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Rhetorical Inquiry Through the Lives of Douglass and Truth

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by Andrew Maples

I. Introduction

This unit seeks to provide usable questions and explorations to deepen student engagement with the language acts of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. A study of the speech, writing, and presentation of these two 19th century activists should situate their stories in time and place through rhetorically analyzing speaker and audience relationships. This is work that welcomes values and motivation conversations--work often glossed over in high school rhetorical analysis strategies, work that can contribute to a classroom culture of debate and contemporize older texts by stimulating historical thinking and inquiry. Teachers are accustomed to filling in background knowledge and performing the ever-expanding work of contextualization, but for me, reading Douglass and Truth biographies causes how they express themselves to re-enter and re-animate their lives and vice versa while history as a timeline gains dimension. This unit asks you to put language alongside experience alongside events alongside theories of how persuasion happens.

I teach 11th and 12th grade English, so I'm imagining your older secondary students would take this dive with you, especially those students learning about American Literature. We are required to teach Douglass's first autobiography in my district, so this unit could be a companion to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, while giving students a needed, black female take on the abolitionist and reconstruction years of the black freedom struggle (and where it overlaps the struggle for women's rights). I definitely think history teachers who take interpreting primary sources seriously could adapt this material to their designs. Structurally, the unit begins by questioning one of my favorite acronyms and then by proposing a list of questions, not to replace it completely, but to define its limits and further it. This battery of rhetorical inquiry questions can be used with any anecdote I describe, but of course, some stories exemplify some questions better than others. The questions are widely applicable, but Douglass and Truth are worth fighting to understand more fully. The questions then lead into activities about how lives speak.

Let's begin with one story among many. Before reading David W. Blight's *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, I knew the self-fashioning Douglass from the 1845 *Narrative*. The detailed and thick biography brought Douglass to life with episodes like I'll share throughout the unit. I paraphrase this one from Blight:

On May 7, 1850, in New York, during intense debate over the Compromise of 1850 and its Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass, at an American Anti-Slavery Society meeting crashed by a racist mob, faces off against an Irish-German ward boss and political thug, Isaiah Rynders, a lethal guy. Rynders took the platform and claimed

*that blacks were part of the monkey species and that race mixing violated nature. Douglass was compelled by fellow abolitionists to respond which he did, though frequently interrupted by Rynders at his elbow. At one point Douglass asked the crowd, "Am I not a man?" The gang leader then chimed in, "You are not a black man; you are only half a n*****." To which Douglass replied, "He is correct: I am, indeed, only half a negro, a half brother to Mr. Rynders." The crowd fell out, and Douglass seemed to enjoy the invitation to be cleverly combative. Rynders later admitted that Douglass's response was "as good a shot as I ever had in my life." Blight says many times throughout the book that "Douglass gave as he took" in contentious settings and back-and-forth newspaper smear jobs.¹*

Here's my first attempt at unpacking this story: Douglass fried that man, and while his autobiography includes scathing analyses of slavery and not so subtle jabs at slaveholders, a small anecdote shows Douglass quickly and extemporaneously correcting a hateful term and making a joke while seeking connection through a willingness to debate and by suggesting a larger, human brotherhood. He educated and entertained and didn't disappoint either side of the race issue pre-Civil War that day.

Not too bad. Often, to analyze the rhetorical situation, I give my students the acronym SPACECAT, a memory device, and a kind of built environment that stands for:

Speaker: Frederick Douglass

Purpose: To defend himself in public against a racist attack by a gang leader

Audience: The American Anti-Slavery Society and the invading, intolerant mob

Context: May 7, 1850 in New York during intense debate about the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act, early in Douglass's political life fighting for the abolition of slavery

Exigence: Shots fired to start an insult battle.

Choices: Douglass humorously outwits his opponent but also creates a connection while earning his respect. Douglass also references the sexual politics of slavery.

Appeals: ethos...shows his credibility when verbally sparring, pathos...arouses excitement, logos...his body presented as proof of his membership in the ranks of men

Tone: restrained aggression, swaggery banter, punchy

SPACECAT is jazzy as far as acronyms go, and the teaching would certainly not end at SPACECAT. But SPACECAT is answer oriented. I want my students to resist quick answers and plug and play test strategies (this one is big in AP world). The goal is to stay thinking longer. CAT carries the weight of interpretation, and SPACE is mostly fill in the blank. The first 'C' I often supply because the connections required typically need internalized frameworks that aren't quite usefully there or that I only know because I researched it. Students deserve a different kind of cat. We need an inquiry-based rhetorical analysis.

