possible to live in a country where maniacs and felons meet the traveller at every crossroad?”

The image conjures a universe of the sort we find in Stephen King’s novels, one as horrifying to the gothic imagination of the

antebellum South as King's creations are to us. Imagine an appliance turned sudden killer, a refrigerator bent on revenge, an automobile murderously pursuing its hapless owner down the road. This same dread haunts us when we uneasily regard the artificial intelligence that lurks beneath the Internet of Things. This was the logic of the slave system, and in these brief passages we glimpse its deepest fears. Slaves were not and could not be persons in the common sense that people possess the capacity to reflect, to reason, and finally to act according to their own interests or needs, no matter how restrictive the condition of their lives. Rather, each black man or woman was potentially a "maniac," simultaneously improved by and guarded against by a white society that, in turn, fashioned its own identity largely in opposition to this dangerous otherness.

White Southern society required in theory that slaves exist merely as artificial men, creatures, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784), actuated by "sensation" rather than by "reflection." So deep appeared the divide between black and white men that the Swiss-born Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz determined instantly upon his first sight of a black waiter in Philadelphia that he could not possibly be human: "I hardly dare to tell you the painful impression I received, so much are the feelings they gave me contrary to all our ideas of the brotherhood of man and unique origin of our species. But truth before all. The more pity I felt at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, the more. . . impossible it becomes for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as we are."

One dwells on this distasteful material at such length, because this is the world that Douglass knew. Acknowledging this, we can turn to the second element of the chiasmus at the heart of Frederick Douglass's narrative of his early life and escape to one kind of freedom in the North. "You have seen how a man was made a slave," he writes. "Now see how a slave was made a man." Though Douglass employs a classical rhetorical device to express the transformation, invoking a literary tradition here as in other places in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), the passage is extraordinarily resonant in ways that we may not fully

grasp by framing the work primarily as a literary enterprise. In 1821, the New Jersey Supreme Court declared that “black men are prima facie slaves” and, in 1826, that it was a “settled rule . . . that black color is the proof of slavery which must be overcome.” This, we know, is the challenge that Douglass takes up in his *Narrative*; but where we are wont to locate a triumphant refutation of this “rule” in his acquisition of literacy, his appropriation of literary form, and his eloquent play on the discourse that conspired to define his alterity—and through which Douglass ultimately managed to empower a fully autonomous self—this can be only a partial account of the work of the *Narrative*.

Slaves worked with their hands: in fields, in factories, in cities, on Caribbean islands, on the Chesapeake Bay, on the Southern frontier. They provided brute labor under violent discipline: the harvesting and processing of sugar cane under pressure of time; the endless and complex cultivation of tobacco; the backbreaking maintenance of rice fields in the scorching heat of the Carolina Sea Islands, and the planting and harvesting of cotton—spring to summer, fall to winter. Slaves worked in factories and on the railroads, regulated by industrial time. They carried heavy things over long distances. Their labor, expended in all its forms, drove the economy of the nation and substantially shaped the contours of Southern life. The product, the climate, the scale of production, the season; all imposed their own demands and created their own webs of social associations. Slavery was not a monolithic institution but a dynamic system that adapted itself and forced those who inhabited it (both black and white) to adapt to the requirements of the market, the time, and the environment. At bottom, though, is one simple truth. Charles Ball captures it fully in his own slave narrative, *Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1837). At the slave auctions, “Our persons were inspected, and more especially the hands were scrutinized, to see if all the fingers were perfect, and capable of the quick motions necessary in picking cotton.” In the South, black hands mattered only because they extracted value from *stuff*.

Work fundamentally shaped slave experience and often even their bodies. Douglass, for instance, impressed many audiences with the strikingly physical robustness of his body, a trait evidently not

common among abolitionist speakers, who themselves often misattributed its cause. “His head would strike a phrenologist,” gushed the New Hampshire abolitionist Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, as though the brain, not the lash, had molded this muscular, “first rate” man. That some sorts of work might also provide opportunities for a clever child was surely an incidental feature of the slave system, which assumed that bondsmen had little agency in the disposition of their labor. Yet mastery of a craft or skill was an important social marker on Southern plantations, as the young Douglass grasped very early in life. John Mason reveals much when he recalls his boyhood home at Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, Virginia: “My father had among his slaves carpenters, coopers, sawyers, blacksmiths, tanners, curriers, shoemakers, spinners, weavers and knitters, and even a distiller.” Merely to call attention to these trades and the possession of them is to set these men apart. They are still slaves, to be sure, but they are something else, perhaps something more, as well: carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths. The particularizing force of this identification is largely lost, I imagine, on Mason himself, who is much more concerned to describe the self-contained industrial character of his father’s plantation, but it is a critical concession nonetheless, for it invests individual slaves with an identity separate from those who do not possess specialized trades. Slave names often reflected this discrimination, as in “Sawyer John” or “Cooper Tom.” Masters may or may not have embraced these distinctions in ways that counted, but slaves certainly did. To acquire a skill was, in a very real way, to distinguish oneself as a man.

The English actress Fanny Kemble perfectly grasped the contradiction implicit in the language of Mason’s reminiscence, which is typical of the attitudes of many slaveholders. Writing in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838–1839* (1863), nominally addressing Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick of Lenox, Massachusetts, she describes the labor of Ned, a slave “engineer” who directed the steam-powered mill used to shell rice on her husband’s plantation. Of “very superior intelligence,” he nonetheless inhabited a “miserable hovel.” His wife, “covered with one filthy garment of ragged texture and dingy color, barefooted and bareheaded, is daily driven afield to

labor.” This, Kemble exclaims, “is another instance of the horrible injustice of slavery. In my country or in yours, a man endowed with sufficient knowledge and capacity to be an engineer would, of course, be in the receipt of considerable wages; his wife would, together with himself, reap the advantages of his ability, and share in the well-being his labor earned.” Kemble goes on, with the insight that characterizes her *Journal*, to compare Ned’s lot directly with those of his counterparts in Boston and New York, “artisans of just the same grade as poor Ned, with their white doors and steps, their hydrants of inexhaustible fresh flowing water, the innumerable appliances for decent comfort of their cheerful rooms.” In fact, Ned does enjoy a modicum of privilege, denied his wife, on Butler’s plantation. He is never put to “any other work” than that for which he was trained; yet Kemble cuts to the quick of it when she identifies Ned with white “artisans of the same sort.” Although she harbored conflicting views, for her race was a largely factitious category. Ned is not merely a slave, he is a mechanic, a workingman.

The leaves of some Southern trees, she tells Sedgwick in another place, “both in shape and color suggest something metallic rather than vegetable; the bronze-green hue and lancelike form of their foliage has an arid, hard character, that makes one think that they could be manufactured quite as well as cultivated.” Frederick Douglass likewise joins “manufacture” with “cultivation” in his description of Great House Farm, on the Wye River in Maryland. It was, he says in the *Narrative*, a “great business place. It was the seat of government for the whole twenty farms” that comprised Colonel Lloyd’s holdings: “All of the mechanical operations of the farms were performed here. The shoemaking and mending, the blacksmithing, cartwrighting, coopering, weaving, and grain-grinding.” Assignment to Great House Farm was, continues Douglass, with considerable emphasis, the aim of every slave: “they regarded it as evidence of great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account, as well as a constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver’s lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for. He was called the smartest and most trusty fellow, who had this honor

conferred upon him the most frequently.” Douglass notes a critical transformation here, but one that may be obscure to the modern reader of the *Narrative*. In their relocation from the site of cultivation to the site of “mechanical operations,” “slaves” become “fellows.”

The Jacksonian era and beyond, when Douglass ascended to his fame, witnessed the greatest transformation of society in the brief history of the republic. Nathaniel Hawthorne called it the “era of annihilated space,” referring to the revolution in communication and transportation of which telegraph, rail, steamship, and canal were the most visible features. George Fitzhugh, proslavery author of *Cannibals All; or Slaves Without Masters* (1851), looked northward to a land of “isms,” the chief menace of which was, of course, abolitionism; but he said hard things about capitalism, suffragism, “free-lovism,” and kindred modern threats to his version of civilization. The period saw a redefinition of American aspirations, the tone of which is well expressed in the historian Richard Hildreth’s plea in *Political Economy* (1853) for the recognition of an “AGE OF THE PEOPLE,” of the “working classes.” A comparatively subdued artisanal republicanism had issued forth from the small shops and household manufactories of the Revolutionary era. It embraced a labor theory of value, seeking to amend classical republicanism, which located civic virtue principally in those who drew their wealth from the ownership of land. By the mid-1830s, *artisanal* had come to represent an altogether different state of consciousness. The “monopolists, the professional men, the men of wealth, they labor, it is said, as well as the farmer and the mechanic,” thundered Theophilus Fisk in an address before the “mechanics” of Boston in 1835. “They do labor to be sure, but it is laboring to collect that which others have earned. . . . If our houses could spring up spontaneously like mushrooms, if we could sit in our seats like dried mummies and by a single scratch of a pen could construct canals, bridges, and railroads, we might then talk about equality of rights and privileges.” Douglass articulates explicitly this point of view in the *Narrative*.

