

NARRATIVES OF FREEDOM

A Reading Guide

What narratives are told in the philosophy we teach about freedom? What philosophy is present in narratives of freedom not normally included in our discipline's curriculum? In this presentation I will discuss how to put American Slave Narratives, and classics of Black American political thought, into conversation with the classics of the social contract tradition and Liberalism. This method of pairing such classics reveals other potential interdisciplinary dialogues that can expand the breadth and depth of your ethics and political philosophy courses.

My approach is to put key enlightenment-era (late 17th to 18th Century) texts that are part of the "Social Contract" and "deontological" (duty-based) tradition in ethics and political philosophy in conversation with key texts from the Black Atlantic and American slave narrative tradition. For example, classics such as Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* as well as his letter on *Toleration* and selected sections from his *The Fundamental Constitution of Carolina*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourses* and *The Social Contract*, and of course Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* are put into direct dialogue with the classic slave narratives included in this course. The pairing of these two intellectual strands and giving each its proper due is intellectually demanding. Learning these two traditions together, however, magnifies the monumental ideas they contain and vigorously criticize and defend: for example, domination, natural law, liberty, equality, democracy, political representation, civic fraternity and sorority, individual civil rights, slavery, property, consent, and tolerance. Moreover, just as both traditions present, either directly or indirectly, political treatises, they both provide "narratives" about emergence of free, equal, and enlightened modern "men," the birth of civil society, and the justification of political power. These treatises and narratives lead us to directly confront a conceptual conflict behind centuries of racial, class, and gender domination, and understand and appreciate more deeply the struggle for liberty, equality, and the hope for individual, social, and political transformation.

Selected Supporting Texts

Assigned

- Douglass, Frederick. 2009. Excerpt from *The Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Chapters 5–7, pgs. 38–53.
- . 1994. "Covey, The Negro Breaker," "Another Pressure of the Tyrant's Vice," and "The Last Flogging," from *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Douglass Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life, My Bondage and My Freedom, Life and Times*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: The Library of America, Chapters 15–17, pgs. 258–287.
- . [1852] 2018. "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, edited by John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman. New Haven: Yale University Press: 55–92.
- Jacobs, Harriet. 2000. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In *Slave Narratives*, edited by William A. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: The Library of America, Chapters 5-7, 773-788.
- Sundstrom, Ronald R. 2020. "Narratives of Freedom," Syllabus.

Bonus Material (Not Assigned)

- Douglass, Frederick. 1985. "A Plea For Freedom of Speech in Boston," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 1 vol.3 1855–63, edited by John W. Blasingame. New Haven: Yale University Press, 420–425.

2009. "Our Composite Nationality," in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, edited by John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman. New Haven: Yale University Press: 279–304.

Start Here

Douglass, Frederick. 1994. *Narratives of the Life My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Douglass Autobiographies. Read the whole narrative and see chapters 6–7 and 9–10 for crucial comparisons with assigned material.*

———. 1994. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In *Douglass Autobiographies*.

———. 2018. *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass. See especially: "Our Composite Nationality," "I am a Radical Woman Suffrage Man," "Self-Made Men," and "Lessons of the Hour."*

Jacobs, Harriet Ann. 2000. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In *Slave Narratives*, edited by William A. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: The Library of America.

Guides to the Philosophical Discussion on Douglass & Early Black American Political Thought

Boxill, Bernard R. 1997. "The Fight with Covey." In *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon, 273–90. New York, NY: Routledge.

———. 1998, "Radical Implications of Locke's Moral Theory: The Views of Frederick Douglass", in *Subjugation and Bondage: Critical Essays on Slavery and Social Philosophy*, edited by Tommy Lott. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 29–48.

Du Bois. W.E.B. 1993. "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Everyman's Library: Chapter 3, 38–51.

Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2009. "Douglass's Declarations of Independence and Practices of Politics." In *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: Chapter 5, 162–209.

Mills, Charles W. 1999. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. *See especially Chapters 1 and 2.*

Threadcraft, Shatema. 2016. "'What Free Could Possibly Mean': The Intimate Sphere in Enslaved Women's Visions of Freedom," *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 34–68.

Sundstrom, Ronald. R. 2008. "Frederick Douglass's Political Apostasy," *The Browning of America and The Evasion of Social Justice*. Albany: SUNY: Chapter 1, 11–35.

———. "Frederick Douglass," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frederick-douglass/> (~ 10 Pages)

In Douglass' Own Words

Douglass, Frederick. 1994. *Douglass Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life, My Bondage and My Freedom, Life and Times*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: The Library of America.

———. Douglass, Frederick, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor. 1999. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings. The Library of Black America*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

———. 1982. *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, edited by John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan. Series 1, Vol. 1-5. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection/>

Biography

Blight, David W. 2018. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Martin, Waldo E. 1984. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Related Ante- & Post-Bellum History

Blight, David. 1991. *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press.

Delbanco, Andrew. 2018. *The War Before The War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War*. New York: Penguin.

Sinha, Manisha. 2016. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Woodard, Colin. 2020. *Union: The Struggle to Forge the Story of United States Nationhood*. New York: Viking.

On Liberalism and Civic Republicanism

Buccola, Nicholas. 2012. *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty*. New York: New York University Press.

Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2009. "Douglass's Declarations of Independence and Practices of Politics," in *the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: Chapter 5, 162–209.

Mills, Charles W. 1999. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Myers, Peter C. 2008. *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Sundstrom, Ronald. R. 2008. "Frederick Douglass's Political Apostasy," *The Browning of America and The Evasion of Social Justice*. Albany: SUNY: Chapter 1, 11–35.

On Liberty, Dignity, and Self-Respect

Boxill, Bernard R. 1997. "The Fight with Covey," on *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon, 273-90. New York: Routledge.

———. 1998, "Radical Implications of Locke's Moral Theory: The Views of Frederick Douglass," in *Subjugation and Bondage: Critical Essays on Slavery and Social Philosophy*, edited by Tommy Lott. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 29–48.

Davis, Angela. [1971] 2018. "Lectures on Liberation," in *A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass*, edited by Neil Roberts. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky: 107–134.

Du Bois. W.E.B. 1993. "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Everyman's Library: Chapter 3, 38–51.

McGary, Howard, 1999. "Douglass on Racial Assimilation and Racial Institutions," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers: 50–63.

Threadcraft, Shatema. 2016. "'What Free Could Possibly Mean': The Intimate Sphere in Enslaved Women's Visions of Freedom," *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 34–68.

On Constitutionalism and Natural Law

Bernasconi, Robert. 1991. "The Constitution Of The People: Frederick Douglass And The Dred Scott Decision," *Cardozo Law Review*. 13: 1281-1296.

Mills, Charles W. 1998. "Whose Fourth of July?" *In Blackness Visible*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 167-233.

Schrader, David E., 1999, "Natural Law in the Constitutional Thought of Frederick Douglass," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers: 85–99.

On Douglass with a *Libertarian lean*.

Root, Damon. 2020. *A Glorious Liberty: Frederick Douglass and the Fight for an Antislavery Constitution*.

Lincoln, NB: Potomac Books.

Sandefur, Timothy. 2018. *Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man*. Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute.