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‘Careful living’: Frederick Douglass’s phenomenology of embodied experience

Jennifer Lewis

By the end of his life Douglass had become a highly visible black man. The most photographed nineteenth-century American, he had, as John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier have shown, deliberately orchestrated and disseminated his image to assert an empowered public image of black identity. He had made himself into an image of black identity that ‘should’, in his own words, be displayed by ‘[e]very colored householder in the land’ as a sign of ‘light and hope’.¹ Yet, consider this passage from *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in which he describes how he felt during the period in which he had been taken up by Garrison and the abolitionists:

Young, ardent, and hopeful, I entered upon this new life in the full gush of unsuspecting enthusiasm. The cause was good; the men engaged in it were good; the means to attain its triumph, good... In this enthusiastic spirit, I dropped into the ranks of freedom’s friends, and went forth to the battle. For a time I was made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisped.²

Here, Douglass seems to express ‘enthusiasm’ for an elision rather than an assertion of blackness. He ‘gush[es]’ over the experience of a ‘new life’ in company with ‘good’ white men and produces a description in which the final pleasure of this regeneration—the ‘hopeful[ness]’ the experience engenders—is that in this new life Douglass feels less black: he ‘forg[o]t that [his] skin was dark and [his] hair crisped’.

Until now, few critics have paid much attention to this statement. Peter Walker is a notable exception; in the late seventies, he argued that it revealed what he called Douglass’s “hopeless secret desire to be white”.³ In the subsequent forty years the few critics who have dwelt on it have resisted coming to the same, provocative and problematic conclusion. In his 1991 biography, for example, William S. McFeely argued that Douglass’s choice of a first wife whose skin “was deeper and richer in color” than his own, literally put Walker’s accusation that Douglass desired whiteness to bed: “There was no such repudiation [of blackness] in that New Bedford bedroom”.⁴ Ten years later, when Gregg Crane and Maurice S. Lee turn to it, both critics suggest that it is a racially innocent description. Lee, for example, describes Douglass as ‘seem[ing] to transcend his corporeal self’ at this moment, through “a disengagement so radical that [Douglass’s] body slips his mind”.⁵ None of these

responses fully answer Walker's accusation or put an end to the anxiety that the passage produces, however. McFeely's argument looks less convincing when Douglass's second, white wife is considered, and Lee's argument side-steps the fact that what Douglass pointedly 'transcend[s]' are the signs of his blackness. Douglass is describing, not "an expansive, inclusive", transcendent identity,⁶ but rather an *exclusive* one; one which he can only enter into if the signs of his blackness are erased.

Though these arguments draw very different conclusions, they share a common assumption: that Douglass made a mistake in expressing his embodied experience in this way. These critics take for granted, either that Douglass slipped, and expressed an otherwise unconscious desire, or that he failed to express himself fully. It is my contention that to read the passage in this way is to fail to consider how subtle an interpreter of his own experience Douglass had become by the time he was writing *My Bondage and My Freedom*. More than this, it is to fail to understand how central, detailed proto-phenomenological analyses of lived experience were to his politics, aesthetics, and philosophy. 'The whole effort of phenomenology' is, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's words, 'to recover ... naïve contact with the world' and to give an account of the world 'as lived.'⁷ In his narratives, speeches, and letters, Douglass placed what he called "this little bit of experience—slave experience" at the heart of all his 'elaborat[ions]'.⁸ Everything he wrote was, as George Yancy also argues, 'grounded' in 'lived, embodied experienc[e]'.⁹ He foregrounded subtly described 'contact with the world,' and created, in the process, what amounts to a phenomenology of slave experience. Therefore, the fact that, in his second autobiography, Douglass draws attention to his awareness of skin and hair and makes a provocative statement about corporeal experience, should alert us to its importance rather than encourage us to dismiss it. We should assume that his insertion of it into his second narrative was not accidental, or unfortunate, but rather deliberate and meaningful: an expression of his emerging philosophy and part of his development into the 'Douglass' of all those famous images.

What follows, then, is an investigation of both Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom* through the lens that this provocative statement offers. In the first section, I look to the work of Merleau-Ponty, Drew Leder, and Shaun Gallagher to find both a language for unravelling the problem Douglass's statement poses, and a philosophical context for understanding his representation of slave bodies. I draw on phenomenological insights to investigate what Douglass tells us about the difference 'dark skin' made to the way he, other slaves, and former slaves, experienced their own bodies. With Frantz Fanon and George Yancy as guides, I also place Douglass's work alongside

Merleau-Ponty, Gallagher, and Leder's to show how Douglass's analyses of nineteenth-century racialized bodies reveal the problematic assumptions that phenomenologists have made about the nature of 'naïve contact with the world'.

