The Conversation: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass
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Abstract: This essay examines a five-week graduate summer course on the essays and speeches of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass taught at the University of Texas at Tyler in 2015. The twenty-one reading days of the five-week class alternated between Emerson and Douglass, with students reading some of their canonical texts ("The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance" as well as "The Meaning of the Fourth of July") in addition to some of their lesser known works ("The Young American" and "The Presidential Campaign of 1860").

Reading these essays and speeches by Emerson and Douglass in the context of public debates over education, race, and identity in 2015 provided students with the opportunity to historicize their own views as well as validate their personal experiences. In the summer of 2015 I created and taught an online class for graduate students at the University of Texas at Tyler on the essays and speeches of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). I structured the course as a dialogue, inspired in part by the fine collection of essays collected by Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter on points of contact between Douglas and Herman Melville. The twenty-one reading days of the five-week class alternated between Emerson and Douglass, with students reading some of their canonical texts ("The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance" as well as "The Meaning of the Fourth of July") in addition to some of their lesser known works ("The Young American" and "The Presidential Campaign of 1860"). This course's conversational structure was necessary to remove Emerson from the Transcendentalist context in which he has been firmly bound and Douglass from the abolitionist circle in which his work is usually considered. As useful as those two contexts are, they can be limiting. Emerson and Douglass were two of the most prominent thinkers and writers of the 19th-century on multiple subjects; therefore, modern readers neglect to appreciate the extent to which these authors were writing about the same national questions and to the same group of influential readers. The thirty-three students were encouraged in the daily recorded mini-lectures to identify the questions the authors examined in their writings as well as contemplate the various ways their answers overlapped and differed over the decades.

In creating this class, I was hopeful that this particular group of students (a mix of new and experienced scholars of literature as well as a fair number of nursing and business graduate students taking the course for elective credit) would be attuned to the historical
relevance of the nuanced discussion revealed by the writings of Douglass and Emerson. As a new historicist, I encourage students to read with a contextual knowledge of the political, social, and economic realities facing authors during the creative process. But I take to heart the reasoning behind our insistence that students use the present tense when writing about a work of literature; the text is alive. A text written in the 1840s that is read in 2015 must be allowed to hold both historical and current contexts if it is to achieve full relevancy. Merging those contexts and then analyzing the issues raised by the texts in order to make his or her own reasoned contribution to the discussion is the work of the scholar of literature. Roger Thompson explains the enriching necessity of this dual perspective for readers in his article on teaching Emerson's "Fate" immediately after the 9/11 attacks: "Interpretation has contexts, and they are not simply historical: they are emotional, intellectual, even spiritual" (Thompson 423). Reading these essays and speeches by Emerson and Douglass in the context of public debates over education, race, and identity in 2015 provided students with the opportunity to historicize their own views as well as validate their personal experiences, hopefully with the goal of forwarding the discussion. I was extremely fortunate that the syllabus I created drew the interest of accomplished and open-minded students with a range of experiences upon which to draw as they read and responded to the ideas of Douglass and Emerson.

In the first week of the course, students were asked to read Emerson's "The American Scholar" and "The Method of Nature" from the Library of America edition and "Farewell Speech" and "The Meaning of the Fourth of July" from the abbreviated Philip S. Foner collection of the writings of Frederick Douglass. Anytime I am lucky enough to teach Emerson at the undergraduate or graduate level, I almost always open with "The American Scholar." This 1837 Phi Beta Kappa Address resounds strikingly with 21st-century students, and its organization is more contained while its philosophy is less enigmatic than other Emerson pieces. I find that students gain a degree of confidence in their ability to read Emerson when I open with this piece, and they are more inclined toward patience when Emerson occasionally wanders in other essays. They learn to read closely for the topic sentences and aphorisms that anchor those essays, and engage as active scholars trying to reason the meaning of the essays. I selected the two Douglass essays for this first week for their incredibly strong sense of audience and persona. While most graduate students in an
English MA program have read the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, very few are even aware that Douglass was one of the best essayists and orators of the nineteenth century. I find that these two speeches from 1847 and 1852 compel students to release Douglass from the idealized prism of the 1845 narrative and acknowledge his evolution as an individual and as a writer.

