

WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS TIME? THE FALLACY OF THE ORIGIN

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, the spread of the standardization of time brought the world and its marketplaces much closer together. This marked a period of great social, technological, and industrial progression in the United States. Simultaneously, millions of enslaved people were prohibited from access to standardized time, unaware of the developments taking place outside of their immediate communities. Enslaved people, like Frederick Douglass, were also denied access to time-related identity markers, such as birthdays. In this paper I examine what happens to an individual's perception of their identity when they are denied the story of their own origin. I study Douglass to reveal the relationship between time, enslavement, and identity. In the national lens, I argue that the ideological origin of the United States is a fallacy, and only once we bring that fallacy to light can the United States begin to deliver on its promises of liberty and justice for all.

INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 1888, *The Terre Haute Express*, a newspaper based out of Indiana, published an article titled "Frederick Douglass's Speech: The Greatest Living Colored Man Speaks at the Republican Wigwam." The article, written forty-two years after Frederick's Douglass's legal emancipation from American slavery, shares, "In opening, [Mr. Douglass] said he had been introduced in a great many ways to public audiences, sometimes as a slave, sometimes as a fugitive slave, but to-night he had been introduced as an American citizen" ("Frederick Douglass and the Freed-Men"). Frederick Douglass had many different identities across his lifetime: student, educator, lecturer, politician, husband, father, and most importantly, free man. But as a person born into slavery in the nineteenth century, Douglass had to fight against all odds to escape bondage, make his name known, and become one of the most celebrated figures in American history.

The nineteenth century in the United States is a fascinating historical era because of the vast dichotomy in the "American experience." It is a century in which significant change occurred very rapidly: the country was still developing as a very young nation, the Industrial Revolution brought incredible new technologies, and a spread in the standardization of time brought the world and its marketplaces much closer together. In 1883 Douglass himself referred to the nineteenth century as "a century which has no equals in the annals of time for its vast and wonderful contributions to the moral and material progress of mankind" ("Speech re Emancipation Day"). Simultaneously, though, as the nation went through a period of considerable progression, millions of enslaved people lived in the dark, unaware of the developments taking place outside of their immediate communities. The study of time in the nineteenth century, and the spread of standard time as it exists today, reveals in particular the differences between the experiences of a free man and the experiences of an enslaved one.

TIME

Time plays an enormous role in the formation of the American identity. Scholars like Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, look at the role of time in the nineteenth century in America, and specifically in the country as a growing global presence. He asserts that America is a country that relies heavily on its origins to determine the nation's values; it is a country that constantly looks to its past to determine its future. What happens, then, when this practice relies on an origin story that paints a heavily edited, glorified picture of America's history? Jeremy Yamashiro and his fellow scholarly contributors aim to answer this question in their "American Origins:

Political and Religious Divides in US Collective Memory.” An origin story is a powerful component in the growth of nationalism and the defining of a national identity. It is also, however, a critical part of an individual’s identity and their construction of the “self.” What happens to identity, then, when a person is denied the story of their own origin?

Existing scholarship on the changes in the perceptions of time in the nineteenth century rarely consider these changes through the lens of race. Douglass challenges theories on the standardization of time in this historic period by reminding us of the presence of an entire class of Americans prohibited from participating in standard time. In her essay “Enslavement and the Temporality of Childhood” Sarah Chinn specifically looks at how enslaved children engaged with time; Maria Holmgren Troy similarly looks at the significance of the spatiotemporal in “Chronotopes in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.” Studying Douglass in tandem with these scholarly works fosters new questions about the relationship between time, enslavement, and identity. What do changes in the perception of time mean to someone who does not even know the date of their own origin? To someone who can only conceive of the days of the week by knowing the Sabbath day is their only day of rest – but has no concept of the days of the month? How does the concept of the global standardization of time change when we consider the three million enslaved people who were denied even basic access to time over the course of the nineteenth century?

DOUGLASS’S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Frederick Douglass, like many enslaved people, lived most of his life without ever knowing his own birthday, his own origin point. And yet, as evident in his autobiographies, Douglass forms a very strong sense of self over the course of his life. Countless scholars have engaged with Douglass’ autobiographies to study the construction of the self, particularly within the genre of the slave narrative. Working with existing scholarship like James Olney’s “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” and James Mullane’s “The Road to ‘I’ Identity in ‘Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,’” in partnership with the Frederick Douglass Papers from the Library of Congress, provides a comprehensive look into Douglass’ perception of his own identity, and how his changing comprehension of time played a role in the formulation of his identity. By looking at identity formation within the individual, we can begin to conceptualize how this applies on a larger scale to the United States as a nation. If Douglass could establish such a powerful sense of self without knowing fundamental information about his own origin, is the power of the origin as a symbol, then, just a fallacy? There are many fallacies in the ideological American origin story around which the country has constructed its national identity. As Douglass illustrates, though, only when we bring those fallacies to light and reject the ideological origin can we see America as a nation that laid the groundwork for democratic exceptionalism, and still has the potential to deliver on its promises of liberty and justice for all.

In 1845, seven years after his escape from bondage and a year before he would be legally emancipated, Frederick Douglass published his first slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. The opening lines of Douglass’ *Narrative* detail what little information he had of his birth in Maryland, and that Douglass, along with many fellow enslaved people, was never given an accurate idea of his age, as he was never told his date of birth:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. 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.

(17)

This is the very first cruelty in the lives of the enslaved, and Douglass opens the narrative in this way to exemplify how enslaved people are instantly dehumanized, from the moment they are born, by slaveholders who deny them the very first thing that defines them as an individual. Withholding a person's birthdate immediately erases a degree of their individuality and their humanity; limiting facets of individuality makes an enslaved person more closely tied to the other enslaved people within their plantation or household. This creates a more homogenized collective in which other factors of identification, like the land the group lives on and who that land and the group belongs to, are more highly valued. There is a humanity in the birthing process; not having that history creates the perception that an enslaved person simply appeared one day, or even worse, that they have always and will always belong to that homogenized collective – eliminating any sense of past or future without them.

Over the course of his life, Douglass wrote two other autobiographies: *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, ten years after *Narrative*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which was published in 1881, closer to the end of his life. Each of these narratives opens with this same matter of Douglass' birth. He includes details of the location of his birth and that he has little knowledge of his birthdate. As he mentions in the opening paragraph of *Narrative*, the mystery of his birthdate was always of great interest to Douglass. This curiosity and desire to know his origin remained with Douglass throughout his life, as clear from his final autobiography, *Life and Times*. Douglass shares that, in 1884, forty-six years after making his escape from slavery, Douglass took the opportunity to meet with his dying former slave master, Thomas Auld. In reflecting on this momentous meeting, Douglass recalls finally being able to ask Auld the question that had plagued him through all his years of freedom and success: "I told him I had always been curious to know how old I was, that it had been a serious trouble to me, not to know when was my birthday. He said he could not tell me that, but he thought I was born in February, 1818" (*Life and Times* 449). Despite successfully self-emancipating, living a life as a free man, and becoming a world-renowned intellect, orator, and advocate, Douglass' origin still haunted him. Identity can be constructed in a myriad of unorthodox ways, but the origin still holds immense symbolic weight, and therefore great power.

BIRTHDAY AND IDENTITY

Making a declarative statement about one's birth in the introduction to a slave narrative was extremely common within the genre. In fact, as Olney notes, "And how do most of them actually begin? They begin with the existential claim repeated. 'I was born' are the first words of the narratives of Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs, of Henry Box Brown and William Wells Brown, or Frederick Douglass and John Thompson, of Samuel Ringgold Ward and James W.C. Pennington, of Austin Steward and James Roberts" and fourteen other formerly enslaved authors (52-53). This seemingly simple statement is an assertion of the humanity that enslaved people were denied, in three words. "I was born" establishes the speaker as an individual, unique in their existence to any other person. Initiating their narrative at the very point of their birth asserts that their life and story as an individual is as important as any other living person's, and that they are not the nameless, faceless "chattel" that the slave system viewed them as. What is interesting in these narratives, though, is that, like Douglass notes in his autobiographies, it was extremely common for an enslaved person to not know their own birthdate; the declaration that they were born, then, is a reclamation of their origin.

The reclamation of an origin point was a process of establishing an identity that Douglass in particular valued highly, as "in identity is freedom – freedom from slavery, freedom from ignorance, freedom from non-being, freedom even from time" (Olney 54). The chattel slave system as it operated in the nineteenth century in the United States was an operation designed to erase all sense of individuality in enslaved people, and to keep them as ignorant to the world outside of slavery as possible. Ignorance of time was a particularly powerful tool in this process. In the introduction to his *Narrative*, Douglass includes an important detail about how time is experienced from within slavery: rather than understanding and organizing time in days, months, and years, in the way that the average American would have in the nineteenth century – when the spread of standardized time followed the rise of global capitalism – the average enslaved person followed agriculturally-based seasonal cycles for harvesting and planting. Chinn discusses the nature of constructing time in this way, and the consequences of the

repetition and cyclicity of time on a plantation: "...the 'laboring time' of slavery is epitomized by 'repetitive, unbroken, and unremitting labor.' Laboring time is a continuous present that admits of no future beyond what exists now and has always existed: relentless work. It precludes progress, and its centrality to the experience of enslavement means that, as Pratt argues, 'there is no unmediated version of time'" (38). "Laboring time" was used as a mode of oppression within the slave system. The cyclical nature of the slave system created the perception that there was no future that was different from the present. This perception makes it much more difficult for an enslaved person to envision a future in which they are free, unlike the way in which, say, the belief in providence allows a Christian to persevere in their challenging present, knowing that a better future is promised to them. Troy shares that this experience of time was common amongst many American slaves: "...this oppressive cyclicity blocks not only the 'forward impulse' in the lives of individual slaves but also that of African Americans as a group, and, ultimately, of the whole American nation" (21). The spaces that slavery operated within, which were ordinarily plantations in small, rural Southern towns, did not often experience the rapid changes that urban environments went through across the span of the nineteenth century. The day-to-day, year-to-year in these spaces perpetuated the ignorance to time that many slaves, like Douglass and Jacobs, were kept within. These spaces operated as closed environments, which they needed permission to step outside of.

The slave system also denied the promise of a future outside of slavery by disrupting family lines; in Douglass's words, "[g]enealogical trees do not flourish among slaves" (*My Bondage* 34). Enslaved family lines were often disrupted and impaired by deaths and slaveholders who would separate children from their parents through the slave trade. This disruption between generations was common among nearly all enslaved people, including Frederick Douglass, who was never allowed a relationship with his mother, and whose movement between owners made it impossible for him to maintain a relationship with his many siblings. Troy notes, "The temporal fragmentation reflects the fashion in which slave families are repeatedly broken up, while the plantation slave's year follows a clearly cyclical pattern, leading to an annual disruption of an already precarious existence" (20). Within a spatiotemporal existence that already did not allow for any anchors to a stable time or place, the destruction of generational ties once again erased any perception of a past that could be reflected upon and learned from, or a future that could be looked towards. In Douglass' own experience, "[t]he Aulds signify paternalistic plantation masters who sought to keep their slaves dependent; as long as the slaves were suspended in a state of intellectual immaturity, they would remain children and would not be aware that they were controlled and manipulated" (Mullane 29). These modes of oppression – the denial of access to time, future imaginings, and generational ties – formulate a cyclical system that kept the enslaved population ignorant and completely dependent upon their masters.

As noted by Chinn, "[e]nslaved time ruptures and reverses any expectation of progress" (45). The construction of "enslaved time" began with the denial of access to an origin point for the individual: the absence of a birthdate. The birthdate, as a person's origin, creates the perception of a specific point in time in which the individual was introduced to the world; they are to reference that point as the inception of their self-identity as they move forward into their future, with the perception that they are already an individual human being, and that the moment they entered the world mattered. When an individual is not permitted the knowledge of their birthdate, they do not have a stable origin point from which they can commence their personal "timeline." Instead, their timeline and journey to self-identification is unstable and must be constructed in unconventional ways; this is particularly difficult to conceptualize without access to an organized sense of time.

A FREE MAN

Despite the efforts of degradation by his slaveholders, Douglass became a free man through his own efforts. Douglass declares, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (*Narrative* 68). Douglass's narrative continues to regale the story of how, despite the denial of an origin point, Douglass learns how to define himself as an individual, and eventually as a free man. Time, therefore, becomes a prevalent theme throughout Douglass' narrative. Although he goes his entire life without the origin point of a birthdate, there are many days in his life that define him, and many that

become points of “rebirth.” While Douglass is physically born into slavery through the law of the mother, in *Narrative* he discusses first being symbolically born into slavery in the moment of observing “the bloodstained gate” (20). This symbolic birth into slavery is one that many enslaved children experienced, according to Chinn: “... enslaved childhood is a series of sharp blows that presage but don’t constitute full initiation into the subjectivity of enslaved person. The piercing violence of slavery stops time temporarily, but after that punctuating moment, everything continues as it has, even if the enslaved child’s experience of self in the world has changed radically” (42). In his first time witnessing the cruel violence of slavery, Douglass’ entire sense of self changes, but it is not the last time a shift like this occurs. Years later, when he is sent to Baltimore, Douglass experiences a life-changing intellectual rebirth when his mistress, Mrs. Auld, initiates his education. He is born again from “mental darkness” when he begins to learn how to read, and it is this education that creates the drive to liberate himself (*Narrative* 45). With this education, Douglass’ self-perception shifts again, and he no longer thinks of himself as a slave, but a man destined for freedom; this shift in perception lead to an attitude of defiance: “It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (*Narrative* 73). When he no longer views himself as a slave, Douglass is reborn a new man, and is determined to make his condition match his self-identity. He is again reborn on the day of his self-liberation: “[...] according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind” (*Narrative* 100). Although he will not be legally recognized by the United States government as a free man until December 12, 1846, he is his truest, most-actualized self at the moment when he sheds his chains and declares himself a free individual.

Douglass has many “birthdays” throughout his life: any of these moments could validly be argued to be the moment in which Douglass’ individuality originates and he “becomes” self-actualized. This collection of moments from which Douglass is intellectually or spiritually “reborn” comprise a series of “origins.” By including the multitude of moments throughout his life in which he was “born” anew, Douglass poses the pertinent question: is the necessity for a singular origin point in the formation of identity, just a fallacy?

The ideology of an origin plays a significant role in the construction of a nation, which was still distinctly important to the very young United States in Douglass’ time. The concept of a nation, like the concepts of time or ethnicity, is largely constructed in the human psyche; there must be imagined factors that come together to constitute a “nation” in order for it to be accepted as such on a domestic or global scale. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson explains why and how nations are built in the minds of men: “An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (26). There is a powerful enough trust in “the image of their communion” that allows individuals to conceive of themselves as a part of a united whole: the American nation (Anderson 6). The factors that allow for the construction of this imagined community consist of the history, values, and experiences that make America ostensibly unique from every other organized society in the world. Yamashiro studies what it is Americans think of when they think of America, and notes the importance of “the origin story – how the group or nation came into existence. Origin stories ground collective identity by setting moral imperatives, shared missions, and a society’s *raison d’être* – in a word, they frequently serve as *charters*” (84-85). The origin is critical in the construction and definition of the United States: it is the reason the Revolutionary War is taught at multiple stages in the American curriculum; it is why many Americans can recite Thomas Jefferson’s declarative beliefs that “all men are created equal” and entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The values put in writing by America’s founding fathers formed the foundation that the nation was built upon: “Origin stories themselves usually reflect political and religious values. Becoming enculturated as an American is to some extent to espouse a certain story about what ‘America’ means, and how it originated” (Yamashiro et al. 85). The national origin is not a pure representation of the experiences of all individuals living in America in 1776, however, and it is often constructed in a way that is ahistorical. No one recognized this more plainly than Frederick Douglass: “... as a people, Americans

are remarkably familiar with all facts which make in their own favor. This is esteemed by some as a national trait – perhaps as a national weakness” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 126). Douglass identifies the flaw in the ideology of the origin: while a national origin looks to the past for collective experiences that characterize the nation’s values, they often erase anything unflattering that does not serve the narrative or reputation that those who want to uphold the country wish to preserve.

What is there to learn, then, from a rejection of the origin? This question arises in Douglass’ 1852 address to the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” This speech scathingly criticizes the celebrated American origin story and its hypocrisies. In this speech, Douglass addresses the cause for celebration of America’s birthdate, and even agrees that the founding of America is something worth celebrating; he praises “your fathers” for being men who rejected oppression and tyranny (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 123). He uses the celebration of this national birthday, however, to draw attention to the fallacy of this origin moment: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; [...] a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 132). The language used here when Douglass emphasizes “your celebration” demonstrates that while Douglass views himself as an American citizen, he does not view the Fourth of July as a celebration that applies to him and his formerly enslaved peers. He especially takes the time to address the hypocrisy of this particular origin story, as the boasting of “liberty and justice for all” is so deeply ingrained in the American fabric. While the Fourth of July is a stable point to cling to as the date of the founding of America, it was not the birthdate of liberty for millions of enslaved Americans:

I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. – The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, I must mourn. (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 128)

But Douglass does not leave the audience to despair; like in his *Narrative*, he acknowledges the opportunities for rebirth that allow an individual to constantly grow and redefine himself. He says the same can be done for America: her cornerstone – the Constitution laid by the founding fathers – is the foundation meant to be built upon so America can continue to improve and recreate herself, rather than remain stagnant in her hypocrisy and cruelty. Douglass knew of America’s potential for democratic greatness:

The violence so long done in America to Jefferson’s assumption that ‘all men have an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’ was unable to destroy the force of that aphoristic utterance. When Abraham Lincoln struck the fetters from the slave, he felt nerved for the task by the fact that he was simply carrying out the great principles which the founders of the American Republic formulated. (“Frederick Douglass and the Freed-Men”)

The solutions to the nation’s most divisive issues lie in America’s historical origins. America can therefore celebrate the Fourth of July as her birthdate, as long as she continues to have new origins that bring forth better, modern eras in the nation’s lifetime. Like Douglass himself in his pursuit of identity, America must continue to be reborn.

Douglass did, however, recognize the symbolic importance of annual celebrations, especially ones that marked eras of rebirth in the history of the United States. Later in his life, Frederick Douglass spoke very frequently at assemblages and with the news media to comment on pivotal events in Black American history which continued to arise in a post-Emancipation nation. In 1888, in a comment for *The National Republican* on how Emancipation Day should be celebrated, Douglass recognizes the importance of celebrating this day for the future generations of Black Americans: “[These annual celebrations] should bring into notice the very best elements of our colored population, and in what is said and done on these occasions, we should find a deeper and broader comprehension of our relations and duties. They should kindle in us higher hopes, nobler aspirations, and stimulate us to more earnest endeavors” (“The Emancipation Day.: Why the Committee is Opposed to a Street Parade”). Behind this statement is the

echo of the damage that a lack of access to time had on enslaved generations: millions of enslaved individuals had been denied any access to their own histories, and therefore had no past that they could build a future upon. This generational matter was of utmost importance to Douglass, as he expressed, “The ability to make future generations debtors for our knowledge and experience, and their ability to appreciate and improve upon it as the result of the same, is one of the grandest perfections of mankind” (“Speech re Emancipation Day”). Douglass, having experienced the generational destruction of the family line himself, and also having desired to know his own birth origin for the majority of his life, saw the importance of creating an origin around Black freedom in America as a point of celebration.

Because he recognized the fallacies behind origin stories, however, Douglass argued that emancipation could not stop there: it had to move onward from its origin and celebration and develop into something grander and more effective. He recognized that Emancipation Day was a monumental turning point in American history, but that it did not simply solve all of the racial and economic issues that came with freeing millions of people. In an 1883 speech about Emancipation Day in Rochester, New York, Douglass spoke candidly about the need to keep American eyes turned toward a future of continuous change and improvement: “I am not so old as to forget the value of high days and holidays either, but I am too old to give much of my time to revelling, and I hope the same is the case with those assembled here. Our business here is not mainly with pleasure, nor with the past, but with the present and the future and their duties” (“Speech re Emancipation Day”). Two months after his comment for *The National Republican* on Emancipation Day celebrations, Douglass spoke again with the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*. In this article, he was far more critical of Emancipation Day and the realities of what “freedom” meant for the new class of American citizens. Douglass spoke frankly: “Those familiar with the condition to which slavery reduced the American Southern States, and who knew the extent to which it had tainted its ethical code, did not expect that the mere proclamation of liberty would at once place the slave in a position of equality with the white race” (“Frederick Douglass and the Freed-Men”). Celebrations of, or “a mere proclamation of liberty,” like that declared on the Fourth of July or spoken at the Gettysburg Address, are not enough to change the reality of a nation.

A proclamation, which becomes glorified in the celebration of the day it is uttered, is simply a *symbolic origin* meant to signify that a significant change or era is coming. If that change does not, in fact, occur, then the symbolism of the origin loses its meaning. It becomes an ideology, and a fallacy: it represents the *intentions* of a nation, but not the reality of the experiences of all those who live in the nation. Emancipation Day, rather than being a true rebirth and origin of freedom, was only one step towards improving the conditions for Black Americans. Emancipation also came with a number of problems in the form of sharecropping, as noted by Douglass in the *Chronicle's* article:

Frederick Douglass, when asked to explain why the plantation negro has made so little of the freedom which the North conferred upon him, brings a sweeping accusation against the South. “The same class that once extorted the negro’s labour under the lash now gets his labour by a mean, sneaking, and fraudulent device. That device is a trucking system, which never permits him to see or to save a dollar of his hard earnings. He struggles and struggles, but, like a man in a morass, the more he struggles the deeper he sinks. The highest wage paid him is eight dollars a month, and this he receives only in orders on the store, which in many cases is owned by his employer. The scrip has purchasing power on that one store, and that one only.” (“Frederick Douglass and the Freed-Men”)

Emancipation was an extraordinarily important political moment in the history of America but reducing it to an origin symbol decontextualizes the reality of the experiences for formerly enslaved people. Ultimately, Douglass argues, the symbolism becomes moot if America does not continue to grow and define itself out of this new political development.

CONCLUSION

It was Douglass’ lifelong desire to know his birthday. But Douglass, as shown in his narratives, is continuously becoming himself, and he continues to define himself and grow as a human being over the course of his life; this is an act of defiance against the slave system that tried to deny him his humanity by erasing the moment that he entered the world. Despite living nearly sixty-six years without this point of

genesis, Douglass finds himself, and establishes himself as a unique individual who went on to advocate for the millions of other individuals dehumanized by the slave system. Having a specific point of origin is not a necessary component in the process of constructing identity. In the process of constructing a national identity, it can even do harm: "A purified image of the nation's origin allows the past to be used as a model for the present" (Yamashiro et al. 97). As Douglass advocated in his address "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" America should not want to model their present on their past. The nation should not want to model itself on a past in which "[t]o enslave, beat and imbrute [a man] were not recognized as wrongs. To whip his wife, to sell his children, to reduce his daughter to concubinage, to brand himself with hot irons" were all legal acts ("Speech re Emancipation Day"). Rather, Douglass encourages the nation to remember that America was created as a country meant to continue its own democratic progression: "...under the inspiration of a glorious patriotism, and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep, the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you" ("What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" 125). The cornerstone of freedom was laid in America's origin, as a foundation: something to be built upon, not stagnant. America, therefore, need not rely so heavily on the ideological historical origin story that overlooks so many of the nation's injustices. Frederick Douglass illustrates that while an origin point holds symbolic weight, its power to determine an individual's or a nation's identity is largely a fallacy. He rejects the origin by exhibiting that establishing an identity is a continuous progression and requires an accumulation of moments through time.

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