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How I Wish I'd Taught Frederick Douglass: An Examination of the Books and Conversations We Have in Classrooms

While pursuing my master's degree in creative writing, I volunteered with a program where I designed and taught creative writing curricula in schools throughout the Washington DC suburbs. One of my most memorable experiences was teaching at a public charter school in Fairfax County named after Thomas Jefferson. "TJ," as it was known, had an outstanding reputation, consistently ranked as one of the top high schools in the country by places like *Newsweek* and the *US News and World Report*. When I entered the school for the first time, walking through the enormous columnal rotunda (modeled after Monticello and the University of Virginia), I was made to feel as if TJ was a utopia where everyone was smart, where being nerdy was cool, where students were devoted to the hours of homework they had each night, where the population was diverse, and many of its students were first generation within the American school system.

After the tour, I sat down with the teacher whose classroom I would visit once a week for four weeks to talk about the personal essay curriculum I had designed. I talked about my learning goals, how I felt that a visiting lecturer had an opportunity to bring in new, modern texts in high school classrooms that usually devoted themselves to classics like *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Romeo and Juliet*. As I was pursuing a degree in creative nonfiction writing, I felt passionately about teaching students what can currently be done with the essay, how it is a term that is so much more varied than the academic essays they have come to dread, how the modern publishing sphere is utilizing CNF and how students can learn

how to give their own stories voice. The teacher approved the plan, but she also handed me a text that needed to be incorporated into the lesson: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Being asked to teach Douglass's *Narrative* in a course on the modern personal essay (which I envisioned as essays published in the last decade or so), I was being asked to do what most schools in America do—teach certain texts by black authors that check the right boxes during Black History Month. Instead of devoting a proper lesson plan to Douglass and his work, he was being folded into a different lesson plan, one where it seemed he didn't totally belong. In doing this, students would be given a simplified understanding of Douglass and his writing that will never become more complex. Much in the same way, we teach young children digestible narratives of other revolutionary figures such as Rosa Parks, Helen Keller, or Martin Luther King Jr. that prevent many from ever learning that Rosa Parks was more than a sweet old lady on a bus, the extent of Helen Keller's trailblazing feminist and disability activism, or that MLK held views on racial equality that are still considered radical by today's (white) standards. When I was handed Douglass's *Narrative* to teach, I had only a week to reread the text and incorporate it into my lesson plan, and as someone who doesn't specialize in the era, I felt I lacked the resources I needed to properly teach the text.

I wish I could have taught my students about his later works, specifically, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, so we could compare it to *Narrative*. As *My Bondage and My Freedom* is essentially an expanded and revised version of Douglass's *Narrative*, it utilizes more details, more moments set in scene, more characterization, more "thinking on the page," than Douglass's *Narrative*. Had I known of the existence of *My Bondage and My Freedom* at the time, I could have used it as a comparative text to teach students about the importance of revision, and how the aforementioned techniques make a piece of writing more engaging. A lesson like this could simultaneously teach students about an important historical black figure, the problems within a white-centric publishing industry (and how it persists to this day), as well as a concrete example of revision (and how important revision is in creating a successful piece of writing).

The climate I arrived into was complicated. At the time, TJ was building towards a reckoning with its inability to offer an equitable education that reflected demographics of the counties it drew students from. While TJ has a substantial non-white population (71% Asian, 19% white, 2% black, 2.5% Hispanic; 5.5% other), it failed to admit black and Hispanic students in numbers that are reflective of the surrounding community. Fairfax County, for instance, where TJ resides, has a population that is 10% black and 15% Hispanic. Prince William County, another county from which students are eligible to attend TJ, is 20% black and 22% Hispanic. In 2020, TJ decided to do away with their “race-blind” admissions test as the Fairfax County School System was “frustrated by a decades-long failure to attract Black and Hispanic students.” This decision caused a big uproar in the TJ community. Years before they are eligible to attend, well-to-do families (many whom are non-white) spend thousands on tutoring and test-prep specifically geared towards the TJ entrance exam. Amidst the outrage to change TJ’s admission standards, seventeen families sued TJ, saying it eliminated opportunities for their children, as, under the previous admission standards, they would have gained admission to TJ. Then, TJ was hit with a second lawsuit centered around the claim that in overhauling its admissions, TJ was attempting to decrease the number of Asian Americans students at the school as data shows that the new admissions process would decrease the Asian American population at the school by 31%. This change, the plaintiffs argue, directly correlates with the increased anti-Asian hate and violence we have witnessed since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Lawsuits are ongoing, but the changes have been implemented, successfully altering the school’s demographics. For the 2020-2021 school year, the number of black students has increased to 7.09% and the number of Hispanic students has increased to 11.27%. Meanwhile, the white student population has increased to 22.36% and the Asian student has maintained its majority, but decreased significantly to 54.3%.

TJ’s struggle to offer an equitable education is indicative of larger issues of education inequity that are inescapable in our country. Even its pride in its rotunda, and its celebration of Thomas Jefferson, a

slaveholder who had a relationship (and six children) with an enslaved person named Sally Hemings (starting when she was 14 years old), represents the way it has followed the same white narrative of the rest of the country, celebrating the achievements of “great white men” while failing to hold them accountable for their problematic actions and morals. Meanwhile, figures such as MLK or Douglass are not revered for their complexities and are celebrated only in distinct windows of time—usually in February.

Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* is one of the most iconic texts taught during Black History Month and Douglass is considered a key figure in the abolition movement. And yet, it wouldn’t be until several years after I moved away from Washington DC to pursue a PhD and took a period course with a focus on African American writing (taught by John Mac Kilgore at Florida State University), that I was introduced to Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* and began to gain a more complete understanding of Douglass, as well as the way his *Narrative* fit into the whitewashed way we teach black history as a nation. This, of course, doesn’t mean that there aren’t ample scholars who analyze and praise the merits of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, but rather, a critique, again, of widespread whitewashing in history and English classes.

Through *Narrative*, audiences are introduced to the harsh realities of slavery, but they are also introduced to a charismatic and smart narrator (Douglass), who demonstrated to white audiences at the time that a formerly enslaved person was not inferior, and rather, could be smart and dignified, and essentially, human. While this text became a seminal text for white audiences and for the white-led abolitionist movement, shortly after his *Narrative* was published, Douglass became dissatisfied with the work, feeling that the writing in it was too heavily controlled by the editorial eye of white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison. I wish I had this discussion with my students.

White abolitionists such as Garrison subscribed to a power structure that put them at the top—searching for, curating, and publishing voices that furthered their cause. Often, formerly enslaved people

such as Douglass were propped up to share their story, utilized to further the abolitionist movement, but not valued equally as writers and thinkers. This control is evident in many ways, for instance, in the way that Garrison often spelled Douglass's last name as "Douglas" as he thought the double s's that Douglass selected were too showy, or the way that John A. Collins, the general agent of the Massachusetts anti-slavery society, once told Douglass, prior to a speech, to simply give the audience the facts, and no more as "we [the white abolitionists] will take care of the philosophy." This obviously racist statement assumes that white abolitionists can understand slavery and its evils better than black activist such as Douglass, who actually experienced slavery.

Eventually, Douglass broke free from Garrison. One of his first acts in doing so was the creation of *The North Star*, a black-run antislavery newspaper where he was free to write, to edit, to think, and to discover/publish voices and ideas he found powerful. He also began revising his life story, republishing it ten years later as *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In Douglass's eyes, this was a do-over of his *Narrative*, a space where he could both share his story and philosophize as to why slavery was immoral, worsening the lives of both white and black people. Yet, while we continue to celebrate Douglass, we do so through his *Narrative*, which was curated by a white voice. At TJ, I taught juniors, an age that is more than equipped to handle the more complex and longer *My Bondage and My Freedom*, yet, how often is this book a part of our curriculums or our lives?

When introducing creative nonfiction to students, one of the first ideas I focus on is the importance of storytelling techniques—that essentially in creative nonfiction, a writer uses tools and techniques that are more commonly associated with fiction writing (narrative arc, character development, imagery, etc.) or poetry (lyricism, imagery, precision of language) to craft stories that are true. In utilizing Douglass's *Narrative* to teach this lesson, the students at TJ and I were able to locate sections of Douglass's narrative that had these elements. We also looked at moments where Douglass "showed" something instead of

“telling” —another introductory level concept in teaching CNF writing. We looked at a scene where Douglass is disgusted by the way that an overseer (Mr. Gore) brutally murders an enslaved man (Demby), and the way Douglass shows Gore’s cruelty, the scene being utilized to convince an audience of the barbarity of overseers and slavery as an institution:

Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at this standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he stood. (39)

In this scene, the attention to Demby’s mangled body is striking, and the audience is left with the image of bloodied water—an image that sticks in the brain, that invokes devastation and injustice.

I wish I could have paired this description, however, with the description of this same scene in *My Bondage and My Freedom* to allow an opportunity to analyze how providing more details, creating a more elaborate scene, allows Douglass to better “show” the audience a truth, or allow this truth to resonate with them. In his expanded version of the scene, Douglass gives more insight into how overseers hold an incredible amount of power over enslaved people and there are virtually no checks to their power as there is never justice or accountability when an enslaved person is murdered, while simultaneously providing an expanded character description of Gore—“The very presence of this man Gore was painful, and I shunned him as I would have shunned a rattlesnake. His piercing, black eyes, and sharp, shrill voice ever awakened sensations of terror among the slaves (90)” —as well as an expanded description of Demby, which is lacking in the *Narrative*. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Demby is described as “a powerful young man, full of animal spirits, and, so far as I know, he was among the most valuable of Col. Lloyd’s slaves” (91). While this description is short, it still humanizes Demby more than he is humanized in Douglass’s *Narrative*. In addition, this description also shows that even an enslaved person that is considered “valuable” is still not safe from the tyranny of plantation life.