II: Rationale

Truth's voice lends corroboration and counterpoint to Douglass's witness. One experience is not enough; Douglass and Truth's lives "bang against and reveal".² Douglass and Truth were both Christian practitioners, Douglass first by way of preaching's performative possibilities and Truth by way of a vision of God

everywhere.³ They were both formerly enslaved people who traveled widely, using public speaking to communicate their messages. They both changed their names; Truth chose both of hers, perhaps to reflect the itinerant preaching lifestyle change she was making, and a fugitive Douglass's last name was suggested after a character in the Sir Walter Scott poem, "The Lady of the Lake", forecasting nicely his literary-ness. He added that extra 's' for distinction.⁴ Douglass was from Maryland, half white, was more political, actively seeking public office later in life, and he is remembered most for his autobiographies, the first of which is the most famous slave narrative of all time. Truth entered the public sphere later in her life than Douglass, was from New York and illiterate, preferred to live communally (once in a cult), and is remembered mostly for things she didn't actually say because Harriet Beecher Stowe of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Frances Dana Gage, a radical feminist, imaginatively borrowed from the witty and powerful person she actually was.⁵ So whereas white women's versions of Truth obscure her, Douglass's own authorial voice and churning revisions to his own life often makes him inscrutable.⁶

These two leaders demand attention and have achieved the status of American icon. In addition to the language they bequeathed us through a paper trail only attributable to historical foresight (FD) or by convoluted, appropriated pathways (ST), they curated their image obsessively, a side of their persuasive self-presentation also worth studying. They both dressed in a middle class style. Truth sold photographs of herself on trading card sized *cartes-de-visite* with the byline, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance."⁷ She was always worried about money, but she knew her worth. Douglass, perhaps the most photographed person of the 19th century, stormily furrowed his brow, looking beyond the camera in the fashion of the day and looking ready to roar beneath his mane. He has often been compared to a lion.⁸ There is only one picture of him smiling. So it's decided: a study of these two requires pictures and word pictures.

Biography brings up questions about who has the right to tell a story and who speaks for whom and what's at stake and who gets to be the judge.⁹ Again, these questions help us think historically and rhetorically. Lives emphasize the "intrinsically human character of history".¹⁰ Lives give us a reference point for how world events are also personal events, helping us "avoid [a] monolithic reading of the past".¹¹ Education has long played a role in what lives will be protected and valued and whose lives will be sacrificed.¹² Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth deserve more than a passing glance, and I hope that a rhetorical inquiry into their lives could serve as a model for comparing black leaders in the 20th century like W.E.B. DuBois alongside Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr. alongside Malcolm X. I also think that, though not contemporaries of each other, James Baldwin and Ta Nahesi Coates would work, and Coates even asks for it.

A life is a good teacher because its consistencies give us a model to emulate, and its nuances, choices and flaws, give us inspiration, igniting what Lerner in "Why teach biography?" calls the "moral imagination".¹³ It became clear while reading biographies of prominent black leaders that they all make creative conflict.¹⁴ Douglass and Truth, by necessity, frequently had to define themselves by opposition. The key seems to be that they insisted on discourse, sometimes politically hopeful, sometimes actually hopeful, sometimes courting public scorn, sometimes coding insult, sometimes not, and sometimes arguing for a body count. Joan Scott, in "The Evidence of Experience" calls for the importance of the literary to the historical project, and this perked the English teacher in me right up.¹⁵ History is the study of change, so "the meanings of categories of identity change and with them the possibilities for thinking the self...That locus, that margin, the split first allows, then demands the appropriate language--now spoken, now written, in both directions over the gap".¹⁶ Scott's language even begins to hover as she makes this point, and the personal and spiritual journeys of Douglass and Truth locate their thoughts as they stalk the systemic incoherencies of their time and space.¹⁷

In seeking new meanings, we need stories. Douglass and Truth were fluent in biblical metaphor, doling out pointed and subtle Bible justice, using old roots to make new shoots. Douglass and Truth needed their stories to be believed because they were proof of slavery's inherent brutality. Douglass told his own self made man story across three lengthening autobiographies, always catching himself up to the present, perhaps proving himself to himself.¹⁸ He published the first time to silence doubters and to regain some agency in the Garrisonian abolitionist camp.¹⁹ When accused of telling lies by someone who remembered him as Fred Bailey, he thanked the man publicly for proving his identity.²⁰ Truth sent six copies of her autobiography along with a letter to the newspaper correcting Stowe's story about her, saying I'm not from Africa, I don't say "honey," and here's where to look to learn about me.²¹ She insisted on her version of events as she could. Our stories light up in the presence of other stories, and a biography is a structured collection of them. We will see "how individuals use the space between normative systems and freedom of action which always exist".²²

From history education guru Sam Wineburg: "If history is to be anything, it must be an education in thinking, not merely remembering".²³ I chose rhetoric because language and other modes of self-presentation can be traced throughout the black freedom struggle in America and also because teachers must spotlight and pursue meaningful discourse. Students need us to be explicit, so they can learn to spot echo chambers and bias that the internet spits out relentlessly. Rhetorical analysis is a chance to slow down, and students will gain an opportunity to question and observe how masters of persuasion communicate their ideas "within the boundaries prescribed by language available".²⁴ While my goal is to assemble a more rigorous and living process for internalizing and using rhetoric, these practices need a substrate in which to flourish. We need models and not just at the moment of a famous speech act or lauded composition, but stories from across a richly complicated life. Douglass and Truth model a dogged willingness to engage with the circumstances of their creation and to recreate themselves. Self-creation is a political act.²⁵

III. Content Matter Discussion

I want to show what I think is possible by analyzing different stories from the Blight and Nell Irvin Painter biographies a rhetorical inquiry question at a time. All together, the question list can serve as a framework for studying rhetoric in the high school English classroom. I'm using Sharon Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* to guide me in this task. Crowley's project is about getting people to talk, and through the lens of rhetoric, she puts values back into the realm of argumentative discourse.

Here is a quick list of the questions and how they might interface with SPACECAT if you don't want to read all the way. I hope you do though because these are storied lives and the questions themselves could use some background to pose well for students:

1. **What is the disagreement?**
2. **What values undergird the beliefs expressed? AND Why do we need the beliefs we live out?**
3. **What is the difference that prompted the argument? OR What is the chain of difference that led to this position?**
4. **Where did the persuasive event temporarily arrive?**
5. **Is the argument reasonable, or is the arguer relying on something else like authority/credibility/personal branding, or emotion, perhaps through story or eloquence?**

6. **How does the speaker simultaneously interrupt and hook into, formulate and connect with, circulating discourses?**
7. **What arguments are available to the speaker in his or her time and space? OR How does the speaker recombine or disorient already aligned forces?**
8. **Do you notice evidence of ideology or assertions about the way things are that are presented as facts instead of conjectures? OR How does the speaker allow for the movement of difference?**
9. **What is the belief doing for the person who holds it, and how does that belief influence their behavior? AND Is the belief expressing a fantasy on any scale?**

1. Disagreements motivate us to express ourselves, and we have to be willing to disagree openly to maintain democracy.²⁶ Douglass was fresh on the abolitionist circuit, and he had found his vocation as orator. At this point, he was a Garrisonian which meant he was being mentored by William Lloyd Garrison whose abolitionist doctrine was defined by moral suasion and immediatism. The former meant that hearts and minds needed changing before the laws could change, and the latter that slavery was an individual and national sin.²⁷ A fruitful exercise would be tracing the Garrisonian ideas through the 1845 *Narrative*. This was basically a religious movement, so at gatherings, Douglass and company were attacking the consciences of communities and particularly the hypocrisy of the church and its clergy. The churches in Concord had closed their doors. Blight quotes and connects: “Douglass did not disappoint. In the ‘inconvenient, uncomfortable’ space of the courthouse town hall, Douglass held forth in the afternoon on how he was ‘not a fugitive from slavery, but a fugitive slave.’ That he was still ‘in slavery’ was due to the American churches’ sanctifying and justifying the tyranny of slaveholding. Looking his audience in the eyes, he declared, ‘You are yourselves our enslavers’”.²⁸ This was a theme that Douglass could hold court on and can be linked to his observations of Covey in the *Narrative*.

