

Teaching Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* through the Colored Conventions

Derrick R. Spires, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

I recently taught an upper level Major Authors course on Frederick Douglass and Frances Harper, and the only undergraduate who'd read Douglass (any Douglass) read him in my African American literature survey the previous semester. The chances are only slightly higher when I teach Douglass in a graduate seminar—and don't ask about Harper. One of the challenges for me, then, is remembering that my students will likely not know much about Douglass or his 1845 *Narrative of the Life* even as I try to rethink *Narrative* and to keep it fresh for myself. With that in mind, I still cover the traditional bases, but I also ask students to think about how *Narrative* might have signified among and drawn on Douglass's black intellectual contemporaries: Henry Highland Garnet, Mary Shadd Cary, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and others with whom he would spar and collaborate for most of his life. To begin this work, I turn to the Colored Conventions movement, now accessible through the University of Delaware's [Colored Conventions Project](#) (CCP). An [award winning](#) NEH-sponsored digital humanities initiative, CCP foregrounds collaboration and black women's labor, provides searchable transcriptions of convention minutes, online exhibits, and [curricula](#), and invites communities to add to this infrastructure.

Orienting *Narrative* within the Colored Conventions and black activism offers a counterpoint to Douglass's connections to the American Antislavery Society and invites students to mark *Narrative* in terms of his engagement with circuits of black print and intellectual history. *Narrative* appeared in 1845. Two years earlier, Douglass made his Colored Conventions debut at the [1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens](#) (Buffalo), where he famously clashed with

Henry Highland Garnet over an “Address to the Slaves” Garnet proposed as the convention’s official statement.* Three years later, he presided over the [1848 National Convention Colored Freemen](#) (Ohio) and was a rising spokesperson for black America.

The challenge has been getting literature students engaged in convention minutes. They aren’t “Literary,” and can look dry. Don’t be fooled. Minutes from Colored Conventions are often carefully crafted documents, chock full of drama, tension, and a narrative form struggling to shape them. To get students thinking in this mode, I begin with a story. [Cue Sophia Petrillo.] Picture it: Buffalo. 1843. Douglass and Garnet, both in their twenties, emerging on the national stage . Garnet boldly addresses his enslaved “brethren and fellow citizens” from the lectern: “You had far better all die—*die immediately*, than live slaves.” The crowd goes wild, and Garnet asks the convention to adopt this statement as its official “Address.” In response, Douglass counters, “There was too much physical force” in Garnet’s rhetoric and such actions would lead to a massacre. I sometimes have students reenact these moments as written in the minutes (their classmates and I provide appropriate audience reaction). It can provoke interesting questions: Where were they standing? Did Douglass raise his voice or speak calmly? Who was in the audience? Sometimes I ask multiple students to read the same parts, and we talk about the choices they made in the delivery. We begin thinking about the minutes as a script, imagining ourselves in a 19C reading room among others who couldn’t attend the convention in person, but who are as eager as we are to get involved in the action.

The usual classroom telling ends here, Douglass generally declared the “winner” (the convention eventually rejected Garnet’s “Address”) with some conversation about the ideological differences involved. The convention, however, offers much more meat. Delegates decided Garnet should revise the “Address” and appointed a committee of five that included

Douglass to help. A tense peer review session, no? I ask students to speculate on the conversation behind closed doors: Douglass, Garnet, and three other activists with deep and varied experiences. Here I might lead students in a debate, not Douglass vs. Garnet, but rather a three or four-sided conference where we tease out motivation and language from multiple angles. Some Ohio delegates, for example, still recovering from the 1841 Cincinnati riots, rejected the “Address,” not necessarily because they opposed rebellion, but because printing it might lead to yet another “unprovoked” attack from whites in the “free” states. Many students become much more invested in this background than in either Douglass or Garnet (I teach in the Midwest). Depending on the course, I might return to the CCP and introduce students to the *Black Abolitionist Papers* so they can develop mini-biographies of principle players. This exercise led one student to wonder why white abolitionists dominated so much of the history she’d learned (when taking up enslavement or black life at all), when this record of black activism wasn’t even “lost.” Responses like this one lead us to discuss how white supremacy structures education systems and public history. It’s a good place to circle back *Narrative*: “That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought.”

But I digress. How might this swirl of arguments and debate over language in this room and the convention as a whole have stretched Douglass’s assumptions about activism, black agency, and print? How might they stretch our reading of *Narrative*? While literacy remains a key to Douglass’s narrating his movement from enslavement to freedom, students mark how central Douglass makes his physical self-defense in *Narrative*. “A slave was made a man,” they note, not after having learned to read, but rather after fighting his enslaver. Douglass “rose” (literally) as he “seized Covey by the throat.” Now we can talk about this moment less as an individual departure from Garrison and more as Douglass’s engagement with black public

discourse. Did Douglass really just remix Garnet? If time permits, I might send students on a scavenger hunt in *Narrative* to find other moments that, having read the convention minutes and Garnet’s “Address,” now resonate differently. This deeper dive leads to discussions about how Douglass narrates black collectivity: his description of his Sabbath school, scenes of his reading newspapers, and, as one student, troubled, began to parse, Douglass’s silences around Anna Murray and the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society.

This approach adds at least an extra day to the unit on *Narrative* for a Tuesday-Thursday schedule, but it’s worth it. Starting with the 1843 convention (instead of, say, white-authored paratexts) invites students to approach *Narrative* slantwise, to think about how it might be an extension of the conversation between Douglass, Garnet, and a larger convention, and to expand their accounts of black print from the inside. A funny thing happens at the end of this unit. Students respect Douglass, but they don’t idolize him in the way they did before. He’s much more...human, and therefore more interesting. He’s part of a collective trying to find a path to justice in a world bent on erasing them. It’s the Douglass I know and enjoy teaching most—the Douglass who almost lost the debate, enmeshed in the drama and artistry of the Colored Conventions.

* I discuss this convention in detail in a forthcoming essay for *Colored Conventions in the Nineteenth Century and the Digital Age*, edited by P. Gabrielle Foreman, Sarah L. Patterson, and Jim Casey (University of North Carolina Press). The essay is the basis for an [exhibit](#) curated by Harrison Graves and Jake Alspaugh.