The North Star and the Atlantic 1848

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African American Review, Volume 47, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp. 51-67 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/afa.2014.0002
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In March 1848, the British steamship *Cambria* arrived in the United States. In addition to its passengers, the ship carried copies of the *London Daily News*, whose pages were filled with reports of a new revolution in France. The paper relayed to readers how, on February 22, what began as a peaceful protest in Paris against the government of King Louis Philippe turned violent as marchers clashed with the city’s police. The riots intensified over the next two days, as Parisians constructed barricades throughout the city. The king called out the National Guard to put down the disturbance, but many of the troops joined the insurgents. On February 24, after unsuccessfully trying to placate the people by appointing new ministers, Louis Philippe abdicated and fled the city. The revolutionaries quickly established a Provisional Government and proclaimed a new French republic. News of the February days in Paris sent shockwaves throughout Europe. By mid-March, bloody uprisings in Vienna and Berlin rocked the foundations of the continent’s most powerful empires, and fighting broke out across the Italian peninsula. In a matter of weeks, a revolutionary wave that had not yet come to rest had transformed Europe.  

As news of the new French revolution spread across the United States, residents of large cities and small towns met to discuss the proper response to the events in Europe. Speakers at such gatherings often cast the French uprising as a descendant of the revolutionary tradition initiated by the United States. New York City mayor William Brady, for instance, embraced the role of the proud father who felt “paternal warmth” at the “birth of the [French] Republic” (qtd. in Roberts 58). But not everyone shared the mayor’s sentiments. On April 27, a small group of community leaders in Rochester, New York, met in the city’s courthouse. After laying the groundwork for a much larger gathering on May 8, the meeting listened to a series of speakers. Among these was Frederick Douglass, who had moved to Rochester the previous fall.  

Already an internationally renowned black abolitionist, Douglass made particular sense as a speaker because France’s new Provisional Government had signaled its intention to abolish slavery in all its colonies. In his brief remarks, Douglass argued that France’s moves toward emancipation shined a bright light on American hypocrisy. “[If] anything can put our republic to the blush,” he declared, “it is that glorious consistency with which the Provisional Government has made and set in operation measures which must bring about the entire overthrow of Slavery in all her dominions” (“French Sympathy”). Rather than seeing the new French Republic as an homage to the glories of the United States, Douglass surmised that France’s consistent republicanism might shame Americans into abandoning their own inconsistent applications of the principles of liberty and freedom. While figures like Mayor Brady imagined a revolutionary spirit traveling from west to east across the Atlantic, Douglass reversed the direction of influence. In 1848, he hoped, Europe would teach the United States how to be truly free.  

Douglass delivered his opinion on the events in Paris aloud to a small audience, and the brevity of his speech made it poorly suited for publication in a pamphlet that might carry his words beyond the Rochester courthouse. But a reporter for the *Rochester Democrat* was present at the meeting and copied down Douglass’s remarks. The *Democrat* printed the speech in its April 29 issue, and two weeks later a reprint of the article appeared on the back page of Frederick Douglass’s own newspaper.
Beyond the handful of listeners present at the original April 27 gathering, Douglass’s speech on the revolution in France reached wider audiences through the pages of newspapers, and the short speech represented only a small piece of *The North Star*’s ongoing coverage of the European revolutions. In the spring and summer of 1848, articles on happenings in Europe in general and France in particular filled the pages of Douglass’s journal. In addition to providing readers with detailed reports from abroad, *The North Star* repeatedly related the revolts on the other side of the Atlantic to the fight for black freedom in the United States. Envisioning American abolitionists and French republicans as two vanguards of a global revolutionary movement, the newspaper read the fall of Louis Philippe as the earthquake that had set off the revolutionary tidal wave sweeping across Europe and inexorably headed toward American shores. What exactly an American 1848 would look like remained something of a mystery, but its arrival was certain.

Focusing on news writing, editorials, correspondence, and reprints from other papers, this article places *The North Star* at the center of the African American response to the events of 1848. Throughout the spring and summer of 1848, the newspaper covered the European uprisings and their American echoes. Moreover, by linking actual and incipient insurrections in France, the United States, Great Britain, and the Caribbean, *The North Star*’s formal features and the rhetoric of its many writers envisioned a series of interconnected peoples and places brought together by a common spirit of revolution. At the same time, the paper refused to ignore the differences between the sites of revolution, instead urging its readers to take their own local circumstances into account when developing plans for liberation. Ultimately, *The North Star* mapped out the multiple routes of an Atlantic 1848, an international movement whose pathways crisscrossed, overlapped, and at times collided, yet nevertheless moved toward the common destination of liberation.