The first question is: **What is the disagreement?** If both sides don’t clarify their positions, the dispute does not include respect for the opponent and the outcome might not be just.²⁹ Covey used biblical chapter and verse to justify his use of the lash, but northern churches were likely giving silent approval by kowtowing to cultural habits or backing down from obligations like in Concord. Why? Why don’t we like to disagree? Because disagreement seems to be a precursor to discord.³⁰ The goal is to foster disagreement without bringing out any level of violence: impoliteness, threats, coercion, physical harm.³¹ Violence seeks deterrence; if it silences, it does not guarantee persuasion.³² If democratic confrontation isn’t allowed, we risk arguments based on other forms of collective identification (like race).³³ Douglass is extremely direct in the above quote. He widens the location of slavery to include the North because of his presence, still technically enslaved, there. He mastered the call-out, but on another occasion when speaking in Scotland, Douglass tells a fictitious story of himself being auctioned off to raise money for the cause of religious freedom overseas. He demands that churches in Scotland fundraising in the American South “Disgorge the plunder”.³⁴ No part of slavery or the slavetrade should exist in religious institutions. Disagreements are multifaceted, but students should try to deeper and wider than the disagreement was with slavery. Hopefully, you can see how these questions swell.

2. It’s very difficult to disagree with people whose motivation stems from moral or passionate commitment, and we know that desires and values influence what we believe.³⁵ Rhetoric, as opposed to strict reason, can also argue from values standpoint.³⁶ So we want to ask the question: **What values undergird the beliefs expressed?** This is not always easy to tease out and can take some excavation. There is no question that Truth evolved. She went from being a sexually abused (by her mistress) slave, to a preacher in the

pentacostal Methodist vein, to meeting abolitionists and feminists and hitting the road. But Truth could be somewhat of a sacred clown, often “interrupt[ing] earnest proceedings with irreverence”.³⁷ In the 1850s, spiritualism had become vogue with reform-minded Americans because salvation was put in the hands of people and original sin left behind. While Truth eventually accepted the existence of spirits, she was very skeptical of seances, which were an extension of the idea that the spirits of God and people cannot be separated.³⁸ At her first seance, she made fun of the proceedings, insisting she knew better, saying, “Come spirit, hop up here on the table, and see if you can’t make a louder noise”.³⁹

Within belief structures, some values are considered non-negotiable, and instead of entering an argument ready to risk a changed mind, people invest their energy disavowing other claims or going after people.⁴⁰ Truth was solidly in the God camp. She had little patience for people who lost themselves in a fit of religious fervor and “refused to attend meetings where the ecstasy turned bruising”.⁴¹ So she was a God-fearing Christian who valued self-control who was unconventional in the more middle class settings she sought out. Once in Salem, Ohio, she interrupted Douglass when he was preaching blood and armed resistance against whites. The meeting was brought to a standstill when she said, “Frederick, is God gone?”⁴² In both of these stories, Truth was listening very intently, either for spirits or before asking a clarifying question, but she clearly had and shared her doubts. She valued honest communication, as her name suggests, and impermanence, which her name also suggests.⁴³ We must expose ourselves to other viewpoints to resist indoctrination.⁴⁴

An extension question is: **Why do we need the beliefs we live out?** Painter points out a long history of African American women acting with the support of supernatural aid to counter worldly struggles.⁴⁵ Truth is within a tradition and a unique expression of it. Her religious values might be part of her motive and confidence to speak, and the trauma of childhood and adulthood could also influence reaching toward the stability of a belief structure. To her merit, she never seemed rigid or stuck. Values are subject to change, and this is what we want students to embody when arguing.

3. Liberal thought values freedom, tolerance, privacy, reason, the rule of law, and equality (more in some times and places than others).⁴⁶ Aristotle, the old rhetorician, thought participation in the community was what freedom was about, where we are neither ruled or ruling.⁴⁷ He thought there were three issues the polis can consider: what we should do, what has been done, and what actions deserve praise or blame.⁴⁸ All three implicate values applied to the future, the past, and present accordingly. In the liberal tradition, values are treated as private affairs, separate from reason, and not up for grabs on the city state’s agenda.⁴⁹ If we aim for consensus in a democracy, we might lose our democratic practices because politics is not rational: passions move us and groups aren’t individuals.⁵⁰ We have to keep arguing! Our identities are formed by excluding and establishing hierarchies, and difference sparks ongoing discourse.⁵¹ What could our question be? How about...**What is the difference that prompted the argument?** OR even better: **What is the chain of difference that led to this position?**