In the second section, I turn to *My Bondage and My Freedom* to examine what kind of an experience it was to be 'made to forget' the physical signs of blackness, and why Douglass chose to forgo it—why it was only 'for a time.' That Douglass came to reject Garrisonian philosophies is well known. Here I shall argue that he also rejected the form of embodiment they demanded, and that he had at first found transformative. Finally, in the last section, I examine how reading Douglass's narratives phenomenologically transforms the way we understand the 1845 *Narrative* and its relation to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, enabling a different way of understanding texts' inconsistencies and sometimes troubling statements. I will argue that, read together, through rather than in flight from their most troubling statements, Douglass's texts emerge as complex and important articulations of embodied experience.

I

A term, coined by phenomenologists to conceptualise the corporeal system that engenders embodied experience, is useful in developing a language for discussing Douglass's experiences: body schema. This describes a system of 'motor and postural functions that operate below the level of self-referential intentionality', through which 'the control and coordination of movements are normally accomplished'.¹⁰ It is the 'performance of the body,'¹¹ activated through a series of neural, sensorimotor processes that enables us, for example, to hold ourselves upright and move in the world without consciously attending to either our posture or movement. It is a 'taken for granted base' from which our actions 'magically' spring, and needs excavating to be brought to awareness.¹² Many phenomenologists engage in unmasking these magic tricks and revealing the complex work the body engages in beneath our awareness. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, Merleau-Ponty presents the reader with examples of his own schema at work:

If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet. It is not that I am unaware of the whereabouts of my shoulders or back, but these are simply swallowed up in the position of my hands, and my whole posture can be read so to speak in the pressure they exert on the table.¹³

Merleau-Ponty's posture here is the result of a complex series of impulses, neural signals and muscular responses. Yet, as he shows, this is not how the movement itself is experienced. Rather, as he goes on to say, 'the gesture[s] called for'—reaching out the arms, leaning forward, allowing the body's weight to traverse the arms towards the desk—'and the gesture itself' have a 'melodic character,' experienced as 'the natural system of one's body.' The body schema is therefore a system that 'efface[s] itself'; it becomes, as we direct ourselves outwards, towards the world, 'experientially transparent,' 'swallowed up' in its own outward-facing projects.¹⁴

This description of, to use Shaun Gallagher's term, corporeal 'transparency', is helpful in determining what Douglass might have been experiencing when he wrote that he had forgotten that his 'skin was dark' and his 'hair crisped.' Certainly, these theories of embodied experience make it possible to understand Douglass's statement in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as something other than an expression of a desire for whiteness. Read through the phenomenological lens as a description of embodied experience, what emerges from Douglass's statement is a spirit of unselfconscious, easeful, willed action. Engaged in an absorbing, outward-facing project, Douglass might be said to be describing what to most phenomenologists is 'ordinary' transparency. He is experiencing his body as 'swallowed up' by his intentionality,¹⁵ as he directs his undivided attention—the 'full gush'—not towards his body, but towards what he wants to do *through* his body—to 'go forth into battle'. In this passage, then, Douglass's body becomes a 'taken for granted base from which [his] actions spring'.¹⁶

However, while we may now understand this statement, not as a desire for whiteness, but rather as a representation of transparent corporeal experience, Douglass's work reveals that this apparently 'ordinary,' 'natural' transparency is, in the West, a function of whiteness. The fact that such a 'natural' experience is, for Douglass, so noteworthy—the forgetting so memorable—reveals that 'transparent' was not how Douglass generally experienced his body to be. Douglass's work therefore points to an important omission in many phenomenologist's work which takes for granted what Merleau-Ponty calls 'open and indefinite unity' with the world.¹⁷ His statement points us towards the fact that, while the experience of corporeal self-effacement may be natural, it is not inevitable. All bodies exist in space, but the 'open and indefinite' spaces that Merleau Ponty's experience enables him to imagine, are what Yancy describes as 'white spaces'; 'socially constituted' places that apply little pressure to the white body, but put 'oppressive stress' on that of the black.¹⁸ All bodies also exist alongside other bodies, in what Drew Leder describes as a 'dialectical body-world relation'.¹⁹ But, the to-and-

fro suggested by the relation Leder describes is not, as Fanon has argued, harmonious or politically neutral in the West. Fanon writes that the black man ‘does not have any ontological resistance in the eyes of the White.’ Instead he is ‘fix[ed]’, ‘burdened’, ‘negat[ed]’ rather than met in reciprocity.²⁰

If we take Douglass’s statement about forgetting literally, as a description of how he experienced his body schema as receding from consciousness, then it becomes clear, firstly, that, until this point, this ‘natural’ self-effacing schema had been unavailable to him. And secondly, that Douglass was aware that a change in his most fundamental experience had taken place. When he writes, ‘[f]or a time I was made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisped’, he indicates that, among ‘freedom’s friends’, he literally felt differently: he became conscious of a difference in his body schema, and of what, until this point, he had been denied.