**Making the Atlantic 1848**

In the nearly three decades since Michael Rogin first coined the phrase “American 1848,” literary scholars and historians alike have explored the multiple ways in which the European revolutionary spirit of the late 1840s manifested in the United States. Larry Reynolds, Timothy Roberts, and Adam-Max Tuschinsky have examined the ways in which writers, politicians, and newspaper editors directly responded to events in Europe. Focusing on the intersecting crises of labor, slavery, and empire in the antebellum Americas, Eric Lott, John Carlos Rowe, and Shelly Streeby have uncovered American equivalents to the European uprisings, and in recent years, in the wake of a body of work that reads the Atlantic world as a space of revolutionary potential, scholars have begun to explore 1848’s black Atlantic character. As Paul Gilroy has famously argued, the ships crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean were “a means to conduct political dissent” (17). These vessels carried a “mobile proletariat,” as Alan Rice describes it, with “diasporan Africans at its core” (24). Hence, the Atlantic “age of revolution” so elegantly traced by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker was very much a black affair (328). Building on such insights in his reading of Douglass’s speeches and editorials, Cody Marrs points out that, “[w]hen revolutions rocked Europe in 1848, Frederick Douglass responded almost immediately by framing these movements across the Atlantic in global terms” (447). And in her study of American engagements with the Italian Risorgimento, Paola Gemme argues that black and white abolitionists responded to the events of 1848 in ways that reveal their “conception of the antislavery movement as merely one manifestation of the global contest between despotism and freedom” (116).
Recognizing the fact that, as Eric Gardner writes, “the nascent black periodical press... was the central publication outlet for many black writers,” Marrs and Gemme have each mined *The North Star* for black writing on the 1848 uprisings (10; original emphasis). David Luis-Brown also turns to the periodical archive in his impressive account of *El Mulato*, a newspaper run by Cuban exiles in New York City, whose “1848 for the Americas brings together diverse historical moments and geopolitical struggles” (450). While demonstrating a welcome turn to the still largely untapped archive of the black press, all of these scholars treat newspapers as little more than vehicles for black-oriented writing, an approach that reflects the dominant way of reading black newspapers. But *The North Star* did far more than simply cover black responses to the 1848 revolutions. Rather, I contend, the particular generic features of that newspaper fundamentally shaped the contours of the Atlantic 1848 that appeared in its pages. Engaging in what Joseph Rezek terms a “media specific analysis of early black texts,” I explore how the institutional and material forms of *The North Star*, together with the rhetoric of its many writers, created the vision of an Atlantic world in the midst of multiple, interconnected yet locally specific revolutions (39).

*The North Star*'s transatlantic gaze, for example, was as much a product of its institutional operations as it was a reflection of its editor’s priorities. Black newspapers based in the United States had been engaging with and circulating in the Atlantic world for twenty years by the time Douglass started his newspaper in 1847. “From its beginnings,” writes Frances Smith Foster, “the African-American press was international in distribution and in its concerns” (727). Before *The North Star*, papers such as *Freedom’s Journal* and the *Colored American* reached readers in Atlantic spaces like Jamaica and Haiti, and carried news from the Caribbean back to subscribers in the United States. But the specifics of *The North Star*’s financing, staff, and readership created a newspaper that was not only international in its scope but particularly attentive to British concerns and happenings. Douglass began planning his newspaper during a two-year sojourn through the British Isles. From 1845 to 1847 he toured Ireland, Scotland, and England, delivering speeches to packed houses and meeting with a range of allies who were sympathetic to the cause of black liberation. These new friends offered Douglass not only their applause but also their money, and raised enough funds to purchase his freedom so that he could safely return to the United States. But before he left Great Britain in April 1847, Douglass secured a promise for another two thousand dollars, earmarked for the purchase of a printing press and all materials necessary to start a newspaper. After he arrived in the United States, Douglass continued to receive letters from his British friends filled with encouragement for his new venture as well as the promised startup funds. Such support proved invaluable since the white American abolitionists to whom Douglass turned for help greeted his plans for a newspaper with open hostility. Each opposition, Douglass wrote in his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “caused me not only to hesitate, but inclined me to abandon the enterprise,” but “[s]ome of my English friends greatly encouraged me to go forward, and I shall never cease to be grateful for their words of cheer and generous deeds” (226, 227).

In addition to the paper’s initial capital, the British Isles sent *The North Star* a central staff member. Douglass had recruited Martin Delany and William C. Nell to serve as his paper’s coeditor and publisher, but many of *The North Star*’s day-to-day concerns seem to have fallen on the paper’s printer, a Scotsman named John Dick. A year older than Douglass, Dick had moved from Edinburgh to London at the age of sixteen to learn the printing trade, and immigrated to the United States in 1847 to work for Douglass. Dick performed a variety of duties beyond setting type, including writing numerous articles for the paper. And in the paper’s early years, as Delany traveled the North in search of subscribers, Dick apparently served as an unnamed coeditor. On the multiple occasions when Douglass was away on speaking tours, most of the paper’s editorials were signed with Dick’s initials. In a March 31
letter to *The North Star*, written while away from Rochester, Douglass admitted that “[o]ne feels little like sitting down at the close of an exciting meeting, in the midst of warm friends of the cause, anxious to exchange opinions, and write an editorial article.” But the absent editor promised that “our publisher and printer doing the best they can, will leave little cause for complaint on the part of our readers during our absence” (Letter). Dick’s writings concentrated in particular on events in Europe, and his contributions advanced *The North Star*’s international agenda.

Great Britain also provided numerous readers to *The North Star*, as Douglass used the contacts he had developed during his time abroad to build a healthy British subscription base. According to *The North Star*’s ledger, of the roughly 420 subscribers to the paper during its first year, nearly half lived in the British Isles. In addition to individuals, the ledger also names institutional subscribers. For example, Douglass sent copies of *The North Star* to a “Newsroom” in Leicester, to the office of the League of Universal Brotherhood in London, and to the Belfast Ladies Association. He also developed exchanges with newspapers such as the *British Friend* in Glasgow. A single paper could be displayed in a reading room, passed around by members of an organization, or excerpted in an exchange paper. Such institutional allies provided Douglass with the means to spread *The North Star*’s message to a British readership beyond the paper’s subscription rolls. And Douglass developed his editorial policies in response to the tastes of his British audience. In one case, for example, the editor apologized to his British readers in particular for reprinting an especially racist attack from the *Democratic Review*. “It is far from our purpose, in managing the editorial department of the NORTH STAR,” he declared, “to assail the eyes of our readers, especially our trans-Atlantic readers, with all the low black-guardisms and vile abuse which the American press may see fit to lavish upon us” (“American Prejudice”; emphasis added). Echoing a common strategy, Douglass imagined that the “low” and “vile” qualities of American racism offended the more sophisticated sensibilities of his British audience. Such a portrayal not only flattered his readers abroad, but also cast white Americans as uncouth rubes. Those fighting for black liberation, by contrast, belonged to a more advanced transatlantic culture, and *The North Star* served as the organ of that community.