As previously discussed, Douglass began his abolitionist career as a Garrisonian, but their purist strategy of only battling slavery in the arena of public opinion and not also the lawbooks, along with some restrictive management techniques of the uncontrollable Douglass, brought about a nasty break-up between Garrison and Douglass, who had a father-son type relationship. Another contributing factor was Douglass’s first trip to Great Britain to escape a capture that his elevating profile was making more likely.⁵² There he started wanting to be his own platform without limits. He wrote to Garrisonians back home, “I will speak in any meeting where

free speech is allowed”.⁵³ He was packaging his own message and didn’t think it at odds to claim slavery is evil at the same time that it is a threat to national security. Hurt and on fire, he defended his right to change his views by telling his old friends that “denunciation, coldness, and unkindness were not arguments”.⁵⁴ Douglass aligned himself with the strategy of Gerrit Smith which involved an anti-slavery interpretation of the constitution and political action because “every man is an abolitionist for himself, but every man is not unselfish to be an abolitionist for another”.⁵⁵ I love Douglass’s description of how anti-slavery meetings could be during this time: “disgraceful, alarming, divided, united, glorious, and most effective”.⁵⁶ Douglass again defines himself by opposition and embraces the adversarial. People are not enemies; they are opponents.⁵⁷ Douglass could never let go of a slight, saying, “Let no man succeed in insulting me!”, so the anti-slavery infighting wound him up.⁵⁸ There is a possibility for respect and justice because each man is willing to address and be addressed by someone else, but the fight did get pretty nasty (Douglass was accused of having an affair), enough that Stowe stepped in asking Garrison to squash the beef.⁵⁹ But the point remains: if either side caved against his will, both sides would be less than before.⁶⁰ Douglass was right that the war would ultimately be about motives not opinions. As a politician he always took the most pragmatic approach, even as he got more radical, and looking back, he said it was hard to believe these internal debates were so heated.⁶¹ Do you see the dominoes that lead to Douglass’s position? It takes some inference and context, and often research, to work your way back in terms of how an argument emerged, but it’s much easier to humanize the arguer when you do.

4. If students are to be rhetoricians or rhetors, they are trying, per Aristotle’s definition to “see the available means of persuasion”.⁶² If they’re good, they will be able to find openings that help everyone involved think about themselves and the situation, and their relationship to the situation, differently.⁶³ Keep these openings in mind. Of course, this superpower can be used responsibly or irresponsibly, as the common identification of rhetoric with spin tells us.⁶⁴ Aristotle noted that there is ethical risk involved in putting art and personality into the commons.⁶⁵ Ancients called rhetoric invention, and the discovering and crafting of arguments is where the art emerges.⁶⁶ Over time, people refine what works well and develop theoretical perspectives which allow others to observe well.⁶⁷ So there is a playbook, and there is a game with some rules, but the terms winner and loser aren’t helpful because persuasion isn’t just about right and wrong; it’s about a willingness to change, something more like teamwork.⁶⁸ There is always more to say, so the question that I think can be applied to rhetorical situations is: **Where did the persuasive event temporarily arrive?**

Truth’s white audiences often saw her as an object of art or something exotic. She didn’t have much control over how others represented her (Stowe was known to “do Sojourner,” imitating Truth’s baritone voice and making her dialect too southern), but Truth initiated what others in turn used for their own ends.⁶⁹ Truth’s “tough talk and humorous delivery allowed her to get away with sharp criticism but allowed her listeners to ignore her meaning”.⁷⁰ The good preacher chooses her passage wisely, so by evoking the story of Esther at a women’s rights convention in New York in 1853, she is speaking about a woman who is also from another threatened group, the Jews. Esther was queen and had been passing as a Gentile, but when she finds out that a massacre of Jews was about to happen, she risks her life and reveals her identity by asking the King for help when she wasn’t summoned. The king asks her what she needs twice, offers her half the kingdom, and invites the Jews to kill those who would attack them. Truth suggests intersectionality, and in comparing the government to the king, makes governing men in America look pretty stingy about what they are offering. Her audience would have known their bible pretty well, and the name Esther might have lit up the rest of that story in their minds. But because Truth is humble at the beginning of her speech (“I know ‘a little mite’ about

women's rights and wanted 'to throw in my little mite, to keep the scales a-movin.'") and ends it with trademark, spunky playfulness ("I don't want any man to be killed, but I am sorry to see them so short minded. But we'll have our rights; see if we don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can. You may hiss as much as you like, but it is comin'."), people could miss the veiled threat to men and whites.⁷¹ This persuasive event temporarily arrived at one place in the immediate context because of widespread Old Testament re-readings and Truth's tone and demeanor, but arrives for us as code beyond simple metaphor, as anger, and as a black woman refusing to choose race or gender, choosing both. Also, because I get to read these words, the double meaning of mite stands out to me. Did Truth sneak a humblebrag in there?

