Public Books
a magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship

PUBLIC THINKER: DAVID BLIGHT ON FREDERICK DOUGLASS, ABOLITION, AND MEMORY

We're on winter break until January 7. Meanwhile, please enjoy our interview with the author of "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom," a New York Times best book of 2018. This article was originally published on November 26, 2018.

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BY MARTHA HODES

Puzzling out the meaning of the Civil War and its aftermath has been David Blight's lifelong work. Among his many books are *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), which won eight prizes; *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom* (2007), based on two previously undiscovered slave narratives; and *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (2011), which explores the war's centennial through four writers, including James Baldwin.

Starting out as a public high school teacher in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, Blight is now Class of 1954 Professor of American History at Yale University and director of Yale's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. He writes for the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Slate*, and numerous other publications and speaks before a diverse array of audiences all over the world. Blight has just published the highly anticipated *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. We recently sat down to talk about Douglass's monumental life, the voice of the biographer, memory and tragedy, and why history matters right now.

PART I: WRITING ABOUT FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Martha Hodes (MH): In describing Frederick Douglass, you have used the word "hero." Heroes and geniuses are complex people. Your new biography intertwines Douglass's public and intellectual life with his personal and domestic life. It's also partly an emotional biography, exploring traumas of childhood, enslavement, abandonment, troubled marriage and family life, and struggles with money. You write in the book about Douglass's loneliness and need for affirmation and love, about his infidelities, his despair combined with faith, his outrage and embittered sensibility combined with optimism and forgiveness. In such a complete and beautiful portrait, you also make clear the silences in the archives. How did you do that as a biographer, a scholar, a writer?

David Blight (DB): Douglass is going to be a hero whether we say he is or not, because of the *Narrative* and the way it's taught. He's always going to be the slave who stole his own freedom, mastered the master's language, and wrote better about it than anyone alive.

With Douglass, I've come to believe you have to begin with the fact that he's an orphan, a true orphan. He knew his mother, but barely. He had to invent an image of his mother to have some idea of what she looked like. He never saw her after age six. He never did know who his father was, although he knew he was probably one of his masters, one of his owners. He knew his father was white, but he didn't know who he was.

So he's an orphan. And that can mean many, many things. But he's an orphan in slavery, and he's an orphan in slavery who experiences just about every kind of trauma slavery could throw at a child, and then a teenager and then a young adult. He's both a brutalized field hand on the Eastern Shore and an urban slave in Baltimore, where he learns a great number of skills.

Now, you mention silences. One of the biggest problems any biographer faces with Douglass is the autobiographies. He wrote 1,200 pages of autobiography—he's one of the greatest autobiographers of American history, especially the 19th century. He wrote the greatest slave narrative.

MH: In a way, that *seems* like the ideal source.

DB: Oh, no. No. They are deeply problematic.

MH: Exactly.

DB: They're great sources. We have to use them. He reveals a lot in there, but he also leaves a great number of things unsaid. He almost never mentions his children in the autobiographies, for instance. There is one—count it, one—mention of Anna Murray Douglass, his wife of 44 years. He just does not discuss the domestic side of his life in the autobiographies. Now, that's not terribly surprising. A 19th-century memoir was not a tell-all. And what Douglass is doing in his autobiographies is telling the story of one hero, himself.

MH: He's crafting the story of his life.

DB: He's crafting a character, and the main character is him. And nobody gets into that circle around the character unless it serves the ascendance of the character. Now, one can say all of that, and it can sound kind of negative and critical. On the other hand, it's understandable.

This is a man who built a family and built a home and was vehement about that idea of home. He says it many, many times in many places, because, of course, he grew up without a home. He grew up with no sense of home whatsoever and no sense of family. And one can psychologize a lot about this, and a couple times I have psychologized, though without applying any direct or instrumental use of theory. I have reflected in the book here and there on just how much Douglass was desperate for stability, for home, for family, and to sustain those relationships, but also how much Douglass lived with, for a very long time in his life—I might even suggest, forever in his life—the traumas and the damages that slavery had done to him.

It's clear to me, absolutely clear to me, that Douglass came out of slavery with a deep rage, a deep anger against slaveholders, against slavery, against all of the elements of brutal unfairness, brutal denial, psychological denial even more than physical denial, that slavery had

wreaked upon him. And he had deep in his mind and his heart—I can't prove this except to show you the language—he had a deep need for revenge.

Now, what that exactly means in life for any of us is never easy to say, but once he got the opportunity, when the Civil War came, to argue for the destruction of slavery and the destruction of slaveholders, he became one of the ugliest, most thumping war propagandists you'll ever want to read. He created the horrible Hun out of the slaveholders. He advocated that they be destroyed, that they be killed. He even invented stories about what slaveholders were doing to dead Union soldiers. He wanted them destroyed, and now he was allowed to argue this in a sanctioned way.

DOUGLASS WILL ALWAYS BE ABOUT HIS WORDS. IT'S THE REASON WE KNOW HIM. IT'S THE REASON WE REALLY TALK ABOUT HIM.

But what I argue in the book is that Douglass had always been arguing for the destruction of slaveholders in his autobiographies, in his speeches, in his editorials. And when the war came, he was sanctioned now to do that. That's an old rage in him. That's an old hatred in him that he doesn't just invent in 1861. It'd been laying there for 40 years.

Douglass was never an elected official. He was never in Congress. He never passed a piece of legislation in his life. But he saw himself through the power of his voice as one of those, in effect, founding fathers of that second republic. And there were some Republicans who viewed him that way too, and welcomed him into Republican folds, to a degree, during Reconstruction.

One of the things that has always fascinated me about Douglass is that he is an example —and there aren't very many of these—of a radical reformer, in this case a former slave, who lives to see his cause of the destruction of slavery and the re-creation of the United States around the idea of emancipation and black equality.

He lives to see that triumph in his 40s. But then he also lives another 30 years. He lives long enough to see most of that victory betrayed. So there's a trajectory that you could say is a biographer's dream. How does somebody manage this process? How does one cope with those changes? How does one change with the changes and still sustain a voice?

MH: How did you find your own voice to write about such a great orator and writer as Douglass? Douglass wrote so forcefully, and you write about Douglass with admiration, indignation, passion. Listening to you talk about Douglass makes me wonder: what was it like for you to find your voice to write about this man?

DB: That's a very hard question. A good one, but hard. This is an honest answer. I don't know exactly how I found my own voice, except that there is a beauty and a power and a genius in Douglass's words that have always been the thing that attracts me to him most. Douglass will always be about his words. It's the reason we know him. It's the reason we really talk about him. We talk about his speeches, his autobiographies, his editorials, his writing. Yes, he escaped from slavery, but if we didn't have these hundreds of thousands of words that he wrote, we wouldn't even be talking about him.

I love language. I love Douglass's ability to capture, sometimes in a metaphor that just comes to him out of thin air, or out of some experience, this American dilemma with slavery and racism, where he illustrates its mental and emotional traumas, where he illustrates its physical fears, where he sometimes has an ability to explain why slavery is the national dilemma of the 19th century—of all of American history, for that matter. There's really few people quite like him, who found in language the way to explain who we are, the way to explain what this problem meant, the way it was someday going to tear apart the Union and cause some kind of rending of the country.

Stereo photograph of Frederick Douglass, ca. 1865–1880. Brady-Handy photograph collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

I think I'm also attracted to his voice, and it probably then affects mine, because it's so biblical. Douglass was so steeped particularly in the Old Testament. It became his source of storytelling. It became his source of metaphor. It became the overall kind of worldview through which he saw history. Douglass had been reading the Old Testament Hebrew prophets since he was 12, 13, 14 years old. At first, he probably had no idea what he was reading. I mean, the Old Testament is confounding. How do you make sense of a lot of it?

But there's an essential story there that he learned quickly, which, of course, millions of other Americans have too, especially African Americans, and that's the Exodus story, the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of the people, the Egyptian bondage, the survival of some of those people, the return of some of those people to a new Jerusalem, whichever prophet you find that in. His favorite prophet was Isaiah, and Douglass quoted him far more than any of the others.

I have tried, therefore, to find a voice to talk about him through his own voice. I don't think there's any other way to do it.

PART II: MEMORY AND TRAGEDY

MH: Memory is a theme that runs deeply through your work, David. And of course, memories of the Civil War mattered deeply to Frederick Douglass. What memory of the war did Douglass want to endure? And then what happened to Douglass's vision in the aftermath of the war, which is in many ways the subject of your book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*?

DB: I was confused about what to do with this idea of memory. We all know that memory is a biological thing. We can't find our car or our keys or our home from here if we don't have a memory, and it's why the memory diseases are so terrifying, because our very humanity depends on this quality of memory.

On the other hand, we also are aware, as historians, that memory is a social creation. There are collective memories. Lots of memory scholars love to debate whether there is such a thing as collective memory, and how do you know a collective memory when you meet one, and so on, but we do know they exist. Institutions build memories. People create memories. Churches create memories. Nations create memories. And all that really means is that they create narratives. They create stories that go to battle with other stories.

Now, in Douglass's case, he was trying to preserve, to hold on to, to keep fashioning and refashioning, a narrative of the Civil War that said the destruction of slavery, emancipation, and the creation of black equality are at the absolute center, are at the core of Union victory. The nation was saved and preserved, but the way it was saved and preserved was by destroying slavery and creating four million new citizens with rights.

And he lives long enough, as we said earlier, to see that victory eroding, first in Reconstruction and then directly betrayed by certain Supreme Court decisions, especially the Cruikshank case in 1876 and the civil rights cases in 1883, and then eventually not only eroded, but defeated by the use of violence and terror by the Southern Democrats and by the Ku Klux Klan and its many imitators. He lives long enough to see even the terrible problem of lynching at its peak by the early to mid-1890s.

MH: Absolutely.

DB: So what's at stake for Douglass in this is the very meaning of his own life. It's the meaning of this new country, this new, invented American republic. If there is a second American republic invented out of the incredible bloodshed of the Civil War, if the verdict of Appomattox was the destruction of slavery and the re-creation or rebirth, as Lincoln said, of a new vision of freedom and equality, what if that all gets defeated? What if that all erodes and is politically defeated by the counterrevolution?

So he uses the only real weapon he ever had, which is language and words and the power of his voice, to keep trying to remind, remind, remind, remind, to call his audiences, white and black, whether it's at a Union army reunion or a black church or a white Republican gathering. Douglass spoke to every kind of audience you could imagine in the late 19th century. He is always reminding them of what the war had been about. And if it's lost, it's as though the very meaning of his own life would be lost with it. You know, a lot was lost in the victory of the Lost Cause. Let's put it that way.

MH: In fact, one of the lessons I take away from *Race and Reunion* is this idea—and it's Douglass's idea too—of amnesia as a tragedy of American history. Let's talk about this idea of tragedy, which I feel is close to your heart, David.

DB: Yes. Douglass wasn't, I don't think, inherently or naturally a proponent of a tragic worldview. He had a deep sense of tragedy, but Douglass always—you can see this all over his rhetoric—he always felt like he had an obligation to hope. He had an obligation to present hope. He would end speeches with uplifting, hopeful metaphors and stories sometimes, even when the middle of the lecture was despairing. And that's partly because he was an abolitionist, partly because he was trying to always hang on to the vision of black equality in a world that didn't want it.

But Douglass profoundly understood that life is tragic. You know, if you grow up in a world of slavery, if you grow up in a world that says *you* were born to be a slave and *you* were born to own me, then you are by definition put into a tragic circumstance.

MH: There's the loss, the abandonment, the loneliness. You know, one of my favorite lines in the new book, David, is when you're writing about Douglass's autobiographical writings, and you say that all great autobiography is about loss.

DB: You are in a world of constant loss. You're surrounded by people whose lives will never develop. People who will never aspire. They will never reach any hopeful end except to stay alive and work without being beaten, and work without being sexually assaulted, and hope that their children will have some other chance.

MH: And yet Douglass did aspire.

DB: Oh, did he ever. This is one of the hardest things to actually explain about him: where does a young slave in his circumstances get that fire in the belly, that ambition, to get out?

Now, he has a lot of lucky breaks, and that's very important. This myth, this sentimentalized myth that Douglass could never be contained by slavery, was destined to be free, that's nonsense. This myth needs its contingent historical moments to explain it, not least of which was the great good fortune of being in Baltimore and learning about the world and the city, and particularly a maritime city, and going to churches, particularly black churches, and learning the Bible and living around people who were free. There were more free blacks in Baltimore than there were enslaved blacks. He was certainly aware of that, and he ends up betrothed to one who was free.

But I think this idea of tragedy is something that American history has never been able to abide very well. We don't like the word. We are the nation of progress, we say, and of course

we want to be that. You don't want to teach your fifth-grader that history isn't about hope and isn't about progress, and you do want to show them those times when people faced terrible problems and solved them. We want to do that.

But our history is riddled with as much tragedy as anybody's. You know, the Russians don't have to be told that life is tragic or that history is tragic. They've lived it. The Germans, my God. Israelis. You know, tragedy? A nation born out of a colossal crime—

MH: Palestinians don't have to be told …

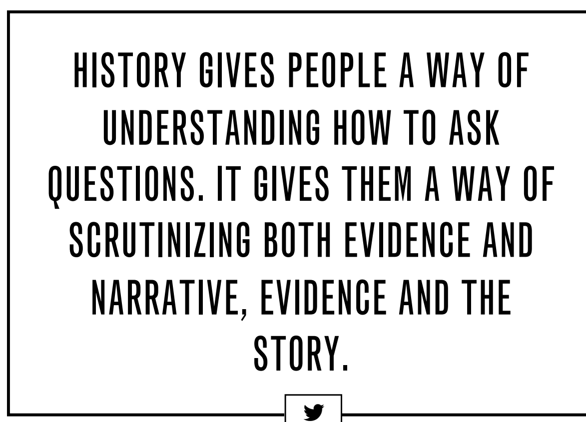
DB: Palestinians can't even find a homeland in front of their face. But Americans still want to believe. We don't want anything to seem fated. We want to control history. But who actually controls history? You know, who predicted 9/11? Who predicted the end of the Cold War? Who predicted Donald Trump's election?

MH: No one, no one, and no one.

DB: No one. There's so many things that happen in history, no matter how much we study it, no matter how much we prepare for it, that we end up baffled by why this could happen, why that could happen.

MH: Yes. And, David, your appearances as a public thinker often connect history to the present day, to unending reverberations of the Civil War. You've written and spoken about the Confederate monument debates, the resurgence of public white supremacy, even Donald Trump's understanding of Frederick Douglass.

DB: That's a short subject.



MH: So let me ask you this, David. Let's talk about studying history, learning history, reading history, at this moment. Why does it matter? Why does history matter? Why does the 19th century matter? Why does the Civil War matter?

DB: Well, hopefully we don't skirt this with clichés, but of course learning some history is the only way to know who we are, how we got here, where we might be going, although we're bad at predicting, we historians.

MH: Clearly.

DB: We're asked all the time, but we're really bad at predicting. But mostly, I think, history gives a person a sensibility. It gives them a way of understanding how to ask questions. It gives them a way of scrutinizing both evidence and narrative, evidence and the story. Why am I being told that story by politicians or by the press or by whomever? What's it based on? You study enough history, you begin to realize it is ultimately about interpretation rooted to some kind of evidence, and it means that that interpretation is always changing. It's baffling and befuddling, and people don't like it sometimes. They want to just know, what happened? "Just tell me."

MH: Complexity again!

DB: Yeah, I know.

MH: It's our stock-in-trade.

DB: Complexity—we're all about complexity, and sometimes people don't like that. The historian typically answers a question by saying, "on the one hand" and "on the other hand," and nobody really wants that.

MH: We want our students to love complexity, too.

DB: Yeah, love complexity and ambiguity. I mean, ambiguity does make the world go around.

MH: It does indeed.

DB: But on the other hand, we've also learned as historians that some things are true, and some things are truer than others, and some things are facts.

MH: We can't just say, "some people will tell it this way," and "other people will tell it that way." Facts do matter.

DB: And you know as well as I do those moments in your research when you convert it into writing, when you realize, oh my, I found something here, and this I know. Yes, I'm going to interpret and I'm going to put it into a story, because that's what we do, but this is something I know. Those are very special moments, say, in biography, with Douglass, when I feel the confidence. And this is always a judgment, and yet you feel the confidence to say: *I think this is what Douglass was thinking. I think this is what Douglass meant. I think this is what Douglass felt.*

That's the harder part. You know, feeling means emotion. Feeling means personality. But we only get there because we've done research and we've read deeply, and we have our umbilical cord in place back to our evidence.

PART III: HISTORY AND HOPE

MH: You're a public scholar. You're also a scholar's scholar. You're both. What's the best way for you to talk about the Civil War and history to a broader audience, a wide readership: high school students, lay citizens, people who care, people who don't care—and we want to make them care?

DB: Right. In talking to or writing for the broadest possible audience, which we all want to reach, whether that's in museums or in schools or in public lectures, you have to tell a story. It's old-fashioned, but you have to have a narrative that connects with them. So when I'm lecturing on Douglass, I often literally begin with a specific story. I place my listeners somewhere.

MH: Yes.

DB: I have several favorites. One of them is the speech Douglass gives right after Lincoln's reelection in 1864, where Douglass employs the Noah's Ark metaphor for the rebirth of the world. I tell that story because it gives me a way into helping my audience understand Douglass as a creature of words. But it also helps me place him in a much bigger, a huge political story—not just Lincoln's election, but the whole Civil War.

Or I can take my listeners into the early 1850s and place Douglass in the moment of his breakup with William Lloyd Garrison. Or I can take them to Tremont Temple in 1863 on the night of emancipation. You've got to place that general reader in a story. It's only through story that we grab the broader audience. And in the storytelling, of course, we give them analysis. Sometimes they may not know it, but we give them as much analysis as we can.

The whole idea of our craft is embedding the research we find into good stories. Historians who lose track of that in their quest for either theoretical perfection or social

scientific empiricism sometimes forget that what most members of the public want is a story. They want to feel good about the story, too—and sometimes you've also got to make them hurt.

MH: The best stories are often about pain and sorrow.
DB: But back to your point about tragedy: the whole point of tragedy is that tragedy is a way of viewing the world. I think to have a solid sense of tragedy about the human condition, and about history, is the real source of hope. It prepares you for when the next cataclysm might come, and when something even like 9/11, which was so cataclysmic, occurs, to know that it is not original. It's happened throughout history that people have attacked civilians on a mass scale. It happened in the Trojan War. It's happened ever since.

The more you know that, the more prepared you are for those times when it may actually happen to you. That was James Baldwin's definition of what it meant to have a sense of history.

MH: Beautiful.

DB: I loved his answer when he was asked: what is a sense of history? He said: you think something has only happened to you, and then you realize it happened to Dostoyevsky a hundred years ago, and it's especially important for a young person to know that they are, therefore, not alone.

To have a sense of history means you're not alone. You know enough of the past to know that things that happen have happened before. You're not alone in this story.

This article was commissioned by Ben Platt.

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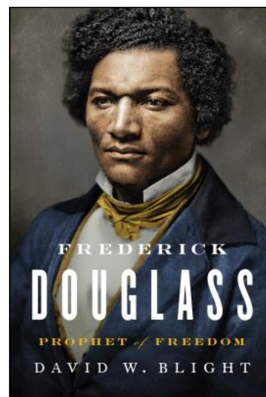
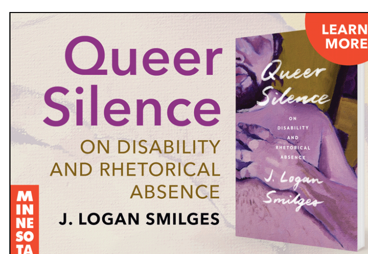
ON THE TABLE



Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom
David Blight

Simon & Schuster, 2018



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