

Frederick Douglass and African American Uses of Communal Celebration and Truth-telling as Modes of Resisting Oppression and Creating Public Memory

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Lessons from the past can teach new things and become newly useful as society continually becomes new. In this way our past can inform our present.

Frederick Douglass's 1852 Fourth of July speech is a case in point. Unpacking the speech in the twenty-first century yields opportunities to learn about our country and ourselves in new and useful ways. Amongst other things, the speech is an example of the African American segment of the United States creating public memory. It also reveals two modes of resistance that the African American segment has utilized throughout a violent history of extreme oppression against what it is to be a member of, or even connected with, that group. Those two methods are celebration and truth-telling.

Both celebration and truth-telling are modes of resistance which have shaped how the African American population has passed on memory within the group and to the country as a whole. Without African American agency in this way, the image of this segment of ourselves as a country would historically be severely tainted where it existed, or nonexistent altogether.

That our history in the United States has changed and is changing and evolving away from the oppression of blackness, means that a larger segment of our society can access and benefit from studying the means of resisting oppression through studying the resistance methods utilized by African Americans as a historically oppressed segment of our society. This is important on the individual and societal level, as oppression in its myriad forms is a human ill to be resisted with skill and know-how wherever it's found.

In 1852, one of the most active anti-slavery organizations, the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society operating out of Rochester, New York, invited Frederick Douglass, who was at that time a well known and respected speaker on the abolitionist speaking circuit to give a Fourth of July speech at the town's Corinthian Hall that year.¹

Douglass accepted. He went to work on the speech, which he delivered intentionally on July 5 of that year. Julia Griffiths, the Society's secretary, visited the Douglasses at their home

¹ P. 173, Frederick Douglass by McFeely, William S. 1991

as Douglass worked on the speech, and she pronounced the work “excellent.”² The speech has since passed down in history as one of the most important speeches, not only of Douglass’s career, but of our collective national history in the struggle for freedom and justice.

The Powers of Celebration and Truth-Telling

Celebration is a key to a life better known and lived. The etymology of the word praise for example stems from the Latin *pretiare*, meaning to price, and value. When there is praise and celebration, there is a recognition of value, of worth. Price, value, and praise connect and mingle as they are experienced. In Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, the character Celie records in her diary a conversation about God between herself and Shug Avery:

But more than anything else God love admiration.
You saying God vain? I ast.
Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a
good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk
by the color purple in a field somewhere and
don't notice it.

Celebration is part of the circle of seeing, valuing, affirming, and utilizing, on a small and cosmic scale. What is known in value and worth can be celebrated, and celebrated not only by the few closely connected to the seen value, but by any and all who recognize that value and worth.

African American history has been intentionally suppressed and unseen for most of the country’s existence. It takes a minute to take hold of the idea in the mind, especially because at this point in our national history, the idea is widely, even if not universally, accepted. And like many things that are commonly understood, we may not give it much thought. If we take a moment to reflect that African American history has been suppressed and often erased, the question arises as to what then are the implications of this.

One implication is that “We” the people are incomplete in our own national understanding. We don’t know who “We” are. By suppressing and ignoring parts of ourselves, the country prevents itself from knowing and valuing not only those parts, but consequently valuing who and what we are in wholeness and in potential.

² Ibid. p. 172

As if the connection between celebration and the recognition of value were understood during the times in our country when our laws supported slavery and Jim Crow segregation, the forces that wished to keep African Americans separated from the national body stringently defined, controlled, or prohibited African American celebration. Doing so had a direct desired effect: it limited the value that could be seen in and placed on African American lives from within the African American experience, and from the country.

Taking a look at African American celebration is one way to tell the story of the quest for justice. Celebration is a cure which both comes from the ability to see value and produces the ability to see it. Stories of African American celebration highlight the perspective of working against oppression of the self, and the needs that come with that. If the self is socially denigrated, there is the need to retain or even gain a respect and love for self in the face of outward derogatory representations, there is the need to find and share positive accounts of the self, and the need to highlight the strength, courage, perseverance, vision and hope in facing the push back from outside sources against positive progress.

These needs are especially acute when the pushback against one's forward movement is not a one-off, but instead is a sanctioned position of the culture. What becomes tremendously challenging is when the positives gained by a group are seen as a challenge to the previous norms of the culture, which many in the culture may not want to see change. This has been true in the African American experience, and it is important to study what the responses to this have been from individual African Americans and from the broader African American population.

One of the responses to the cultural pushback against African American selfhood and progress has been truth-telling. One kind of truth-telling is the kind that promotes positive self-identity. African American celebratory resistance to oppression often features celebration combined with an educational component. The educational component reframes the narrative about African American individuals and the group, and supplants the narrative presented from hostile outside sources. By centering a narrative from an African American perspective, a perspective often ignored historically by the larger country, the celebration bolsters the group.

The African American body has been priced throughout much of American history. Celebration with truth-telling, in the face of an awful social reality, reframes value and worth and places it on the black body and black personhood by African Americans themselves. Instead of the black body existing as a valuable commodity to an economic system, celebration and truth-telling in this way directly connects to and takes back the value and worth of black personhood.

An additional kind of truth-telling that acknowledges the hostile larger context in which celebration is present is evident in Frederick Douglass's 1852 Fourth of July speech. The speech focuses on the celebration of the 76th anniversary of the country's birth since the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, and its founding ideals.

Douglass's speech's truth-telling also adds to our collective understanding of the power of celebration. Douglass answers his own question, a question he uses as the title of the speech, "*What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?*" July Fourth reveals to the oppressed slave Douglass says, "more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim."

"More than all other days," because the celebrations of liberty itself and of the national greatness in liberty's pursuit and attainment are false, in light of the treatment of the African American segment of the population. Or, if liberty and freedom are genuinely celebrated, then the ability to celebrate them in the midst of the country's legalization of slavery and the barbarity to the African American is itself a complete rejection of the personhood of African Americans, free or enslaved. Either way there is a barrier and a problem to the slave's and the free African American's ability to celebrate the Fourth of July in a slavery supporting country. The country's celebration in the context of slavery also reveals the depth of corruption that the nation had come to tolerate in itself. As Douglass states:

Your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are to him... a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of every day practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting, barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

It's in the face of this reality that African American celebratory resistance took place during the time of legal slavery. In order to understand the nature, strength, and power of African American resistance through celebration, we have to account for what the group was resisting and the conditions of the land. In this way the two modes of resistance, celebration and truth-telling intersect. Celebration is practiced directly in the light of, and as a challenge to the truth and ugliness of oppression.

So while African American celebration isn't the subject of Douglass's Fourth of July speech, it is there amongst the truth-telling. The speech draws out our consciousness to ask, what would prevent celebration of the nation's birthday? It offers the country a chance to respond. If we don't know the truth, good or ill, we can't learn from it. We can't learn from tracing the paths that led towards those truths or away from them.

Celebration and Truth-Telling Inform Frederick Douglass

Celebration was withheld or used as a weapon in young Frederick Douglass's life. And at least once celebration acted as a miracle that Douglass seems to have returned to again and again throughout his life.

Frederick Douglass Witnessed The Power of Celebration Withheld

Frederick Douglass does all he can to shatter the secrecy and expose the workings of the slave system in his autobiographies. One of the pieces of slavery's machinery used to hold in check the spirit of the slave was to keep the slave ignorant of when they were born. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it,"³ Douglass writes in his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, 1845. He elaborates to explain that:

By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit."⁴

In all three of his autobiographies he says that it was intentional that slaves were kept ignorant of their birthdays. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855 he writes, "I learned when I grew up, that my master — and this is the case with masters generally — allowed no questions to be put to him, by which a slave might learn his age. Such questions deemed evidence of impatience, and even of impudent curiosity."⁵ In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881 he writes, "Masters allowed no questions to be put to them by slaves concerning their ages. Such questions were regarded by the masters as evidence of an impudent curiosity."⁶

The fact that asking after their birth date was thought of as impertinent, suggests the masters believed the slave was asking for something that didn't belong to them. Purposely keeping the slave ignorant of their birthdate, while the white children knew theirs, indicates that

³ P. 18 The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, 1845

⁴ Ibid, P.22

⁵ P. 132 The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

⁶ P. 436 The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881

the information was valuable to the personhood of the slave, something of their person that could be marked or even celebrated. This was personal power denied by denying the potential of celebration or even acknowledgement of one's birth date.

The potential power of knowing, owning, and possibly celebrating one's birth can be seen in how far the slave system went to circumvent the slave obtaining that knowledge. The slave system worked to move a child along after birth and into adult slavehood in a way which insured the child and their biological families would not develop familial bonds, and that information concerning individual slaves would be lost to them. Throughout his autobiographies Douglass describes the slave system he was moved through as a child including: being separated from his mother who was sent to work far from her child after birth, his being placed for convenience with his grandmother, and then when very young, his being moved to the Lloyd plantation where his owner, Aaron Anthony resided, and where Douglass was to be looked after by an unrelated slave, who was harsh, until he was old enough to work.

Owners needed to have some idea of the slave's birthdate in order to move them along the system. Douglass pieces together the approximation of his birth year in 1825 when the wife of one of his masters mentions to him as he is leaving the Lloyd plantation for Baltimore, that he is eight or nine.⁷ In 1835, he heard his then master say he was about seventeen years old.⁸

In 1980 historian Dickson Preston published a ledger of slave ownership belonging to Frederick Douglass's owner Aaron Anthony. The ledger listed the birthdate in month and year only, of a slave named Frederick Augustus, having a mother named Harriott (sic).⁹ Douglass's mother is named Harriet Bailey, and Douglass was able to retain throughout his life the knowledge that she had named him Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.

Frederick Douglass Witnessed The Power of Celebration Used for Control

Celebration was not always denied in Douglass's youth. In all three of his autobiographies he observes that celebration was used in an insidious way to take the desire for liberty from those who had never known freedom, to make the idea of freedom uncomfortable and dangerous for the slave. Between Christmas Day and New Year's day slaves were given a holiday away from most of their work¹⁰ Douglass writes that the short break was given to maintain the slave system, to give slaves something to hope for and to remember when it was

⁷ P. 817 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1881*

⁸ P. 22 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*

⁹ National Constitution Center, *The Story Behind The Frederick Douglass Birthday Celebration* Feb 14, 2023 by Scott Bomboy).

<https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-story-behind-the-frederick-douglass-birthday-celebration>

¹⁰ P. 544 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1881*

over, and to release the steam of the slave system. Slaves had a chance to experience the normal pleasures of life such as Douglass writes, "... the married man can visit his wife; the father and mother can see their children ... The slave's happiness was not the end sought, but the master's safety"¹¹ Douglass writes:

To enslave men, successfully and safely, it is necessary to have their minds occupied with thoughts and aspirations short of the liberty of which they are deprived. A certain degree of attainable good must be kept before them. These holidays serve the purpose of keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasure, within the limits of slavery ... Before the holidays, these are pleasures in prospect; after the holidays, they become pleasures of memory, and they serve to keep out thoughts and wishes of a more dangerous character.¹²

But an especially insidious use of the holiday's celebrations was not just to allow the slaves a little taste of normal life as an appeasement, but to taint the very idea of what it would mean for them to be free. Douglass describes that the slave owners preferred the slaves to spend the holidays drunk, and would frown on industrious activity that might make the slave ultimately think of life beyond of slavery. So drinking to excess became the expected activity. Those slaves who would not participate were considered suspect and abnormal. It was thought of as ungrateful for a slave not to drink to excess during the holidays.¹³ Douglass describes the thinking behind the slave system's intent for holiday celebration by describing how masters would disgust their slaves away from things they didn't want them to have:

I am the more induced to take this view of the holiday system, adopted by slaveholders, from what I know of their treatment of slaves, in regard to other things. It is the commonest thing for them to try to disgust their slaves with what they do not want them to have, or to enjoy. A slave, for instance, likes molasses; he steals some; to cure him of the taste for it, his master, in many cases, will go away to town, and buy a large quantity of the poorest quality, and set it before his slave, and, with whip in hand, compel him to eat it, until the poor fellow is made to sicken at the very thought of molasses. The same course is often adopted to cure slaves of the disagreeable and inconvenient practice of asking for more food, when their allowance has failed them. The same disgusting process works well, too, in other things, but I need not cite them. When a slave is drunk, the slaveholder has no fear that he will plan an insurrection; no fear that he will escape to the north. It is the sober, thinking slave who is dangerous, and needs the vigilance of his master, to keep him a slave.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid P. 547.

¹² P. 271 The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

¹³ Ibid p. 270

¹⁴ Ibid p. 273

The slave was at the mercy of what they knew of life, to what they could get a hold of from it to learn about it, and trapped in a slave system that doled out experiences that reinforced their slavery. Celebration given to a slave by an enslaving system would surely benefit that system. Taking note of this, Douglass's life experiences revealed to him the power celebration could have over what one could envision about life, and even about freedom. He writes:

I have known slaveholders resort to cunning tricks, with a view of getting their slaves deplorably drunk. A usual plan is, to make bets on a slave, that he can drink more whisky than any other; and so to induce a rivalry among them, for the mastery in this degradation. The scenes, brought about in this way, were often scandalous and loathsome in the extreme. Whole multitudes might be found stretched out in brutal drunkenness, at once helpless and disgusting. Thus, when the slave asks for a few hours of virtuous freedom, his cunning master takes advantage of his ignorance, and cheers him with a dose of vicious and revolting dissipation, artfully labeled with the name of Liberty. We were induced to drink, I among the rest, and when the holidays were over, we all staggered up from our filth and wallowing, took a long breath, and went away to our various fields of work; feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back again to the arms of slavery. It was not what we had taken it to be, nor what it might have been, had it not been abused by us. It was about as well to be a slave to master, as to be a slave to rum and whisky.¹⁵

Frederick Douglass and a Celebration That Informed His Entire Life

Early in Frederick Douglass's life, an event took place that stayed with him. When he was moved from the care of his grandmother, to the Lloyd plantation under the management of a woman called Aunt Katy, his life took a sharp turn for the worse. Aunt Katy, called "Aunt" out of respect, was the cook on the plantation responsible for feeding the young slaves.¹⁶ Douglass speaks of fighting the dog for scraps from the table, and following a serving girl when she went out to shake the tablecloth, in order to find bones or other means left behind from a meal. He sought out the boiling water that meat was cooked in, so that he might dip a piece of bread into it as a special luxury.¹⁷ He would sometimes get food, even whole meals he says, from

¹⁵ P. 272 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

¹⁶ *Ibid* P. 144

¹⁷ *Ibid* P. 158

“sympathizing old slaves, who knew my sufferings.” They assured him he would be a man someday. “Never mind, honey — better day comin”(sic) they would say.¹⁸ The scenes of hunger he outlines testify to the lack of value young slave children had. Children slaves weren’t adult slaves, whose labor had a monetary value to the plantation, and apparently were fed as such.

On one occasion, Douglass had gotten on the wrong side of Aunty Katy, who he describes as cruel. She would parcel out the food rations of coarse cornmeal, according to her will. On this occasion she decided that the small amount of food Douglass would get on a day, he wouldn’t get. He must have been about six or seven. But on that day his mother arrived to see him, carrying with her a ginger cake in the shape of a heart for him. He writes:

The “sweet cake” my mother gave me was in the shape of a heart, with a rich, dark ring glazed upon the edge of it. I was victorious, and well off for the moment; prouder, on my mother’s knee, than a king upon his throne.¹⁹

He only saw his mother a few times in his life. The visits, like the one where she brings the cake, were short and at night. He writes:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day’s work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise ...²⁰

As can be understood, his mother could hardly live long in her situation, walking even a few times after a long day in the fields for a visit with her child, and then walking the long way back, only to face another grueling day in the field. Sometime after the cake visit, she dies before seeing him again:

I do not remember to have seen my mother after this occurrence. Death soon ended the little communication that had existed between us; and with it, I believe, a life judging from her weary, sad, down-cast countenance and mute demeanor — full of heartfelt sorrow. I was not allowed to visit her during any part of her long illness; nor did I see her for a long time before she was taken ill and died. The heartless and ghastly form of slavery rises between mother and child, even at the bed of death. The mother, at the verge of the grave, may not gather her children, to impart to them her holy admonitions, and invoke for them her dying benediction. The bond-woman lives as a slave, and is left to die as a

¹⁸ Ibid P. 154

¹⁹ P. 145, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

²⁰ P. 23 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*

beast; often with fewer attentions than are paid to a favorite horse. Scenes of sacred tenderness, around the death-bed, never forgotten, and which often arrest the vicious and confirm the virtuous during life, must be looked for among the free, though they sometimes occur among the slaves. It has been a life-long, standing grief to me, that I knew so little of my mother; and that I was so early separated from her.²¹

When one looks over the life of Frederick Douglass, the story of his mother is a strong force in the course of his life. Reading of her in his autobiographies, with only a few times of contact with her son, she made a sustaining impression:

The counsels of her love must have been beneficial to me. The side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life, without feeling her presence; but the image is mute, and I have no striking words of her's treasured up.²²

Through the celebration of her visits, we can see why Douglass was a champion of women's rights. We can see that the celebration of her time and love sustained him, even when he had so little of her to hold onto. And the celebration of her visits, he makes sure to tell us, were under excruciating circumstances. That is the truth of what the celebration of her visits took place in.

Through the value of her visits, through their embodiment of celebration, the power of celebration manifested in the life of young Douglass, before he even knew it was there. But the magic of those visits, worthy of celebration, grew in his life over time. "I had to learn the value of my mother long after her death, and by witnessing the devotion of other mothers to their children."²³

After her death he also learns that she could read. The few visits of his mother to see him open up a world of self knowledge that he carries about himself throughout his career. And that self knowledge leads to an understanding not only of himself, but of the idea of race and what that means. Her visits are celebratory markers that let him cut through the inaccuracies of racial stereotyping. The celebration of his mother's life creates the Frederick Douglass the world comes to know.

I learned, after my mother's death, that she could read, and that she was the only one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe who enjoyed that advantage. How she acquired this knowledge, I know not, for Tuckahoe is the

²¹ P. 146 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

²² P. 146 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

²³ *Ibid* P. 148

last place in the world where she would be apt to find facilities for learning. I can, therefore, fondly and proudly ascribe to her an earnest love of knowledge. That a “field hand” should learn to read, in any slave state, is remarkable; but the achievement of my mother, considering the place, was very extraordinary; and, in view of that fact, I am quite willing, and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess, and for which I have got — despite of prejudices only too much credit, not to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother — a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt.²⁴

African American Traditions Informed Frederick Douglass’s Life, and in Turn He Helped Create Them

Before the end of the Civil War in 1865 African Americans were denied the right of following traditions that honored who they were. Black freedom before the end of slavery had to contend with the specter of slavery on every level, including in developing and maintaining traditions. Memory traditions were impacted by the potential of being enslaved, and the enslavement, or threat of enslavement of loved ones and community members.

Even so, African American traditions were always there. As sustaining parts of humanity, the existence and practice of traditions, even if deeply underground, are impossible to annihilate without completely annihilating the people who practice those traditions. Even then, something of what a people valued may always exist to be found, as left behind evidence, or as unattributed pieces mixed into the lives and traditions of other peoples.

Following the life of Frederick Douglass shows us the development of more freely practiced means of black expression in all arenas, including the creation and maintenance of memory traditions, because he was there when the United States first outlawed chattel slavery. Black expression could certainly be more public after slavery’s end. At the very beginning of black life in the United States, before the end of slavery, whether or not documentation exists, African American memory traditions were used as forces against the world slavery created, and after the end of the Civil War, we can start to see these traditions in a more public light.

In 1893, celebration and truth-telling came together in the activism of Frederick Douglass as he continued to forge a defense for a place in America for African

²⁴ P. 146 The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

Americans. That year the World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. The exposition was a chance for the United States to show the world what had thus far become of it since Christopher Columbus's landing in the "New World" in 1492. People from all over the world flocked to Chicago, Illinois, USA to see the newest and the best examples of progress that American life had to offer.

But the nation took a well worn track with the opportunity, and again all who were not seen as "White" were disappeared. The instances where non-whites were represented were orchestrated and outlined by whites only. This resulted in trivialized, marginalized, or offensive representations of themselves, according to the non-white segments of American society. Benjamin Harrison, the twenty-third president of the United States, created the Board of National Commissioners as the administrative body of the Exposition. Out of 208 persons on the Board, none were members of racial minorities.²⁵

There was also a Board of Lady Managers. Seeing the absence of African American representation on this board as well, African American women advocated for representation, and were denied on all fronts. They were unsuccessful in getting a seat on the board, or in encouraging the assignment of one board member "whose duty it shall be to collect exhibits from the colored women of America."²⁶ At every turn, from staffing to exhibits, the Exhibition wronged African Americans and others through erasure.

