

Future Directions of Douglass Scholarship: Biography

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Amidst strong crosswinds and countercurrents, this is a time of historic and historiographical opportunity for African/African American Studies in the United States. Much of the outpouring of scholarly and general audience work on the history of African Americans owes to developments in the African American community, including initiatives conducted by members of countless families, including that of Frederick Douglass, not simply in rewriting American and African American history, but in reincarnating it. With this idea in mind, I would like to center the following remarks about the future of Douglass scholarship under the rubric of *living history*.

As a scholar, I think and practice biographically, and I see a spreading field of biographical possibilities for Douglass scholarship today. For me, accessing it begins by reorienting the prevailing focus on Douglass as the singular or transcendent individual to one on Douglass as a figure of family, community, and peoplehood. A powerful cohort of scholars have been pursuing this line of thought the last decade, several of whom come most immediately to mind for the broadening effect they have had on the field of Douglass Studies. In the years before his death in 2015, Joseph L. Douglas Jr., who self-identified as a direct descendant of Perry Bailey Downs, began a period of concerted research into the Bailey/Douglass family history culminating with his little-known, but seminal, *Perry Bailey a.k.a. Downs and Samuel A. Douglas, Relatives of Frederick Douglass: A Family History: 1733-1929* (2005). More recently, Leigh Fought has provided the most intensely argued critical analysis to date of Frederick Douglass' immediate family life in *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (2017). Likewise, in his consummate single-figure Douglass biography, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (2018), David W. Blight ties the story of a supreme self-made man to his grounding in family. Looking ahead, all Douglass scholars eagerly await the publication of Celeste-Marie Bernier's array of broadly researched works, perhaps most particularly *The Anna Murray and Frederick Douglass Family Papers* and *Douglass Family Lives*, which follow her coedited *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (2018). Comprehending and enveloping all this fine work is the still growing master archive of Douglass Studies, the encyclopedic annotations gathered in the ongoing Frederick Douglass Papers series published by Yale University Press, now nearing its semicentennial. All Douglass biographers go a-fishing in its inexhaustible well of Douglassiana.

But, to be clear, for all this accomplished work on Douglass and the Douglass family, I think a redefinition of "family" is due, one that homes in on the "generic" as well as the "nuclear" model—the former, the nearer approximation to the mutable, flexible formation that emerged as a short- and long-term response to the centrifugal force of enslavement on traditional family structures. I think, furthermore, that current social paradigms, proliferation of digital archives, network theory, and attention to media pathways have made this reformulation both practical and incumbent. If so, the underlying signifier for the biographer may be Bailey/Douglass, or even a more encompassing composite.

This fundamental reformulation effectively redefines the cultural field. It means that the temporal boundaries for Douglass studies are not just 1818 to 1895 but, roughly, 1700 or earlier to the present (and by "present" I mean the continuous present). Individuals die; families generally persist. In this schema, the unit of life may as fundamentally be generational as individual. If so,

the element of time, unfixed to a single figure, may signify differently to the biographer as tracking over a multigenerational continuum and returning upon itself – the power of memory reconstituting family profile.

In addition to a change of temporal boundaries, geographical boundaries may need to be redrawn—and maybe even reconceived—to conform to the life of the family. The obvious consequence would be that they would expand to correlate to the lives of disparate family members and branches living across a range of extended locations. Yet a shift of geographical boundaries may also paradoxically enhance consideration of family narrative in diasporic terms. If so, the Bailey/Douglass narrative invites a renewed focus on the original and the continuing home base of the family – which may be Talbot County, may be the Eastern Shore, but is definitely the state of Maryland. Douglass, for one, always thought of himself as a Marylander and the geographical arc of his life may well be understood as one that started in Maryland and, increasingly in later years, returned to Maryland.

Thirdly, in addition to and as a consequence of changes of temporal and geographical boundaries, I would suggest the *dramatis personae* of Douglass studies needs to be expanded to include a much broader cast of figures. This extension of the cast will at the least be enriching but may also be transformative. Missing from nearly all accounts of Douglass have been detailed and historicized accounts of his siblings, cousins, and most antecedents and descendants, as well as the environs in Maryland that have occupied for over three centuries as one of the longest-lived and most prominent Black families not just on the Eastern Shore but in the state. Pursued energetically, this line of analysis may yield a geometrical increase of people, places, and even events relevant to Douglass Studies.

