

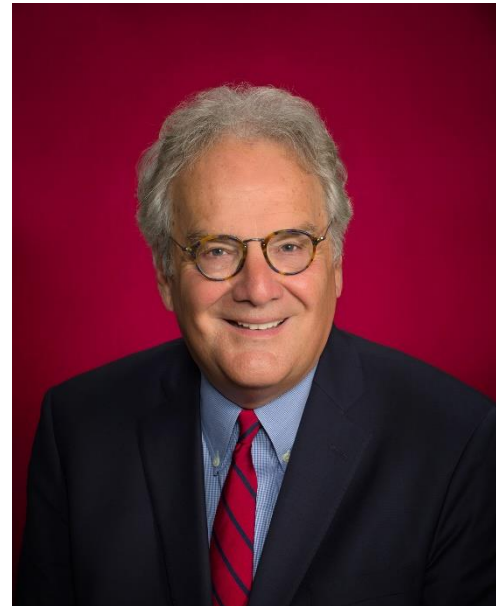
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

The Composite Nation Frederick Douglass

As I mentioned [last week in *Book Notes*](#), this week we'll examine one of the earliest and still most eloquent statements of the beauty of America's shifting, ever-expanding definition of the "**We**" in "We the people..." First delivered in 1867 at the Parker Fraternity Course in Boston, Frederick Douglass's "*The Composite Nation*" speech is a brilliant vision of America's evolving "*Tapestry*" in all its colors, shades, and ethnicities. As Jill Lepore stated in *This America*, it was one of "(T)he most important addresses of this era [Nb. the immediate post-Civil War era]" ... and the one "that most expansively expressed the ideas of liberal nationalism." [1]



Lepore's use of the phrase "liberal nationalism" has little to do with our contemporary political use of the term *liberal*. Rather, it refers to the term's original meaning: "...the belief that people are good and should be free, and that people erect governments in order to guarantee that freedom." [2] And, as she concludes in *This America*, "In a world made up of nations, there is no more powerful way to fight the forces of prejudice, intolerance, and injustice than by a dedication to equality, citizenship, and equal rights, as guaranteed by a nation of laws." [3]

These qualities are the essence of “The American Creed.” These civic ideals are the warp threads of the American Tapestry bonding the American nation together. As Michael Kazin argued, they are the grounds upon which all those at first excluded from “We the People...” fought for inclusion. [4] The excluded did not reject “The American Creed,” but embraced it as their path to inclusion and full citizenship.

One of the first to embrace those values as the path to inclusion and full citizenship was Frederick Douglass. Douglass’ autobiographical saga of the fugitive slave who became the most famous African-American of the 19th century is well-known. I’d, however, add that Douglass is not as well-known as he should be; he is one of the most important Americans of any era or any ethnicity.

David Blight’s *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (2018) provides an excellent treatment of Douglass’ life. Blight remarks that Douglass, while arguing for the annexation of Santo Domingo, “...saw Reconstruction’s egalitarian promises – the end of slavery, equality before the law, birthright citizenship, and the right to vote – as catalysts and justifications of American expansion” but also as “a new America” and “a living experiment in racial equality.” [5] Blight argues “he may have expressed these sentiments most hopefully in the speech “The Composite Nation.” [6]



In an era before radio, television, and the movies, much less email, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, public speaking was a form of mass entertainment. Great orators were the “rock stars” of the age. And Douglass was among the star-of-stars! A passionate abolitionist, a friend of John Brown, he spoke across the United States and in Ireland, England, and continental Europe. He was internationally famous.

In 1867, having grown tired of endlessly repeating his life story, Douglass sought new topics. [7] In “The Composite Nation,” he seized upon the hope generated by the Union’s victory in the Civil War and Reconstruction’s early successes to address the era’s racial and anti-immigrant biases. In rebutting the anti-Irish and anti-German Catholic immigrant prejudice and the virulent, West Coast anti-Chinese racism, he argued for an America uniting the descendants of earlier white settlers, the newly freedmen of the South, and the recent immigrants from Europe and Asia into a global beacon of liberty.

Briefly, in the America of the late 1860s, there were at least five threads needing woven into America's Tapestry: 1) triumphant white northerners, 2) the newly freedmen of the south, 3) white southerners, 4) recent European immigrants, largely Irish and German Catholics, and, 5) the Chinese immigrants whose labor built the transcontinental railroad and dug the gold and silver mines of California and Colorado.

