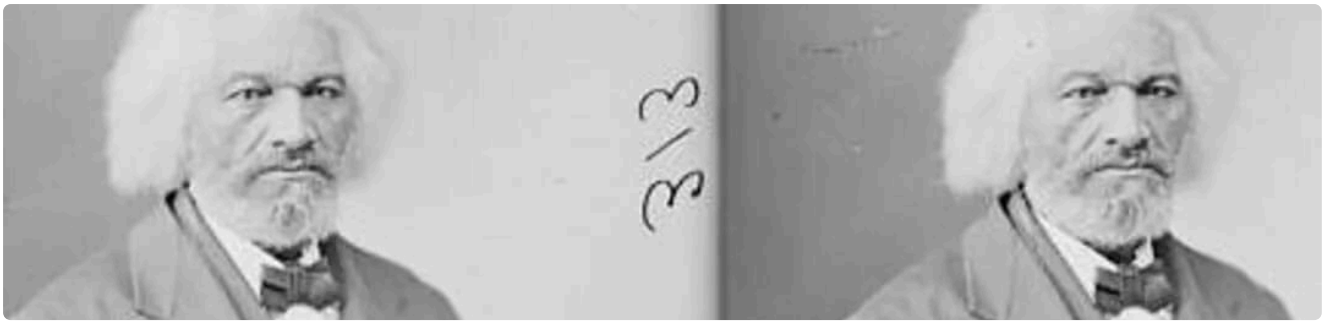
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Frederick Douglass

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Frederick Douglass's life stood at the crossroads of the national and transatlantic connections that influenced his life and he helped create. Born with slave status in Talbot County, Maryland around 1818, he was later involved in many reform movements with international ties and participated in the circulation of ideas across the Atlantic.

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Hélène Quanquin is a Professor of American Studies at the University of Lille (France). She studies 19th-century reform movements and activists. She is primarily interested in the mutual influence between the personal and the political and the different sites where political work is done and ideas are produced. Her latest book, Men in the American Women's Rights Movement, 1830-1890: Cumbersome Allies, was published by Routledge in 2020.

Frederick Douglass's life stood at the crossroads of the national and transatlantic connections that influenced his life and he helped create. Born with slave status in Talbot County, Maryland around 1818, he was caught in the great instability and violence inherent to slavery and its expansion into the "peculiar institution" in the South of the United States in the first decades of the 19^th century. His father was

white, and his enslaved mother, who died when he was about 7 years old, lived on another plantation. When he was around 6, he was separated from his maternal grandmother. Between the ages of 8 and 15, he lived in Baltimore, at the time a major commercial center and a port, with a diverse population that included free and enslaved Blacks, native-born whites, as well as recent immigrants. It was during that time that he learned how to read and discovered the publication *The Columbian Orator*, which was one of his doors to education and a world outside of the United States and slavery. In 1836, after three years spent on different plantations, he was sent back to Baltimore, where he was hired out to work as a caulker on shipyards. It was then that he met Anna Murray, a free Black woman, who helped him with his escape plans. On September 3, 1838, he fled by train and by boat, using the traveling documents of a Black sailor. He reached New York City, where he married Anna Murray on September 15.

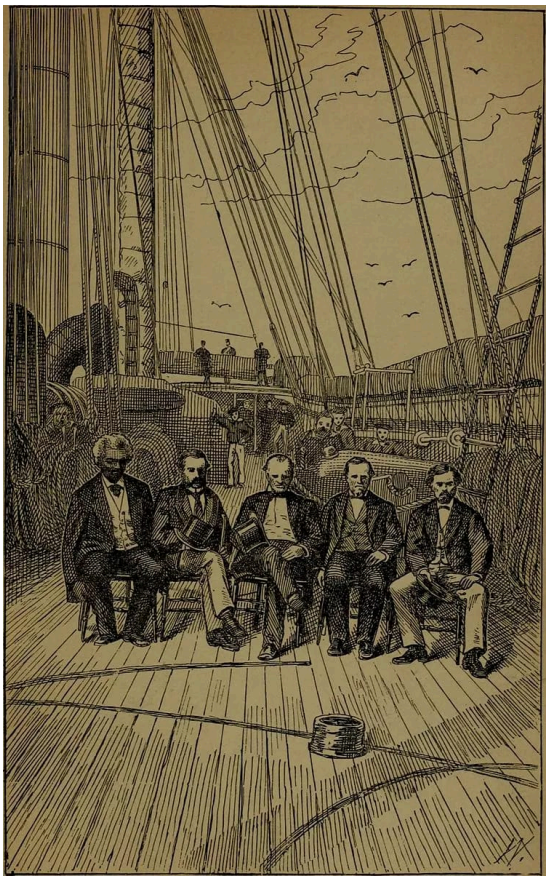
The couple settled in Massachusetts, where he became acquainted with abolitionism. The abolitionist movement which he formally joined as a lecturer in 1841 was transatlantic in nature, sustained as it was by networks which dated back to the late 18^th century and had been fueled by numerous trips and lecture tours as well as financial ties. In June 1840, the first World Anti-Slavery convention had gathered more than 400 people in London. Pamphlets, essays, slave narratives, and correspondences were written in English and other languages, and sometimes translated, which contributed to the circulation of ideas from both sides of the Atlantic.

