On Plantation Politics: Citizenship and Antislavery Resistance in Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*

I. Introduction

The question ‘who counts as a member of the polity’ is both a fundamental matter in political philosophy and an urgent issue in American political culture today. As a matter of political philosophy, the answer to this question determines to whom the polity owes distinctive obligations of justice. As an urgent issue today, exclusionary conceptions of membership are marshaled in order to deprive immigrants of essential social goods, as in the Trump administration’s proposed rule to penalize green card applicants for accessing social services like SNAP and Medicaid.¹ There is a role for political philosophers and theorists in combating these harmful policies and the exclusionary conceptions of political membership that underlie them: we can, and should, articulate alternative, inclusive conceptions of political membership, furnishing the normative arsenal of emancipatory politics.

In this paper, I show that we can look to Black abolitionist political thought for conceptions of political membership that bear emancipatory potential today. In particular, I argue that Frederick Douglass articulates a conception of American citizenship specifically crafted to combat oppressive exclusion from the political sphere. For Douglass, what it is to be a citizen is to enact a commitment to the fundamental principles of a polity.² Douglass argues that a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression is the fundamental principle of the American

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² This generic conception of citizenship is itself a particular version of a more generic conception of social relations— in particular, social relations that bear substantial responsibilities and rights— as constituted by enacted commitments. See Mara G. Marin, *Connected by Commitment: Oppression and Our Responsibility to Undermine It* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
polity. Thus, according to Douglass, what it is to be an American citizen is enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression.

This strategy for addressing the question of political membership is motivated by the history of the concept of citizenship in the US. Until Reconstruction, citizenship was an underdetermined, contested concept in American political thought. Just after the Civil War, former congressman Horace Binney observed that “The word citizen is found ten times at least in the Constitution of the United States, and no definite of it is given anywhere.”3 Today we take for granted that American citizenship consists, in the first case, birthright, and, in the second case, naturalization. But as Martha Jones has demonstrated, this conception of citizenship was developed in the American context by abolitionists with an eye to expanding the boundaries of political community in the US.4 While we might be wary of the emancipatory potential of birthright citizenship in the context of mass migration, we can look to the moment in history in which this conception of citizenship was forged for inspiration for alternative conceptions of citizenship that bear greater emancipatory potential today.

In section II, I show that this conception of citizenship is implicit in Douglass’s claim that slaves possess a political ‘right of rebellion.’ In section III, I argue that American citizenship is constituted through a distinctive variety of resistance against tyranny and oppression, which I call political resistance. In section IV, I argue that resistance is political when it cultivates bonds of trust, loyalty, solidarity, and non-paternalism (what I call emancipatory social bonds) among those engaged in resistance. Douglass demonstrates that many forms of antislavery resistance performed by slaves on the plantation cultivate emancipatory social bonds; it is for this reason

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3 qtd in Foner, The Second Founding, 5.
that, on Douglass’s view, enslaved and free Black people are paradigmatic American citizens (and white slaveholders stand at the margins of American citizenship).

The emancipatory potential of Douglass’s conception of citizenship consists in two points. First, the kind of activity through which one constitutes herself as a citizen—political resistance—is something that people subject to oppression engage in ubiquitously. Second, the performance of political resistance helps to reinforce a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression as the fundamental normative principle of the American polity. Citizenship is one fulcrum by which Douglass seeks to transform the normative foundation of the American polity, and thereby its boundaries of political inclusion.

II. Citizenship as Enacted Commitment

In a crucial passage in *Bondage*, Douglass argues that the hypocrisy of slaveholders justifies a right of rebellion for slaves:

The slaveholder, kind or cruel, is a slaveholder still— the every hour violator of the just and inalienable rights of man; and he is, therefore every hour silently whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves.\(^5\)

In this passage, Douglass asserts directly that, insofar as slaveholders affirm the principles of the American polity, they assert the right of their slaves to revolt. In this section, I argue that the right of slaves to rebel stems, for Douglass, from their standing as American citizens. For Douglass, enslaved and free Black people in the US are American citizens because they enact a

commitment to resistance tyranny and oppression. A commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, Douglass thinks, is a founding principle of the American polity, which advocates of emancipatory politics can draw on in reforging a more just polity.