*The North Star*’s many makers and readers indeed provided the newspaper with a decidedly international perspective. To be sure, the paper expressed in part Douglass’s existing affinity for transatlantic collaborations, but the particulars of newspaper production shaped *The North Star* in ways that transcended, and at times collided with, the attitudes and ideals of its main editor. As Jared Gardner writes, the pages of periodicals possess a “motley and cacophonous quality,” and Douglass at times expressed frustration at the unruly nature of *The North Star*’s many voices (3). For example, after a London correspondent for the paper seemed to call for the overthrow of the British monarchy, Douglass explained in an editorial “that the North Star does not, and will not, hold itself responsible for all the sentiments of its correspondents; and that the article in question was inserted in its columns in the absence of its editor—and is not in harmony with his views” (“London Times”). But despite such disavowals, disagreements over the proper path to liberation filled the pages of *The North Star*. Rather than a simple representation of Douglass’s opinions, then, the Atlantic 1848 envisioned by *The North Star* reflected the newspaper’s collective nature. Indeed, I suggest that the paper’s vision of an international, interracial revolution made up of a series of interconnected, though locally distinct movements emerged from the contests and negotiations that necessarily attended the collective nature of newspaper production.

The form of the newspaper page reinforced *The North Star*’s transatlantic connections, while also revealing the contested nature of the paper’s Atlantic 1848. Consider, for example, the third page of the April 28, 1848 issue of *The North Star* (Fig. 1). Here, the newspaper pulls readers from both sides of the ocean into the
space and time of a decidedly revolutionary Atlantic world. With seven evenly spaced columns, the page follows the paper’s standard format, and aside from the image of the ship at the top of the third column, presents readers with a fairly uniform appearance. This uniformity creates a visual sameness that brings the distant geographies together on the page. The three center columns are devoted to the “Foreign News” section, which is filled with breathless accounts of revolutions erupting across Europe. Uprisings are reported from Ireland to Russia, and no space, either on the page or the continent, seems safe from the contagious and rapidly spreading revolutionary spirit. The page’s second column carries a letter from the black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, who provides an account of the attempted escape of nearly eighty slaves in Washington, D.C., an event reportedly inspired by the recent revolution in France. The North Star thus collapses the space between the two sides of the Atlantic through its layout, placing Washington next to Paris and making it all the easier for readers to imagine the revolutions of Europe making the jump to the United States. In their study of white newspapers, Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone argue that “the form of news creates an environment: it invites readers into a world molded and variegated to fit not only the conscious designs of journalists and the habits of readers but also the reigning values in political and economic life” (6; original emphasis). The North Star worked in much the same way. But rather than reflect an environment built to fit its world’s “reigning values” (which often included support for slavery and racial oppression), the newspaper invited readers into an Atlantic world that seemed poised on the brink of liberation.

Recent technological innovations made it possible for The North Star to rapidly bring together the two sides of the Atlantic and become, in the eyes of its editor, a figure for an ongoing, international revolution. Pointing to the steamships rapidly crisscrossing the ocean and the telegraph poles popping up across the United States, Douglass argued that the Atlantic world had become an interconnected field of revolutionary possibility.15 “Thanks to steam navigation and electric wires,” he wrote in his April 28 editorial, “we may almost hear the words uttered, and see the deeds done, as they transpire. A revolution now cannot be confined to the place or the people where it may commence, but flashes with lightning speed from heart to heart, from land to land, till it has traversed the globe, compelling all the members of our common brotherhood at once, to pass judgment upon its merits. The revolution of France, like a bolt of living thunder, has aroused the world from its stupor” (“France”). Here, Douglass sees no difference between a revolution and the news of its occurrence. For while the new information technologies of the 1840s carried reports of the Paris uprising to distant locations, Douglass imagines the revolution itself traveling at “lightning speed” across the wires. However, since only a select few had direct access to the docking ships or the telegraph office, the newspaper provided a crucial conduit for the transmission of a revolution “from land to land.” According to its editor, then, The North Star’s coverage of the Paris uprising in effect transported the European revolution to American shores.

By bringing together distant places, The North Star exemplifies the spatial side of Benedict Anderson’s theory of simultaneity. Moreover, the paper’s pages exemplify simultaneity’s temporal dimension. The date on a newspaper’s masthead, Anderson argues, creates a “calendrical coincidence” that unites the events appearing in its pages (33) (Fig. 2). The European revolutions covered in the paper’s “Foreign News” section occurred weeks apart from one another, but in the newspaper they seem to happen all at once. By appearing alongside the European uprisings, the escape attempt in Washington, D.C. joins the fray. The newspaper’s spatial architecture thus creates temporal connections, as there is an immediacy to The North Star’s form, a sense of present tense that creates a unity of space and time between the multiple revolutionary sites and moments of the Atlantic world. In asking readers to connect
their own liberation struggles to other fights against tyranny occurring at the very same time, *The North Star* moved away from the emphasis on past revolutions that had dominated abolitionist writings, black and white. As Robert Fanuzzi has argued, abolitionist print culture “served as a memory culture, instructing contemporaries in the historic significance of their current struggle and establishing a system of analogies with distant events” (xxi). Such “distant events” included the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and, especially for black abolitionists, the Haitian Revolution. William Wells Brown’s repeated return to the early nineteenth-century uprising in Haiti in his speeches and travel writings exemplifies Ifeoma Nwankwo’s claim that “Whites’ fear of the revolution and its presumably contagious nature forced people of African descent throughout the Americas, particularly those in the public and published eye, to name a relationship to the Haitian Revolution” (7). In 1848, *The North Star* also established a “system of analogies” between the fight for black freedom in the United States and other liberation struggles, including those in the Caribbean. But instead of looking to the past for inspiration, the newspaper connected the revolutionary struggles currently erupting throughout the Atlantic, sites of struggle that no longer seemed very distant in space or time.

