

Frederick Douglass and Sexuality on the Antebellum Plantation:
What Angela Davis and David Blight Can and Cannot Teach Us

Sarah Jane Kline

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Dr. Gary Bertholf

“Douglass is tricking you on every page ... there are many intriguing literary interpretations ... I don't buy it.”

- David Blight, in conversation at Davidson College

“Sexual mores in the years before the Civil War were in many respects less repressed than they are today. Gender roles were extremely fluid, so much so that the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality did not even exist ... more general expressions of love (or intimacy) between two men (or two women) were considered perfectly normal ...”

- John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*

“Douglass's overt grammatical gestures were oftentimes informed by latent, inverted references to his own sex and sexualized treatment.”

- Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro*

Following my reading of Frederick Douglass' autobiography *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, I read David Blight's "Introduction: A Psalm of Freedom" to Douglass' *Narrative* and Angela Davis' "Lectures on Liberation." As a result, I became interested in looking more closely at the ways in which scholars use Douglass' *Narrative* as a means to further their own ideological interests and disciplines, and how these distinct ideologies ultimately have a monopoly on the interpretation of Douglass' *Narrative*. In order to unveil underlying motivations in texts by authors such as Angela Davis, David Blight, and John Stauffer, who all hail from separate academic disciplines, it is necessary to consider the amount of interplay or lack thereof between manifest historical readings and latent literary readings of debatably sexual scenes in Douglass' narrative, most notably, his encounter with Edward Covey which Douglass describes as the "turning-point" in his life as a slave.¹ Subsequently, I formed some conclusions about how scholars include or exclude portions of either interpretation as a means to describe and support a narrative they already seek to tell or reinforce. There are many reasons scholars deliberately

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 43.

exclude Douglass' possible queerness; however, without providing a combined literary and historical interpretation, the reader is denied a complete understanding of the black male slave's sexual function on the plantation. I would argue that scholars use Douglass' *Narrative* to secure their own ideological interpretations within particular academic disciplines – that also claim distinct ideologies – and consequently, hinder our ability to understand sexuality on the antebellum plantation.

By looking at the way Angela Davis uses Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* in her “Lectures on Liberation,” we can discern and extract a clear picture of her political and philosophical motives in relation to her reading of *Narrative*, but we can also see her motives in the element of *Narrative* she chooses to exclude – the sexual one. An associate to the Black Panther Party, Davis offers in “Lectures” the philosophical exploration of the “active struggle for freedom” among oppressed people topical to the 1960s civil rights movement.² Therefore, with the intent of encouraging a unified urge for political action, she exposes her own support for communist ideologies and radical politics by citing Marxist theory and indirectly the Hegelian master-slave dialectic.³ She furthers that “freedom...means the destruction of the master-slave relationship” calling forward the political and historical movement of abolitionism in an attempt to reposition the fight for human equality in the collective consciousness of blacks in the late 1960s.⁴ By connecting her political and philosophical understanding of Marx to a nation-wide movement through the lens of a slave narrative, Davis invokes a relatability to the overthrow of the master and thus connects notions of freedom to her own political party.

² Angela Davis, “Lectures on Liberation,” in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, [1845] 2010), 47.

³ Davis, “Lectures,” 60,71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

Davis, if “Lectures” is to be deemed a manifesto of its own, is especially concerned with the notion of resistance. To make her point on the necessity of resistance in securing freedom Davis uses Douglass’ encounters with the slave-breaker Edward Covey as a launching point for her political argument.⁵ As a preface to the specific scene and her subsequent analysis, she marks the encounter as Douglass’ “first experiences of this possibility of a slave becoming free upon resisting his own whipping.”⁶ This statement represents her manifest reading: that Douglass’ restored manhood stems from “physical resistance, violent resistance” rooted in his conquering and eventual overthrow of his master Covey.⁷ While this reading, grounded in physically violent resistance, is acceptable for the purposes of her politically charged motive, she deliberately disregards the queerness latent in the scene in order to secure the deeply Hegelian reading. It is a reading where Douglass becomes capable of freedom by means of his ability to master his “master.” However, intersectional theorist Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro rightfully asks which of Douglass’ thoughts are rendered invisible by not fitting into traditional preexisting frameworks for political thought like the one presented by Davis.⁸ Davis herself even asks questions suitable to a latent sexual interpretation, but she provides answers one would expect, considering her intentions. She remarks: “We have to ask ourselves what is happening here...why is Covey unable to cope with that unexpected resistance?”⁹ Now, the transfixed reader of her radicalized Douglass is torn between two interpretations: the physically violent as presented by Davis and the sexually violent latent in the text. Davis creates the framework to interpret the encounter between Douglass and Covey as homoerotic. Here, I rely on the English scholar and author Vincent Woodard’s expanded

⁵ To read the original scene in Narrative, specifically, the sections Davis cites. Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.