An immediate worry for this interpretation is that the right of rebellion Douglass asserts here isn’t obviously a claim on the American polity. One might say that Douglass is gesturing to a reversionary right to forcefully break from a polity that fails to promote, and indeed radically harms, one’s interests. (The right is ‘reversionary’ because, on a Lockean framework, we’d think of its invocation as a reversion to a state of nature.) Such a right wouldn’t make a claim on the American polity, because its enactment would circumvent the political institutions of the US.

Against this interpretation, note that Douglass emphasizes that slaveholders’ hypocrisy justifies slaves’ right of rebellion. Douglass’s emphasis on the hypocrisy of slaveholders in this passage is of a piece with his general emphasis in the period on the hypocrisy of white America, as we see for instance in the Fifth of July speech:

I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.  

In decrying the hypocrisy of slaveholders, and white Americans generally, Douglass directs his audience’s attention to the fact that the actions of slaveholders are inconsistent with the fundamental political principles they espouse. But Douglass would not need to point to an

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6 Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 195.
inconsistency between the practices and principles of white Americans in order to justify a right to break from the polity. The plain fact that slavery and white supremacy are wrong—and severely harm enslaved and free Black people in the US—would suffice to justify a right to break with the polity, regardless of whether racist practices are consistent with the fundamental principles of the American polity. If the polity were rotten to the core, that would simply be all the more reason to break with it.

Instead, Douglass’s reference to slaves’ right of rebellion captures a political power slaves have as members of the American polity: the fundamental principles of the American polity empower slaves to rebel against the tyranny and oppression to which they are subjected. The fundamental principles of the polity renders rebellion by slaves a form of participation in American politics. The right to rebellion (i.e., to resist tyranny and oppression), on this reading, is a political power that slaves have a rightful claim to exercise just as citizens have a rightful claim to participate in the selection of their representatives in government. If slaves are empowered to participate in American politics by exercising a right of rebellion, then slaves possess political standing in the American polity. In other words, Douglass is claiming that enslaved Black people are already American citizens, because they possess a political right of rebellion.

The claim that slaves are already American citizens might seem puzzling, since slaves are systematically deprived of legal recognition as citizens. In one sense of the term operative in Douglass’s time, to be a citizen was simply to possess the “elective franchise” (right to vote). This conception of citizenship exemplifies what Kymlicka and Norman call “citizenship-as-

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7 Although Douglass is focused in this passage on the right of rebellion for enslaved Black people in the US, I think that he can offer a similar justification for free Black people’s right of rebellion, in virtue of their subjection to white supremacist forms of tyranny and oppression.

8 Webster, American Dictionary of the English Language; Foner, The Second Founding, 7.
legal-status,” on which citizenship consists in the possession of rights.⁹ On this conception of citizenship, when one is deprived of legal recognition of the rights of the citizen, one is deprived of citizenship itself. Slaves are deprived of all plausible rights of the citizen. In particular, slaves in the antebellum US plainly do not possess a legal right to rebellion. Douglass clearly cannot mean that enslaved Black people in the US already possess citizenship qua legal status.

Instead, Douglass is invoking a conception of citizenship as desirable activity, in Kymlicka and Norman’s terminology, which is “a function of one’s participation in [a] political community.”¹⁰ Citizenship-constituting activity is desirable, on such conceptions, not for the individual alone, but for the community in which the individual is embedded through such activity. What is desirable for the community, in this sense, is reflected in the fundamental principles of the community.¹¹

The kind of activity that constitutes citizenship, on this account, depends on what the fundamental principles of a particular political community are. This might seem to fatally constrain the emancipatory potential of the account. It is undoubtedly conceivable that the fundamental principles of a polity—especially one with deeply-ingrained structures of oppression—might limit what counts as citizenship-constituting activity in ways that exclude those who are subject to oppression.¹²

The solution to this worry rests on the plausible assumption that the fundamental principles

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¹⁰ Kymlicka and Norman, 353.

¹¹ This is not to say that citizenship-constituting activity is necessarily, or typically, undesirable for individuals. In the background here is a commitment to a version of the Aristotelian claim that individuals flourish as members of communities, so that the flourish of the community typically contributes to the flourishing of the individual.