But the timeliness of *The North Star* also exposes the vast distances that separated the two sides of the ocean. For while steamships and the telegraph had increased the pace of transatlantic communication, *The North Star*’s April 28 accounts of the European revolutions reported news that was already weeks old. An insurrection in Madrid, for instance, had occurred on March 20. The newspaper clearly dated the events it described, forcing readers to confront the distance in time between the date on the newspaper’s masthead and that of a European uprising that may have otherwise felt fresh and immediate. Indeed, the very sense of urgency that the newspaper conveyed underscored the fact that events abroad were moving at a fast pace, and that the shape of the revolutions might have dramatically changed by the time the news reached American shores. In revealing the gap in time between the occurrence of an event and its appearance in print, *The North Star* illustrates Trish Loughran’s observation that early American print cultures not only created a sense of unity in space and time but also “worked in many cases to register the failures of such simultaneity” (12). By highlighting the distances that separated the Atlantic world’s multiple liberation struggles, the form of *The North Star* revealed the difficulties of applying a single method of revolutionary change to varying local circumstances. Hence, while considering the insurrections erupting across the Atlantic world as fronts in a common war for liberation, *The North Star* urged readers on both sides of the ocean to carefully consider how their local conditions necessarily shaped the particular manifestations of this global struggle. So while Douglass’s rhetoric at times cast the 1848 revolutions as evidence of, according to Marrs, “a universal freedom drive that was tranhistorical as well as transnational,” *The North Star* understood that specific settings and histories would necessarily determine how that drive took shape (447). By simultaneously collapsing and highlighting distances in space and time, then, the form of *The North Star* reveals the tensions between the roots, and routes, of the Atlantic 1848.
Nearer Home than Paris

In the spring and summer of 1848, articles on the happenings in Europe in general and France in particular filled the pages of Douglass’s journal. Through editorials, news reports, and correspondence, The North Star repeatedly read in the Paris uprising lessons for liberation struggles in the United States and Great Britain. For those fighting against slavery in the United States, the revolution in France provided hope and inspiration. The Provisional Government’s commitment to abolishing slavery in its colonies cemented the bond between the French republicans and the American men and women who were committed to black liberation. “There are only two classes in this country who are in a position sincerely to sympathise with France in her present glorious struggle in behalf of liberty,” wrote Douglass in an April 28 editorial, “and these are the negroes and Abolitionists” (“France”). Building upon the logic of this equivalency, The North Star repeatedly read the February uprising as a sign that slavery in the United States would soon collapse. “We call upon tyrants the world over, and especially American tyrants,” wrote Douglass in a March 24 commentary on the French uprising, “to look and reflect upon this late revolution in France,” and remember that it “is impossible that the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity can always be kept under.” He concluded by warning “the slaveholder to learn anew, that human nature is still human nature, and that the time may not be distant when an illustration of the fact may be afforded nearer home than Paris” (“France”). In The North Star, the fall of Louis Philippe heralded the destruction of slavery, the American equivalent to European tyranny.

In mid-April, events on the ground seemed to indicate that the revolutionary wave had reached American soil. On April 13, the schooner Pearl docked in Washington, D.C., and seventy-seven enslaved men, women, and children boarded the ship. Daniel Drayton, captain of the Pearl, sailed up the Potomac with the plan of transporting his passengers to the free states. But, disastrously, he chose to wait out bad weather in a cove at the mouth of the river, and was caught by a pursuing ship. The fugitive slaves and the crew of the Pearl were brought back to the nation’s capital and paraded in chains through the city’s streets on their way to the federal jail. Drayton and his crewmates were held for trial, and the vast majority of the recaptured slaves were quickly sold south. Despite its failure, the scale and audacity of the attempted escape set off a national firestorm. Pro-slavery advocates framed the escape attempt as an assault on the property rights of slaveholders, and blamed the entire affair on Northern abolitionists and their allies in Washington. One correspondent to the New York Herald, for example, claimed to have “never heard of a more outrageous or audacious violation of constitutional and personal rights, than that perpetrated by a gang of abolitionists and kidnappers in Washington, D.C.” (“Slave Abduction”).

The North Star, however, folded the Pearl episode into its ongoing coverage of the 1848 revolutions. Douglass first commented on the events in Washington in his April 28 editorial, in which he chided Americans for their cool reception of the French revolution post-emancipation. “While we write this,” he explained, “a paper has been handed us containing a detailed account of the arrest and imprisonment in Washington of seventy-seven slaves, for an attempt to escape from the land of slavery to a land of liberty; and for helping these men to escape, three white American citizens are confined in an American dungeon.” In the scene Douglass sets, news of the Pearl (carried in a newspaper) interrupts him in the midst of writing a piece on American reactions to French emancipation. But instead of distracting the editor from the task at hand, the plight of the fugitives provides him with a striking illustration of slavery in the nation’s capital. And the presence of slavery in Washington, D.C.
supports Douglass’s larger claim that European revolutionaries should not expect support from the United States, since “it would be more consistent with our character for cruelty, (if not for cowardice,) to invade France with an army, with the avowed purpose of reinstating Louis Philippe, and restoring the emancipated slaves to their tyrant masters; than to sympathise with France in her struggles for a republic” (“France”). Throughout its coverage of the Pearl escape attempt and its aftermath, The North Star would follow Douglass’s strategy in this editorial and relate happenings in Washington to a broader transatlantic revolutionary moment.

