

"The Pathway from Slavery to Freedom": Frederick Douglass and Black Education in Antebellum America

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Abstract: This paper investigates the emergence of education for African Americans in the antebellum South through close examination of the pioneering autobiography Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. It highlights two starkly contrasting perspectives on black education in the decades before the Civil War - that of white slaveholders, who considered learning dangerous and likely to incite rebellion amongst slaves, versus the viewpoint of Douglass himself, an enslaved man whose hunger for education was a source of hope and a pathway he imagined could lead to freedom. By conducting a close reading of Douglass's personal philosophy on education while he was still enslaved, this paper aims to illuminate the deep hunger for learning and great risks African Americans were willing to take in order to become literate during the antebellum period, demonstrating how highly they valued education in the context of their oppressive status. It seeks to underline the central role of education in early African American freedom narratives and nascent resistance movements through Douglass's pioneering example.

Keywords: Frederick Douglass, antebellum America, black education, slavery, emancipation

1. Introduction

In 2016, Moss examines issues related to teaching about historical school segregation and educational inequality in a paper, pointing that many students are still unable to gain a proper and accurate understanding in this field[1]. Moreover, Kytte and Roberts also published an essay in 2017, analyzing the controversies over the history of slaves should be taught in schools.[2] That got me thinking, what is black education? This paper will dig into the early sources to understand more about black education. Contrary to the common belief that it was not until the period of civil rights that education for black people started to appear under the lead of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Dubois, valuable historical evidence has shown that even during the antebellum period, black people have already started to value the significances of education by advocating it as a mean of emancipation from slavery and pursuit for human rights.

2. Background on Slave Education

In the early 19th century, before the Civil War, educational opportunities for African Americans remained extremely struggled. Under the pressure of forbidden education, black education was not only limited by local "black laws" but also affected by heavy discrimination. By the 1820s, a few

black churches and benevolent societies in cities like New Haven had established their own primary and Sabbath schools. However, secondary, and collegiate education largely remained out of reach, as blacks were barred from most private schools and all major colleges. Understanding this context, the battle between North and South could be also described as the one between education as liberation and education as a threat. Therefore, the movement of black education led by black leaders like Frederick Douglass during the pre-civil War provided racial enlightenment not only served as a catalyst for social transformation but also aroused the determination of resistance by evoking the voices of black fellows.

3. Comparing Secondary Sources

There are various papers that discuss this topic. For example, in "*Frederick Douglass, Refugee*," Fanuzzi, the author, analyzes Douglass's experiences as self-liberated refugee and how that shaped his perspectives about abolitionism [3].

According to Fanuzzi, living as a refugee made Douglass acutely aware of the precarity of freedom for Africa American and the importance of abolitionism: necessity of aspiration of slaves instead of gradual measures. This complements my analysis of the different points of view thorough slavers holders and slaves themselves. Moreover, Fanuzzi's argument strengthens my point that education is the fundamental to Douglass's vision of liberations by illustrating how his refugee experiences intensified his activist goals.

However, while Fanuzzi argues that Douglass's escape from slavery and his life as a fugitive profoundly influence his advocacy on emancipation, this paper focuses on Douglass's perspectives on black education leading to liberation. Additionally, whereas Fanuzzi focuses primarily on Douglass's life after escaping slavery, this paper concentrates specifically on Douglass's attitudes towards education while enslaved. Fanuzzi highlights how Douglass's continuing attempts on fighting against to slavery with risks of capture and enslavement as a runaway black slave. In this case, Fanuzzi provides crucial biographical context for understanding Douglass's post-emancipation activism., which built the foundation for the civil war. Therefore, this paper will enrich the argument by considering the definition of "black education" in the perspectives of both slaves holders and Douglass.

Additionally, *How Literacy Became a Powerful Weapon in the Fight to End Slavery* written by Colette Coleman also discusses the anti-slavery rebellion during the South antebellum period [4]. While Coleman focuses on the rebellions of Nat Turner, this paper covers the broader emergence of black education through Frederick Douglass. Moreover, this paper provides more about the background of struggles and obstacles slaves have to face which Coleman doesn't mention. In addition, this paper uses contrasting perspectives between slaves and slaveholders to highlight the early effort of black education which is different from Coleman's. Last but not least, since Coleman spotlights Nat Turner and Anti-literacy laws in a limited timeframe, there is still a profound value to use a broader view to analyze the earlier black educational ideology and efforts through Douglass.