¹² For example, principles that value deliberation might limit citizenship-constituting activity to participation in long debates in an exclusive forum, thereby constraining full membership to an elite subset of the polity.
of a polity depend on what its members do. On the one hand, this assumption implies that if the members of a polity act in unjust and oppressive ways, their patterns of action can indeed calcify into exclusionary principles. But on the other hand, this assumption also implies that the foundation of a polity can be transformed in a more just, inclusive direction, by altering the patterns of action in which members of a polity engage. If the fundamental principles of a polity are dynamic and contestable, then even a polity which has maimed itself with oppressive practices that have calcified into exclusionary principles still possesses the potential to be transformed into a just, inclusive community.

Douglass deploys this line of reasoning in casting the history of America as a narrative of decline in his antebellum political thought.\(^{13}\) The oppressive practices of slavery and white supremacy threaten to calcify into irreparably exclusionary principles. But the threat these oppressive practices pose is a threat to dislodge emancipatory principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence that Douglass takes as “the ringbolt to the chain of [the] nation’s destiny,” in that “[t]he principles contained in that instrument are saving principles.”\(^ {14}\) Through the Declaration, the founders “pronounce[d] the measures of government unjust, unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not be quietly submitted to.”\(^ {15}\) In so doing, they express a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. But the Declaration does not only express a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression; it enacts such a commitment, through its resolution that “these united colonies are, and of right, ought to be free and independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved.” The founders, on

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14 Douglass, *Frederick Douglass*, 191.
15 Douglass, 190.
Douglass’s reading of the Declaration, forge the polity through action that builds in a
commitment to resist tyranny and oppression as a founding principle.\textsuperscript{16}

The founders constitute themselves as American citizens, on this picture with the same
actions through which they forge the polity. Through acts of resistance like the Declaration, the
founders enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression which, at the same time, they
institute as a fundamental principle of the polity. But in instituting a commitment to resist
tyranny and oppression as a fundamental principle of the polity, the founders determine what
activity constitutes individuals as citizens of the polity. This citizenship-constituting activity is
political activity that enacts a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. This is precisely the
kind of activity in which the founders are engaged in forging the polity, thereby constituting
themselves as citizens. This is one way in which we can understand the dually descriptive and
normative language (“is, and ought to be”) in the resolution that Douglass focuses on in his Fifth
of July speech: in the same act, the founders lay the normative basis for citizenship and
constitute themselves as citizens.\textsuperscript{17}

In the rights of rebellion passage, Douglass indicates that slaves’ right of rebellion stems
from threats to “the just and inalienable rights of man,” recalling the language of the Declaration
of Independence. For Douglass, Gooding-Williams observes, through resistance slaves “aspired
to keep faith with the work of the founders… which was to establish a republic that respected

\textsuperscript{16} This reading of the Declaration indulges in mythology, as it overemphasizes the role the founders in
penning a single document. A more accurate interpretation would account for the various forms of political activity
Americans across the colonies engaged in which culminated in the Declaration. Such an interpretation is simply
more grist for Douglass’s mill, however, because it suggests that the kinds of political action that qualify as
citizenship-constituting are even more capacious, and thus more accessible to enslaved and free Black people
resisting oppression.

\textsuperscript{17} Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” \textit{New Political Science} 7, no. 1 (June 1, 1986): 7–15. B.
‘the just and inalienable rights of man.’”\(^{18}\) Thus, in framing slaves’ right of rebellion as stemming from the rightful demand for a republic that respects the just and inalienable rights of persons, Douglass suggests that those engaged in antislavery resistance are engaged in the same political project as the American founders. Gooding-Williams observes that “Douglass presents the nation’s black sons, men the July 5 speech describes as not sharing the ‘inheritance of … liberty’ bequeathed by the fathers, as imitating those heroes and acting to refound the nation.”\(^{19}\) Through antislavery resistance, enslaved and free Black people in the US imitate the founders’ resistance against tyranny and oppression. But the founders, through their resistance, made themselves citizens by enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression that at the same time forged a polity with such a commitment as its fundamental principle. So in imitating the founders through resistance, enslaved and free Black people in the US make themselves citizens by enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression that at the same time reforges the polity with such a commitment as its fundamental principle.