Indeed, The North Star seized on reports that the February uprising in Paris had directly inspired the escape attempt of the seventy-seven slaves in Washington. In his April 28 letter to the paper Henry Highland Garnet included a lengthy excerpt from the Troy Daily Post, which reported that a “result of the grand sympathy meeting, got up in Washington, to glory in the success of Republicanism in France, with the fine speeches at them, in favor of the rights of man, appears to have been, to lead a number of slaves, who were probably listeners, to think that they too were to share in the glorious boon of freedom” (“Model Republic”). A week later, William C. Nell imagined the Pearl’s passengers “assembled at the Washington meeting of sympathy with the French,” where the enslaved men and women heard “Senators glorifying a revolution which had made all the people in France free.” As a result, Nell concluded, “the spark of freedom ignited their hearts, and behold their declaration of independence!” (“Morning Dawns”). In truth, speeches lauding the French revolutionaries had little to do with the meticulously planned escape attempt. But in the pages of The North Star, it appeared that the news of the revolution in France had led American slaves to seize, however fleetingly, their own freedom.

Despite the quick recapture of the fugitives aboard the Pearl, Douglass insisted that the escape attempt marked the beginning of American participation in the Atlantic 1848. The affair had brought the practice of slavery in Washington to the attention of the nation, and this increased scrutiny could only help the abolitionist cause. “The broad eye of the nation will be opened upon slavery in the District as it has never before,” Douglass wrote in a May 5 editorial. “The North and West will feel keenly the damming disgrace of their Capital being a slave mart, and a deeper hatred of slavery will be engendered in the popular mind throughout the Union.” The editor saw the scene of seventy-seven men and women “running from the Temple of Liberty to be free,” and then subsequently being paraded through the streets of the nation’s capital and sold south, as a public relations disaster for American slavery (“What of the Night?”; original emphasis). Articles like those in the Daily Post seemed to support this reading, and The North Star reprinted similar pieces from a variety of Northern newspapers.

In addition to its value as a rallying cry, the aftermath of the escape attempt provided antislavery activists with an ideal opportunity to challenge the legality of slavery in the nation’s capital. The District of Columbia had long been a focus of abolitionists, since Congress had the power to do there what it could not in the various states: end slavery. Abolitionists in New England saw the impending trial of the crew of the Pearl as an occasion to force the issue, and on April 25 held a meeting in Boston to discuss the affair. A report from the gathering, reprinted in The North Star, denied “that the Constitution confers on Congress any power to establish, or to maintain slavery, in territory over which it possesses exclusive jurisdiction,” and those at the meeting set about hiring counsel that would bring “before the Supreme Court of the United States the question of the legality of slavery in the District of Columbia” (“Prisoners”). Douglass urged his readers to support a proposed defense fund. “Such a trial in the Supreme Court of the United States, with the present power of the antislavery press, the general antislavery sentiment at the North, and the great tide of moral influence setting in upon us from all parts of the civilized world,” he wrote in the May 5 issue of The North Star, “might be made instrumental
in the overthrow of slavery in the District of Columbia” (“Captain and Crew”). In addition to the progress in public opinion that was evident in the North (influenced by newspapers like *The North Star*), Douglass cited international pressure as a key reason that the spring of 1848 represented the right time to undertake such a challenge, implying that European revolutionaries would exert a “moral influence” over the Justices of the Supreme Court.

**Barricades in the House of Commons**

By casting the *Pearl* affair as a manifestation of the revolutionary spirit that had brought down Louis Philippe, *The North Star* imagined an Atlantic 1848 that would be located in the courtroom rather than the street. This admittedly odd translation of a popular uprising from below into a fight for legal reform from above begins to make more sense when we consider *The North Star* as the organ of a varied Atlantic world. Specifically, the paper’s faith in the reasonableness of popular opinion and the government reflects the British version of the revolutionary Atlantic. Through reprinted pieces from British newspapers and letters from its own London correspondents, *The North Star* extensively covered the implications of the February revolution for its many readers in the British Isles. *The North Star*’s inclusion of British voices followed the practice of most American newspapers. Traveling by steamship, British newspapers represented the primary source of European news. Few American papers had correspondents in Paris, so American editors largely used British voices to tell the story of the French uprising. As part of their larger coverage of foreign affairs, American newspapers also chronicled the response to the European revolts in London. While *The North Star* followed the general form of American newspapers by placing much of its British reporting under the heading of “Foreign News,” its large and carefully cultivated British readership complicated this classification. Such readers would have considered accounts of British happenings decidedly domestic. Hence, a report reprinted from the *London Times* that declared, “[m]ore important, if possible, than even the momentous events of Paris, is the influence of those events upon *us*,” reflected the priorities of nearly half of *The North Star*’s readers (“Taxation in England”; emphasis added).