5. Liberal discourse seeks understanding, but just because we understand something doesn't mean we automatically agree.⁷² Liberal discourse asks that morals and emotions are put to the test by reason. The old Enlightenment man, John Locke, distrusted enthusiasm, what he called a "warmed brain", because its products can't be proved by anything other than intuition.⁷³ There is a difference between understanding and conviction.⁷⁴ But once ignorance has been fixed by education, the goal of the rhetor is to convict, do away with error, and pull out all the stops to resist resistance.⁷⁵ Remember that logos is just one of the appeals in the triangle. Maybe, instead of listing appeals, we should ask: **Is the argument reasonable, or is the arguer relying on something else like authority/credibility/personal branding or emotion, perhaps through story and eloquence?**

You can see it in the title, but Blight's biography takes care to describe Douglass as a prophet throughout. His thesis rings true. He includes some characteristics of prophets like the apocalyptic capacity to think of history as a capital 'S' Story with endings and regenerations, like how prophets must be shattered in order to shatter others, and like his engagement with society over its fundamental values.⁷⁶ After Douglass returns from that first transformative trip to Great Britain, he gets angrier. This corresponds with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott decision, leading up to secession and carrying through the Civil War. He begins to egg on violence. Of the fugitive-slave crisis: "Two or three dead slaveholders will make this law a dead letter".⁷⁷ We know from his first autobiography that he could brawl, and he would throw down to protect himself during abolitionist meetings turned riots. But while talking of violence is not committing it, Douglass doesn't hold back. His style is the vehicle for how he views reality, and racist policy and racial violence were teaching him. Then he turned around and taught, "[Black people] need this deed for their self-respect. An image in the American mind, Douglass asserted, had to be destroyed--that of fugitives who 'quietly cross their hands, adjust their ankles to be chained, and march off unhesitatingly to the hell of slavery.' In the public mind, he said, such behavior was judged 'their normal condition.' But no longer. 'This reproach must be wiped out, and nothing short of resistance on the part of colored men, can wipe it out. Every slaveholder who meets a bloody death...is an argument in favor of the manhood of our race. Resistance is, therefore, wise as well as just'.⁷⁸ Is this argument reasonable? Is it moral? Is it justifiable political violence? Emotions were running high, but rightfully so. As we attempt to separate reason from force of delivery, we also must remember that reason and emotion need each other and build on each other.⁷⁹ Douglass's philosophy of violence is great fodder for classroom conversation. He saw Black Lives Matter coming, quoting Isaiah, "There is no peace, said my God, to the wicked".⁸⁰

6. We also have to consider that the language we use and how we adapt it to time and place constructs us and the world.⁸¹ Words and speech refer to some part of reality, and they can join tightly to ideologies and beliefs that play out in communities.⁸² Language is slippery and foundational at the same time. We can't think without it. And this sounds very abstract, but when we say a word like slavery there are associations the word

carries with it. In America, black chattel slavery is evoked. I've now also heard sex-trafficking described as modern slavery. I grew up with a Baptist minister father, so I also think of Hebrew enslavement in Egypt. I think of the lasting impact of slavery in America and the shapeshifting of oppression. Language, like human subjectivity, can change, can be more than one thing, and is contingent (dependent on meanings that have come before).⁸³ When I see "No Justice, No Peace" tagged on a monument-less pedestal, I now think Isaiah, and I think Douglass. As rhetors, we must use the language available already as a result of shared living to make an argument.⁸⁴ We already know Douglass and Truth could Bible-thump. Douglass carried a book called *The Columbian Orator* with him out of slavery which provided him with not only the conventions of elocution, but also "a vocabulary of liberation".⁸⁵ Because they are tightly networked, words can be ground for persuasion. Here's the question: **How does the speaker simultaneously interrupt and hook into, formulate and connect with, circulating discourses?**⁸⁶