**III. Political Resistance**

According to Douglass, American citizenship consists in the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. To this point, we have a clear example of the enactment of this commitment: the American founders’ declaration of independence (through the document of the same name). Douglass must think that slaves also enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, because he holds that slaves are empowered to rebel against slaveholders as American citizens. But we haven’t yet fully spelled out what sorts of actions qualify as enactments of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. It seems clear that the actions that


\(^{19}\) Gooding-Williams, 194.
enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression are (at least paradigmatically) acts of resistance, since the commitment which must be borne out in action is a commitment to resist.

I argue in this section, however, that resistance per se is not a sufficient condition for enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression in a way that constitutes the agent as a citizen. Call resistance that enacts a citizen-constituting commitment to resist tyranny and oppression political resistance. The view I am rejecting in this section is that resistance is intrinsically political. If resistance is not intrinsically political, then we must look to the contextual character of acts of resistance in order to explain what makes some (indeed, many) acts of resistance political.

A necessary condition of the political is that it expresses a commitment beyond our immediate circumstances. The political is frequently characterized as involving, for instance, a commitment to something ‘bigger than oneself,’ a concern for the well-being of others, or the adequate (e.g., just, orderly, free, etc.) organization of a community. Each of these specific characteristics can be contested. For instance, a political liberal might reject a concern for the well-being of others as characteristic of the political as such, to the extent that it invokes a comprehensive understanding of what well-being consists in. But each of these specific characteristics invokes a consideration wider than one’s individual, immediate circumstances. This commonality suggests, I think, that a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances is a generic characteristic of the political.²⁰

This generic characteristic of the political is reflected in the commitment constitutive of

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²⁰ I do not claim that a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances is a sufficient condition of the political, because this would seem too capacious. A concern with the well-being of one’s soul after death expresses a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances (i.e., a commitment to the well-being of one’s soul), but I think we would be hard-pressed to understand this as in itself a political commitment (although we could imagine it as a concern figuring into a plausibly political commitment).
American citizenship on Douglass’s view: the commitment to resist tyranny and oppression is general, in the sense that it calls for resistance wherever tyranny or oppression arises in the polity. It is not a commitment to simply resist this or that circumstance, which happens to be tyrannical or oppressive; it is a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression as such.

But not all acts of resistance express a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances. Imagine that the mayor of my city issues an unlawful curfew order. Caught out after curfew, I can resist arrest without taking any attitude toward the lawful status of the order; in resisting arrest, I might just desire to get home and away from immediate danger. In this case, my resistance expresses only a (important!) commitment concerning my immediate circumstances. If resisting arrest qualifies as resistance— and I think that it should, on pain of begging the question about the character of resistance here-- then resistance is not intrinsically political.

Contrast the resisting curfew arrest case with Douglass’s discussion of appeals by slaves to slaveholders when threatened with punishment. Douglass observes that slaves who appeal to slaveholders when threatened with violent punishment by overseers incur “a fearful hazard,” as the slave is likely to suffer a more severe punishment for attempting to override the authority of the overseer. But Douglass’s does not claim that slaves are necessarily mistaken in appealing to slaveholders in this way:

When a slave has nerve enough to [appeal], and boldly approaches his master, with a well-founded complaint against an overseer, though he may be repulsed, and may even have that of which he complains be repeated at the time, and, though he may be beaten by his master, as well as by the overseer, for his temerity, in the end the policy of complaining is, generally, vindicated by the relaxed rigor of the overseer’s treatment. The latter becomes more careful, and less disposed to use the lash upon such slaves
thereafter. It is with this final result in view, rather than with any expectation of immediate good, that the outraged slaved is induced to meet his master with a complaint.21

Slaves’ appeals to slaveholders, Douglass observes, are often directed at altering the future behavior of overseers: through these appeals, slaves aim to restrain overseers’ use of violence in the future, without necessarily expecting ‘immediate good’ (i.e., avoiding a particular, immediate act of violent punishment). Moreover, it’s plausible to think that these appeals aim at restraining overseers’ general behavior on the plantation, to the extent that one’s slave’s appeal threatens the potential for other slaves to appeal as well.22 Douglass’s description of appeal is part of what we can call his plantation politics—i.e., his picture of political antislavery resistance by slaves.23 The political character of such resistance is marked by its orientation beyond the resistor’s immediate circumstances.24

One might object that this characterization of the political is at odds with familiar emancipatory principles like feminist mantra that “the personal is political,”25 or Audre Lorde’s assertion that “self-care is an act of political warfare.” It might appear that this picture of political resistance as necessarily (or paradigmatically) involving a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances smuggles in a traditional distinction between public and private

21 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 56.
22 Of course, one foreseeable limit of this strategy is that it might lead overseers to target slaves who are less likely to appeal to the slaveholder; but this limit on the efficacy of appeal doesn’t undermine its political character.
24 To be clear, my claim is not that a political action cannot express a concern with, or commitment to, one’s immediate circumstances—political acts do not have to be acts of self-sacrifice. Rather, the claim is that an action cannot qualify as political without expressing a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances. Douglass’s discussion of slaves’ appeals to slaveholders in Bondage illustrates that a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances is an element of his picture of plantation politics.
25 http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html
spheres that those engaged in emancipatory politics have good reasons to reject.

I am not, however, contesting critiques of the public/private distinction, or the claim that acts of care, for oneself or others, are political. Rather, I am contesting the claim that acts of resistance in the so-called ‘private’/‘domestic’ sphere, or warfare through care for oneself or others, are political simply in virtue of their status as resistance. If acts of resistance in the ‘domestic’ sphere are political, or if acts of self-care are acts of political warfare— as I think Hanisch, Lorde, and other feminist theorists have given us good reason to think— but resistance itself is not intrinsically political, then we should look to the rich contextual character of such acts of resistance in order to explain their political character. I argue in the following sections that Douglass, through his analysis of antislavery resistance, has a compelling account of the contextual features of such resistance that renders it political, and thereby as action that enacts a citizenship-constituting commitment to resist tyranny and oppression.

IV. Enacted Commitments and Emancipatory Social Bonds

In this section, I argue that antislavery resistance is political, on Douglass’s view, when such resistance cultivates bonds of love, trust, loyalty, solidarity, and non-paternalism— which I call emancipatory social bonds— among those engaged in such resistance. This account of what makes resistance political renders many day-to-day acts of antislavery resistance political, enabling Douglass to maintain that enslaved and free Black people in the US are already American citizens.

In January 1835, Douglass arrives as the plantation of William Freeland, to whom Douglass’s master, Thomas Auld, had hired him out. Not long after he arrives, Douglass begins organizing a Sabbath school, through which he intends “to impart the little knowledge of letters
which I possessed, to my brother slaves.”

From two initial students, John and Henry Harris, “the contagion spread” to “twenty or thirty young men, who enrolled themselves, gladly, in my Sabbath school, and were willing to meet me regularly, under the trees or elsewhere, for the purpose of learning to read.”

Douglass observes that the group as a whole was “impressed with the necessity of keeping the matter as private as possible,” because a previous Sabbath school Douglass had help organize at St. Michael’s had been attacked and shut down by slaveholders. The need for covertness is a persistent feature in Douglass’s account of antislavery resistance. In 1836 Douglass organizes a runaway plot with core members of the second Sabbath school, John and Henry Harris, Sandy Jenkins, Charles Roberts, and Henry Bailey. Douglass remarks that he “hated the secrecy” with which the member conducted their plotting, “but where slaver is powerful, and liberty is weak, the latter is driven to concealment or to destruction.” Organizing in secret, Douglass observes that their “meetings must have resembled, on a small scale, the meetings of revolutionary conspirators, in their primary condition. We were plotting against our (so called) lawful rulers; with this difference— that we sought our own good, and not the harm of our enemies.”

Here Douglass gestures to the political character of the runaway plot: the plotters are committed to something beyond their immediate circumstances— Douglass means that “we [the plotters] sought our own good” not in terms of immediate benefit, but it terms of the potential for the conspirators to achieve freedom down the road through the plot. The conspiracy driving the

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27 Douglass, 162.
28 Douglass, 162.
29 Douglass, 171.
30 Douglass, 171.
runaway plot is an expression of a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances.\textsuperscript{31, 32}

The claim that the second Sabbath school and runaway plot are examples of antislavery resistance is reinforced by the fact that the ‘rights of rebellion’ passage we examined in section II is bookended by these two episodes. The right of rebellion passage tacitly maintains that enslaved and free Black people are already American citizens, as it is in virtue of this fact that they are empowered to participate in American politics through rebellion. Through the placement of this passage, Douglass is suggesting that his audience should acknowledge that enslaved and free Black people in the US are already American citizens on account of episodes of conspiratorial resistance like the second Sabbath school.