Just as Douglass had worked through his editorials to establish a connection between French republicans and American abolitionists, *The North Star*’s British contributors asserted an affinity between Parisians and British reformers. In a letter printed on April 7, the London correspondent R. S. D. wrote that the “great mass of the people of this country sympathise warmly, with the people of France and the noble spirit of the provisional government” (Untitled). These same voices, though, pointed out the crucial differences between the French who had turned to the barricades and their British counterparts. Lest readers in Great Britain fear that the spark of full-scale revolution would jump the English Channel, *The North Star* focused on the tradition of reform that anchored British society. While cognizant that “the epidemic of popular excitement, prevalent throughout Europe, and bursting into revolution so near us, is not without its effects even upon our more staid and sober temperaments,” the writer for the *London Times* saw no sign “that any class here is tainted with disaffection, or inclined to *emeute* [riot]” (“Taxation in England”; original emphasis). The author of another reprinted piece explained how the French revolutionary spirit manifested in a British context: “Our emeutes are public meetings, and our barricades in the House of Commons” (Jerrold, “Paris As It Is”). *The North Star*’s subsequent interpretation of the *Pearl* escape attempt reflects precisely this faith in institutional reform to right society’s wrongs.
But events in the British Isles seemed to contradict this confidence in British
reserve. Anti-tax riots broke out in Glasgow and London on March 6. In The North
Star, R. S. D. dismissed the rioters as “the ignorant and degraded, who swarm in
painful numbers in all the great centres of population in this country” (Untitled).
The London Times, though, reported that the violence, “coupled with the late events
in Paris, gave rise to a general dread of some political disturbance” (qtd. in Saville
89). Tensions escalated when the Chartists, who had been fighting for political
reform for over a decade, announced a mass meeting and procession on April 10.
The government, remembering that the revolution in Paris had begun as a peaceful
protest, responded by banning the gathering, deploying troops and cannons
throughout London, swearing in and arming thousands of special constables to the
police force, and sending the Queen to the Isle of Wight for her safety. “After such
extraordinary preparations,” wrote R. S. D., “people began to talk of a revolution
here.” But April 10 proved anticlimactic. Chartist organizers had hoped for a gath-
ering of 200,000 to 300,000, but fewer than 10,000 marchers materialized, and R. S. D.
concluded that April 10 was “a day in which people had apparently conspired to
make fools of each other” (“State of Europe”).

In the pages of The North Star, Douglass unequivocally condemned the Chartists
for bringing Great Britain to the brink of violent revolution. In a May 5 editorial
entitled “Chartists of England,” he described their attempt to “overawe the govern-
ment” through a show of force as a “wild and wicked measure,” and rejoiced that
the Chartists had “wisely abandoned the mischievous and useless project.” Unlike
the revolutionaries on the continent, Douglass argued, the British had avenues for reform
besides a violent uprising. “While the liberty of speech is allowed—while the free-
dom of the press is permitted, and the right of petition is respected, and while men
are left free to originate reforms without, and Members are left free to propose and
advocate them within the walls of Parliament,” he wrote, “no excuse can be valid for
resorting to the fearful use of brute force and bloodshed” (“Chartists of England”).
While sympathetic to the overall aims of the Chartist movement, Douglass could
not countenance violence when alternative avenues to reform remained available.
The revolutionaries in cities like Paris and Berlin had no voice in an elected parliament,
nor could they print their views in newspapers without fear of government reprisal.
But for Douglass, the very fact that the Chartists could print their own newspaper,
present their petition to Parliament, and have their concerns taken up by that body’s
members, demonstrated the openness of the British political process. Violent revo-
lution had no place in such a society.

The details of “Chartists of England” explicitly addressed the concerns of The
North Star’s British readers. But Douglass’s take on the role of violence in liberation
struggles also applied to the American manifestations of the Atlantic 1848. The May 5
editorial dovetailed in particular with the paper’s approach to the Pearl escape attempt
and its aftermath. The North Star’s reading of the Pearl episode as an opportunity to
challenge slavery in court offered an American version of Douglass’s insistence upon
a nonviolent, parliamentary solution to oppression in Great Britain. Moreover, the
paper emphasized how the escape attempt itself had been a peaceful affair. A week
before composing his editorial on the Chartists, Douglass contrasted the peacefulness
of the fugitive slaves, who had attempted “in the most harmless way possible, without
violence or injury to any one, to gain their freedom,” with the violence of their
captors, “a band of armed menhunters, who compel them, at the musket’s mouth,
to surrender” (“Fugitive Slaves”). For Douglass, the Pearl episode revealed violence
as a tool of oppressors, not of the oppressed.

In part, The North Star’s focus on peaceful reform reflects the “anglophilia” that
Elisa Tamarkin sees as a fundamental part of early American culture, including
American antislavery efforts. Douglass, especially, expressed his admiration for English
reserve and his faith in British institutions to enact needed reforms. But Douglass
represented only one of The North Star’s many voices. And at times, the full chorus of the newspaper undermined the arguments of its editor. For instance, on the very page on which Douglass chided the Chartists for trying to transport continental revolutionary tactics to London, other articles pointed out the ways in which a British model of parliamentary reform might not apply to the antislavery struggle in the United States. In “The Chartists of England,” Douglass cited freedom of speech and freedom of the press as preconditions for peaceful reform. The aftermath of the Pearl episode had, however, revealed that these freedoms were not secure in the United States. After the fugitives had been returned to Washington, D.C., a rumor spread that Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the local antislavery newspaper The National Era, had played a part in the attempted escape. A mob attacked the newspaper office, demanding that Bailey shut down his presses and leave the city. Although Bailey and his newspaper ultimately survived, The North Star used the attack to highlight the precarious position of a free press in the nation’s capital. On April 28, the paper reprinted a letter from Bailey decrying the attack as “aimed at the freedom of the press.” “It is a damming disgrace,” the Era’s editor continued, “that at the very moment we are rejoicing with the people of France at their triumph over a despot who undertook to enslave the press, an attempt should be made to strike down the freedom of the press in this capital city of this Republic, in sight of the National Legislature” (“Disturbance”). For Bailey, the actions of the mob suggested a parallel between Washington, D.C. and Paris before the February revolution. Bailey portrayed the United States, like France under Louis Philippe, as a land where a newspaper could be destroyed for voicing an unpopular opinion.