4. Douglass Narratives Analysis

Frederick Douglass's seminal 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, has become one of the most influential slave narratives and a foundational text in understanding the black experience and early education efforts in antebellum America[5]. As one of the most prominent abolitionist leaders of his era, Douglass provides a first-hand account of slavery and ideas of education as emancipation.

Scholars have extensively analyzed Douglass's *Narrative* to uncover insights into slave resistance, abolitionism, identity formation, and education. As Houston A. Baker Jr. discusses, the *Narrative*

chronicles Douglass's "growth in comprehension and eloquence" and his realization that knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom.[6] Henry Louis Gates Jr. examines how Douglass uses the literary form of the slave narrative to construct his life story and identity.[7] William L. Andrews highlights how the quest for literacy allows Douglass to transition "from human commodity to human being to heroic defender of his people." [8]

This analysis will dig into this narrative through two lenses: the perspectives of Douglass's masters and of Douglass himself toward education. Comparing the different views will provide thorough understanding of early African American's education. This paper will focus on Douglass's own words and experiences to how tough and risky was to resistance against the whole slavery system with literature.

4.1. Slaveholder Perspective

The first thing to notice about this book is that Douglass's masters were clearly terrified of slave education. For example, in chapter 6, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. [5]" In this paragraph, we can see that Douglass's master is afraid that educated slaves will have their own ideas and they won't obey rules anymore. With that thought, masters will punish Douglass once they found out he is trying to learn or gain knowledge. "I had been at my new home but one week before Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger. [5]" In this case, the way of punishment emphasizes the obstacles and struggles Douglass had to face during the pursuit of education. That's not all, in chapter 11 when Douglass was trying to learn during the night, he was found and tortured brutally. This powerful passage demonstrates the demoralizing effect of oppression on Douglass's journey of learning. Last but not least, in chapter 11, "He told me if I would be happy, I must lay out no plans for the future. He said, if I behaved myself properly, he would take care of me." In this quote, masters were trying to maintain their control over the slaves by suppressing the idea of independence or education. Through the way, masters thought and punished, masters viewed education as a threat of uncontrol or anxiety of losing power.

4.2. Douglass's Viewpoint

On the other hand, differing from masters, Douglass viewed education and literacy as paths to freedom. During the antebellum period, even though with the background of black slaves were born to be slaves for their whole lives, Douglass noticed that the only way to be free was to be educated. "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. [5]" This quote shows that Douglass realized how education and literacy empowered him and he started to value the significance of education in order to be freed. Whatmore, during the conversation between slaves, Douglass said that "I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good a right to be free as you have? [5]" This excerpt is the first time when Douglass began to recognize that he deserved the same rights as white children, and that shows that Douglass started to form his argument about slaves also deserve human rights. In addition, when Douglass was reading books, he found out that "The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human rights. [5]" Douglass shows how the knowledge acquired from the books builds up the foundation of his arguments against slavery and his sense of indignation over the lack of human rights

for slaves. Therefore, even under the risk of being afflicted, Douglass began to capture every possible opportunity to learn. For one thing, Douglass read newspapers and books from his master when his master was absent. Moreover, when he got work to deliver packages, he will make time out to make friends with the little white boys on the street and convert them into his teachers [5]. Second, he copied the words from the cargo ships and competed with white children in the streets using those words to learn even more. Therefore, he could learn writing not only through the handwriting from Master Thomas's copybook [5]. Moreover, he gained knowledge about the abolitionist movement through reading books, further fostering hope.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, through his writing, different perspectives of his masters and himself provide us a more comprehensive insight into early black educational thoughts and goals for uplift. By analyzing his own words and experiences, we uncover how crucial education was to early enslaved resistance against slavery systems. Understanding these contrasting perspectives, we can appreciate just how profoundly African Americans valued education before the Civil War, as they saw schooling as essential to their liberation and human rights. Therefore, back to Floria's discussion, if you ask Douglass what is the reason for being educated, he would say education provides enslaved black people with the power and brave to resist the oppression in the slavery system and to strive for the human right they deserved.

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