Moreover, the placement of the rights of rebellion passage points to what makes acts of conspiratorial resistance political for Douglass. The rights of rebellion passage immediately follows a characterization of the social bonds forged among the school’s participants:

I never loved, esteemed, or confided in men, more than I did in these. They were true as steel, and no band of brothers could have been more loving. There were no mean

\textsuperscript{31} See also Gooding-Williams’ claim that “[i]n Douglass’s revolutionary imagination, the black sons and white sons must conspire together to refound, reconstruct, and reconstitute the American nation.” \textit{In the Shadow of Du Bois}, 197.

\textsuperscript{32} We should acknowledge that there is a gendered dimension to Douglass’s picture of emancipatory political agency. The band which talks, plots, and eventually acts in antislavery resistance is after all one of brothers. Gendered political claims do crop up with some frequency in Douglass’s political thought, however. See, for instance, Douglass’s 1855 lecture for the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, “The Anti-Slavery Movement” in \textit{Douglass, Frederick Douglass}, 323–24.

Gooding-Williams notes that it isn’t obvious these gendered commitments are part of the substantive architecture of Douglass’s political thought (\textit{In the Shadow of Du Bois}, 318 fn 125). For a demonstration of this point, which draws on the “restorative care” relationships among Douglass and the other participants in the runaway plot, see Ange-Marie Hancock Alfano, “Black Masculinity Achieves Nothing without Restorative Care: An Intersectional Rearticulation of Frederick Douglass,” in \textit{A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass}, ed. Neil Roberts (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 236-51. Indeed, on the interpretation I offer in this paper, Douglass’s account of political resistance as consisting in the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds compliments feminist critiques of the standard public/private distinction, since such social bonds can, and are, cultivated through resistance in the traditional private sphere. Nevertheless, the issue requires a full treatment in its own right, and so is beyond my scope in this paper.
advantages taken of each other, as is sometimes the case where slaves are situated as we were; no tattling; no giving each other bad names to Mr. Freeland; and no elevating one at the expense of the other. We never undertook to do any thing, of any importance, which was likely to affect each other, without mutual consultation. We were generally a unit, and moved together. Thoughts and sentiments were exchanged between us, which might well be called very incendiary, by oppressors and tyrants.\textsuperscript{33}

On Douglass’s characterization of the social bonds forged through the Sabbath school, its participants ‘moved together as a unit’ because they stood in relations of love, trust, loyalty, solidarity, and non-paternalism to one another. In moving together as a unit in this way, the participants come to express a commitment to oppose tyranny and oppression, which they enact through the purpose of the Sabbath school itself, teaching one another to read. This passage suggests that the participants in the Sabbath school enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression through their cultivation of emancipatory social bonds.

One might see the role of emancipatory social bonds in rendering resistance political as purely instrumental. In order to engage in conspiracy against overseers, slaveholders, and the general system of white supremacy, the participants in the Sabbath school must be able to rely on one another to effectively conduct their covert activity. Social bonds of love, trust, loyalty, solidarity, and non-paternalism facilitate effective covert coordination. So emancipatory social bonds enable agents engaged in resistance to conspire with one another, and some other feature of conspiracy constitutes such resistance as political.

But in fact, I claim, the political character of antislavery resistance in episodes like the the second Sabbath school and runaway plot is realized in the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds.

\textsuperscript{33} Douglass, \textit{My Bondage and My Freedom}, 165.
bonds. In order for resistance to be political, it must enact a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances. But the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds is itself the enactment of a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances: for instance, to trust and be loyal to others is a commitment that necessarily outstrips one’s own immediate interests. Moreover, under conditions of oppression, to cultivate emancipatory social bonds is itself to resist tyranny and oppression—slavery seeks to dissolve social bonds among slaves, as Douglass makes clear in his discussion of familial bonds in the early chapters of *Bondage*.

