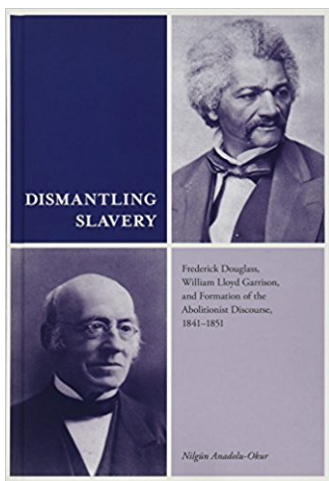


# Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Formation of Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851

a review by

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In her book, *Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Formation of Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851*, Nilgun Anadolu-Okur has taken on one of the most critical decades prior to the Civil War to analyze in terms of abolitionist discourse. By choosing to read the narrative of conflict and progress in the lives and careers of two of the largest personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Anadolu-Okur has given fresh insight into the relationship

between the 21 year old fugitive, Frederick Douglass, and the 36 year old Garrison beginning in 1841.

Nilgun Anadolu-Okur has written an unusually powerful book. She has challenged the major themes of the relationship between the two men to uncover or reveal the gifts through oratory that Douglass brought to the table deep from his African origin. This is a revolutionary and Afrocentric approach to an element of abolition that has been studied without attention to the African contribution to Douglass's eloquence as African.

The author has given us a book about the abolition movement that does not minimize the cultural or historical role of Douglass. She is aware of the motif Douglass played for the white abolitionists but she is sure that it was Douglass's rhetoric in tones that "felt like rain soaking the land with blessings" that made them realize his true greatness. Using the powerful centric concept of agency the author asserts that Douglass, recently out of bondage, was able to project a sense of agency, personal will and intent, that elevated all blacks in the eyes of the white abolitionists. He was not just speaking for himself, but out of the collective condition of the African people.

Bringing a keen Afrocentric lens to the history of the abolitionist movement, Anadolu-Okur demonstrates the substantive relationship between Garrison and Douglass as one fraught with respect and awe. Douglass, up from enslavement, was intent on showing himself to be equal to all men, any man, even the fierce abolitionist Garrison who saw him as someone in need of assistance. Of course, the slave system had been designed, prosecuted, and defended by whites who saw themselves as superior to blacks and Garrison had cried out against this system yet he was also a victim of the entrapment of the rhetoric, atmosphere, and dance of white authority. Douglass was Garrison's lesson plan, his core test for humanity, and his friend.

The author of this book makes a strong case for the presence of an African oratorical style in the work of Douglass. In fact, many of the older works on African American oratory and rhetoric saw in Douglass a man of unusual gifts for eloquence; however, it is not until Anadolu-Okur grabs the reins of the arguments to wrestle with the origin of this unique gift as being related to African concepts of spoken word that we see a new, more fundamental legacy, of Douglass' speech. The author finds that Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs who had escaped slavery brought a special urgency to the need to free Africans from bondage. However, they brought something more, the epic memory and African *nommo*, generative power of the spoken word, and a discourse of memory. This was Douglass's chief contribution to the platform of abolition. He and Jacobs could tell their narratives, excite the crowds, and demand freedom but Douglass could and did call upon the experiences of his childhood in the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the oral traditions of his grandmother, the hearing of the great sorrow songs, as Du Bois called them, and the idea that he could become a vessel for liberation. This was all wrapped in the cloth of a powerful African sense of spoken words. His style was powerful without being bombastic, poetic without being flowery, and narrative without being boastful.

*Dismantling Slavery* is not simply about Douglass and Garrison, though that is its most prevalent duo; it also examines the social, political, and cultural networks of the abolitionists themselves. As the leader of one of the most enduring conferences on the Underground Railroad held at Temple University each year, Nilgun Anadolu-Okur has gained a reputation for considering the material and cultural artifacts of abolition including tabloids, antislavery forums, conventions, bazaars, ladies' auxiliaries, sewing circles, pamphlets, journals, newspaper articles, diaries, posters, and autobiographical sketches of the period as the richly textured sources for a full exposition of the dismantling of slavery.

One cannot find a better contemporary book on the subject of Douglass and Garrison's relationship. Much like the author's understanding of the material artifacts that came through the reading and consideration of the many papers and pamphlets of the period, she is also aware of the great number of artists and creative personalities who joined in the movement against the abominable system: John Greenleaf Whittier, Lydia Maria Child, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, participated with Douglass and Garrison in various capacities, sometimes only as supportive voices in print.

Playing the chords between Douglass's exhibition one and Garrison's fierce writing about the reasons for abolition, Anadolu-Okur shows how Garrison eventually had to place himself, as other abolitionists did, outside of the protection of the law. Resistance meant that you would gather many enemies and would become, like the enslaved, targets for the bigots who defended slavery. Garrison's notion of just and unjust laws, later to be heard in Martin Luther King's rhetoric, rendered the Constitution a document that was inadequate to protect the enslaved because it was complicit with slavery.

The author shows how Garrison's doctrine of nonresistance to the racist laws was the ultimate form of resistance. Garrison, she argues, felt that the abolitionists could not participate in the laws that considered the natural rights of human beings below the laws of men. No system of property rights should trump natural rights in Garrison's mind. Urging nonresistance meant that the abolitionists renounced the power of the law's protection for blacks and abolitionists. Douglass would break with Garrison over two principal issues. The first would be Douglass's decision to exercise his right to publish a paper, *The North Star*, and Douglass's belief that he could use the Constitution in the fight against slavery by showing the hypocrisy of the white Americans. Garrison thought that Douglass should stick with his strength as an orator and he also believed that the Constitution was a dangerous weapon against the enslaved Africans.

Anadolu-Okur's book is relevant to contemporary history and society with its wide appeal to scholars in several disciplines. In fact, she connects the abolitionist struggle and the agency of Douglass directly to the Black Arts Movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when African Americans fought for the right to be self-defining and self determining. Although the author privileges the agency of Frederick Douglass in his relationship with Garrison, as a good Afrocentrist should do, she also highlights the interconnectedness and supportive social structures that survived the constraints of the hierarchical and paternalistic society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This book captivates the reader from the first chapter "Formation of the Alliance: Frederick Douglass Meets William Lloyd Garrison" and does not disappoint in five brilliant chapters, concluding with the realistic "Dissent in the Alliance" as a way to suggest the trials and triumphs of political and social alliances. I happily recommend this book for its rigor, exceptional understanding of the context, use of new materials, and its enlightened application of an Afrocentric analysis to a traditionally complex topic.