



TEACHING ABOUT SLAVERY

By Michael Johnson

Slavery lasted for 250 years just in the territory of the United States, and for half a millennium in the Atlantic world. Teaching about it is therefore a huge assignment. I will begin with a wide-angle, panoramic lens, and then develop five important contexts that may be familiar to us but not to our students, and then look at one specific slave experience, that of Frederick Douglass.

First, the U.S. is a very big place. The entire UK could fit comfortably within the state of Nevada. The states of the confederacy that fought in the Civil War were huge, roughly the size of Western Europe.

The second point is understanding the gigantic expansion of slavery during the 19th century. Slavery had a long history in the 17th-18th centuries, but in the 19th century that expansion continued at a greater rate than ever before. Approximately 10 million enslaved Africans were brought to what is now the New World, of whom only about 400,000 came to the territory that is now the U.S. Most of them came in the 18th century, and virtually all of them before 1807, when the African slave trade closed. In 1790, the first U.S. census year, slavery was a national institution. It existed in every state except for Maine, Vermont, and Massachusetts. Of course, it was concentrated south of Pennsylvania, where 94 percent of all slaves lived in 1790. Slaves comprised about one fifth of Americans in that year. Slavery was national, and about 700,000 slaves lived in the U.S.

In 1860, 4 million slaves lived in America, for a growth rate of about 5-1/2 fold over seventy years. Four million people is the number that then lived in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, and Kansas. There were as many slaves as there were people living in that gigantic region of the U.S. Furthermore, those slaves were far more uniformly American born than the white population of the U.S. and of those five states. For example, in Wisconsin, 36 percent of the population was foreign born; in Illinois, 18 percent. Slaves in the U.S. were among the most American of Americans, if one uses birth as a metric for who's American.

As a result, by 1860, the U.S. was the world's largest and most powerful slave-holding republic. But during this same period, slavery had shrunk. It was no longer national, but had been concentrated in the slave states. Slavery had been eliminated legally north of the Ohio and Missouri Compromise line. The U.S. by the 1830s or so was the only slave-holding society in the world to have such a crisp line separating the slavery states from the free states. That line turned out to be very important in the history of slavery in the U.S.

But slavery had expanded in that it moved west, like the rest of America. In 1790, all the slaves in the U.S. lived in states with an Atlantic coastline. By 1860 more than half lived in states that did not have an Atlantic coastline, owing to the enormous development of cotton, the massive movement of slaves and the domestic slave trade from the Atlantic coast inland. Nonetheless, slavery was not a stagnant or collapsing institution. It was booming and vigorous, despite the way it has been portrayed by many people at the time and some subsequent scholars.

A third basic context is racial slavery. All slaves were people of African descent (although there were a small number of Native American slaves, mostly in the 17th-18th centuries). Furthermore, almost all-but not all-people of African descent were slaves. In the U.S. by 1860, roughly half a million African Americans were free. Most of them lived in the slave states; a slightly smaller number lived in the free states. The capital of free black people in 1860 was Baltimore, in the slave states; the secondary capital was Philadelphia.

This racial character of slavery meant that the societies in the free states and slave states were very different racially. In Wisconsin in 1860, for example, there were two black people for every 998 white people. In Illinois, there were five black people for every 995 white people. In the northern U.S. as a whole, there were about ten African Americans for every 990 whites. The free states taken as a whole were almost lily white. Thus, politically and in many other ways, most white people in the north had never encountered a black person, and certainly not a slave. Nothing could be more different than the South. In the slave states, there was a profoundly biracial society. Slaves comprised a little over a third of the total population, but in

some regions they were a majority and in some, they were as much as 90 percent.

And yet slaves were a minority of the total region, living in a white majority society. Where slaves and whites lived in a society in which they encountered each other frequently, they were not strangers to each other, which is very much unlike the northern states in this era. That has a couple of corollaries for teaching the history of slavery. One is that the histories of whites and blacks were inextricably intertwined. We can't understand one without looking at the other. Second is the fundamental problem of historical knowledge. We know more about masters than slaves. Masters wrote something, and some of their writings were preserved. In all, by 1860, there were 385,000 slave owners in the U.S. out of a total white population of the slave states of about 7 million. Much of what we know about slaves comes from masters, who were a tiny minority in this profoundly biracial society. Masters were enormously outnumbered by slaves--4 million slaves, 385,000 masters. Since much of what we know about slaves comes through the eyes of masters, we must try to read through those eyes to learn about people with whom masters had a very problematic relationship to say the least.

True, a few slaves could write, and a few documents written by slaves do exist. The most accessible sources by slaves were autobiographies, narratives of a life in slavery, most of them published before the Civil War by the anti-slavery movement or after the Civil War by people who had been slaves. There are about one hundred of them, full of evidence of the biracial quality of the history of slavery.