So, in antebellum America, the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds among those subjected to slavery and white supremacy constitutes not only a generic political commitment, but a commitment to what Douglass takes as the fundamental principle of the American polity. The cultivation of emancipatory social bonds can thus explain directly why much of antislavery resistance renders enslaved and free Black people in the US American citizens.

One might object that there are other viable candidates for the enactment of a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances, which would explain why the second Sabbath school and runaway plot are acts of political resistance. For example, one might observe that the second Sabbath school aims to teach slaves to read, and claim that it is the character of this aim that renders the resistance political. After all, attempting to teach someone else to read enacts a commitment beyond one’s immediate circumstances (take a trivial case: contrast teaching another to read with reading a particular item for her). Moreover, slavery aims to prevent slaves from learning to read, teaching another to read expresses a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. Thus, we can explain what makes the second Sabbath school an act of political resistance in terms of its particular aim, rather than in terms of the social bonds cultivate through,

34 Douglass, 36, 43.
or for the sake of, the pursuit of this aim.

The objector claims that what makes the second Sabbath school political resistance is the character of the particular aim of the school— to teach slaves to read. I claim that the political character of the second Sabbath school consists in its cultivation of emancipatory social bonds through the pursuit of this aim. In essence, the dispute between my view and the objector’s view concerns the means-end relationship between the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds and the aims of particular acts of resistance. The objector claims that the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds is instrumental to the realization of the aims of an act of resistance, and the political character of that resistance is realized in the aim pursued. I claim that the aim of a particular act of resistance is instrumental to the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds, and it is in the cultivation of these bonds that the political character of resistance is realized.

I think there are two advantages to the view I ascribe to Douglass. First, the claim that the political character of antislavery resistance consists in the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds seems to give a more consistent explanation of why such resistance is political than appeal to the character of the aims of particulars, or varieties, of resistance. Given the diversity of aims we find in different sorts of antislavery resistance, one might worry that an account of what makes such resistance political in terms of the character of these aims will be too unwieldy. We have a clear explanation of how the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds enacts a citizenship-commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. One might worry that an account of political antislavery resistance given in terms of the particular aims of particular acts of resistance will become so complex as to appear ad hoc.

Second, my account ensures that resistance will continue to qualify as political even as the particular aims of those participating in resistance change. The transition from the second
Sabbath school to the runaway plot is illustrative here: central participants in the second Sabbath school decide to redirect their efforts towards an attempt to escape from slavery. Plainly, for Douglass, if the participants in the second Sabbath school are engaged in political resistance, they are still engaged in political resistance when organizing the runaway plot. (This is clear, for instance, in Douglass’s description of the runaway plotters as ‘revolutionary conspirators.’)

While it is not impossible to explain the continuous political character of their resistance in terms of the particular aims pursued— it just so happens that the two particular aims selected qualify as political— it is easier to ensure the continuous political character of their resistance in terms of a feature that remains constant over the changes in the particular aims they pursue. The cultivation emancipatory social bonds is a constant across this development of their aims. Thus, we have good reason to hold that the cultivation of emancipatory social bonds constitutes the political character of citizenship-constituting resistance.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that, for Douglass, one constitutes herself as an American citizen through resistance that cultivates emancipatory social bonds. Such resistance enacts a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, which Douglass takes (and seeks to reinforce) as the fundamental normative principle of the American polity. Antislavery resistance performed by enslaved and free Black people in the US— plantation politics— is a paradigmatic instance of political resistance. Douglass’s conception of citizenship is crafted specifically to defend the political standing of those who are politically disempowered under oppressive regimes.

At the same time, Douglass situates his conception of citizenship in the American revolutionary tradition, arguing that enslaved and free Black people in the US constitute themselves as citizens in the same way as the American founders did through the Declaration of
Independence and political activity surrounding the document. Through this conception of citizenship, Douglass aims to radically reforge an extant polity, which he believes possesses normative principles deployable for emancipatory ends.

One crucial aspect of Douglass’s conception of citizenship is that it is constituted by a political actor’s own activity (undertaken in concert with others); citizenship on this conception is seized rather than conferred. Douglass’s conception of citizenship coheres with versions of emancipatory politics that maintain that resistance against oppression must be driven by the political agency of those who are subject to oppression. Citizenship, on this picture, is a status within the reach of any political actor who resides within a polity among others striving for emancipation.