Douglass wrote this statement in 1855 when composing *My Bondage and My Freedom*. But it describes what he had been experiencing during the early 1840s—when he had been writing the 1845 *Narrative*. As Nick Bromell has persuasively argued, by the time he wrote his second autobiography Douglass had come to recognise that ‘the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance’ (*MBMF*, 148).²¹ What the statement—which is a reflection—shows us is that part of what he was ‘view[ing]’ was his own self. In the 1850s Douglass was looking back on himself as he had been during the 1840s and remembering that ‘the point of view’ from which he had viewed his life as a slave at that time was one informed by this new, ‘transparent’ experience. It shows us, then, that when writing his first text, Douglass had been developing an understanding of the most fundamental way that he had been made to ‘feel [him]self a slave’²² and had written the *Narrative* whilst possessed of this new perspective. Therefore, *My Bondage and My Freedom* gives us a new lens through which to read the *Narrative*. It reveals the extent to which bodies mattered to Douglass, not just as evidence of slavery’s inhumanity, or as spectacles to evoke sentimental responses, but as lived spaces that slaveholders looked to disrupt.

To read Douglass fully then, we need to read him *through* the bodies he describes, and through the phenomenological perspective he offers us. When we do, it becomes quickly apparent that the *Narrative* repeatedly describes the ways slaves were perpetually made to experience their bodies as burdensomely present, rather than vanishingly transparent: as skin and hair, and fragmented, fragile, corporeal material that constantly demanded attention, rather than taken-for-granted wholes from which intention could ‘magically’ spring. It becomes clear that Douglass was centrally concerned with representing the myriad ways in

which slaves had their body-world relation disrupted, and how this caused them to suffer a perpetual state of disequilibrium between their embodied selves and the world.

The most obvious of these disruptions is violence; this is what the *Narrative* begins with and it underwrites every description of slave life in this text. From the first few pages Douglass shows how terrible ‘cutting, and slashing’ brutally disrupts any sense a slave might have of the body’s natural comportment (*N* 22). He describes beatings as fixing slaves’ bodies into unnatural postures which quite literally dis-able their normal and unconscious functioning. When, for example, Douglass’s aunt Hester is released from the hook from which she has been tied precisely to disrupt her postural schema—‘her arms . . . stretched up at their full length, so that she stood on the ends of her toes’ (*N* 19)—this schema collapses; she can ‘scarcely stand’ (*MBMF* 67).

These punishments do more than send the body temporarily into a crisis from which it recovers though; they are more fundamentally scarring. Douglass’ descriptions show slaves to be marked, not only by the ‘gashes’ that transform their skin, but also through the way that they are forced to inhabit their bodies. In the following passage, for example, he depicts the ways slave owners make two young women ‘fe[el themselves] a slave’ in the most fundamental ways (*N* 96):

Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so . . . The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress . . . Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. They seldom knew what it was to eat a full meal. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. So much was Mary kicked and cut to pieces, that she was oftener called ‘pecked’ than by her name (*N* 39).

Here, multiple, interlocking ways of making bodies burdensome, demanding presences are in evidence. The ‘cruel mistress’ beats the young women so that their bodies are in perpetual pain. More than this, she beats them in such a way as to disassemble them as discrete bodies. Douglass states that they are ‘literally cut to pieces’ and the terrible Mrs. Hamilton accomplishes this division—this dismantling of the body’s natural integrity— through the regularity of the ‘lashings’ she inflicts upon them. She cuts them so often that their skin loses its ability to heal and restore itself. She opens their flesh and then maintains it in a state of painful indeterminacy with ‘festering sores’ which disrupt corporeality, both by generating

continuing pain, and by exposing the body's vulnerable materiality. She transforms skin, which should be a mediator of sensation into a repository of it, breaching the corporeal boundedness it should secure.

Henrietta and Mary are also 'emaciated', 'kept nearly half-starved' and, therefore, perpetually hungry. Drew Leder argues that, as humans, we feel hunger, not just in the stomach, but also in the mouth, in the muscles, and in mood. 'It is everywhere', he writes. It effects 'the entire corporeal field' and 'saturates [the subject's] environment as well,' 'lock[ing] us' into our bodies for as long as it lasts.²³ The unstated assumption in Leder's analysis is that hunger is a fleeting sensation. For Henrietta and Mary though, it is a permanent state of being, outlasting all the beatings and forming the basis of their most essential being-in-the-world. As they fight with the pigs for the food thrown out onto the streets, Douglass reveals their world to have been shrunk to one in which all attention and activity is taken over by the need to find temporary relief from the demands their bodies make.

While Douglass presents some slaves as literally beaten into postures of powerlessness, he reveals others to consciously adopt them to secure for themselves a degree of protection from the 'driver's lash'. Douglass represents this as a strategy most notably adopted by the 'slaves of the out-farms', and calls it, with great irony, 'careful living':

They regarded [being selected to do errands] 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 ... The competitors for this office sought as diligently to please their overseers, as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people (*N* 23).

Douglass represents the postures these slaves inhabit as ingratiating, obsequious, and, because they embody a complete surrender to the racist demands the plantation makes of them, wholly 'slav[ish]'. He reveals that assuming them accrues some benefits to the slaves—not least among them the ability to escape the field and the overseer. But he also shows the cost to be high. For careful living demands a perpetual performance of servility; a permanent assumption of the 'habitudes' overseers deem appropriate to men and women with 'dark' skin and 'crisped' hair.²⁴ Though these 'privilege[d]' slaves avoid the painful embodiment Mary and Henrietta suffer, therefore, at bottom they share in a form of perpetual corporeal consciousness that is, whether they recognise it as such or not, a corporeal crisis. All slaves, Douglass suggests, are forced, in one way or another, to experience their

embodiment as ever-present awareness. To be a slave, Douglass writes, is to live every moment ‘carefully’.

In the *Narrative*, therefore, Douglass creates descriptions of lived experience in which no experience of the body or the world arises out of the ‘implicit knowledge’ that the phenomenologists so often take for granted. There is no ‘slow construction of [the] self as a body in the midst of a spatial and temporal world’ in Douglass’s first text. Rather, there are demonstrations of the ways in which slaves are ‘worked upon ... carve[d] out’,²⁵ developing deportments that are dense with wholly defensive ‘crouching servility’ (*N* 37). ‘[A] slave must stand, listen, and tremble’, Douglass writes, adding, in case we make the mistake of interpreting this metaphorically, ‘such was literally the case’ (*N* 26). Nothing represents more powerfully the absolute rupture between the slave and the world s/he inhabits than this deportment.

II

The statement—that he ‘forg[o]t’ the colour of his skin—has, therefore, significant consequences for the way that we read the 1845 *Narrative*. The later text is a lens, provided by Douglass, through which to read his own earlier work. In it he described his own mindset when composing the *Narrative* and showed us that he had been looking back on his experience as a man who had found a new transparency in the body he inhabited, and a new awareness of what it was to be denied embodied easefulness because of ‘dark skin’ and ‘crisped hair’.

The phenomenological perspective Douglass creates in *My Bondage and My Freedom* not only provides us with a way of looking back on the *Narrative*, however. It also offers us a tool to examine the later text and illuminate the extent to which this second book functions as a form of self-critique. Reading Douglass’s second autobiography through the phenomenological lens reveals that he was centrally interested in demonstrating that he was no longer willing to ‘forg[e]t’ either the signs of his ethnicity, or what these signs signified in the world he inhabited. In fact, reading *My Bondage and My Freedom* phenomenologically reveals that, ten years on, Douglass was living his experience very differently.

Douglass titled the chapter from which the description of forgetting comes, ‘Introduced to the Abolitionists’. The first half is taken up with his apparently unequivocal celebration of these men—especially Garrison, whose ‘simple majesty’ he describes at some

length (*MBMF*, 365). This eulogizing leads directly to Douglass's depiction of corporeal forgetting. Therefore, it makes sense to read this new experience as positive—as the expression of a release from the burden that American racism made of blackness. However, as soon as he expresses it, Douglass's tone changes. '[S]hadows' immediately appear: 'I was growing,' Douglass states, 'and needed room' (*MBMF* 366-7). This demands a shift in understanding. If Douglass 'needed room', then it follows that the Garrisonians were hemming him in. Furthermore, if he was still 'growing', even after his transformation into a man who could 'forget that [his] skin was dark and [his] hair crisped', then the state of apparently transparent embodiment which he seemed to have achieved, cannot be read as the peak of embodied experience that, in many phenomenologists' accounts, it is often taken to be. Rather, it becomes clear that while the experience of 'forget[ting]' dark skin and crisped hair had initially been enabling for Douglass, helping him to analyse the fundamental way that black men and women suffered under slavery, this 'forget[ting]' was also a limitation; even a loss. For, as the narrative of *My Bondage and My Freedom* continues, Douglass comes strongly to suggest that what he experienced through his association with the abolitionists, was not, after all, a free 'outward' radiation, but rather a requirement to 'carefully' adopt a new, externally imposed, comportment.²⁶

He 'drops into the ranks', he says. Coming hard on the heels of descriptions of the 'loneliness and insecurity' Douglass felt in his first year in the North, this metaphor reads as a description of unity, solidarity, and the sheer relief of finding a like-minded community. '[I]n the ranks' he is safe, he has a place. Yet, as the military origins of the metaphor remind us, to be in the ranks is also to forgo individual expressivity; it is to acquiesce to a very particular corporeal mode. To understand this new embodied experience, we need first to understand that of this troop's leader. For William Lloyd Garrison was a very particular kind of white American man. He was a radical pacifist who prided himself on his ability to comport himself with 'calm and gentle manners' no matter what the provocation.²⁷ Garrison 'brandished' language that was deliberately violent, and used his physical presence to provoke, giving public speeches in highly contested places to create 'disturbance' and 'turn the world upside down.'²⁸ Yet he did so to model an alternative, entirely non-resisting, corporeality. He was 'never loud or noisy', wrote Douglass; he was 'calm and serene as a summer sky' (*MBMF* 363) and it is pacifist self-possession that his friends repeatedly call attention to. 'I was touched to the heart by his calm and gentle manners,' wrote Archibald Grimké; 'There was no agitation, no scorn, no heat, but the quietness of a man engaged in simple duties.'²⁹ Corporeal 'quietness', therefore, was valued highly by Garrison and his followers. It was, for

them and in the words of Douglass, the physical sign of ‘a more exalted piety,’ and Garrison modelled it through his own ‘presence’ (*MBMF* 362).

By the time that Douglass met Garrison he had liberated himself and ‘made’ himself ‘a man’ by being just the opposite (*N* 60). He had fought Covey, survived a Southern jail, defended himself against ship-workers, and self-consciously developed a posture of ‘bold defiance’ that communicated to all around him his determination to resist oppression by physically asserting himself, and meeting violence with violence. Over several years, in fact, he had come to reject ‘careful living’ in favour of a comportment that deliberately ‘let it be known of [him], that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing [him]’ (*N* 65). If, therefore, Douglass found men who were like-minded in the abolitionists, he did not find men who were also like-embodied.

Yet, Garrison’s descriptions of Douglass reveal that, in his company at least, Douglass did adopt the white men’s idealised corporeal passivity. In a letter addressed to his wife and published in *The Liberator* in 1847, for example, Garrison described how white men had accosted Douglass after he had taken a seat reserved for whites on a New England train, and celebrated the comportment Douglass retained when faced with racist violence. In his description Garrison reveals firstly that ‘complete submission’ is highly valued—it is his ability to submit to the white man’s violence that makes Douglass noteworthy here—and secondly, that Douglass had learned to present ‘complete submission’ through his physicality (*MBMF* 362). It is this that Garrison explicitly admires:

Douglass took a seat in one of the back cars before I arrived; and while quietly looking out at the window, was suddenly accosted in a slave-driving tone, and ordered to ‘get out of that seat,’ by a man ... Douglass quietly replied, that if he would make his demand in the form of a gentlemanly request, he would readily vacate his seat. His lordly commander at once laid violent hands upon him, and dragged him out. Douglass submitted to this outrage unresistingly.³⁰

Douglass described himself as Garrison’s ‘faithful disciple’, and critics usually read this observation as a comment on Douglass’s intellectual and emotional attachment to the older man (*MBMF*, 391). Garrison’s admiring description of Douglass’s behaviour in this letter, however, recalls the etymological root of the word ‘disciple’ and, through *discipulus*, its close connection to discipline. Among the Garrisonians, Douglass ‘was made to forget’ his own way of being in the world; ‘made to’ occupy the ‘serene,’ ‘gentleman[ly]’ Garrisonian persona. If he found a place and felt an ease among these men, it was only because he accepted and ‘carefully’ accommodated himself to their corporeal discipline.³¹

Once he freed himself from the Garrisonians, however, Douglass presented himself as carving out for himself a very different corporeality and a very different way of responding to the rupture that always accompanied being black in a white racist world. Denied, by his skin's colour and his hair's texture, the pleasures of transparency and harmony with the world he occupied, he concluded *My Bondage and My Freedom* by presenting himself, not as resigning to 'careful' habitudes that circumvented white hostility and violence, nor as developing a transparency born of conformity, but rather as drawing on a rebellious, care-less way of being in the world. Douglass' description of another railroad scene, in the final chapter, exemplifies this carelessness:

Attempting to start from Lynn, one day ... I went, as my custom was, into one of the best railroad carriages on the road. The seats were very luxuriant and beautiful. I was soon ... ordered out; whereupon I demanded the reason for my invidious removal. After a good deal of parleying, I was told that it was because I was black. This I denied, and appealed to the company to sustain my denial; but they were evidently unwilling to commit themselves, on a point so delicate, and requiring such nice powers of discrimination, for they remained as dumb as death. I was soon waited on by half a dozen fellows of the baser sort, ... and told that I must move out of that seat, and if I did not, they would drag me out. I refused to move, and they clutched me, head, neck, and shoulders. But, in anticipation of the stretching to which I was about to be subjected, I had interwoven myself among the seats. In dragging me out, on this occasion, it must have cost the company twenty-five or thirty dollars, for I tore up seats and all (*MBMF* 394).

Interpreted through the phenomenological lens, a very different Douglass emerges in this scene. Rather than fitting himself into the train compartment/compartiment, by excluding himself from the spaces deemed white, and allowing both himself and all the other occupants (passengers and conductors), degrees of transparency, Douglass sets out to make the space he defiantly occupies accommodate him. Refusing to confine himself in any way, he relinquishes the freedom from body awareness that corporeal quietness had enabled him to experience and instead places himself in a space in which whites will immediately render him opaque. But rather than bearing this rupture alone, he both physically and metaphysically pulls these whites who collectively form what he ironically calls 'the company' into what quickly becomes a troubled space. He makes 'demand[s]' of the conductor and forces the white passengers into a conversation with him that unsettles the categories their hegemony depends upon. His 'delica[cy]'—of argument, but also, perhaps, of dress and comportment—

undermines them and as a result *their* body schemata, which are usually secured by their whiteness and by the ‘white space’ they occupy, show signs of collapse. Douglass’s behaviour curtails their ‘open unity’ and the ‘natural system of [their privileged] bodies’ stalls;³² they become ‘dumb as death’.

Then, when the ‘baser’ white men arrive and threaten him with violence, Douglass calls their bluff and forces a different and more intimate form of body awareness. Having ‘interwoven’ himself between the seats, he manages to subject these men to different kind of interweaving. Douglass’ actions force them to grapple with him on the floor, and to deal directly both with his body and with the will it expresses. Finally, ‘dragg[ed] out’ of the space, Douglass deliberately transforms it. When the train had arrived at Lynn it had been ‘luxuriant and beautiful’, ‘one of the best railroad carriages on the road.’ When it goes on its way, it is, perhaps like the men who set upon him, all ‘tor[n] up’. Douglass’s actions, therefore, result in the carriage’s transformation from something that seemed politically neutral—simply ‘beautiful’—to an object that articulates the grim violence that underpins racial ‘discrimination’. In this new scene, therefore, Douglass not only relinquishes transparency but also leaves a visible trail of his corporeality behind him, leaving the company and ‘the company’ literally counting the cost of denying his co-subjectivity. When Douglass wrote that ‘he was growing and needed room’, this must have been the kind of experience he had in mind. He seems to have desired to make his presence literally felt.

III

Using a phenomenological method to pay full attention to the extent to which Douglass writes through and to his embodied experience reveals significant and often-overlooked aspects of Douglass’s narratives. The first of these is that the texts, in and of themselves, are revelatory. Though the 1845 *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* cover much of the same ground, there are distinct differences in both the stories Douglass tells and the way he tells them. Often, when critics have brought these two texts together it has been to draw attention to these seemingly irreconcilable differences and to interpret them as evidence of Douglass’s strategic ‘performativ[ity]’.³³ The texts’ inconsistencies have led Eric Sundquist, William Andrews, and John Stauffer, for example, to judge as ‘limit[ed]’ their potential for ‘revelation of Douglass’s identity and thought.’³⁴ In their readings, the narratives only demonstrate the ‘protean character of Douglass’s life and writings,’ and the way he ‘refashion[s]’ himself as he adapts to shifting contexts.³⁵ This essay demonstrates that

what these inconsistent narratives articulate is not simply a performance—Douglass as ‘art object’³⁶—but rather a tension that *is* revelatory, disclosing Douglass’s gradual process of self-discovery.

The phenomenological method, therefore enables us to understand that Douglass developed as an intellectual, writer, and activist, and that, having been ‘pin[ned]’ down to his ‘own personal experience’ (*MBMF* 367) by the Garrisonians, he learned to philosophise *through* this experience, subtly developing what amounts to a phenomenology of nineteenth-century African American embodiment. It also teaches us that to understand the difference ‘dark skin’ and ‘crisped’ hair made to lived experience during this period, both the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* must be read through the context of Douglass’s own embodied experience. For reading phenomenologically reveals that *My Bondage and My Freedom* articulates a decisive and important shift in Douglass’s consciousness of race, place and body. It shows that Douglass recognised that the *Narrative* had been written out of a borrowed transparency that had been the reward of his ‘dropp[ing] into’ the Garrisonian ‘ranks’ (*MBMF* 366), and it shows that Douglass finally rejected the easy comforts it had allowed him—of ‘forget[ting]’ in an antiblack society, ‘that [his] skin was dark and [his] hair crisped’—because it demanded too much. My analysis reveals that Douglass came to understand that this transparency was too often accessed, not through an innocent ‘intertwin[ing]’ of self and world, but rather through a conformity to it and to the sedimented habitudes imposed too often by white others.³⁷ So he rejected ‘careful living’ in all the aspects I have sketched in this essay. Instead he chose to retain a certain ‘genuine’ ‘wild[ness]’ (*MBMF* 144), and to impose himself on the spaces he occupied, even when this meant that his own body was ‘dragged ... bruised ... stretched’ in the process (*MBMF* 394).

Making of himself the most photographed man in his country seems of a piece with this refusal to confine himself, either to the obligatory habitudes of former slaves, or to the ‘quiet’ Garrisonian comportment. In the images he commissioned and disseminated Douglass certainly attempted to assert a distinct embodied subjectivity. He critiqued representations that ‘distort[ed]’ black features and ‘burlesque[d]’ black ‘manners,’ for example, but also disparaged those that presented too ‘kindly and amiable [an] expression’.³⁸ Bernier argues that in the many portraits Douglass sat for, a scar on his forehead was ‘typically visible ... a metonymic shorthand for his body as a site of suffering during slavery.’³⁹ Reading the image through the phenomenological lens Douglass’s work encourages us to take up enables another interpretation; it suggests that Douglass rendered the scar visible as a deliberate visual reminder of his enduring willingness to ‘t[ear] up’, place, body, ‘and all’.

The phenomenological method that Douglass's narratives model, and that I have attempted to follow here, has significance beyond the boundaries of Douglass scholarship, though. It also points towards the blind spots of phenomenology and raises questions about what 'naïve contact with the world' can be, and to what extent phenomenologists speak out of and for a place of privilege secured by whiteness in an antiblack world. It reminds us that subjects are always embodied and emplaced and reveals that when subjects find that they have such a 'melodic' relation to the place in which they are situated that they 'forget' their bodies, it is because they are positioned, usually unconsciously, in a privileged place in which the demands this place makes on them—in terms of conformity and containment—are balanced by their sense that this space is open to their expressivity. Phenomenological readings of texts by writers of all ethnicities, would build this knowledge, and develop our understanding of lived experiences that transcend and critique white norms.

Finally, reading phenomenologically also enables a re-orienting shift in criticism. I began this essay by arguing that writers who address Douglass's provocative statement tend to interpret it as a mistake—a slip that fails fully to articulate what he had intended. This demonstrates a lack of confidence in Douglass's ability to describe his lived experience and it speaks to a much larger issue than just what this one man meant on this single occasion. For the extent to which slaves, fugitive slaves, and later freed people could fully own their bodies, their experiences, and their self-representations has been, and often remains, highly contested. When commentators and critics interpret inconsistencies and irregularities as failures at full—in all senses—self-possession, their interpretative acts risk functioning as mastery, as they correct the texts they survey. Reading through a phenomenological lens, on the other hand, demands a kind of 'reparative' practice. As an analytic method it requires openness to what a writer has to say about his or her embodied experience; it attends to such expressions in all their complexity rather than explaining them away. Here, it has pushed me, to borrow Eve Sedgwick's words, 'to do better justice' to the 'unexplained upwellings' that disrupt even the most 'careful living' (*N* 23) in Douglass's narratives,⁴⁰ and to understand all such disquieting articulations as potential moments of self-realisation.