Lest readers mistake the attempted suppression of the Era as an isolated incident unrepresentative of the government’s position, The North Star covered in detail congressional debates surrounding the affair. These debates revealed that United States Senators not only supported suppression of the press, but also sought to silence even the most tangential discussion of slavery. A report from the Senate floor covered the front page of the paper’s May 12 issue. In response to the attack on the Era, Senator John Parker Hale from New Hampshire, who had been elected in part because of his antislavery leanings, asked leave to introduce a bill “for the Protection of Property in the District of Columbia—making any city, town, or corporate place liable for injuries done by mobs.” Senators Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun erupted in a fury, charging Hale with attacking the institution of slavery. For Calhoun, the attack on the Era had been an appropriate response to the charge that Bailey may have been involved in the Pearl escape, and any measure designed to forestall similar reactions in the future would “prevent the just indignation of our people from wreaking their vengeance upon the atrocious perpetrators of these crimes, or those who contribute to them.” As far as Calhoun was concerned, the anger of the slaveholder trumped the freedom of the press. Southern senators not only objected to the substance of Hale’s bill, but also to his temerity in introducing legislation that even tangentially touched on the subject of slavery. Hale indignantly responded that although he realized that the “right of speech was sacrificed long ago . . . it is to be proclaimed that we cannot even introduce a bill looking to the execution of the plainest provisions of the Constitution, and the clearest principles of justice, for the protection of human rights, because gentlemen choose to construe it into an attack upon that particular institution” (“Senate”). At the same time that Douglass urged the British to pursue peaceful means because they lived in a society with a free press, free speech, and political representatives free to introduce legislative reform, The North Star showed its readers that the slave power threatened all of these conditions in the United States.
Serious Symptoms of Insurrection

The North Star left it largely up to its readers to conclude that, since the United States resembled Louis Philippe’s France rather than Great Britain, a successful attack on slavery might require more than legal proceedings. But Henry Highland Garnet’s April 28 letter to the paper (which included a lengthy excerpt from the *Troy Daily Post*) made an explicit case for violent revolutionary tactics. In light of the failure of the *Pearl* escape, the attack on *The National Era* in the United States, and the progress of revolutionary movements in Europe, the *Daily Post* concluded “that soon, Moscow in Russia, and Washington in the United States, will be the only national capitals [sic] that can furnish a mob to destroy a free press; and that the only victory against human liberty this year is in our national capital, over sixty negroes.” Garnet agreed with the *Daily Post* and lamented that the fugitives aboard the *Pearl* had not acted more like the European revolutionaries. Rather than be caught unawares and unarmed by a pursuing vessel, he wrote, the *Pearl*’s passengers “ought to have been better prepared.” “One good cannon, well managed,” Garnet reasoned, “would have crippled a dozen steamers. If white men were to undertake to runaway [sic] from human bloodhounds, they see to it, that the Telegraph wires were cut the distance of every ten miles in the direction of their flight. More than this they would do; they would pull up the rails of the rail-roads, and stop the speed of the iron horses.” Cannons, of course, were not normally the tools of slaves running for freedom. Nor were cutting wires and ripping up railroads typical tactics of black fugitives. Garnet critiqued the fugitives aboard the *Pearl*, then, for acting like runaways instead of revolutionaries. In order to be successful, he reasoned, the *Pearl*’s passengers needed to be prepared to use violence. Moreover, they should have recognized that technologies like the telegraph not only brought inspiring stories of foreign fighters to American shores, but also carried news of their flight to their enemies. In other words, the black men and women aboard the *Pearl* should have taken up the tools and techniques of someone fighting in the streets of Paris, Berlin, or Vienna. White men fighting for liberation from tyranny engaged in these sorts of tactics. “Do you think friend Douglass,” Garnet asked, “it would be an unpardonable sin for slaves to do the same?” (“Model Republic”).

Douglass’s firm commitment to nonviolence suggested one answer to Garnet’s challenge. In the early summer of 1848, however, *The North Star* imagined a less-peaceful response in island-hopping across the Atlantic on its way to the United States. France’s Provisional Government had declared emancipation in its colonies on April 27, but it took over two months for the declaration to reach the Caribbean. On May 23, slaves in Martinique successfully rebelled and forced the local governor to declare immediate emancipation, and on May 27, the governor of the neighboring island of Guadeloupe followed suit in order to preempt a similar uprising. The Provisional Government’s declaration arrived eleven days later.22 On June 30, *The North Star* reprinted a piece from the *Boston Bee*, whose author trembled at the implications of the French Atlantic uprisings for the United States. “Do not the scenes now enacting in Martinique and Guadaloupe [sic],” the writer asked, “convey a warning to us as a people?” Reading the European uprisings and the Caribbean revolutions as fronts in a global “war of races,” the author reasoned that white Americans “cannot expect that the negro race of this country will forever remain quiet” (“Martinique and Guadaloupe”; original emphasis). Instead, the article concluded, the “spirit of rebellion, freedom, or whatever any one chooses to call it, will, sooner or later, arouse them to action, and the evil hour is unquestionably hastened on by the mad fanaticism of those who are crying out for immediate emancipation” (“Martinique and Guadaloupe”). Although evidently written by an opponent of the abolitionists, the article’s contention that antislavery agitation “unquestionably
hastened” the “evil hour” of black liberation served in the pages of *The North Star* as a rallying cry for American and British readers. A week later, the newspaper reprinted a report of a suspected insurrection in Cuba. “There have,” wrote the article’s author, “been lately some serious symptoms of insurrection discovered among the slaves of this island.” The writer surmised that news of the emancipation of the slaves in the French islands “and the terrible vengeance which they are inflicting upon their former masters” had likely “occasioned the present symptoms of outbreak, and may yet produce more decisive effects as they become more generally known among the slaves” (“Insurrection in Cuba”). With the rumblings of a slave uprising in Cuba, it seemed that the “spirit of rebellion” detected by the writer for the *Boston Bee* had already spread from the Antilles, and now flourished just off the coast of Florida.