“The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers,” he writes of his awakening to the speech of books; “I could

regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers. . . . I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men." This, and passages like it, have received much attention from literary critics and historians alike, who have been concerned to trace Douglass's co-optation of his "master's tools," in Audre Lorde's memorable phrase, which is to say, literacy and eloquence, through which he has exerted so pressing a claim on our attention. It is imperative that we ground the metaphorical "tool" in the more material circumstance of Douglass's early life. Again: slaves worked. With scythe and hoe, with hammer and awl, they impressed their strength and will upon the malleable stuff of clay marl, black loam, cypress, cedar, oak, and iron. Modern intellectuals perhaps too easily lose sight of alternative routes into consciousness, history, and narrative, for we privilege in our own times that aspect of Douglass's achievement that appeals most to our own certainty (if not vanity) that the published word is all that *matters*, that his chief creation was the *Narrative*, as a book, and his subsequent writings and life as an activist, diplomat, and literary man. This misses the most crucial of many truths in the *Narrative* that can be got at best through the historian Carlo Ginzburg's bold examination of what he calls the "evidential paradigm" as a mode of self-conscious inquiry into the meaning of things. As the scholar Edward Muir summarizes Ginzburg's argument, "Paleolithic hunting lore [provided] a method for interpreting animal tracks," which, in turn, "produced the idea of narrative." In like fashion, "'physicians, historians, politicians, potters, joiners, mariners, hunters, fishermen, and women in general'. . . all. . . proceeded by building up a knowledge of the whole from an examination of parts." The continuum where "historians" and "joiners" meet is luminously evident in the *Narrative*, for we must see that as a necessary precondition to Douglass's entrance into the world of speaking books, he had first to master the singing language of the caulking mallet.

A ship *is* a narrative. Its lines and their execution capture an aesthetic and a practice, both formal and vernacular, that seldom finds adequate expression in words. A wooden ship represents the epitome of craftsmanship in the age of sail, the collaborative enterprise of

skilled hands trained in the most advanced technologies of the period. F. O. Mathiessen intuited, though he did not explain, the significance of such things in *American Renaissance* (1941), which features as its frontispiece a daguerreotype of the great builder of clipper ships, Donald McKay. Mathiessen could not quite imagine a space in which Emerson and McKay might easily interact, or he may have shared Emerson's fear of (and admiration for) inarticulate men with fluent hands, mere "Artisans" as Thoreau judged them, but it is exactly this sort of fluency that arrests us here. Douglass was a ship caulker; he drove a three-pound slotted oak mallet against a fan-shaped iron wedge that seated oakum and cotton between the planks of the boat, rendering the hull watertight. "The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard," recalls Douglass, in a passage worth quoting at length:

And frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of this ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus—"L." When a piece was marked for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—"S." A piece for the larboard side forward would be marked thus—"L. F." When the piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus—"S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus—"L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus—"S. A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard.

The laborious repetition of the lesson in a text otherwise notable for its economy of language must surely signal its great value in the history of a man's life, for it draws us step by painful step through the process of learning to cipher the alphabet, as a caulking mallet begins to rise in pitch when a seam hardens up. The great hull of the uncompleted ship looms as squarely above us as it did over the head of the apprentice caulker, whose own young strength helped to complete a *narrative* that would soon ply the waters of the Chesapeake Bay, potentially as one of "freedom's swift-winged angels."