The capstone of this racial context of slavery is whites' belief in black inferiority. Today, most Americans believe in racial equality even though the daily practice of racial equality leaves an enormous amount to be desired. In the 19th century, the belief in black inferiority was virtually universal among whites, with the exception of abolitionists and some anti-slavery people. Most whites in both the South and the North had a bone-deep conviction about black inferiority that justified slavery in their eyes. Even whites who recognized some evils about slavery tended to shrug them off as necessary evils, given the fundamental inferiority of black people. White racial prejudice served as a kind of Kevlar vest, an ideological protection that shielded slavery from assault, both political and moral.

Turning to the legal context of slavery, state laws defined slavery as hereditary, lifetime servitude. Enslavement came from their mother. If the mother was a slave, then her children were slaves. This legal definition, which dates from the 17th century, was true regardless of the race of the parents. The children of a slave mother and a free white father were slaves; the children of a slave father and a free white mother were free. Of course, there were more of the former than the latter. This legal definition of slavery at the state level obviously had a racial cast, with certain legal specifics attached to it. People of any discernible African descent in the slave states were presumed legally to be a slave unless they had legal proof of their freedom. The best way to prove that you weren't was to prove that you were born to a free mother. Or, you could prove that you'd been manumitted by your owner, or that you'd been purchased and freed, often by self purchase. But the legal presumption is a racial presumption: appearance equals slavery unless proven otherwise.

Slaves were by law virtual nonentities, legally incompetent. This had numerous ramifications. They could not legally marry, own property, or testify in courts against whites. That leads to another legal context that is in some ways the most fundamental, which is that the law defined slaves as property. Masters had nearly unrestricted authority over their slaves—"nearly" because in the late antebellum period, the slave states individually had ultimately outlawed the killing of a slave. But this law was only sporadically enforced and typically was ignored. Legally, in the practice of daily life, masters had near absolute power over their slaves.

Economically, slaves were very valuable property. In 1860, the dollar value of slaves was around \$4 billion, or \$12 trillion in today's dollars. The richest and most influential people in this biracial society were slaveholders. While most slaveholders owned only a very few slaves, slaves were typically their most valuable asset.

Furthermore, the average wealth of the slave states as a whole was the highest in the U.S. The average wealth of adult, native-born white men was nearly twice as high in the slave states compared to the free states. Slavery worked exceedingly well to redistribute wealth from the poorest people, slaves, to the richest, masters. It worked because of the corrosive authority of masters, symbolized in all the antislavery literature and accurately so by the whip. That corrosion made possible this wealth accumulation, which was the greatest in antebellum America. The legal context thus leads to this profoundly important economic context.

A final context is the moral context. Like the rest of us, our students believe that slavery was wrong, immoral and evil. But this conviction has only been present in American historiography relatively recently, roughly in the last fifty years or so. Before the Civil War, most white people, North and South, considered slavery basically ordinary--troublesome perhaps, but not highly problematic morally. They were insulated by their own racial prejudice. Obviously anti-slavery sentiment grew greatly among white northerners during the antebellum years, but it never commanded a politically effective majority until the middle of the Civil War.

In the presidential election of 1860, Lincoln ran as a moderate on slavery in the Republican Party. He pledged not to interfere with slavery where it existed, and didn't think he had the power to do so. In his first inaugural, he promised to support a constitutional amendment that would guarantee that the federal government would not interfere with slavery in the states. He had a very moderate political position on slavery, even if his own moral views were quite different. Lincoln got about 1.8 million popular votes; his opponents, whose views ranged from championing slavery to being morally indifferent, received 2.8

million votes. For most Americans slavery was a thing that something should perhaps be done about, but they did not see it as a problem that had to be solved.

In order for us to understand slavery, we have to temporarily suspend our own moral certainty about the evils of slavery. We need to try to measure slaves and masters against their own moral standards and not simply against our own. We can attempt this by examining Frederick Douglass's Autobiography, looking at slavery through the eyes of a slave and studying his central argument. His autobiography is fascinating, compelling, and memorable, and most important, students love it. It's written in clear, forceful language that Douglass had polished on the platform of the anti-slavery movement for years.

Douglass was born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland in 1818. He was a slave for about eight years, and then was sent to Baltimore, where he learned to read and write, learned a skilled trade, and became a Christian. At about age 16, he was sent back to the eastern shore, back to the plantation, and eventually became an unruly and troublesome slave who was sent to a slave breaker, a man named Edward Covey. A highpoint of Douglass's autobiography is his breaking the slave breaker by basically fighting him to a standstill. But after in a sense breaking the slave breaker, Douglass returns to the fields of the plantation on the eastern shore and then eventually is sent back to Baltimore, from which he fled successfully in 1838.

Douglass doesn't have just one autobiography, he has three. His first was published in 1845. He had escaped slavery seven years earlier and become an abolitionist lecturer about four years earlier. But as he was going about on the lecture circuit and publishing ultimately this autobiography, he was taking a very large risk. In order to authenticate his account, he had to name names and give specific incidents and places. He had to make people recognizable to his audience. That made him subject to recapture and being sent back to slavery in Maryland under the federal Fugitive Slave Law.

Only three months after Douglass published his autobiography, he fled to England, where he could not legally be recaptured. He spent 18 months there working in the antislavery movement. While he was there, his British friends raised \$710 and bought his freedom from his master. So by December 1846, Douglass was 28 years old and finally legally free, no longer subject to re-enslavement under U.S. law. Now he could speak openly and freely about his slave experiences, and he did, on the antislavery lecture circuit. In 1855, he published *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which may be his best autobiography. Being free, he could speak openly, and he had had a long time to perfect his argument on the lecture circuit. Douglass's third autobiography, written after the Civil War and after he had become a stalwart in the Republican Party, had all the problems of an autobiography of a prominent politician—it's bloated and flawed.

In *My Bondage*, Douglass argued that nature makes all human beings equally free. The system of slavery, however, crushes that natural freedom. Slavery forces both slaves and masters to violate their natural impulses. Douglass highlights nature: "Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slave holders. Nothing but rigid training, long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other." Neither slaves nor masters were born with the character of slaves or masters; instead, they were made by "rigid training, long persisted in." A central theme of Douglass's narrative is how the system of slavery provided this destructive nurture, this rigid training. Slavery, he argues, educated slaves and masters to deny their natural freedom. In effect, Douglass's narrative is about the creation of what we might call a culture of slavery that destroyed the natural qualities of slaves and masters.

Douglass cites many examples of this miseducation for slaves and masters. Speaking of how slavery destroys the family for slaves, he writes, "Slavery obliterates from the mind and heart of the slave all just ideas of the family as an institution." Douglass doesn't know who his father was, but he wrote that "My father is shrouded in a mystery I've never been able to penetrate." His mother, a slave named Harriet, he barely knew. He was taken away from her as an infant and put with his grandmother. He expresses shame that when he was about eight years old and his mother died, "I received the tidings of her death with no strong emotions of sorrow for her, and with very little regret for myself on account of her loss."

Although Douglass had four sisters and an older brother, he says that they were such complete strangers to him, he could not even recognize them in a group of slave children. Douglass writes that for him, slavery so destroyed his family ties of affection and intimacy that "it left me without an intelligible beginning in the world."

Douglass explains how the twisted, destructive culture of slavery made him an orphan—isolated, alone in the world, an individual stripped of the most important human support and solidarity. In reality, Douglass did have a family. He says that he did not know when he was born--that's true, he did not know his real age—and that he did not know even whether he had any ancestors. That is not true. He was born in February 1818—historians have reconstructed this, not from his narrative but from going through local and county records. His name was Frederick Augustus Bailey. The Bailey name comes from his great-great-grandfather, who was owned by an ancestor of Fred Bailey's owner back in 1701 in Maryland. So there is a genealogy tree in Frederick Douglass's family, but he genuinely doesn't know it. His father was almost certainly his master, Aaron Anthony. Anthony, a white man, was born in 1767 in a family of illiterate, landless farmers on the eastern shore. By the time Douglass was born, Anthony had risen significantly in the world to be the overseer of the many plantations and slaves owned by one of the richest men in Maryland, three-time governor of the state, twice U.S. senator--Edward Lloyd. Lloyd had over 550 slaves. Anthony, coming from a poor family, obtained his first slave, Betsy Bailey, when he married. Bailey, Douglass's grandmother, had several daughters. Anthony systematically increased his slave force by having children with the Bailey's daughters. Harriet Bailey, Douglass's mother, was one of those daughters. By the time Anthony died in 1826, he owned 30 slaves, and he never purchased a single one.

Douglass was genuinely uncertain who his father was. We know this because late in his life, shortly before he died, he went back to Maryland and tried to find evidence. He arranged with the Lloyd family to come back to the plantation manor house to look at the family pictures of the male Lloyds to see if any of them look like him. We don't know what he concluded, but it's almost certainly true that it was not Lloyd, who was tied by family to Roger B. Taney, who delivered the Dred Scott decision, and was related by marriage to Francis Scott Key, author of our national anthem.