Journalist and antilynching activist, Ida B. Wells approached fellow journalists at black newspapers for support for a pamphlet that would let the world know as the title of the pamphlet reads, *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.²⁷ The pamphlet addresses the issues faced by African Americans, not only concerning erasure from the Exhibition, but also the state of African American life in the nation.²⁸ The pamphlet exposes the horrific state of subjects like lynching to the international audience who would attend the Exhibition, but it also follows what is becoming at the time a much used means of African American resistance to oppression and survival: celebration. The pamphlet celebrates black life and achievement, even as it addresses the gross injustices African Americans faced. African American Celebration and explicit truth-telling join forces to shape American consciousness and memory.

To start off the pamphlet, Wells addresses the would-be reader: "To The Seeker After Truth." She explains that what would have truly been an example of American

²⁵ P.20 African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition Anna R. Paddon, Sally Turner, Illinois Historical Journal, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Spring, 1995) pp. 19-36

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html#V>

greatness and progress, perhaps the best example, was left out of the Exhibition: "The exhibit of the progress made by a race in 25 years of freedom as against 250 years of slavery, would have been the greatest tribute to the greatness and progressiveness of American institutions, which could have been shown the world."²⁹

The introduction to the pamphlet is written by Frederick Douglass, who was asked by the country of Haiti to represent their interests at the Exposition. So while he attended the Exposition and represented African American life, he was doing so at the behest not of his country, but at the request of Haiti.³⁰ By joining the 1893 Reasons Why pamphlet project, Douglass has come full circle to his younger days when he delivered his infamous 1852 Fourth of July speech. He is once again bringing to light the barriers to African American celebration to the world's attention through truth-telling. He writes:

It involves the necessity of plain speaking of wrongs and outrages endured, and of rights withheld, and withheld in flagrant contradiction to boasted American Republican liberty and civilization. It is always more agreeable to speak well of one's country and its institutions than to speak otherwise; to tell of their good qualities rather than of their evil ones. There are many good things concerning our country and countrymen of which we would be glad to tell in this pamphlet, if we could do so, and at the same time tell the truth.³¹

He lists philosophical and legal states of American life in which he would like to be able to say are true, but which aren't true then, and with which America continues to struggle to reach in the twenty-first century. Douglass offers an answer as to why the struggles to live up to our national values persist:

All this, and more, we would gladly say of American laws, manners, customs and Christianity. But unhappily, nothing of all this can be said, without qualification and without flagrant disregard of the truth. The explanation is this: We have long had in this country, a system of iniquity which possessed the power of blinding the moral perception, stifling the voice of conscience, blunting all human sensibilities and perverting the plainest teaching of the religion we have here professed, a system which John Wesley truly characterized as the sum of all villainies, and one in view of which Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, said he "trembled for his country" when he reflected "that God is just and that His justice

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html#V>

cannot sleep forever." That system was American slavery. Though it is now gone, its asserted spirit remains.³²

Ida B. Wells continues by outlining the working mechanisms of how the spirit of American slavery was still asserting its hold over American moral consciousness and law. Before she brings the horror and death of American lynching into view, she starts off by outlining the day to day workings of government which told the world how black Americans had been abandoned to second class citizenship to start, and to worse to follow:

The Thirteenth amendment to the Constitution making the race citizens, was virtually made null and void by the legislatures of the reconstructed states. So it became necessary to pass the Civil Rights Bill giving colored people the right to enter public places and ride on first-class railroad cars." – Johnson's History of the Negro race in America. This Bill passed Congress in 1875. For nearly ten years it was the Negro's only protection in the south. In 1884 the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Bill unconstitutional. With "state's rights", doctrine once more supreme and this last barrier removed, the southern states are enacting separate car laws. Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky have each passed a law making it punishable by fine and imprisonment for colored persons to ride in the same railway carriage with white persons unless as servants to white passengers. These laws have all been passed within the past 6 years. Kentucky passed this law last year (1892). The legislatures of Missouri, West Virginia and North Carolina had such bills under consideration at the sessions this year, but they were defeated.³³

After Well's chapter on "lynch law," (which was unofficial but socially and systematically supported law) where she states the case plainly that authorized murder with impunity is taking place around the United States, mostly against black Americans, Irvine Garland Penn's chapter five of the pamphlet follows, and introduces readers to "The Progress Of The Afro-American Since Emancipation." In this way, progress can be viewed as occurring in the midst of horror.

Even so, as the progress is abundantly outlined, this progress of a people is joyous to read. The celebration is given its full due. If the Columbian Exposition would not include African Americans, they would include themselves through creating an opportunity for public information and memory. The pamphlet celebrates education, teachers, and students:

Taking the census figures for '90 as a basis for '92, and adding the 646 Afro-American teachers in denominational and non-denominational schools, we

³² Ibid

³³ The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html#V>

have a sum total approximation of 24,510 Afro-American teachers in the United States with 1,512,890 pupils.