After a short period spent merely appreciating the historical significance and writing styles of the two authors, the class became adept at identifying some of the common threads between the four essays assigned in the first week. The essays by Douglass and Emerson ask some of the same questions: "What is an American?" "How does capitalism define, enhance, or limit the United States?" "How does the thinker balance his individual principles and his responsibility to society?" "How does the thinker balance his intellectual life with action?" "How does the thinking man inspire his fellow citizens to improve themselves and their country?" And "What does the future hold for the United States?" In their discussions, students began to equate Emerson's Scholar or Man Thinking with Douglass' Abolitionist. At base, these composite men have dedicated their lives to self-improvement through education. However, instead of hoarding their knowledge to themselves, these figures recognize that one aspect of the American identity that differentiates it from Europe is the moral obligation to apply their intellect to some realm of American life. Emerson's scholar most often endeavors to encourage the proper education of American youth. In examining this theme, many students highlighted Emerson's famous assertion from "The American Scholar": "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances" (63). Douglass' Abolitionist accepts that public office and recognizes the fact that slavery is inherently un-American, despite current social and political acquiescence, and dedicates himself to its eradication by use of reasoning, moral persuasion, and physical opposition, when necessary. Douglass praises the modern abolitionist as "the only men who dared to defend the Bible from the blasphemous charge of sanctioning and sanctifying Negro slavery" ("Farewell Speech" 63).

During the second week of the short summer session, students analyzed "The Present Conditions and Future Prospects of the Negro People" (1853) and "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered" (1854) by Douglass as well as Emerson's "Man the Reformer," "The Young American," and "Self-Reliance." By this point of the semester, even
the most dubious student was convinced that these two great nineteenth-century thinkers were engaged in a conversation – with themselves, with each other, with the American people – over some of the defining questions facing our nation. The question that most engaged the class during this week was: "What is man?" In asking this question, students continued the exploration of a prevalent nineteenth-century theme, American masculinity. Emerson and Douglass were motivated or pressured by different factors to make this inquiry. For Douglass, as he explains in "The Claims" essay, the unrelenting program of some Americans to deny the humanity of African Americans compels him to devote an essay to defining and defending the criteria of American manhood in order to claim definitively manhood for African American men. This Douglass essay is unique in that the fiery oratory is tamped down. Instead, Douglass addresses the scientific and pseudo-scientific claims of some of the most popular nineteenth-century writers on race: Samuel George Morton, Baron Larrey, and Charles Hamilton Smith. He quotes extensively from their publications in order to refute, with calm logic, the fallacies in their thinking and the flaws in their research. In a rare use of typographical emphasis, Douglass writes "The Negro is a MAN" multiple times in this essay to ensure that even the most casual of readers will not miss the central claim (284). Emerson's exploration of masculinity does not need to begin at the foundational level of humanity. Therefore, he has the luxury of exploring more philosophical qualities connected to masculinity in his essays. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson declares that "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage" (270). Again in "Man the Reformer" and "The Young American," Emerson asserts that manhood is connected to the rationality of a man's mind, his ability to reason, and his willingness share his conclusions with others. He explains man's purpose in "Man the Reformer": "What is a man born for but to be a reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all" (146). As many of the students noticed, acting on these components for American manhood would require a nineteenth-century Emersonian to serve as an active abolitionist.

These week two essays were key to the development of other related comparative claims. After Douglass and Emerson detail what it means to be an American man, their essays explore the definition of leadership, the integrity of individuals, and the importance of
informed nonconformity. To Emerson in "The Young American" only a man who knows the importance of self-trust can be a successful leader, for that position requires a willingness "to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic" (226). Douglass makes a similar assertion in "The Claims": "Human rights stand upon a common basis; . . . they are supported, maintained, and defended, for all the human family" (296). As is evident from the pairing of these quotes, by the end of their second week of readings, students were hearing the conversation being held by Douglass and Emerson. Once students could identify the common threads in the writings of these two men, they were able to take a topic seemingly entrenched in the writing of one author, like Emerson's nonconformity, and identify its parallel in the works of the other thinker. Emerson famously explains, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (261). He follows this aphorism later in the essay with a startling image: "For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (264). In the context of a Douglass – Emerson conversation, the image of being whipped for declaring your individual agency must evoke abolitionist relevancy. Speaking as a rallying general to his outnumbered troops, Douglass promises, "In the solution of this question [slavery & discrimination], the scholars of America will have to take an important and controlling part. This is the moral battle field to which their country and their God now call them" (282). By the end of the second week, students comprehended the larger conversation about American identity being held in these Douglass and Emerson essays.