Truth was speaking at a Millerite revival. The Millerites were end times theology with a date set and everything, and Truth had just started preaching as a profession. She knew she wasn't a Millerite when ministers started roiling the crowd. She calmed the people down by calling them "children" and asking them why they were so frenzied, "Are you not commanded to watch and pray?" She then turned to the ministers, and had this to say to everybody: "Here you are talking about being 'changed in the twinkling of an eye.' If the Lord should come, he'd change you to *nothing!* for there is nothing to you. You seem to be expecting to go some parlor *away up* somewhere, and when the wicked have been burnt, you are coming back to walk in triumph over their ashes--this is to be your New Jerusalem!! Now *I* can't see any thing so very *nice* in that, coming back to such a *muss* [her word] as that will be, a world covered with the ashes of the wicked! Besides, if the Lord comes and burns--as you say he will--I am not going away; *I* am going to stay here and *stand the fire*, like Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednago! And Jesus will walk with me through the fire, and keep me from harm. Nothing belonging to God can burn, any more than God himself; such shall have no need to go away to escape the fire! No *I* shall remain. Do you tell me that God's children *can't stand fire?* It is *absurd* to think so".⁸⁷ Yes, that's a long quote from an observer of her rebuke, but we should savor the precious few words we have from Truth. Truth to form, she cites biblically, but she takes the destructive power of fire and makes it a proving ground. She argues for an earth-bound struggle with God's help, not a gloating survival. The fire is proof of relationship with God instead of a means of separation. Also, by denying that change can happen quickly, those who can, amount to nothing because they don't have much substance to begin with. Her words tapped into the situation at hand and reframed a vindictive mindset that seemed to yearn for death. She pivots on the words 'nothing' and 'fire' in a similar way that she does on 'black' telling another crowd, "It took my black face to bring out your black hearts".⁸⁸ It's word hinges; it's serious fun.

7. The question that comes next is: **What arguments are available to the speaker in his or her time and space?** This question is huge, an encircling context question, a consideration of speaker-audience-purpose, the process behind choices. Postmodern thought has turned binaries (black/white) into relationships (shades of gray).⁸⁹ Because of history, ideology, and power structures, the range of possibilities for argument within a given situation varies by person.⁹⁰ Truth could be scathing when criticizing white people, but the way she said it made them laugh. Truth's affect or mood often stood in for the reality of what she said. Can-do-ness, or the power of the capable, emerges because forces like time and place, an available disagreement, an available argument, and who the speaker is (and that he or she spoke) have aligned in one moment.⁹¹ Another way to ask the question of this paragraph is: **How does the speaker recombine or disorient already aligned forces?**⁹²

It was quite the bad habit in the 1800s for white people to racially describe black people, even if they weren't necessarily trying to offend. Resisting racist discourse in a country founded on it is difficult. Pathways become ruts, and white racism is a hegemony that is "still undergoing challenge".⁹³ An example comes from an article about Douglass's first speech in Ireland in 1845. Here's Blight's version of what a member of the press had to say: "Enthralled with his mixed parentage, the reporter declared the orator's appearance...singularly pleasing and agreeable. The hue of his face and hands is rather yellow brown or bronze, while there is little if anything, in his features of that peculiar prominence of lawyer face, thickness of lips, and flatness of nose, which peculiarly characters the true Negro type. His voice is well toned and musical.' Exasperated by these racial characterizations, which he encountered almost everywhere, Douglass sometimes snapped back, declaring in a Cork newspaper they they 'looked like a good advertisement from a slave trader'".⁹⁴ Truth also had to deal with categorical specifications, as we'll look at more later. These exotized descriptions were part of how community was defined between blacks and whites, and such commonplaces, as Crowley tells us, help define communities by frequent usage even as they hold extensive arguments that are not often said.⁹⁵ Commonplaces *are* said when for some reason community values need to be put on display, but because of their familiarity in the community, commonplaces can also be used to launch an argument, which Douglass does here.⁹⁶ He deftly links such language to the auction block and shows how systemic racism evolves and why abolition continues after The Emancipation Proclamation. It becomes an argument because Douglass is able to bring an ideology to the surface, to consciousness.⁹⁷ Ideology is a great topic for the rhetorician because it is a display of how beliefs connect.

8. If Douglass or Truth happened to change any hearts and minds in racist and slaveholding America, it's because they were able to resonate, or politically arouse people to join together, and do it well enough to outpace competing ideologie.⁹⁸ And anyway, most likely their influence would have been only part, a link, of why that person transformed.⁹⁹ Ideological values, along with fantasy and emotion, are major motivators for behavior.¹⁰⁰ When someone's "densely articulated ideology" is threatened, it's a personal threat because there is a personal cost to losing the structures around which your life orbits.¹⁰¹ Sometimes belief structures are used to explain everything in a person's life! When language related to a tightly knitted belief structure is evoked, other language (meaning) is triggered.¹⁰² This is why people imbricated within a belief structure can make connections not necessarily tied to reason, and these connections then get repeated ad infinitum and often thoughtlessly.¹⁰³ These connections create a very high level of sympathetic resonance across their lives. Ideology channels attention, inspires emotional reactions, and then ideas domino, again forming a chain that must be followed to the source.¹⁰⁴ So ideology is always interested, and similarly it takes a never-ending, never-disinterested process to generate alternative positions (another reason why SPACECAT is maybe too static in how it prompts responses).¹⁰⁵ Audiences can listen and change themselves when a climate is created that allows it. This paragraph's rhetorical inquiry question comes from the ancient idea that what exists and what doesn't, what's good and what isn't, and what's possible and impossible should be referred to as conjecture instead of facts.¹⁰⁶ This accounts for the movement of difference, and keeps arguments productive.¹⁰⁷ So...**Do you notice evidence of ideology or assertions about the way things are that are presented as facts instead of conjectures? OR How does the speaker allow for the movement of difference?**

