

Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, And Formation Of The Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851

Margot Minardi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Minardi, Margot (2017) "Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, And Formation Of The Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.26

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss3/21>

Review

Minardi, Margot

Summer 2017

Anadolu-Okur, Nilgün *Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Formation of the Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851*. University of Tennessee Press, \$60.00 ISBN 9781621902362

Abolitionism's Allure

Nilgün Anadolu-Okur, a scholar of African American literature at Temple University, examines a decade-long partnership between two leading lights of the American abolitionist movement, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, culminating in their falling-out in 1851. She argues that the rhetoric of these two men shaped American literary and political discourses in the nineteenth century. *Dismantling Slavery* describes how the friendship between Douglass and Garrison gave focus and inspiration to antislavery activism and helped connect abolitionists to other protest movements and cultural developments of the day. Anadolu-Okur offers thoughtful analysis of abolitionist discourse, such as her engaging readings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's antislavery poetry and her intriguing glimpses at the Africanist elements in Frederick Douglass's writings and speeches. The body of the book draws on a wide array of primary and secondary source material in order to sketch significant events and people in abolitionist history. In addition to describing the formation and dissolution of the alliance between Douglass and Garrison, the five chapters of the book give particular attention to the abolitionist movement's discourses on democracy, its relationship to women's rights activism, and its connections to nineteenth-century protest literature.

The book makes ambitious claims for the utmost importance of the alliance between Garrison and Douglass in the 1840s. Anadolu-Okur contends that, after the friendship between the two men soured in the early 1850s, "the main focus of the [abolitionist] movement was dissolved.... Stakeholders crowded abolition halls and scrambled back and forth without a sense of direction. Abolition's golden vessel had lost its rudder in a violent storm" (p. 256). Abolitionists

certainly faced their share of challenges in the 1850s, including the enforcement of the nefarious Fugitive Slave Act and the violence of Bleeding Kansas. But far from being rudderless in this crucial decade, the period was marked by the strengthening of both political abolitionism and the movement's revolutionary strand (developments in which Douglass himself played no small part). Readers interested in understanding these developments, as well as their roots in the earlier history of antislavery activism, would do well to consult Manisha Sinha's magisterial *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (2016).

Anadolu-Okur extends her claim about Douglass and Garrison's absolute centrality to contend that without this pair, the movement would have lacked "an intense, and multidimensional outlook" and would have been unable to "direct the public's attention to constitutional rights which lay at the heart of American democratic principles including equality, liberty, freedom of speech, right to dissent and protest, advocacy for women's rights, disenfranchisement, and suffrage" (p. 257). There's no question that an American abolitionism absent Douglass and Garrison would have looked very different from the abolitionist movement in which they played such vital roles. But in stressing this duo's singularity, Anadolu-Okur skirts the richness and complexity of a movement that extended well beyond these two luminaries. Indeed, her argument is undermined by the impressive volume of evidence she presents in the body of the book. The chapter on "Prose, Politics, and Poetry" is organized into very loosely linked capsule biographies of fifteen other abolitionists or fellow travelers, ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to Theodore Dwight Weld. The chapters on democracy and women's rights discuss still other prominent nineteenth-century reformers. Garrison and Douglass often seem tangential in Anadolu-Okur's lengthy discussions of other reformers. Taken together, then, these chapters do not provide the evidence and reasoning to substantiate the counterfactual claim that abolitionism would have been a lackluster and narrow discourse without Garrison and Douglass.

In her introduction, Anadolu-Okur describes her project's evolution: "whereas I began with the prospect of focusing on works before mine as analytical springboards, I eventually sought to identify and reconstruct a separate pathway to contextualize the literary streams that filled the well of abolitionist discourse" (p. 22). This decision to bypass a thorough review of the relevant historiography was a missed opportunity, as the recent scholarship on abolitionism is deep and rich. Anadolu-Okur's bibliography is extensive, but it does not include the most relevant and up-to-date works that might have

significantly enhanced her project. Given her focus on what she variably calls a “friendship” or “alliance” between Garrison and Douglass, she would have done well to consult literary scholar John Stauffer’s thoughtful study of a foursome of abolitionist friends (including Douglass), *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (2004). The chapter on “Discourse on Slavery and Democracy” would have benefited from W. Caleb McDaniel’s careful work on Garrison’s political thought in *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (2013). These and other recent works on abolitionism could have developed *Dismantling Slavery*’s discussion of the crucial political tension in the Douglass-Garrison relationship (their eventual disagreement over the relationship between the Constitution and slavery); the secondary literature could also have enhanced the book’s treatment of the racial politics of the two men’s relationship.

The University of Tennessee Press ought to have subjected the manuscript to more rigorous editing. The book is rife with typographical errors, and the citations are sometimes spotty. There are also a number of misleading statements regarding historical fact and interpretation. Anadolu-Okur’s claim that in the mid-nineteenth century, “white women were not allowed to attend school or even develop too much interest in secular education” drastically overstates the restrictions on female education at the time (p. 60). She asserts that only after the circulation of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) did slaveholders “vex over the possibility of a slave revolution in the making”—a statement that would have surprised many an anxious eighteenth-century slaveowner. The book dates the Missouri Compromise to 1850 instead of 1820 (p. 123); it places the utopian Northampton Association (of Massachusetts) in New York State (p. 145). Certainly the occasional mistake is bound to escape even the most hawk-eyed editor, but cumulatively these misstatements mar the book’s credibility.

Anadolu-Okur calls Douglass’s and Garrison’s legacy “transcendent” (p. 22). Many who have read the powerful words of these activist-rhetoricians will surely agree. *Dismantling Slavery* provides an eclectic introduction to these two figures and their world. In order to get a fuller picture of abolitionism in all its complexity, readers would benefit from putting this book alongside other studies of abolitionism. Nonetheless, there is much to appreciate here in Anadolu-Okur’s sense of abolitionism’s ongoing allure.

Margot Minardi is Associate Professor of History and Humanities at Reed College and the author of Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts.