NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
AN AMERICAN SLAVE
Written by Himself

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY PETER J. GOMES
AND A NEW AFTERWORD
BY GREGORY STEPHENS

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AFTERWORD by Gregory Stephens

To Write My Own Pass

What survives of Frederick Douglass in the public memory? As with any ''culture hero,'' what we remember is very selective. The iconic images that dominate, and the catch phrases that circulate, may tell us more about our own myopia than about the lives of those we memorialize. Once a year North Americans get clips of Martin Luther King Jr.'s ''I Have a Dream'' speech, but not his later critique of the United States as ''the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.'' Malcolm X in his early fistshaking, ''white man is the devil'' mode endures; the later Malcolm, the internationalist coalition builder, is too complex for those who still think in black and white. The global media have enshrined Bob Marley as the prophet of ''One Love,'' mostly to the exclusion of more radical messages in songs like ''War'' or ''Revolution.''[1]

With Frederick Douglass, we get the *Narrative*—the heroic slave rising up to fight off Covey, the slave breaker. But we get little or nothing about Douglass as feminist, as an international celebrity, as a Republican Party functionary and diplomat in the Caribbean, or as a lifelong, determined opponent of the ''diseased imagination'' of racial categories.

In *The Next American Nation*, Michael Lind calls Douglass ''the greatest American,'' who deserves a monument as grand as those of our slave-holding forefathers.[2] I agree with this assessment. He is a great American precisely because he was part of social movements that transcended the barriers of ''race,'' religion, gender and nation. More

than any other public figure in the nineteenth century, he challenged us to expand our definitions of self, community, and nation.

Douglass was a ''real revolutionary,'' and memorializing Douglass in his entirety would have revolutionary implications. But seeing Douglass whole is difficult, in part because he didn't die young like so many iconic figures. It's also made difficult by our deep-rooted investment in racial mythologies. Douglass has too often been ''ghettoized'' within a black box, despite the fact that the whole of his life, and the social context in which he lived, is impossible to assimilate into racialized thinking.

Douglass' challenge to the various forms of ''mental slavery'' in his day, and ours, cannot be understood simply by reading the *Narrative* as a self-enclosed text. We have to first glimpse the reasons why he wrote the *Narrative*. And we must understand Douglass in relation to the preexisting international networks that made his rise to fame possible, and that in turn became a cornerstone of Douglass' own sense of identity and community for the rest of his long, productive life (1818–95).[3]

Douglass wrote the *Narrative* to prove he had been a slave. He had been hired in 1841, barely three years out of slavery, as an agent for the William Lloyd Garrison branch of the abolitionists. Garrison had been calling for an immediate end to slavery, and publishing his newspaper, the *Liberator*, since 1831. But it was only when the Garrisonians were able to contract former slaves such as Douglass to advertise their cause that the abolitionists were able to enter the mainstream of American public opinion.

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass confessed that he had been ''something of a hero worshipper.'' He imagined Garrison as a modern-day Moses, ''raised up by God, to deliver his modern Israel from bondage.''[4]

But it was Douglass who had the entire package—the good looks, the soaring rhetorical skill, and above all, the experience in slavery, to lead abolitionists toward the promised land. Between 1842 and 1844, many experienced cognitive dissonance on watching a young man so recently

removed from slavery speaking with golden oratory. ''Better to have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not,'' his handlers warned him. '' 'Tis not best that you seem too learned.''

But as Douglass recalled, ''I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. . . . I was growing, and needed room.''[5]

So the predictions came true. Suspicions of Douglass' authenticity became widespread. ''People doubted if I had ever been a slave.'' So he composed the *Narrative* to set the record straight. He had to flee for his life, traveling throughout Great Britain and Ireland from late 1845 until

1847. Douglass was lionized; his speeches were widely distributed; his *Narrative* became a bestseller in several languages; people wrote his slogans on walls and singers set his words to music. Children followed him around, and many women reacted to him as a sex symbol. The experience of life without blatant race prejudice, and the awareness of the international reach of his support network, changed Douglass profoundly. ‘‘I seem to have undergone a transformation,’’ he wrote Garrison. ‘‘I live a new life.’’[6]

Arguably the biggest change of all was the zeal with which European women became his strongest supporters. It was mostly European women who raised the funds to buy Douglass’ freedom, and to send him back to the U.S. with a printing press. It was a British woman, Julia Griffiths, who dropped everything to rush to Rochester, New York, in 1848 in order to become the de facto coeditor of Douglass’ fledgling newspaper, the *North Star*; his personal manager; and as Douglass later remembered, ‘‘my constant companion on the underground railroad.’’[7]

Douglass’ wife, Ana, whom he had married immediately after the escape from Maryland in 1838, mostly raised Frederick’s children alone while he was off fighting for freedom. But she was illiterate, and treated Frederick as an ‘‘honored guest’’ on his returns home. It was European women who primarily played the role of confidante and comrade in arms. After Griffith returned to England in 1855 (hounded by rumors spread by Garrisonians jealous of Douglass’ growing fame and independence), the German journalist Ottilie Assing became Douglass’ soul mate

for the next three decades, as Maria Diedrich has shown in *Love Across Color Lines*.[8]

And in 1884, a year after Ana passed away, Douglass married Helen Pitts, the feminist daughter of parents who had been his supporters during the Rochester years. ‘‘False friends’’ on both sides of the racial divide decried the marriage. But Douglass was acting in accordance with a long history of affectionate and respectful relationships with European and Euro-American women, which went all the way back to Sophia Auld, who had started the young Frederick on the path to literacy when he was a boy in Baltimore.

Aside from being an antislavery crusader, Douglass was also a self-described ‘‘women’s rights man.’’ He played an important role at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, where the course was set on the long trudge toward women’s suffrage. He was a close friend and collaborator of many nineteenth-century feminists, such as Susan B. Anthony and Lydia Maria Child. The masthead of his newspaper, the *North Star*, proclaimed, ‘‘Right is of no sex, truth is of no color.’’[9]

Abolitionism was an international, multiethnic movement, and Douglass was its superstar. His speeches were reprinted in the pages of major newspapers of his day, and he had supporters across Europe. From this stage, he articulated a vision of a more inclusive America. Taylor Branch refers to the 1950s and 1960s as ‘‘the King years,’’ because Martin Luther King Jr. most clearly gave voice to a more inclusive vision of political community. In like manner, I believe we can speak of the mid-nineteenth century as ‘‘the Douglass years.’’[10]

Republicans seeking an inclusive public face sometimes claim Abraham Lincoln as a founding father. But let’s give credit where credit is due: to Frederick Douglass, who was a Republican loyalist for more than forty years, back when Republicans were known as the antislavery party. It was Douglass who helped convince Lincoln that the Civil War was about destroying slavery, at a time when the president was still dreaming about shipping African-Americans back to the motherland. It is Douglass, rather than Lincoln, who represents the Republican Party’s most

inclusive legacy. Douglass understood that what Cuban patriot José Marti called *‘‘nuestra America*’’—our America—must be transracial and hemispheric.[11] Douglass put his words into practice, marrying an Anglo feminist (Helen Pitts) and serving as a diplomat in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

In his ‘‘Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,’’ given at the unveiling of the Freedman’s Monument in Washington in 1876, Douglass honored Lincoln as ‘‘the first martyr president of the U.S.’’ But he rejected the Great Emancipator Myth. ‘‘Lincoln was not either our man or our

model,'' Douglass said. ''He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. You, my fellow citizens, are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his stepchildren.''[12]

If we were to look for a model of a leader who was devoted to the welfare of all peoples, inclusively, it would be hard to come up with a better example than Frederick Douglass. That is why I call Douglass an ''integrative ancestor,'' who can be claimed by people of many backgrounds.[13] His words and example are still relevant for the political, educational and cultural problems that bedevil us. He built international alliances by employing a definition of morality (equal rights and justice) that transcended mere national interest. And Douglass is a model of how to build coalitions based on something other than the language of race.

As an iconic figure, Douglass consistently challenged people's racial stereotypes. In 1886, he told an audience: ''[A man painting me insisted I show] my full face, for that is Ethiopian. Take my side face, said I, for that is Caucasian. But should you try my quarter face you would find it Indian. I don't know that any race can claim me, but being identified with slaves as I am, I think I know the meaning of the inquiry.''[14] Douglass claimed his own experience as a ground from which to Articulate both a critique of American racialism, and a more attractive alternative: what Nelson Mandela has called nonracial democracy.

These dimensions of his life—feminist, diplomat, and antiracialist—are at best only hinted at in the *Narrative*.

But they are often foreshadowed. In this first autobiography, he mentions briefly a religious revival in 1833 at which he hoped his master would get religion, and thus free his slaves—a hope inspired by the fact that such conversions had already been witnessed by Douglass during those dark years. (Those were the years of the Second Great Awakening, an echo of the First Great Awakening in the prerevolutionary eighteenth century, when religious revivals were often multiracial affairs, and many revivalists openly and with some success agitated against slavery).[15]

But in *My Bondage*, written ten years after the *Narrative*, Douglass seems to reimagine many events of his youth as having prepared him for life as a mixed-race leader of a multinational, multiethnic movement. Recalling his keen interest at this religious event, at which a limited amount of interracial communion was possible,

he wrote: ‘‘I ventured to take my stand at a sort of halfway place between the blacks and whites.’’[16] This statement symbolizes the halfway place he would take during his entire public career. In principle he was a freedom fighter for people of African descent, but in practice he was a full-time interracial mediator.

When we reread the *Narrative* with knowledge of Douglass’ later career, richer meanings emerge. Recalling his struggle to become literate, Douglass observed: ‘‘I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass.’’ Beyond the literal level, this can be seen a prefiguration of Douglass’ use of literacy to carve out new personal, social, and political space. Douglass was forever ‘‘writing his own pass’’ into domains from which he, and the people he represented, had been previously excluded. Douglass’ understanding of literacy also speaks to a broader human truth. If we don’t know how to write our own scripts, then others will write them for us, often in ways that restrict our freedom. So Douglass’ passage into physical freedom also looks ahead to the forms of literacy that will be needed to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery.