Douglass's feelings of estrangement from his siblings were real. Douglass never made any attempt to contact his siblings who were still in slavery in Maryland, never really made an overture to try to bring them out, and didn't really contact them until after the emancipation, suggesting a real distance between him and his family members, evidence that for him, the destructive character of slavery on the slave family was very real.

A second example of the destructive power of slavery, according to Douglass, has to do with "learning." Douglass argued that by nature, human beings learn from the time they are born and gradually become more and more educated and confident and morally responsible. Slavery, he said, stunts and nearly reverses this natural development. "To make a contented slave you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision and as far as possible to annihilate his power of reason." Ignorance, he wrote, is a high virtue in a human chattel, and as the master studied to keep the slave ignorant, the slave was cunning enough to make the master think he had succeeded. Even though slaves who were not ignorant had knowledge, slavery forced them unnaturally to repress their learning and to appear to be ignorant.

Douglass observes repeatedly that, tragically, slavery succeeded in making most slaves willfully ignorant. He speaks of the "stupid contentment of most slaves." On his plantation, he wrote, "I am persuaded that I could not have been dropped anywhere on the globe where I could reap less in the way of knowledge from my immediate associates." Douglass argues that slavery teaches slaves to suppress their human will to learn and to make themselves constructively in their world. "Make a man a slave and you rob him of moral responsibility." Freedom of choice is the essence of accountability. These harsh, unnatural lessons of slavery, Douglass argues, caused most plantation slaves to ask "oh, what's the use" every time they lifted a hoe.

Douglass himself eventually unlearned these destructive lessons of slavery. The central theme of his narrative is his own growth and learning, his own development of a robust moral personality, and his own distinctive diagnosis of the crumbling and crushing moral blight of the slave system. In this sense, his autobiography partakes of the development of the classic American story of the 19th century: the self-made man. Douglass portrays himself as a man who largely makes himself against the greatest odds being in this desert of ignorance. And yet, Douglass's own success shows that his indictment of the culture of other slaves may be too harsh. After all, he, a slave, managed to unlearn the lessons that he argued all slaves had to learn.

Douglass also makes the harder case of why slavery destroys the moral development of masters. His master "was not by nature worse than other men, the slaveholder as well as the slave is the victim of the slave system." Why should we shed any tears about the slaveholder as the victim? Because "reason is imprisoned here, and passions run wild." Passions undermine whites' families. Masters sexually abuse slave women, as his own master did, and certainly he knew that, although he did not know the master was his father. Slavery, he argued, gives to the pleasure of sin the additional attraction of profit. Further, masters indulge their passions not just sexually, but also in frenzies of whipping and outburst of violence that vented their rage and frustration rather than harnessing it by reason and directing it constructively toward positive ends.

For masters, probably the most scathing writings in *My Bondage* are about the way the religion of masters is destroyed by a system of slavery. "The religion of the South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, the justifier of the most appalling barbarity, and a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds and a secure shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest and most infernal abominations fester and flourish." Christianity, in his view, "supported, justified, promoted, the very worst features of slavery." Religion that should bring people together in affirmation of human brotherhood and love instead becomes, because of the slave system, a source of hatred and moral violence, of violent denial of human fraternity. "Religious slaveholders are the worst. I found them almost invariably the vilest, the meanest, and the basest of their class."

In sum, Douglass writes that slaveholders were not intrinsically evil; instead, the slave system educated them to be unnaturally despotic. Douglass wrote of his master, "Nature has made us friends, but slavery made us enemies." Douglass saw an opportunity for redemption. He claimed that slaveholders could become like other men. They could be restored to their natural human friendship with slaves if slavery were abolished. Slaveholders could be as humane as abolitionists, he prophesied, if they could "be brought up in a free state, surrounded by the restraints of a free society." By the phrase "the restraints of a free society," Douglass meant the law. Plantations were little nations with their own immoral law determined solely by the tyranny of masters. The law of a free society would be very different. In a free society, if slavery were abolished, masters would be forced by law to restrain their immoral tyranny. The moral force of the law would do the work. Douglass argued that only by the destruction of the slave system could the natural moral order be restored—by liberating slaves and governing masters with the restraints of a free society.

Of course, Douglass's indictment of the slave system is subject to many criticisms, chief among them that he was far too optimistic about the moral order of nature. Further, hindsight suggests that he seriously underestimated the longevity of the destructive moral and political culture of slavery for former slaves, former masters, and the nation as a whole. From Appomattox to the present, the destructive legacy of slavery tragically persists. Much progress, but much persistence in our own society. Still, Douglass offers an unsurpassed beginning point for teaching about slavery, for challenging students to think

about the causes and consequences of slavery, freedom, and moral accountability in the Civil War era and in our own time.

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