The revolution in Martinique underscores the ineffectiveness of the routes that ostensibly linked the Atlantic world and the impact of that uneven interconnectedness on the Atlantic 1848. Had the Provincial Government’s emancipation declaration reached its colony sooner, it would likely have forestalled the uprising. But the ocean’s tendency to slow time transformed the island from an instance of emancipation from above into a reminder that enslaved men and women could seize their own freedom. As the events were reported in *The North Star*, Martinique exemplified the possibility that the Atlantic 1848 could be as easily manifest in a slave rebellion as in a piece of legislation, or a court case. By weaving the liberation struggles in France, the United States, Great Britain, and the Caribbean into an Atlantic 1848, *The North Star* not only invited its African American readers into an international revolutionary community, but also provided them with multiple routes to liberation. The *Pearl* may have failed to carry its passengers to freedom, but the affair paved the way for a legal challenge to slavery. And if the barricades of black liberation did not succeed in the courtrooms and legislative chambers of Washington, D.C., the successful insurrections in Paris and Martinique provided an alternative approach. As a newspaper built from transatlantic collaborations, *The North Star* recognized the potential of an interconnected Atlantic world as the ocean’s vastness revealed a multitude of revolutionary possibilities.

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**Notes**

1. For a general overview of the European revolutions of 1848 see Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic, 2010).
6. For other seminal work calling for increased attention to the black press, see Foster; and Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).
7. When writing on the black press, scholars have routinely treated the papers as neutral vessels valuable mostly (if not entirely) because they contain writings by familiar individuals like Douglass, or recognizable literary genres such as novels and short stories. See, for example, Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Carla Peterson, “‘We Hold These Truths to be Self-Evident’: The Rhetoric of Frederick Douglass’s Journalism,” in The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays, Todd Vogel, ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 71-89; Daniel Hack, “Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of Bleak House,” Critical Inquiry 34.4 (2008): 729-53; Ivy G. Wilson, “On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and The Heroic Slave,” PMLA 121.2 (2006): 453-68. For an argument for an alternative approach that is sensitive to the specifics of newspaper production, see Todd Vogel, Introduction to The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays, Todd Vogel, ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 1-14.


11. During his time in Rochester, Dick met and married Eliza Griffiths, sister of Julia Griffiths. The two moved to Toronto in 1850, and settled in New Zealand in 1861. Dick’s 1895 obituary inflates his role at The North Star, claiming that after the printer completed his apprenticeship in London “he crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America, where he was introduced to Mr. W. Lloyd Garrison, through whose influence he was enabled to start an antislavery paper at Rochester.” The obituary makes no mention of Douglass. See Untitled Notices, The Otago Daily Times 8 Apr. 1895. See also McFeely 152-53.

12. See Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, “Ledger No. 1,” Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. This ledger offers an indispensable window into the financial operations of the paper as well as the makeup of its readership. The record shows, however, present some difficulties when attempting to provide precise figures. For example, multiple subscriber names and exchange papers have been crossed out. One cannot be certain whether this means that they were either solicited subscriptions and exchanges or that existing arrangements were later canceled. Moreover, there is no clear indication of when certain entries were made. For more on the paper’s readership as well as the importance of the ledger see McFeely 151-53.


14. While it is not the focus of this article, future work could fruitfully consider how the newspaper made Douglass as much as he made the newspaper. Examining Douglass’s turn to what he terms a “cosmopolitan constitutionalism,” Crane remarks that, “[a]s editor of the North Star, Douglass was drawn into a broader range of antislavery views” (110). A study of The North Star’s impact on Douglass’s political transformation could take Crane’s quick observation as a launching point, unpacking how the institutional and material forms of the newspaper informed Douglass’s antislavery activism. Fanuzzi has gestured in this direction in his work on Douglass’s split with William Lloyd Garrison. “Although scholars typically regard the bitter schism between Garrison and Douglass in 1853 as the inevitable result of deeply held personal resentments or as the battle of two outsized egos,” he writes, “their battle can be understood in more contemporary terms as a publicity war between two rivals in the newspaper trade in which libels and personal depredations were the accepted means of attack” (109). A thorough reading of the impact of the newspaper on Douglass’s politics and philosophies could also, for example, revisit Marrs’s contention that, “[f]or the rest of his life Douglass tended to understand revolution as a serial event rather than a self-contained singularity, and this politico-historical sensibility derived in large part from his reading of 1848 and its aftermath” (451). Recognizing that the vast majority of Douglass’s reading of 1848 came through his work on a newspaper, one could explore how the serial form of the newspaper shaped Douglass’s later ideas of revolution. We may also reconsider Robert Levine’s observation that Douglass’s “‘African American literary nationalism was for many years expressed through his editing and circulating of black newspapers,” focusing on how newspaper editing and circulation not only expressed by also shaped Douglass’s views (Dislocating 183).
15. In 1844, Samuel Morse successfully demonstrated his electric telegraph by transmitting the Whig nominations for President and Vice President from Baltimore to Washington, D.C. Almost immediately, telegraph poles began popping up across the country. The wires initially carried stock prices between commercial centers, but newspaper editors soon saw the value of near-instantaneous news reports. By 1850, 12,000 miles of telegraph wires crisscrossed the United States, and that number nearly doubled in the next three years. See Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848 (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 690-98; Paul Starr, The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications (New York: Basic, 2004), 153-77.


21. For more on Douglass’s connections to the Chartists, see Richard Bradbury, “Frederick Douglass and the Chartists,” in Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass & Transatlantic Reform, Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1999), 169-86.


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