⁶ Davis, “Lectures,” 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro, “Black Masculinity Achieves Nothing Without Restorative Care: An Intersectional Rearticulation of Frederick Douglass,” in *A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Neil Roberts (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 239.

⁹ Davis, “Lectures,” 83.

definition of homoeroticism which “implies same-sex arousal and draws attention to those political, social, and libidinal forces that shape desire.”¹⁰ Davis notes that Covey is white and a notorious slave breaker; she then asks why it is that Covey is suddenly physically weaker and unable to break Douglass – a sixteen-year-old and legally subhuman slave – and why did he, in truth, not whip Douglass at all?¹¹ I argue that Davis, for political and philosophical purposes, needs Covey to be physically violent in order to appeal to her audience during that particular moment in history. If Covey is sexually violent and Douglass resists with similar queerness, then her ultimate political message for resistance – and more specifically social revolution – is rooted in possible homoeroticism instead of brute violence.

In “Lectures,” Davis presents her understanding of philosophy as a discipline during that particular time frame by asserting that black literature presents a “much more illuminating account of the nature of freedom...than all the philosophical discourses on this theme in the history of Western society.”¹² Therefore, we can take her to mean that historical philosophical thought has, to an extent, failed her audience until this distinct moment. She believes then that the physically violent master-slave relationship is central to understanding freedom. However, can the physical pain of slavery also include the sexual domination and abuse that Thomas Foster writes “no male slave would have been safe from” regardless of the time period?¹³ Based on Davis’ analysis in “Lectures,” sexuality seems to have no window into philosophical conversations regarding freedom. Jim Downs brilliantly cites Marc Bloch when he discloses that notions of historical evidence were “politically and socially biased,” so readers must turn to “linguistic” and

¹⁰ Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 14.

¹¹ Davis, “Lectures,” 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ Thomas Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 448. Thomas Foster is a Professor of History at DePaul University and writes often on Gender and Sexuality Studies.

“theoretical” techniques for answers to the aforementioned questions.¹⁴ Therefore, Davis denies her audience an understanding of the master-slave relationship that utilized sexual domination compounded by physical violence inflicted upon the slave to secure the slave’s position as abject. Additionally, she denies readers the knowledge that, as Foster maintains, “sex between masters and male slaves undoubtedly occurred...as a particular kind of punishment” on the antebellum plantation.¹⁵ Therefore, in order to understand the full breadth of violence masters enacted upon slaves, we must look not only at physical violence but the sexually violent possibilities and capabilities that were not made obvious by women reproducing.

The social activist that Davis was and still is shows in her most recent publication *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. In his review of *Freedom*, Mahmoud Zidan writes, “Davis adopts an intersectional approach, analyzing discourses of race, gender, class, imperialism, sexuality, and ability” thus making the reader aware of her social versatility specifically with regards to the topic of sexuality.¹⁶ As such, her intended use of “Lectures” to secure her own political and philosophical ideologies within and against her discipline becomes ever clearer. But, it also becomes evident that “Lectures” deliberately impedes our understanding of sexuality on the antebellum plantation. Even in Zidan’s review, he mentions her conversation on sexuality a single time, and that is merely to mention it, whereas her conversations on violence claim much more written territory.¹⁷ In *Freedom*, Davis posits, “We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability are

¹⁴ Jim Downs, “With Only a Trace,” in *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America*, ed. Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, & Jennifer L. Morgan (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 30. Jim Downs is a Professor of History at Connecticut College with specializations in U.S. History and African American History. March Bloch, whom Downs cites, is a French Historian who specialized in Medieval History.

¹⁵ Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men,” 452

¹⁶ Mahmoud Zidan, “Freedom is a Constant Struggle, by Angela Davis,” *Journal of Black Studies and Research* 47, no. 3 (2017), 87. *Taylor & Francis Online*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

intertwined.”¹⁸ Now, as the United States navigates a second black reconstruction in the age of Donald Trump, the resurgence of police brutality, anti-black racist groups, the KKK, and neo-Nazi terrorism becomes increasingly more normalized and threatening. Therefore, Davis’ “Lectures,” although lacking in comprehensive interpretation, as they were in the 1960s, has become more useful to the present social climate than serving to Douglass’ *Narrative*. She writes, “even when he attains his own freedom, he does not see the real goals as having been obtained” which highlights how even today, the real goals have still not been obtained, and the United States has a long way to go to attain human equality.¹⁹