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- ¹ Douglass cited in John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright, 2015), xix.
- ² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 366 (hereafter cited in text as *MBMF*).
- ³ Peter Walker, *Moral Choices : Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 247.
- ⁴ William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1991), 77.
- ⁵ Maurice S. Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111-2.
- ⁶ Gregg D. Crane, *Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125.
- ⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'What is Phenomenology?' *CrossCurrents* 6, no.1 (Winter 1956), 59.
- ⁸ Frederick Douglass, 'Sources of Danger to the Republic: An Address Delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, on 7 February 1867,' in *Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* Vol. 4: 1864-1880, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991; Frederick Douglass Papers: Digital Edition, 2016), 160, <https://frederickdouglass.infoset.io/islandora/object/islandora%3A2673#page/10/mode/1up>
- ⁹ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 142.
- ¹⁰ Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Cole, 'Body Schema and Body Image in a Deafferented Subject', in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), 132-3.
- ¹¹ J Paillard, 'Body Schema and Body Image: A Double Dissociation in Deafferented Patients', in *Motor Control, Today and Tomorrow*, ed. G. N. Gantchev, S. Mori, and J. Massion (Sofia, Bulgaria: Academic Publishing House, 1999), 197.
- ¹² Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 20; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 137.
- ¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 115.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120; Gallagher and Cole, 'Body Schema and Body Image', 371; Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 38; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 115.
- ¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 115.
- ¹⁶ Leder, *Absent Body*, 20.
- ¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 354
- ¹⁸ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 8-9. For an analysis of whiteness and the kinds of 'proprietaryship' this translates into in American society, see also Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- ¹⁹ Leder, *Absent Body*, 34.
- ²⁰ Frantz Fanon, 'The Lived Experience of the Black', in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001), 184-5.
- ²¹ Bromell focuses on Douglass's political philosophy rather than his phenomenology, but it in many ways his discussion anticipates my own. He explores, for example, Douglass's valuing of 'embodied knowing,' and coins 'perspectivalism' to draw attention to point of view as 'a core principle of [Douglass's] life and work.' See Nicholas Bromell, 'A "Voice from the Enslaved": The Origins of Frederick Douglass's Political Philosophy of Democracy,' *American Literary History*, 23, no.4 (Winter 2011).
- ²² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 96 (hereafter cited in text as *N*).
- ²³ Leder, *Absent Body*, 51.
- ²⁴ 'Habitudes' is a word Douglass uses to call attention to the ways in which bodies occupy space. See *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered: An Address before the Literary Societies of Western Reserve College, at Commencement, July 12, 1854* (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co., 1854), 8. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.21036/?sp=8>.
- ²⁵ Douglass, *The Claims of the Negro*, 29. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.21036/?sp=29>.
- ²⁶ Leder, *Absent Body*, 74.
- ²⁷ Archibald H. Grimké, *William Lloyd Garrison, The Abolitionist* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891; Internet Archive, 2011), 344, <https://archive.org/stream/williamlloydgarr00grim/page/344/>.

²⁸ William E. Cain, Introduction to *William Lloyd Garrison and the Fight against Slavery: Selections from The Liberator*, ed. William E. Cain (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995; Internet Archive, 2012), 38, <https://archive.org/stream/williamlloydgarr00will#page/37/>

²⁹ Grimke, *William Lloyd Garrison*, 344.

³⁰ Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, Harrisburg, August 9, 1847, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Walter M. Merrill, vol. 3, *No Unity with Slaveholders, 1841-1849* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973), 506.

³¹ This idea—of Douglass writing out of a specifically Garrisonian, disciplined body—has implications for other sections of the *Narrative*. For example, in chapter ten, Douglass criticises slaves who engage in ‘such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, [and] dancing’ (N, 66). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya V. Hartman reads this as evidence of Douglass’s response to a Foucauldian form of disciplining. She argues that Douglass understands how such ‘amusements’ “cultivat[e] submission, debasement, and docility’ (see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47). A phenomenological reading of this passage adds another possibility. If Douglass has adopted a ‘serene,’ ‘gentleman[ly],’ Garrisonian embodiment whilst writing passages such as these, his unease at the spectacle of slave ‘dissipation’ (N, 67) suggests corporeal repression. Douglass’s valuing of ‘staid, sober, thinking and industrious’ comportment (N, 66) reads as the effect of an imposed corporeal quietness.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 120-1.

³³ John Stauffer, ‘Frederick Douglass’s Self-fashioning,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213.

³⁴ Sundquist, ‘Introduction,’ 4.

³⁵ Eric J. Sundquist, ‘Introduction,’ in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 4; Stauffer, ‘Frederick Douglass’s Self-fashioning,’ 213. See also: William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 205-264.

³⁶ Stauffer, ‘Frederick Douglass’s Self-fashioning,’ p. 213.

³⁷ Leder, *Absent Body*, 98.

³⁸ Douglass cited in Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 67; Douglass cited in Zoe Trodd, ‘A Renaissance-Self: Frederick Douglass and the Art of Remaking,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American Renaissance*, ed. Christopher N. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 190.

³⁹ Douglass cited in Waldo E. Martin Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 120; Douglass cited in Stauffer, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, ii; Celeste-Marie Bernier, ‘The Face of a Fugitive Slave’: Representing and Reimagining Frederick Douglass in Popular Illustrations, Fine Art Portraiture and Daguerreotypes,’ in *Life Writing and Political Memoir*, ed. Magnus Brechtken (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2012), 20.

⁴⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150.