Douglass’ writing in the *Narrative* sometimes takes on multiple shades of meaning that reach across genera-

tions, and even centuries. ‘‘I have found to make a contented slave it is necessary to darken his mental and moral vision and annihilate the power to reason,’’ Douglass wrote in 1845. Reading this in the twenty-first century, I find that it still describes the mental slavery of many ‘‘contented consumers’’ of our own day, whose ‘‘power to reason’’ and ‘‘moral vision’’ seems to have been annihilated.

Teaching Douglass’ *Narrative* to Jamaican students, I have been struck by the extreme myopia that a merely racial concept of identity and community can still produce. This myopia is an impediment in various ways, whether it is being able to interpret a text addressed to a mixed audience, or being able to imagine the crossethnic, cross-class, or international alliances that are a prerequisite to social or political reform. For many of my students, it has been very difficult to understand why people who are not of African descent would take a strong interest in a narrative with a ‘‘black man’’ at its center.

This tells me again how important it is to read Douglass in relation to his social and historical context. Many slave narratives were bestsellers, while often the books we now think of as classics, by contemporaries of Douglass such as Melville or Hawthorne, went virtually unread. The reason for the popularity (and commercial success) of the slave narratives comes across in many of the early newspaper reviews of Douglass' *Narrative*. These reviewers often describe the power of Douglass' story in relation to the classics. ''This is **our** *Odyssey*,'' they said.[17] This voice by the former slave revealed to us, for the first time, the universal dimensions of the American search for freedom. It was both a tragedy and a heroic narrative, and it occurred in an interracial context.

Many Americans as well as Europeans were curious about the lives and culture of African-Americans. That these books were bestsellers indicates that many were proud of or interested in the march toward a more inclusive freedom. And the way in which critics framed these narratives indicates that the voice of Douglass, in partic-

ular, was so powerful that his contemporaries could only make sense of it by comparing it to other mythical narratives from the Bible, or the ancient Greeks.

Hence many Europeans and Americans learned to see the humanity of African peoples through Douglass. He placed Afro-American peoples at the moral center of the challenge of enacting true democracy or true Christianity. That is, we could not be true democrats or true Christians without recognizing our kinship with enslaved Africans (or more broadly, other people who had been excluded from our sense of community and citizenship). Recognizing a form of kinship, or common humanity, meant recognizing our moral obligations, like the Good Samaritan, to provide assistance. This insistence on placing our relations with our ''other'' as the truest test of our humanity, and the practice of our political and religious ideals, was and is a revolutionary message. It has only partially been understood, much less put into practice. But the slave narratives helped produce a sea change in American history. And without a doubt, Douglass' *Narrative* in particular took its rightful place as a cornerstone of an emergent American literary tradition.

It certainly did not hurt that Douglass looked the part of an interracial mediator. Douglass' public persona was that of a defender of the rights of Afro-Americans. But his private identity was multiethnic. And increasingly, he was willing to make that private identity the touchstone of his public life. In dialogue with a mixed public, Douglass came to embrace the belief that his ''mission in life'' was to ''break down the walls between the races.''[18] He believed that his multiethnic identity and community were not abnormal, but rather represented the future of America.

Douglass understood that *racialism*, ''the insidious confusion of race with culture that haunts this society,'' in the words of Ralph Ellison, was the root cause of racism, and is a problem perpetuated by people of all colors. Douglass called racialism ''diseased imagination.'' If it could not be cured, it could be contained by presenting a more attractive alternative.[19]

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If I were to attempt to follow the trajectory of Douglass' passage through the nineteenth century into the present, I would come to this conclusion: that this alternative to warring over superficial differences cannot be accomplished by appeals to a discredited model of the melting pot, in which we forget (or outgrow) our differences and become monochrome citizens who all speak the same language, worship the Creator by the same name, and salute the flag with the same blind allegiance to the current political authority.

''Inclusion, not assimilation,'' W.E.B. Du Bois once said, in what I take to be his forwarding of the essence of Douglass' legacy.[20] Inclusion without racialism. That may be a hard message to learn for people of several stripes, who have made careers out of appealing to racial prejudice, racial guilt, or racial victimization. Inclusion *into what* is a subject that must continue to be debated, and reimagined. ''The politics of recognition,'' of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and yes, gender diversity, is a permanent part of twenty-firstcentury political culture. Trying to achieve unity by mobilizing people around fear of an external or internal enemy can only be a successful short-term strategy, at best. A long-term strategy will require political leaders

who govern by listening—‘‘*mandar obedeciendo*,’’ as the Zapatistas say.[21] And if they listen, most people will profess that we are capable of holding allegiances to more than one nation, language, or ethnic group. That being fully human nowadays means being multicentered, for most of us. For opening up space to think about identity and community in those more inclusive terms, we are forever indebted to Frederick Douglass. Give thanks.

—Gregory Stephens

Endnotes

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16 half-way place, *My Bondage and My Freedom,* 194.

17 David Cheesebrough, *Frederick Douglass: Oratory From Slavery* (Greenwood Press, 1998).

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