“Frederick Douglass, Transnationalism, and the Arab World”

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In the 1960s and 1970s, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845) emerged as one of the founding texts of African American literary studies, and since the 1980s has been generally recognized as one of the most canonical works of nineteen-century American literature. The remarkably rapid appreciation of this work within a range of national spaces has overshadowed the way that this book, along with Douglass’s other diverse writings, is part of a much more heterogeneous tradition, one which, Douglass himself realized, engages with a wider transnational world in which, as he wrote in his famous July 5, 1852, speech, “Space is comparatively annihilated.” This paper will explore Douglass’s transnational view of the world, in particular the connections to the Middle East and North Africa, which is evident in his earliest published writings. In his 1845 Narrative, more than forty years before his 1887 voyage to Egypt (where he looks familiarly at “a small army of Arabs”), Douglass recounts how he learned to read with Caleb Bingham’s The Columbian Orator (1797), which features David Everett’s play “Slaves in Barbary,” an exemplar of the popular genre of North African captivity narratives. In addition, in My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Douglass describes his mother’s facial features as Egyptian. Furthermore, William S. McFeely’s 1991 biography indicates that Douglass’s family name at birth—Bailey—has no known origins among white Americans to whom he was connected and may be a variation of “Belali.” Such conjecture, as unsubstantiated as it may be, allows for understanding Douglass as part of a literary tradition that includes what Ronald A. T. Judy calls “New World Arabic slave narratives” with Islamic (and Arabic language) roots that predate the Middle Passage of transatlantic slave ships. My paper will combine research on Douglass with the rich body of recent scholarly interest in African Arabic narratives to consider how a reconsideration of Douglass—from his youthful reading of Everett’s play to his late accounts of his time in Egypt—might reframe as transnational those traditions of which he has become a representative figure.