As to pupils the showing is more remarkable. Five years after the surrender, in 1870, [Civil War, 1865] only a tenth of the Afro-American children eligible to school opportunities were actually reported therein. In 1890 we find that within a fraction, ONE-HALF of the eligibles are reported in school. Figures can be given to authenticate this statement upon application, as they are only omitted for sake of space which is precious.³⁴

The elderly benefited from the education of the young: "elderly persons who may not read the letter but who are yet intelligent by contact and association."³⁵

Rev. C. C. Smith, D. D., Cor. Secretary of the "Negro Education and Evangelization Society" of the Christian Church, carefully studies the problem and awakes to find himself making this admission that "The Negroes desire for education considering his past environment is 'The Eighth Wonder.'"³⁶

In literature a history is given and then the state of progress:

Our history shows that prior to 1861, there had been thirty-five works of Afro-American authorship published and sold. In the earlier days of 1792, America's first poet was Phillis Wheatley, a little black girl, who was brought to this country in a slave ship. After careful education by her white friends, she published a book of poems. The purity of style, simplicity of expression, and refinement of feeling shown in these poems, caused many to doubt their authorship. This doubt was set at rest by her master John Wheatley of Boston, and the leading ministers of the city. They wrote a letter in which they declared Phillis to be the author of the poems published by her. Near the same time Benjamin Banneker, a Negro of Virginia, made his own measurements and calculations, and published an almanac. Since 1865 over 100 books have been published by Afro-American writers. They have been mainly histories of the race, autobiographies, poems, and works on science, fiction, religion and general literature. A Greek Grammar for beginners, by W. S. Scarborough, of Wilberforce Ohio, is in use in the schools of Ohio³⁷

Amongst the lauded listings of achievements is "a partial list of patents granted by the United States for inventions by colored persons."³⁸ Amongst these are 15 patents issued to

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition, <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html#V>

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

Elijah McCoy of Detroit, Michigan. From his name we likely get the term, “The Real McCoy.” Perhaps if he had been featured along with other African Americans at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, history would know for sure if his name inspired the maxim. But along with other African Americans, including inventors and common folks making progress before the turn of the century, we have his name in the “The Reason Why” pamphlet, honoring his skill for posterity.

McCoy invented the automatic engine lubricator for oiling the moving parts of steam locomotives (1872). The device was used by steamships, railroads, and operators of other heavy machinery. This invention was revolutionary for its time, and saved precious moments and manpower. As time and money depended on the gadget working, buyers, it’s said, didn’t want one of the knockoffs that had hit the market. As McCoy’s device had a solid reputation, they asked for “the real McCoy.”³⁹ The phrase survives today as a mark of authenticity and quality.

The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition pamphlet highlighted the accomplishments of African Americans as a group and as individuals, and they were celebrated. Strides in music, art, sculpture, medicine, medical training, the trades, general labors, business, religion, journalism, literature, the professions, and education were all honored publicly through the pamphlet. This kind of celebration and truth-telling helped create public traditions in African American creation of communal memory and contributed to the resources that African Americans could use against oppression.

In 1913, twenty years after the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, African Americans were celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. One celebration planned, the National Half Century Exposition and Lincoln Jubilee: 50th Anniversary Celebration took place in 1915 Chicago, Illinois, from August 22 to September 16th. Unlike the Columbian Exposition, this event was organized by African Americans and others committed to African American representation and liberty. This Exposition celebrated the life and contributions of African Americans and highlighted contributions from every aspect of society.⁴⁰

What had been hoped for in a smaller way for the Columbian Exposition was now manifest on a grand scale. The Exposition was held in the Chicago Coliseum. The displays were extensive and varied: from the contributions of women like Nora Lee, who hand painted china, to a man who carved with a pen knife, a “perfect locomotive carved from wood ... All parts movable.” The arts were on display, medicine, too, needlework and schools.

³⁹ Kat Eschner, This Prolific Inventor Helped Give Us The Phrase “The Real McCoy” Smithsonian Magazine May 2, 2017. Web address continuing in footnote on next page. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/prolific-inventor-helped-give-us-phrase-real-mccoy-180963059/>

⁴⁰ Chicago History Museum Blog, JoJo Galvan, The Bronzeville Origins of Black History Month. <http://www.chicagohistory.org/the-bronzeville-origins-of-black-history-month/>

And in the Michigan Exhibit, Elijah McCoy and his inventions, including the automatic engine lubricator were honored.⁴¹ In the 1893 *The Reason Why* pamphlet, McCoy is simply listed in a list of African Americans who received a patent from the US government. This is the only mention of his accomplishments in the pamphlet. But by 1915 at the Jubilee Exposition, a prominent display is included about him and his devices singularly, and is not Michigan's only display. A picture of the display is included in the Lincoln Jubilee Album, compiled by the Exposition's official photographer, John H. Ballard, which is singularly titled about McCoy, instead of listed under the title of a state exhibit, such as some of the other states have photographs listed.⁴² The automatic engine lubricator, the Lubricating Oil Cup, is mentioned by name in the caption. This notes that McCoy and his devices had risen to some notoriety, and adds to the evidence that McCoy's engine lubricator could have been popular enough to request by name, leading to the maxim, "The Real McCoy." This story is a direct example of how African Americans used celebration as a means of creating public memory, and as resistance against oppression through truth-telling.

One Jubilee Exposition attendee, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, having taken the trip to Chicago for the Exposition, was so inspired, that in September 1915, while the Exposition was still on, he met with local leaders at the YMCA on Wabash Avenue, and established (ASNLH), the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History⁴³ The organization is still in existence today as The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).

In 1926 the Association founded Negro History Week in February, celebrating black history in the month of Abraham Lincoln's and Frederick Douglass's birthdays.⁴⁴ In 1976, two-hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, and after the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, Negro History Week expanded to a month long celebration.⁴⁵ That year, President Gerald Ford officially recognized February as Black History Month in the United States.⁴⁶

Frederick Douglass's mother, an unknown slave mother who died in slavery, through the celebration of visiting her child, even through horrible realities, instilled in him that he was not only a child, a lower valued slave, but as he wrote in *My Bondage And My Freedom*,

⁴¹ Exhibition book compiled by official photographer to the Lincoln Jubilee John H. Ballard, 1915, Internet Archive). <https://archive.org/details/lincolnjubileeaal00ball/mode/1up>

⁴² p. 23, Lincoln Jubilee Album, 50th Anniversary of Our Emancipation, 1915 by John H. Ballard. <https://archive.org/details/lincolnjubileeaal00ball/mode/1up>

⁴³ Chicago History Museum Blog, JoJo Galvan, The Bronzeville Origins of Black History Month. <http://www.chicagohistory.org/the-bronzeville-origins-of-black-history-month/>

⁴⁴ ASALH, Our History, <https://asalh.org/about-us/our-history/>

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/760074.htm>.

somebody's child.⁴⁷ Which would also make him a somebody worthy of a birthdate, which he chose for February.

In this way, like so much of history, the unknown, and the lost to history still influence our lives in ways we may never trace back to them. And yet, every February the world holds something of Harriet Bailey's celebrations and history.

My mother died when I could not have been more than eight or nine years old, on one of old master's farms in Tuckahoe, in the neighborhood of Hillsborough. Her grave is, as the grave of the dead at sea, unmarked, and without stone or stake.⁴⁸

Who's He?

It's a great tragedy that so much usable history is lost, especially the troublesome kind of history, which African American history certainly is. African Americans have taken steps to insure that black history, and with it a more complete American history have been kept for posterity. It takes the resource of history to know that much of African American history has included truths that are uncomfortable for the nation. As a result these truths have been ignored or suppressed, along with the histories and even existence of the people who asked that America look where it would rather not.

This is the case with Frederick Douglass. Frederick Douglass's name may be familiar. The fact that he escaped from slavery, was an abolitionist, and a great American orator for equality and justice may be known. Just as easily these facts may be unknown. But whether or not the larger part of American society can state these facts concerning Frederick Douglass, deeper information about him is largely missing, which means large segments of American society can't use the lessons his life and work hold for either themselves, or for the body politic of the nation.

"Nobody knew who he was," says Lee Blake, educator and president of the New Bedford Historical Society as she remembers a time when Frederick Douglass was not on the national radar. She describes working on projects with public officials, as well as the general public, and having to introduce them to information about Douglass. For over a decade Blake has worked to revitalize New Bedford, Massachusetts's history so that it better reflects the area's African American, Native American, and Cape Verdean histories, making sure that these histories are represented, where they were absent. That history includes much about Frederick Douglass,

⁴⁷ P. 141 *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855*

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 144,

abolition, and the Underground Railroad.⁴⁹ She explains that Mass Humanities has been at the forefront of bringing Frederick Douglass to a wider modern audience in Massachusetts.

A private non-profit foundation, Mass Humanities serves as the statewide affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. As a grant giving institution, Mass Humanities funds amongst other projects, the organizing of free community readings and discussions of Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Mass Humanities also holds a yearly reading of the speech at the Boston Common's Shaw-MA 54th Memorial near the Massachusetts State House. This event is co-sponsored by the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice at Harvard Law School, Community Change, Inc., and the Museum of African American History (Boston and Nantucket).

How Did These Readings Start and What Do They Do?

Easter morning 1968, the week after freedom and justice crusader Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN, Horace Seldon in Massachusetts, while driving home after preaching the Easter service, had an Epiphany. He had to do what he could to end white racism.⁵⁰ Seldon then founded Community Change that year after the 1968 Kerner Commission Report was released.⁵¹ The Kerner report was the final report of findings from the Kerner Commission, a bipartisan Presidential Commission established by Executive Order 11365 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who hailed from Texas.⁵²

The report was to investigate the causes of urban riots during the summer of 1967 and to provide recommendations to address the root problems. The report attributed the riots to African American economic insecurity, and the effects of racism, police brutality, and white perspectives dominating national media. Excerpts from the official Kerner Commission report summary:

What white Americans have never fully understood--but what the Negro can never forget--is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.⁵³

It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American

⁴⁹ Lee Blake: Black history is not just Black history. Black History is the History of the People of This Country, June 20 2023, Sean McCarthy, New Bedford Light.

⁵⁰ <https://www.horaceseldon.com/obituary/>

⁵¹ <https://communitychangeinc.org/our-history/>

⁵² (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerner_Commission).

⁵³ REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS, SUMMARY OF REPORT <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group.⁵⁴

Community Change, as Seldon envisioned it, was to tackle the “‘white problem’ at the root of American inequality revealed by the Kerner Report,” says, David Harris, managing director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice at Harvard Law School, one of the institutions that sponsor the Boston Common readings of Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July Speech.⁵⁵

Harris remembers, “In the early 2000s Community Change started a tradition of reading the Douglass speech in its library. A small group would gather in a circle and take turns reading paragraphs from the speech. I attended in 2008 and was deeply moved by the experience.” Thinking that more people would be interested in taking part in the readings, Harris reached out together with Paul Marcus, who directed Community Change at that time, to another of their colleagues, David Tebaldi, who then directed Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, the organization which is now called Mass Humanities. They wanted to know if Tebaldi’s organization would be interested in sponsoring a public reading of Douglass’s speech.⁵⁶

The answer was yes! Horace Seldon also worked at the Boston African American National Historic Site as a National Park Service Ranger. All groups that Seldon, Harris, Marcus, and Tebaldi represented got together, and the readings at the Boston Common began. Harris hoped that holding the event before the July 4th holiday would get people talking during their 4th celebrations about the meaning and significance of the speech. The first Boston Common reading took place in 2009, President Obama’s first year in office. Harris says, “I said then and throughout his presidency that rather than freeing us from talking about race, his election freed us to talk about it.”⁵⁷ And talk about it people have. Mass Humanities has sponsored many such readings around the Commonwealth, and continues to today.

When It’s time for Something, It’s the Time: Reading of Frederick Douglass’s 1852 Fourth of July Speech Start to Pop Up

Abigail McGrath, founder of Renaissance House writer’s retreat, and daughter of Harlem Renaissance writer Helen Johnson, and niece of Dorothy West, also a Harlem Renaissance

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Frederick Douglass’ Fourth of July Speech, Then and Now: A Q & A with David Harris by Jeff Neal, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july-speech-then-and-now-a-ga-with-david-harris/>).

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Frederick Douglass’ Fourth of July Speech, Then and Now: A Q & A with David Harris by Jeff Neal, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july-speech-then-and-now-a-ga-with-david-harris/>).

writer, remembers that she was out on the beach with folks attending the Renaissance House retreat.⁵⁸ At least two of the group had PhDs and there was at least one lawyer. Fred, one of the group, brought out Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July speech for discussion. None of them had heard it. And they all started asking themselves how it was possible that none of them had heard the speech. Fred ended up reading the entire speech to the group that day. They were all interested. And that is when McGrath decided that they could read the speech on the beach as a tradition for the retreat. That first reading was in 2001. As the readings evolved, the groups started to discuss what in life is worth dying for, as they recognized the peril Douglass must have been in as an ex-slave and abolitionist. In this way celebration and truth-telling, traditions of African American survival and memory are continuing with the public reading of one of Douglass's most famous speeches, and his work.

L'Merchie Frazier, former Director of Education for the Museum of African American History, remembers holding readings of the speech beginning in the early 2000s. They had the first reading in the African Meeting House using the podium where Frederick Douglass had at one time stood and referred to his 1852 Fourth of July speech.⁵⁹

Community scholars attended the various groups that were popping up and reading the speech together. Community members from one group ended up at readings others had. And the separate groups that knew about the speech started to overlap. Reading Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July speech has grown ever since.

One of the things that has grown out of the readings is that people are finding out a world of knowledge from not only the speech, but from Douglass's other work. For example, he has three Fourth of July speeches.⁶⁰ In 1852 there was "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July." In July of 1862 there was, "The Slaveholder's Rebellion," in which Frederick Douglass demands that President Lincoln issue a proclamation freeing the Confederacy's slaves, if he is indeed serious about winning the war.⁶¹ Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September of that year, and the final Proclamation took effect January 1st, 1863.⁶² Douglass's final July Fourth speech is in 1875, "The Color Question."

Celebration and truth-telling are African American traditions of resistance to oppression and of public memory creation. Through Frederick Douglass's life and work, and through those his life and work touch, we can see the uses of African American celebration and truth-telling. His 1852 Fourth of July Speech can be viewed as coming from a man who learned about the power of celebration and truth-telling while enslaved. Over his lifetime he drew on that knowledge to harness the power of celebration and truth-telling to advance justice for many sectors of people. In the twenty-first century modern readings of his most well known speech

⁵⁸ 2022 Mass Humanities Film on the Reading Frederick Douglass Together Grants

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/393ae428732c4cc8905f3e3af01128d7>

⁶¹ Frederick Douglass. "The Slaveholders' Rebellion". Speech, July 04, 1862. From Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-slaveholders-rebellion/> (accessed August 31st, 2023).

⁶² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emancipation_Proclamation

can carry on his work for justice, while also continuing African American resistance traditions of celebration and truth-telling, for the benefit of African Americans, and for Americans in general and for the world.

In the twenty-first century, each of our individual lived realities is made up of lived realities which interact with our own. In this way, we in modern life are each of us, part African American through our lived experience. Each of our experiences of this will be singular to us; the part of our lived experience which is African American working in concert with the rest of who we are, including our biological makeup, to make up our personal experience. All of who we are will come to bear on how our portion of our African American lived experience affects our lives. But because we are so mixed through overlapping lived experiences, justice for one part of that experience is justice for the whole of ourselves, personally. In this way Frederick Douglass's hope for African American justice is a hope for ourselves.