[In an earlier *Book Notes*](#), Henry Louis Gates' *Stony the Road* (2019), we learned that Reconstruction and the granting of their civil rights to the newly freedmen would unravel under the twin pressures of a resurgent southern white supremacy and northern fatigue combining in a desire for peace. In a future *Book Notes*, we'll explore the tangled history of immigration in Daniel Okrent's *The Guarded Gate* (2019) and Thomas Gjelten's *A Nation of Nations* (2015).

For now, however, a history of immigration in one or two paragraphs will have to suffice. Everyone reading these notes is descended from an immigrant – some sooner, some later; some willing, some unwilling; but everyone is descended from someone who came from somewhere else. From the earliest times, all those newcomers encountered resistance and resentment. As Douglass says, “Repugnance to the presence and influence of foreigners is an ancient feeling among men. It is peculiar to no particular race or nation.” **[Nb.]**

It's at least as old as Benjamin Franklin resenting early German immigrants because they persisted in speaking German; as old as Know-Nothings opposing Irish and German Catholic immigration in the mid-19th century; as old as anti-Chinese and anti-Asian immigration resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banning all Asians; as old as Prescott Hall and the Anti-Immigration League opposing southern and eastern European immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century; as old as the nationality quotas of the 1924 Immigration Act; and as recent as anti-immigration activities on the southern border in the early 21st century. Each of America's waves of immigration was followed by a nativist pushback as earlier immigrants pulled up the proverbial ladder to exclude the newest immigrants.

But Douglass had a vision of a “composite” America, a multi-hued America becoming a global beacon of liberty. For a fleeting moment in the late 1860s, it seemed possible that freedmen, white Americans, and immigrants of all varieties could live in harmony. That it would take almost another 150 with still much work to be done, Douglass could not have known. But he suspected. He began a campaign to remind Americans why the Civil War had been fought and to argue in favor of immigration.

What was Douglass' argument? What was Douglass' “composite nation?”

He begins by saying that nations “are ever among the most attractive, instructive and useful subjects of thought.” Anticipating Lepore, Douglass continues, “The simple organization of a people into a National body...is of itself an impressive fact...it marks the point of departure of a people from the darkness and chaos of unbridled barbarism, to the wholesome restraints of public law and society. It implies a willing surrender...of individual aims and ends...to the broader and better ones that arise out of society as a whole.”

In that last sentence, Douglass encapsulates one of the major threads in ***The American Tapestry*** – the ongoing struggle between the need for a strong central government and the need to protect individual rights. In American history, the need to protect individual rights has almost always been the need to protect minority rights, whether that minority is indigenous-people, African-Americans, immigrants of a veritable rainbow of ethnicities, women, and those of sundry sexual orientations.

Douglass immediately addresses it as ***the*** issue in American history. He declares, “I especially speak to you of the character and mission of the United States, with special reference to the question whether we are better or the worse for being composed of different races of men.”

Of course, he asserts that the “real trouble with us was never our system or form of Government, or the principles underlying it; but the peculiar composition of our people, the relations existing between them” and the resistance of some to embrace “the only principle which can solve that difficulty...the principle of absolute equality.”

Why? Because, Douglass continues, “(W)e are a country of all extremes, ends, and opposites; the most conspicuous example of a composite nationality in the world. Our people defy all the ethnological and logical classifications. In races, we range all the way from black to white, with intermediate shades which, as in the apocalyptic vision, no man can name or number.”

And, as he adds, “In regard to creeds and faiths, the condition is no better, and no worse.” Or, more pointedly, America’s rich religious tapestry involving in some variation all of the world’s religions results directly from the First Amendment’s anti-establishment clause. In a nation without a state sanctioned religion, all religions can flourish.

In short, what was true in 1867 is by orders of magnitude truer in 2020 – we are already a “composite nation.”

So, what is to be done?

To those who argue that is not possible, to those who reject political or social equality for all because some are worthless and unworthy and/or because it is unnatural to mix different peoples, Douglass reasserts that we are already a composite nationality. To those who say some are unworthy, Douglass says, “the way to overcome (that) argument is to work for the elevation of those deemed worthless, and thus make them worthy of regard and they soon will become worthy, not worthless.”

To those who say mixing people is unnatural, Douglass argues “...nature has many sides. Many things are in a certain sense natural, which are neither wise nor best. It is natural to walk, but shall men therefore refuse to ride? It is natural to ride on horseback, shall men therefore refuse steam and rail? Civilization is itself a constant war upon some forces in nature; shall we therefore abandon civilization and go back to savage life?”

Douglass states, “Nature has two voices, the one high, the other low; one is in sweet accord with reason and justice; the other...at war with both.” Following the former, “the more men really know of the essential nature of things, and on the true relations of mankind, the freer they are from prejudices of every kind.”

Therefore, in answer to the question whether he would support Chinese immigration (or by extension, any immigration), he responds, “Do you ask, if I favor such immigration, I answer I would.”

Why? Because the question of Chinese immigration, all immigration, “should be settled upon higher principles than those of a cold and selfish expediency.” Then, arguably for the first time anywhere, Douglass asserts “There are such things in the world as **human rights**. They rest upon no conventional foundation, but are external, universal and indestructible...among them is the right of migration.” He rejects “the arrogant and scornful theory” by which some white people, who constitute only one-fifth of the world’s population, would limit these rights only to themselves, for as he says, “Right wrongs no man.”

As a result, he declares, “...I hold that a liberal and brotherly welcome to all who are likely to come to the United States, is the only wise policy which this nation can adopt...to make us the perfect national illustration of the unit and dignity of the human family, that the world has ever seen.”

Continuing, he makes the argument that this is not only right and just, but it is also practical. Practical, he maintains, because those nations that have retreated back in upon themselves have withered and shrunk, for “the very soil of the national mind becomes, in such cases, barren, and can only be resuscitated by assistance from without.” For “the voice of civilization speaks an unmistakable language against the

isolation of families, nations and races, and pleads for composite nationality as essential to triumphs.”

Why? Because “all great qualities are never found in any one man or in any one race. The whole of humanity, like the whole of everything else, is ever greater than a part.” Therefore, he continues, “If we would reach a degree of civilization higher and grander than any yet attained, we should welcome to our ample continent all nations, kindred tongues and peoples...”

In support of his case, he puts forth the contributions of the two groups of immigrants most vilified in mid-nineteenth century America: the Irish and Catholic Germans. Without the Irishman’s labor, the canals would not have been dug nor the railroads built. As for the Germans, Douglass states, “Say what you will of their lager, their smoke, and their metaphysics, they have brought us...a boundless facility in the acquisition of knowledge; a subtle and far reaching intellect, and a fearless love of truth.”

In saying which Douglass anticipated New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who, upon opening the 1939 New York City Building at the ill-fated 1939 World’s Fair said “...our exhibit to the whole world is that in a city of seven and one-half million people, coming from every land and every country, we live here in peace and harmony...All we do is let every man and woman have a say in their own government and we have eliminated the artificial stimulus of hatred.” [8]

Well, from the vantage point of 2020, perhaps not yet, but that is still the goal.

Why? As Douglass reasons, “...the great wisdom of incorporating foreign elements into our body politic (is) founded not upon any genealogical or archeological theory...but upon the broad fact of a common human nature...man is man, the world over. This fact is affirmed and admitted in any effort to deny it.”

"The sentiments we exhibit...will always imply a like humanity...a smile or tear has not nationality; joy and sorrow speak alike to all nations, and they, above all the confusion of tongues, proclaim the brotherhood of man.”

So, Douglass argues, if America is to fulfill its destiny of building a nation that is a beacon of liberty, if it is to be Ronald Reagan’s “shining city upon a hill,” for reasons both principled and practical America needs only to recognize that it already is a **composite nation** anchored by and building upon its diversity.

If Jill Lepore's *This America: The Case for the Nation* rests upon America's adherence to its civic ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity, then when those ideals are wedded to Frederick Douglass's "*The Composite Nation*" of a diverse people and an ever expanding definition of the "**We**" in "We the people..." it will be a nation, as Douglass concludes, of which "...no eloquence can adequately portray (its) greatness and grandeur..."

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.,
Scholar-in-Residence
Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

End Notes

Nb. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Frederick Douglass are from "*The Composite Nation*" available at *Black Past* <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1869-frederick-douglass-describes-composite-nation/> or *The Library of Congress* available at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mfd.22017/?sp=1>

1. Lepore, Jill. *The Story of America: Essays on Origins*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 66.
2. Ibid., p. 40
3. Ibid., p. 137
4. Kazin, Michael, "A Patriotic Left", in *Dissent* (Fall, 2002), pp. 41-44.
5. Blight, David. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), pp. 543-544.
6. Ibid., p. 544.
7. Ibid., p. 528
8. Strausbaugh, John. *Victory City: A History of New York and New Yorkers During World War II*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2018), p. 129.

Photograph of Frederick Douglass statue in the Emancipation Hall U.S. Capitol Visitor Center taken by Andrew Roth March 8, 2019 during Raimy Fellows visit to Washington, D.C.

Next week in *Book Notes* – Walt Whitman and why we need to
"hear America singing."