When Douglass's fame rose among abolitionists in the first half of the 1840s, notably thanks to his great oratorical skills, it naturally crossed U.S. borders to reach Europe. His slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, became an instant bestseller in the United States and Europe. Confronted with his former enslaver's determination to bring him back to Maryland, he left the United States in August 1845 to tour England, Scotland, and Ireland for 18 months. This trip was decisive for several reasons. It increased Douglass's fame and influence in Europe, where he experienced what he described as a life free from racial prejudice. It was also there that he found the means to emancipate from white Garrisonian abolitionists. British women raised money to buy his freedom back. Moving to Rochester, New York on his return to the United States, he was also able to start a newspaper, *The North Star*, which became *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in 1851 and was read in the United States as well as Europe and the West Indies.

Throughout his life, Douglass was involved in many reform movements, including women's rights, temperance, and the "Colored Conventions" movement, all of them with strong transatlantic ties. He was the only Black participant at the first women's rights convention which took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. Forty years later, he attended the first meeting of the International Council of Women, which gathered delegates from 9 countries, including France, India, Canada and Norway. Douglass also attended the World Temperance convention in London in 1846 and was a participant at the "Colored Conventions" that were organized before and after the Civil War throughout the United States. In his newspaper and in person, he actively took part in the debates about Black emigration, which he staunchly opposed.

During the Civil War, Douglass worked for the recruitment of Black soldiers in the Union army and met Abraham Lincoln. He then continued to work for freedmen's rights, moving to Washington, D.C. in 1872, and held several official appointments: president of the Freedman's Bank in 1874; U.S. Marshal of the District of Columbia from 1877 to 1881; Recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia from 1881 to 1886. On July 1, 1889, he was appointed U.S. minister resident and consul general for the Republic of Haiti and

chargé d'affaires for Santo Domingo. He resigned exactly two years later, as his mission was undermined by the U.S. government's expansionist views and the U.S. press's accusations that he was too close to Haitian interests.



Commissioners to Santo Domingo, 1882

Source: Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 159.

The failure of Douglass's mission in Haiti confirms the ambivalences of the "diplomacy of blackness" in which he engaged. [1] In 1871, he had accepted the position as assistant secretary to a commission to Santo Domingo set up in order to investigate the possibility of annexation by the United States, which he endorsed. Although those nominations were hailed as a sign of racial progress and unity among Black communities across the Atlantic, they also point to the difficulty in representing a country dominated by white supremacy and imperialistic interests.

In 1892, Douglass was appointed as commissioner of Haiti's pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois. On January 2, 1893, he gave a speech in which he extolled Haiti as "the only self-made Black Republic in the world" and blamed the racism and imperialism of the United States for the state of the relations between the two countries. "Haiti is black, and we have not yet forgiven Haiti for being black," he claimed. [2]



Haiti's pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893

Source: Library of Congress

After his initial tour in 1845-1847, Douglass visited Europe on two other occasions. In 1859-1860, he spent a few months in Great Britain in order to escape authorities after John Brown's failed raid in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His third tour from October 1886 to May 1887, which he narrated in the revised version of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1892, was however very different. While he had been prevented from visiting France during his first trip on the racist ground that he was not a citizen of the United States, he was able to cross the Channel and travel to France, Italy, Egypt and Greece, which confirmed his extraordinary trajectory from enslavement to fame and influence as one of the most famous U.S. citizens in the world. Douglass had a travel companion, his second wife. In January 1884, he had married Helen Pitts, a white woman, causing a controversy which they may have wanted to escape. The addition of Egypt as a destination was motivated by "an ethnological purpose," [3] i.e. to demonstrate the country was the cradle of humanity, a theory he had advocated in his 1854 lecture entitled "The Claims of the Negro Race Ethnologically Considered." In this trip, he also found arguments in order to fight against racial prejudice and the theory of polygenesis in the United States, pointing to common physical and cultural characteristics between the people he met in Southern Europe and Blacks in the United States.

Since his death on February 20, 1895, Douglass's legacy has been commemorated through plaques, monuments, and ceremonies both in and outside of the United States, which is evidence of both his international fame and his participation in transatlantic conversations throughout his life.

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NOTES

1. Ronald Angelo Johnson, "Frederick Douglass and a Diplomacy of Blackness," *Black Perspectives*, April 23, 2019. (accessed on April 6, 2021).
2. Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Haiti," *The Haitian Pavilion, Dedication Ceremonies Delivered at the World's Fair, in Jackson Park*, Chicago, January 2, 1893. (accessed on April 6, 2021).
3. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), revised edition, 703.