Through expansion, Douglass changes the scope of this entire moment, teaching the reader to look more closely at Demby, to think of him while he was alive, rather than to look only at the white characters, or Demby's mangled body. With a simple character description, or with choosing which details to incorporate, Douglass is able to construct a new argument, or a new meaning in the text. Further, by including more details of the characters' physical appearance, such as Gore's "piercing black eyes" and "sharp shrill voice," he is able to make them become more three-dimensional on the page.

I wish I had taught my students how Douglass teaches readers in *My Bondage and My Freedom* the importance of creating a sense of place, which helps concretize a story. In his *Narrative*, Douglass provides a very pared down description of the plantation that he was raised on: "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland." Yet, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass creates a striking image of Tuckahoe that is imbued with anger:

In Talbot county, Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton, the county town of that country, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever.

The name of this singularly unpromising and truly famine stricken district is Tuckahoe, a name well known to all Marylanders, black and white. It was given to this section of country, probably, at the first, merely in derision; or it may possibly have been applied to it, as I have heard, because some of its earlier inhabitants had been guilty of the petty meanness of stealing a hoe—or taking a hoe that did not belong to him. Eastern Shore men usually pronounce the word took, as tuck; Took-a-hoe, therefore, is, in Maryland parlance, Tuckahoe. (21)

While the *Narrative* offers a one-sentence description of Tuckahoe, I have only included a portion of the description that Douglass offers in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. This description sets the scene for Douglass's story, creating a sense of place, which is so important in creative nonfiction writing. Additionally, in this scene, Douglass braids history and culture into his personal story. Teaching these texts, or these sections, comparatively would not only teach students about using these strategies in their own writing, it would also teach them more about Douglass and how he wanted to be free to make editorial and artistic decisions in his writing and how the restrictions placed upon him reflected the racist ideologies that were embedded in the abolitionist movement in the 1800s. This would be an important lesson to teach at any school in America, even a school like TJ where students are given an exceptional education, yet, there are still blind spots in this education, and the school is not built upon anti-racist pedagogy.

I missed the opportunity to continue the conversation about the whiteness of the publishing industry. We could have talked about needing to have conversations about race, how they happen all the time, how they are happening at TJ. We could have talked about texts that address these types of conversations, like Claudia Rankine's *Just Us*, which braids poetry, with lyric essay, and cultural criticism to analyze conversations (or a void of conversations) in American concerning white supremacy—who has (and who avoids) these conversations, why they are so difficult to have, what patterns they follow. In this text, Rankine engages in conversations about diversity at schools, even analyzing instances where a call for increased diversity has led to a decrease in Asian students, as well as Thomas Jefferson's racism in texts such as *Notes of the State of Virginia*, and how myths and misconceptions continue to perpetuate around historical figures and moments because of our inability to have conversations. We could ask ourselves: How many of us had misconceptions about Douglass or abolitionists before studying Douglass? Why do these misconceptions exist? How do we combat them? In addition, we could analyze the style of Rankine's

work. How does she construct her own narrative, so to speak? Why does she choose a hybrid or genre-bending form?

In truth, I don't know if I would have been permitted to have these types of conversations with students. Visiting lecturers don't have too much agency or control in a classroom. Would I be discouraged from having these types of conversations, to not bring up uncomfortable conversations, to not exacerbate a fraught situation? This is generally the norm in classrooms, and is becoming even more common, more explicit. I live in Florida where a bill that "shields white people from feeling discomfort" in a classroom—not only banning conversations about race, gender, or sexuality, but also encouraging students to record these conversations if they happen, and to sue teachers that engage in this discourse—was just approved by the Senate and House. Similar bills are being introduced in other states in the South and Midwest. We have a history of banning books that make us uncomfortable. Now we are banning conversations as well.

Instead, we should be devoting more resources to having a greater grasp of history. We should have a better grasp on historical figures like Douglass. When we combat misconceptions, we gain a better understanding about ourselves and the world we live in by reading diverse narratives. This does not mean that we simply read a certain number of texts by black authors, it means that we come to understand the diversity in someone like Douglass's work and the type of authorial presence he hoped to curate. We also learn from the people in conversation with him, both during his time and people who continue to be in conversation with him.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass teaches us a great deal. He teaches us about slavery and abolitionists and censorship, he teaches us about the importance of curating a version of ourselves on the page that is representative of who we are. This is an indelible lesson, a jumping off point in teaching students about telling their stories through the art of the personal essay.

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