However, Davis is not the only scholar guilty of motivated authorship. David Blight similarly neglects the sexually queer element of Douglass’ *Narrative*. A historian and frequent writer on Douglass, Blight wrote an introduction to *Narrative* titled “A Psalm of Freedom” in 1993 and recently released a new biography on Douglass titled *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* in 2018 for which he just won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in History. Despite his renowned expertise, for the purposes of this paper, I want to explore what Blight can and cannot teach us about Douglass and sexuality on the antebellum plantation. By looking at “Psalm” and *Prophet* we can see how Blight manipulates Douglass’ encounters with Covey in order to secure the Christ-like hero narrative he seeks to tell. In “Psalm,” Blight writes that Douglass’ time on Covey’s farm “frames a story of resurrection and an unforgettable image of freedom” characterizing Douglass as “a self-made hero ascending to his destiny.”²⁰ Furthermore, he notes specifically the fight between Douglass and Covey as Douglass’ “personal resurrection through force.”²¹ Here, Blight

¹⁸ Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 4.

¹⁹ Davis, “Lectures,” 59.

²⁰ David Blight, Foreword, Preface, and “Introduction: A Psalm of Freedom,” in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1993), 12, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

clearly intends to fashion Douglass in the image of Christ, highlighting Blight's deliberate exclusion of queerness in his interpretation. By writing an introduction to *Narrative*, Blight conditions the reader to view the autobiography through the lens he provides – a Christian one. The story of Jesus, the ultimate Western ideological hero who sacrificed His life so all could be saved, is the parallel narrative to which Blight chooses to convey the story of Douglass. He affirms this notion nearly thirty years later in *Prophet* when he writes, “slave workers on this isolated farm called Covey the ‘snake,’” and he describes Covey's physical defeat as Douglass' ascension to “‘the Heaven of comparative freedom’” thereby exaggerating the Christian elements in *Narrative* to create an overall Christian narrative told by him – which he titles “Psalm” and “Prophet” by no mistake.²²

By using Christian themes to secure Douglass' story as that of a pious hero, Blight attempts to make history accessible to the public audience; he writes a history that is washed of nuance and sexual ambiguity. Accordingly, in a review of a biography of Douglass, Blight deems the “suggestion of a ‘homosexual attraction’ on the part of Covey” as “needless” and stretching “credible evidence” thereby revealing his unwillingness to allow homoeroticism into Douglass' story.²³ Yet, Blight urges us to “close read” *Narrative* twice in “Psalm” “to uncover not only Douglass' rhetorical devices but a good deal about the...nature of slavery,” but Blight himself fails to comment on the rhetoric that potentially reveals the homoeroticism present in the master-slave relationship.²⁴ Therefore, we are brought back to Downs' use of Bloch's notion that academic bodies cannot be entirely relied upon to answer questions concerning sexuality in history.²⁵ In noticing the unreliability of academic disciplines to tell a representative narrative, we can see how

²² David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: A Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 61, 65.

²³ David Blight, “The Private Worlds of Frederick Douglass,” *Transition*, no. 61 (1993): 165.

²⁴ Blight, “Introduction: A Psalm,” p. 4.

²⁵ Downs, “With Only a Trace,” 30.

Blight makes clear in his Preface that “Psalm’s” main function is to aid historians, but implores that the text still be read as literary; yet, he fails to discuss or even acknowledge the latent queerness present in the scene with Covey or in the scene with Aunt Hester.²⁶

In continuing to intentionally over-simplify *Narrative* in order to make it legible, Blight frequently uses inapplicable binaries when writing on Douglass’ life. He tells it as, “both inspiring and terrible” a “two-life lifetime” a journey “into and out of slavery” contrasted between “brutality and good fortune” and the list could go on.²⁷ Binaries are essentially dualisms that the general public understands, but they are not challenged by them. Blight uses the historical discipline to write a history that otherwise would not be easily understood by an audience not well-versed in the literature of and on Douglass. However, in doing so, Blight hinders conversations about the possible homoeroticism present on the plantation. Therefore, through Blight’s specific use of Christian themes, of the hero’s journey, and of binaries to construct an attractive and legible narrative, we can begin to question Blight’s motives to remain heteronormative in his works and in his historical discipline which undermines our understanding of homoeroticism during the antebellum period. Foster contends “such stories have rarely been told by historians.”²⁸ Therefore, I posit that much of Blight’s neglect on the topic of sexual abuse between master and enslaved male originates from his desire, as a historian, to sell historical biographies. Mass markets purchase manufactured “hero’s journeys,” but if Douglass, instead of physically overpowering his master to secure his manhood and freedom, engaged in an act of queer sexual violence, readership that desires a Western and Christ infused hero might not purchase such a biography.