The essays I selected for the middle of the five-week term were "The Presidential Campaign of 1860," "The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States" (1862), and "John Brown" (1881) by Douglass and Emerson's "Spiritual Laws" and "Heroism." When I crafted the syllabus in the spring of 2015, I knew we would discover many relevant connections to the 21st century, but I could not have anticipated the national discussion over the definitions of heroism being held in the summer of 2015. Numerous debates over the criteria for heroism were held on social media in the wake of the ESPN decision to award Caitlyn Jenner the Arthur Ashe Courage Award and Donald Trump's questioning of John McCain's status as a war hero. In their discussion board posts and quizzes, the students in my class were thrilled to apply Douglass and Emerson quotes related to heroism.
to these current debates. Almost all students explored this theme in the essays and examined the definitions and examples in light of 21st-century beliefs.

In his exploration of heroism, Emerson is uncommonly direct. He lists several characteristics of the modern hero beginning with a claim which echoes a key tenet in "Self-Reliance": "Self-trust is the essence of heroism" ("Heroism" 375). He follows that central trait with other qualities necessary for the American hero – persistency, independence, commitment, service, generosity, strength, truthfulness, temperament, and love (377-380). Many of these features have parallels in Emerson's Lords of Life in "Experience." These assets are essential given that "times of heroism are generally times of terror" (380). In his analysis of heroism, Frederick Douglass appears to be in complete agreement with Emerson. In his writing, Douglass tends to work from direct experience and examples in order to reach larger philosophical claims. So rather that define heroic traits, Douglass examines and praises the actions of those he would consider modern heroes: John Brown and Charles Sumner. Douglass commends Sumner's "quenchless zeal and irresistible earnestness" in his quest to end slavery ("Presidential Campaign" 404). His regard for John Brown is even more fulsome. To Douglass, "The country [has] learned the value of Brown's heroic character . . . [and his] boundless courage and skill" ("John Brown" 638). Brown and Sumner were heroes to Douglass because they foster the inherent qualities of a hero identified by Emerson – intelligence, strength, fortitude – into the service of a great cause, abolition. For both Douglass and Emerson, an individual's willingness to act on his beliefs is his true measure. Douglass praises the people of Great Britain who show themselves willing to "act for [the] abolition" of slavery ("Presidential Campaign" 402), while Emerson continues to pair thought and action in "Spiritual Laws": "the effect of every action is measured by the depth of the sentiment from which it proceeds" (317). With the straightforward question of heroism in the third week of the semester, the conversational vision I held for the class when I constructed the syllabus bloomed. Students began to see more similarities than differences in the topics broached in the writings of these two men. Their styles and their immediate goals were different, but both men were extremely attuned to their audiences. In order to achieve their personal and professional goals, Douglass and Emerson recognized that they needed to connect their individual interests (abolition, fame, financial reward) to the larger nineteenth-century debates on national identity, capitalism,
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gender roles, and religious beliefs. And in this regard, the students in the class were now able to join the discussion being convened by scholars like Hugh Egan and Len Gougeon. Egan takes as his starting point Emerson's relatively unknown poem, "On Freedom," in order "to view the trajectories of America's two most important 19th-century public intellectuals as they cross and re-cross one another" (204). Gougeon, in his 2012 essay, also explores the intersections between Emerson and Douglass, but he details the ways in which Emerson may have used the figure of Douglass to define militant abolitionism as well as the ways Douglass may have striven to become the "anti-slave" modeled in Emerson's speeches. Being aware of the questions raised by scholars sharpened their final reading days and provided the foundation for the creation of individual comparative projects in the fourth week of the semester.

The readings for the final days of the summer session were challenging, but given their immersive experience as scholars of Douglass and Emerson, the students approached the essays with aplomb. They were assigned Emerson's "Circles," "Experience," "Politics," and "New England Reformers" as well as "Address to the People of the United States" (1883), "The Nation's Problem" (1889), and "Why is the Negro Lynched?" (aka "The Lesson of the Hour" 1894) by Douglass. Pairing "Politics" and "The Nation's Problem," students explored the essays' larger conversation about equality, as a theoretical philosophy and as a practical policy. The authors seem, at times, despondent about the current state of the country, and both convey a sense of urgency. Douglass declares that "at no period since the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, have the moral, social, and political surroundings of the colored people of this country been more solemn and foreboding that they are this day" (726). Emerson's despair over the honor and actions of the government might be seen in his brief denunciation: "the less government we have, the better" (567). Yet neither man drops the metaphorical mic and walks away. Both thinkers still see in political theory and in actual governance hope for the continued struggle to ensure the equal treatment of all men, if only to allow for the pursuit of their "inner genius" (Emerson, "Experience" 492). Emerson, logically, returns to the individual man and expresses a faith in "governments [that] have their origin in the moral identity of man" (566). Conversely, Douglass clarifies the two types of equality that concern him: "one potential and the other actual, one theoretical and the other practical" (731). Although a firm believer in the beauty
and power of language to inspire men, Douglass pushes for his audience to act on their beliefs: "We should not be satisfied by merely quoting the doctrine of equality as laid down in the Declaration of Independence, but we should give it practical illustration" (731).

This statement by Douglass leads naturally to the second major discussion thread pursued by the students in the final weeks of the class: man's individual duty or responsibility to society. We started with a few generalizations: Emerson's discussions of duty tend to be internal or broadly principled while Douglass' understanding of the term is external and more focused on external action. But those simplistic categories disintegrated as we worked closely with the essays. Emerson's understanding of duty does begin with the process of knowing oneself. But that awareness was never intended to be the ultimate goal. One crucial goal of this introspection was aligned with civic responsibility. The Sage of Concord urges his readers in "Experience" to seek true understanding, "to finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours," for that is "wisdom" (479). When we make that effort, we can then contribute fully to society. In his meditation on "Politics," Emerson connects that internal journey of self-knowledge with civic duty. "[E]ach of us has some talent, can do somewhat useful, or graceful, or formidable, or amusing, or lucrative" (568). Moreover, if we continue to develop our own characters, we will invariably demand the same firmness of character in our elected officials and our government. He explains, "the same necessity which secures the rights of person and property against the malignity or folly of the magistrate, determines the form and methods of governing, which are proper to each nation, and to habit of thought" (563).

The statements made by Douglass on the subject of duty run parallel to those made by Emerson. In language reminiscent of the Preamble to the Constitution, he tells the Convention of Colored Men at Louisville, Kentucky in "Address to the People of the United States" that we are "charged with the duty of doing what we may to advance the interest and promote the general welfare of a people lately enslaved" (669). Douglass, as in many of his speeches, does not end with a general charge to his audience. He furnishes them with specific directives, often encouraging them to engage others in those tasks. Therefore, one of the chief responsibilities held by the leaders of African American organizations is to "make such representations and adopt such measures as in our judgment may help to bring about a better understanding and a more friendly feeling between themselves and their
white fellow-citizens" (669). It is the civic responsibility of all people in positions of authority to engage in never-ending conversations for the betterment of all people.

There is a notable point of connection between the definitions of duty fostered by Emerson and Douglass – accountability. Both authors argue that it is the duty of a friend, of a citizen, to hold others accountable for their words and actions. In "The Nation's Problem," Douglass contends that "no man can to a better service to another man than to correct his mistakes, point out his harmful errors, show him the path to truth, duty, and safety" (730). Emerson agrees. In his "Man the Reformer," the essayist studies the ways humans are responsible for and to each other and the representatives they elect. He declares, "the duty of every man should assume his own vows, should call the institutions of society to account, and examine their fitness to him" (143). While both men feel called as essayists and orators to inspire their audiences, they both recognize the danger of inspiring youth within a bubble of heightened emotion. The young people who hear their empowering calls to know and trust themselves must be directed to offer their talents to the service of others, especially those without their opportunities or talents. And, in viewing their peers, those youths must have the firmness of character to hold them accountable when they fail to contribute their time and geniuses.

We closed the intense summer session with a pragmatic question: "So what?" On some level, these students were motivated to read and debate these essays simply for graduate course credit. What relevancy, if any, would these essays have for the general American reader? Why should we attempt to discover and enter the discussion being held by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass over a hundred years ago? In that last week, a common question emerged – common to the essays of Emerson and Douglass and common to the 19th century and 21st century. These essays appear to ask readers, "How does an individual respond to inequality when he is the subject of prejudice or when she sees others being discriminated against?" That inquiry emerges in the context of education and personal development as well as labor and the economy in the essays.

Both authors are deeply concerned with the state of education in the United States. Douglass focuses more on universal access to basic instruction for all Americans, regardless of class, race, or gender, while Emerson more often directs his comments to college students. He wishes to provoke the young men who have been blessed with the
opportunities to secure a university education to exercise critical thinking to fix the weakness in the system. He laments in "The American Scholar" that students have become "decent, indolent, complaisant"; as a consequence, "the mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself" (70). It follows that readers who are making a personal and economic investment in their own educations would identify the 21st-century relevancy of these claims. After Emerson tells readers to know and trust themselves, he gives the self-identified scholar a national responsibility in "The Method of Nature": "Whilst the multitude of men degrade each other, and give currency to desponding doctrines, the scholar must be a bringer of hope, and must reinforce man against himself" (116). The exigency of this call demands that scholars attend to their personal development. In the essay which aligns portions of his personal philosophy with Emerson's, "Self-Made Men," Douglass glorifies the effort required by such individuals: "we may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!! Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work" (161). To this group of readers – most of whom work full-time jobs and raise families while attending graduate school – this declaration gives witness to the dedication and sacrifice they were exhibiting in their daily lives.

After the context of inequality in opportunities for educational and personal development, the second most powerful lens through which to view these essays for these 21st-century readers was economic. The employment and entrepreneurial avenues for this generation of students has been severely impacted by the Recession of 2008 and the subsequent economic reality exposed by the Occupy movement. These students, therefore, identified the lasting impression the Panic of 1837 had on the thinking of Douglass and Emerson. The Emerson essay that motivated them to begin this conversation, "The American Scholar," attacks the selfishness of the extremely wealthy: "public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat" (70). Their actions and attitudes are depriving a younger generation of air, and their indifference to the wheezing of the economic asthmatics they have created is not just unconscionable, it is un-American. In the "New-England Reformer," Emerson more precisely addresses the question of unequal pay, "why should professional labor and that of the counting house be paid so disproportionately to the labor of the porter, and the woodsawyer?" (593) The readers in this class, trained for
careers that were being outsourced or recast as part-time and benefits ineligible, made
associations with Emerson's question and the soaring salaries and benefit packages paid to
CEOs and administrators in higher education in their era. Emerson concludes in "The
Young American," "this is the good and this the evil of trade, that it would put everything into
market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself" (221). And it is on this point that we have
one of the key intersections of thought between Emerson and Douglass. If you are unwilling
to devote yourself to abolition for religious or philosophical reasons, the economic argument
is incontrovertible. If you agree one group is legally saleable, what is to preclude someone
in authority from someday deciding, in the name of free trade, that the group to which you
belong can legally be bought and sold? The forces of trade see only profit, and if your sale
might benefit the interests of business, it would logically be a desirable outcome. Revisiting
some of Douglass' arguments against slavery gains new relevancy in this pragmatic
audience to the most visible spectacle of the slave trade, the slave auction. "Attend the
auction; see men examined like horses; see the forms of women rudely and brutally
exposed to the shocking gaze of American slave-buyers. See this drove sold and separated
forever" (198). Here is the natural consequence of the economic disparity deplored by
Emerson in his essays, the dehumanizing of people for the sake of trade, "one of the
peculiarities of American institutions" (197). For this generation of readers in 2015, the
larger argument about labor and economics both Emerson and Douglass pursue achieved
an eerie resonance.

The pairing of questions and themes presented in this article represents a mere
fraction of the parallels examined during this five-week immersive class on the essays of
Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass. The students understood that they could
claim membership in Emerson's audience when he issues this invitation in "The Young
American": "I call upon you, young men, to obey your heart, and be the nobility of this land"
(226). They also felt inspired by Emerson's gentle challenge in "Experience": "every roof is
agreeable to the eye, until it is lifted" (472). And while the summer of 2015 saw our nation
struggling with many social, economic, and political challenges, the students were
heartened by a simple affirmation offered by Douglass in his "Present Condition and Future
Prospects of the Negro People": "We are one nation, then. If not one in immediate
condition, at least one in prospects" (253). So, are these essays relevant in the 21st century? Yes, of course. Every reader who had the opportunity to read, discuss, and write about the essays of Emerson and Douglass in this immersive course had a moment of epiphany. In entering the broader conversation being held in these 19th-century texts by two of the greatest thinkers and writers of a generation, these students gained the perspective and vocabulary to identify and debate some of the related questions pressing for attention in 2015.


Thompson, Roger. "Emerson's 'Fate,' September 11, and an Ethical Hermeneutic."


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