The most effective way to summarize this argument may be simply to offer an example of how this approach might open lines of analysis that would thicken and enrich the Douglass narrative. I will take for the purpose of this exercise the following two-week synopsis of the life of the Bailey/Douglass family from 4 June to 19 June 1865. Here are some highlights:

- Son Lewis H. Douglass arrives in Chesapeake-facing Talbot County and begins the process of establishing either the first or second African American school in the region;
- A few days later, Lewis walks the eight miles into St. Michaels, bypassing on the road several Bailey relatives whom he does not recognize, and engages in a full-scale reunion between the Bailey and Douglass sides of the family— in the course of which he also meets a number of his father’s childhood friends, associates, and antagonists;
- Douglass’s cousin, George Washington Bailey (with whom he shares a middle name), embarks with his 9th USCT regiment from City Point dock, near Norfolk, to deployment guarding the Rio Grande border in southeastern Texas; and several days later, so does cousin Stephen Bailey with either his 19th USCT Regiment or with the Ambulance Corps of the 25th Army Corps;
- During the course of their redeployment, both the 9th and 19th regiments rise up in mutinies against their White officers—a test not just of Black-White relations in the Union Army, but also of what I would call ex-slaves’ halfway state of freedom as soldiers sold by their masters to “three years or during the war” service in the army;

- Douglass writes a friend to deny that he is planning to make a speaking tour of the Southern states, an act from which, so soon after Lincoln's assassination, friends and family were trying to dissuade him, quite possibly with good reason—yet this, at a time, when he informed his dear friend and confidante Julia Griffith Crofts that he was considering moving to Baltimore, where he would speak on four different occasions during that breakthrough year;
- Son Charles R. Douglass, the first Douglass to relocate to Washington, corresponds with his father about Mary Todd Lincoln's gift to Douglass of her husband's walking stick, which she has sent to Charles via family friend Elizabeth Keckley;
- Back on Holme Hill Farm in Tuckahoe, the first grandchild of Stephen and Caroline Bailey is born enslaved to the third and last generation of Anthonys to own both the farm and the majority of the Bailey family, just as the Anthonys were preparing to sell the farm and move to a smaller, more manageable one across Talbot County in Royal Oak near the neighborhood of Lewis Douglass' school;
- Juneteenth comes to Texas on 19 June 1865, a milestone in Bailey family history, since brother Perry and three generation of his family were still living in South Central Texas in enslavement even after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on 1 January 1863; Maryland enacted its own emancipation on 1 November 1864; and Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox on 9 April 1865.

In short, this broader cultural field is rich with possibilities for the expansion of Frederick Douglass Studies. The basic principle: As the circumference of the field changes, so does the center— although which comes first may be a matter of the chicken and the egg.

Finally, to round out this sketch of the family's *living history*, I would like to present briefly an instance of how the Bailey/Douglass family legacy speaks from beyond the temporal grave.

One of this country's largest and most symbolic restorative justice projects is Project Harmony (<http://www.projectharmonycemetery.com/>), currently making slow-but-sure progress in the general vicinity of Washington, DC. The project, drawing on partial funding from the state of Virginia and the moral support of the state of Maryland and the District of Columbia, is reclaiming thousands of tombstones once located in historic Columbian Harmony Cemetery, a Black mutual aid society undertaking dating back to the 1820s. In 1959, this historic African American cemetery was closed and its land sold to a private developer, who in turn sold it to the District of Columbia. The municipality, in its turn in 1967, built on the abandoned cemetery site the Rhode Island Avenue/Brentwood station of the soon-to-be-operational Red Line of the Metro rapid train system.¹

At the time of the cemetery's closure, its 37,000 remains were exhumed and reinterred in suburban National Harmony Cemetery in Landover, Maryland, though without headstones or other signs of respect. The original headstones had been sold or junked, many discarded into the Potomac River downstream from the District.

¹ Paul E. Sluby and Stanton L. Wormley Jr., *The Columbian Harmony Society: A Brief History* (Washington, D.C.: The Society, 1976).

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Figures 1 and 2 – Headstones retrieved in 2021 from the Potomac River, cleaned, and stored for future disposition at nearby Caledon State Park, Prince George, Virginia. Courtesy of Kelley Deetz.

One by one, at the project’s beginning in 2020, the first of those headstones have been lifted out of the river and deposited on the grounds of adjacent Caledon State Park, Prince George, Virginia, and cleaned by hand by toothbrush and soap. This process, now mechanized, continues and accelerates, with the ultimate goal of returning legible headstones wherever possible to descendant families or, in the majority, to memorialization in public spaces along the river and in a cove at National Harmony Cemetery.

Among the 37,000 sets of remains are those of Lewis H. Douglass, Charles R. Douglass, their children, grandchildren, and cousins, as well as of such friends as memoirist Elizabeth Keckley, pioneer journalist Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Civil War Medal of Honor winner Christian Fleetwood, and Harper's Ferry survivor Osborne Perry Anderson. To this day, National Harmony Cemetery has few individual markers for those 37,000 people, a situation replicated across a national landscape of desecrated or neglected Black cemeteries.² But that situation is currently changing; Black families, such as the Douglasses and many other descendant families of Columbian Harmony, are not just speaking back to but taking practical steps to rectify this historical injustice that has persisted beyond the grave.

² Jill Lepore, "When Black History Is Unearthed, Who Gets to Speak for the Dead?" *New Yorker* 97 (Oct. 4, 2021), 34-45.