²⁶ Blight, “Preface,” vii. At the end of chapter on in *Narratives*, Douglass writes about his experience witnessing his Aunt Hester being tied up by their master and whipped. But, through a close reading of Douglass prose, it becomes clear that Douglass is recounting a scene of sexual violence inflicted from master to slave.

²⁷ Blight, “Introduction: A Psalm,” 4, 24, 2, 3.

²⁸ Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men,” 454.

It is interesting to note that in *Prophet* the word “homosexuality” appears zero times, the word “queer” appears four times (but only under the literal definition), and the word “sexuality” (including “sexual”) appears twenty-eight times but never in regard to same-sex relations.²⁹ Therefore, we can see that Blight’s historical imagination excludes any notion of homoeroticism or queerness as present on the plantation. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman notes that “slaves’ bodies *were* subject to the full range of sexual practices,” whereas in *Prophet*, the Covey scene reads as another attempt by Blight to secure a Christian framework in which Douglass’ time under Covey is his “crucifixion and resurrection” disregarding the sexual subjection Abdur-Rahman makes clear.³⁰ Blight uses Douglass’ apparent biblical references as the sole tool to decode his rhetoric, yet this becomes problematic when the Christian symptomatic reading completely masks a sexual one. In Blight’s analysis of the fight scene, he remarks that Covey literally “beat him with a switch,” but in *Narrative*, Douglass writes, “The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all.”³¹ So, how can this peculiar moment in *Narrative* not be mentioned in Blight’s textual analysis while in footnote twenty-six he mentions that there are many literary interpretations of this particular scene.³² I want to postulate that this absence of non-heteronormative vocabulary might be the linguistic problem Hortense Spillers suggests: “the language of the historian was not telling me what I needed to know.”³³ Therefore, because words like “homosexuality,” “queer,” and “homoerotic” are not used

²⁹ Blight, *Prophet*.

³⁰ Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” in *Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and Black Figuration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 31; Abdur-Rahman is a Professor of English at Brandeis University with specializations American and African American Literature and Culture, Critical Race Theory, and Gender and Sexuality Studies; Blight, *Prophet*, 60.

³¹ Blight, *Prophet*, 60.; Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.

³² Blight, *Prophet*, 745.

³³ Hortense Spillers, Sadiyah Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelley Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Watcha Gonna Do?’: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,’” *Woman’s Studies Quarterly* 35, no 1 (2007): 308. Spillers is the Gertrude Conaway Professor of English at Vanderbilt University and is a renowned literary critic.

by Blight and other historians, readers are not given substantial information because only using the term “sexuality” provides a shallow explanation of the extent to which sexuality was not heteronormative in the antebellum south. Consequently, our historians are not telling us the entire (hi)story.

In his joint biography of Douglass and Lincoln, the literary scholar, John Stauffer provides a glimmer of hope in regard to sexuality and language when he says, “the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality did not even exist.”³⁴ However, this quotation is extracted from a lengthy span of information about Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed’s possible queer relationship while nothing of this sort exists on the topic of Douglass’ sexuality. Stauffer interprets the interaction between Covey and Douglass in a much more sexually nuanced mode but still does not explicate that when Douglass wrote (in italics) that he had not been whipped at all, that him not getting whipped was not solely “Covey’s way of trying to save face” after losing a fight.³⁵ Consequently, we can see that a homoerotic relationship that was not necessarily repressed during the 19th century, but was possibly coded in metaphor, is now being repressed by the philosophical, historical, and literary scholars that seek to re-tell Douglass’ life.³⁶

After examining the motivated and strategic readings of Douglass’ works by Davis, Blight, and even Stauffer, the question that remains is to what author or discipline should one turn to for a complete understanding of not only Frederick Douglass but of sexuality on the antebellum plantation. The disciplinary divide between politics, philosophy, history, and literary studies creates restraints upon an author’s interpretations, and thus limits what a reader can learn from an

³⁴ John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 111

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.; Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.

³⁶ Look at his theories regarding the “repressive hypothesis.” Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” in *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 15-36.

author's text. Therefore, books written for the general public are rendered problematic in that they disseminate a washed and biased reading of Douglass. Similarly, we must ask ourselves if movements like Davis' are so politicized that we lose sight of Douglass' story and focus primarily on the *effect* of Douglass? If so, where can we turn to find a dynamic interpretation of Douglass' life and the time period in which he lived that is not saturated with an intent to secure personal or disciplinary ideologies? Does such an interpretation even exist?

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