Douglass's bitter disappointment, then, upon his eventual return to Baltimore and to Gardner's shipyard, where he was beaten nearly senseless by white apprentices fearful of their displacement by cheaper enslaved labor, speaks both to the acquisition of this tradecraft and to the failure of his expectations. His skill and strength should have allowed entrance into the collective enterprise. He makes this clear in his description of an episode, which frames, as neatly as do the ribbands and forms from which a planked hull takes shape, the form of his own story: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." Douglass is careful here, as he is in the case of establishing the grounds of his literacy, or his getting "hold of" the *Columbian Orator*, to locate the moment exactly, August 1833, which affirms a moment in history and his right to inhabit it. The scene that opens an "epoch" in this story commences at the plantation, overseen by the notorious "nigger-breaker" Mr. Covey, with a description of a "mechanical" process of the sort that he earlier associated with Great House Farm. Douglass and two other slaves are "fanning" wheat. This simple apparatus separated chaff from the harvested grain. Though primitive, requiring "strength rather than intellect," Douglass remembers, the procedure resembles in its most essential features other, more elaborate industrial, agricultural, and trade practices where men collaborate to convert raw materials into goods. Dazed by heat and exertion, Douglass reels away from the job, which promptly grinds to a halt: "everyone had his own work to do; and no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time." Covey's retribution is swift and exacting. He thrashes Douglass bloody.

This prologue is critical to the famous scene where Douglass finally confronts Covey and in a feat of physical prowess overcomes the brutal overseer, because one of the men whom Douglass assists in fanning wheat comes to play a supporting role. As Douglass toils in the barn one morning, Covey accosts him once again, ordering William Hughes, Douglass's erstwhile partner, to aid in subduing the unruly slave. Hughes half-heartedly moves to secure one of Douglass's hands, but he fends off the effort with an emphatic kick. Ordered again, Hughes demurs: "Bill said his master hired him out

to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out," as vivid an expression of "work to rule" as one is likely to find. Douglass recovers through his victory over Covey the "expiring embers" of his freedom and a renewed "sense of [his] own manhood." Within the world of the *Narrative*, however, the pivotal moment is sustained by an expression of collective identity. Bill, Douglass's "fellow" worker, appeals to a higher obligation that grows from their shared task; "his master hired him out to work and not to help to whip me." Bill effectively resists Covey's authority as a slave breaker, and instead acknowledges a common bond with Douglass as a laborer, which momentarily transcends their respective status as slaves. Fanning wheat may not figure among the most sophisticated of technologies nor among the most exacting of trades, but it does serve at this moment in the *Narrative* to stand in for those skills that Douglass would soon seek to apply in the shipyards of Baltimore and later in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

This is why the account of the horrible beating he receives at the hands of his fellow apprentices at Gardner's shipyard is so surprisingly circumspect. Douglass is reluctant to dwell on their racial hostility, though he states frankly that older shipwrights did not refrain from hurling epithets against "the damned nigger." These taunts stung, he admits, but notes in the single footnote to the text that the motives of the apprentices were deeply rooted in anxieties attendant upon the tough economic times of the late 1830s. Their racism, he suggests, came after the fact, in consequence of the competition between free and black labor that slavery promoted: "they *began* [emphasis mine] to put on airs, and talk about the 'niggers' taking the country." Slavery traded in false consciousness. It exposed, as he recast the scene in 1881, "the conflict of slavery with the interests of white mechanics and laborers." The apprentices had merely reenacted another version of the behavior Douglass had already witnessed among slaves in the countryside: "it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others." Douglass's indictment, then, turns not so much

upon the prejudice of the young shipyard workers, as on the way that the peculiar institution corrupted the natural affinity of men engaged in collective enterprise, fanning wheat, building ships, the simple performance of which makes them men. Douglass appeals at least implicitly to a commonality that supervenes race, as did Fanny Kemble in her proposal to afford both whites and blacks the prerogatives of “engineers.” He puts it most succinctly when, again invoking the rhetoric of Jacksonian-era workingmen, he condemns the master to whom he hands over the largest share of his hard-won wages, “not because he had any hand in earning it . . . not because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. The right of the grim-visaged pirate upon the high seas is exactly the same.” In this condemnation of slavery, both chattel and wage, Frederick Douglass joins with fellow mechanics everywhere who, with him, labor for others with small benefit to themselves.

Among the many poignant images in the *Narrative*, one acquires a special urgency. Douglass pauses during the description of his childhood in one of the rare moments when the narrative present inserts itself. He may have recollected that he once labored with men amidst sharp edges—sliced flesh was a common badge—and looking up from his writing desk into a world depressingly like our own, he muses: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes”: work, the body, and thought itself are one. The arm that so expertly wielded a heavy mallet of live oak and soft iron that it rang across the shipyard may also drive a steel pen in measured lines across the page. Reason and will impose order upon oakum, wood, and viscous thought, pen and paper with equal force. This fact prevails against the accident of birth and manufactured bigotry. Douglass creates himself, an act that forcibly repudiates Jefferson’s dismissive judgment regarding “sensation” and “reflection” among “Negroes.” To drive a tight seam draws upon a knowledge that Mr. Jefferson never possessed, embedded in the brain and hand, as a pen may be in the flesh. When Douglass arrives in New Bedford, he encounters Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, who stand among his

earliest patrons. We know from other sources that the Johnsons were pillars of the free-black community on the island; Douglass sees no reason to emphasize this fact. Instead, he remarks simply that they read many newspapers and that Mr. Johnson was a “workingman”: “His hands were hardened by toil, and not his alone, but those also of Mrs. Johnson.” The hands speak their own language to those who care to hear it.

The point of all of this is to widen the narrow casting of Douglass the workingman into a precocious litterateur, an aspiring bourgeois, a prodigy of autodidacticism. He was all these things, but he quickly recognized the opportunity afforded by William Lloyd Garrison’s exploitation of his charisma and eloquence, and he ultimately capitalized upon it as an intellectual. Douglass still clung to the expectation that he would live among laborers. “My hands had been furnished by nature with something like a solid leather coating, and I had bravely marked out for myself a life of rough labor, suited to the hardness of my hands, as a means of supporting myself and rearing my children,” he confided years later in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Even when he moved his family from New Bedford to Lynn in 1842, he returned home from his speaking tours to the rapidly industrializing center of New England shoemaking and took dinner with his working wife, Anna, who was a shoe binder, and whose own callused hands spoke the conditions of labor in this bustling place. Douglass never rested far from the *job*, at least until he returned from Europe in 1846 and moved the family to Rochester, New York.

Ultimately the abolition circuit itself shattered any faith Douglass had in the likelihood of working-class solidarity across racial lines. He encountered near-uniform hostility, angry mobs, physical violence. He offered splendid rhetoric. He suffered fists and aerial brickbats in return. Quite naturally he found it more salutary to cultivate patronage and genteel company with whom he could continue his spectacular assaults against the slaveholding class (and sometimes other abolitionists), increasingly carrying on his war in print, expanding his audience eventually to Europe and throughout the free states. He flirted briefly with the Chartists before he left England, but his writings after

the 1845 *Narrative* reflect both his growing cosmopolitanism and his absorption into a recognizably middle-class, reform-minded intelligentsia, wherein it had become possible to sustain oneself and family without developing calluses and from within which he could wield effectively his voice and pen.

I suspect that the hands of the man who spoke at the unveiling of the Emancipation Memorial in 1876 were well kept, nails unchipped. In life, Douglass stood straight; his carriage resembles that of the military men of his generation. It is important to see that the muscular, crouched freedman at the base of the monument, who under Lincoln's paternalist approval lifts a broken chain, remains on his knees. Indeed, the figure was modeled on Archer Alexander, a freedman who was the servant of one of the memorial's white promoters. The statue was offensive to Douglass. He wrote scathingly after his performance at the unveiling, "What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man." If we turn, then, to Thomas Ball's sculpture and try again to see it as Douglass must have, one feature immediately draws the eye. The shackles are broken, but the bracelets remain, and they serve compositionally to disassociate the hands from the whole of the man. And there he kneels, Lincoln towering above him, caught forever in the pose that abolitionism had rendered iconic: "Am I not a man and a brother?" Conceived as a monument to emancipation, the bronze form merely buttresses the view that black hands—and the labor they represent—are the only things that matter. The ancient Romans employed the term *proletarius* to describe the underclass that Marx would later universalize as the *proletariat*. It was a useful class, so the Romans believed, not only for the labor that could be extracted from it, but also for its capacity to renew itself endlessly. Douglass understood political economy. This knowledge was rooted in his bones, in the muscles that contracted them, in his once leather-hard hands. He saw before him as much a monument to white supremacy as those that appeared two decades later on the median of Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, and that have since been removed.