Truth's famous breast-baring episode works to unpack this. Painter cites the following account of what happened. By the late 1850s Truth had enough draw as a speaker to put on a series of meetings in Indiana, Some men kept one of these meetings from ending, claiming that Truth was a man. The fight for authenticity was raging for people outside of the dominant white, male culture. Pro-slavery people in the audience wanted

her to show her breast off-stage to women who would report back to the crowd. Confusion and uproar ensued, but Truth shamed her questioners: "Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some to those white babies had grown to man's estate; that, although they had suckled her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, for more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck! In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame".¹⁰⁸ Truth really keeps the categories in check. She claims responsibility for strong examples of manhood while infantilizing her hateful audience and their insinuations.¹⁰⁹ She resists being just a scrutinized body, throws light on double standards in regards to black bodies vs. white bodies, and avoids any sexual scandal by exploding the madonna-whore dichotomy.¹¹⁰ She certainly allows for the movement of difference. Truth poses here as a southern slave as she speaks to pro-slavery agitators for more black women than just herself within the system of slavery. Her ideology is black feminist, but she allows her audience to reach their own conclusions. She is persuasive, not prescriptive.

9. You are patient to be with me this far, and you are reminded of the shortcut. We just need to talk a little more about motivation. Beliefs are social and must be useful.¹¹¹ Crowley writes, "Our beliefs are continuously formed and transformed by our lifelong interactions with ourselves".¹¹² Rhetors must pay attention to how beliefs fit into their audience's economy of values. People determine "where, how, and with what intensities" they can become involved in the world around points de capiton (quilting points) that hegemonies (dominant dispositions, prevailing ways of seeing) attach to.¹¹³ These collectively determined nodes help us determine what is significant and what gets us in our feelings, and then, in a feedback loop, emotions are the experiences that provide the foundation for our values.¹¹⁴ This is how the points de capiton get fixed and determine identity and resist difference.¹¹⁵ We get emotionally attached. So values and emotions definitely influence behavior.¹¹⁶ Desire arises because there is perceived or actual lack.¹¹⁷ Fantasies, a type of desire, are "pleasure without obligation," and collective fantasies we call myth.¹¹⁸ Myth is there to try to fix some kind of disruption in society, and it has a simplifying effect as it covers up the fact that we can't live up to mythological expectations.¹¹⁹ Language and culture, the imagination, and the real shape our personal feelings, tastes, and opinions, but are we focused enough on the real?¹²⁰ The real is what keeps values conversations communal and up for argument. We ask ourselves: **What is the belief doing for the person who holds it, and how does that belief influence their behavior? AND Is the belief expressing a fantasy on any scale?**

Let's bring ourselves down to the real. Waiting for a ferry, Douglass was once out walking in Battery Park (Manhattan) with two white, female friends of his, the Griffiths sisters. Julia Griffiths, from England, helped Douglass run his first newspaper. Douglass often relied on white women to be his intellectual companions and to make possible his hectic schedule. But back to the story: they were attacked and assaulted by six white men, and Douglass fought them off with an umbrella. Closer to the dock, one of the same assailants jumped out and punched Douglass in the face. The *Times* printed articles that argued Douglass deserved it for violating racial-sexual boundaries. Douglass of course used this attack to make his case even stronger: "His offense, he argued, had never been the companionship with white women, but the assumption of equality with them. America's aristocracy of skin could not tolerate such behavior...Douglass argued that the term 'prejudice' was simply too weak and 'innocent' to capture what blacks endured. A more 'savage' language was required...'Properly speaking,' Douglass contended, 'prejudice against color does not exist in this country. The feeling (or whatever it is) which we call prejudice, is no less than a *murderous, hell-born hatred*

of every virtue which may adorn the character of a black man,' Black men were acceptable as 'appendages,' he said. While 'riding down Broadway in company with ladies,' Douglass wrote, they observed 'several white ladies riding with black servants.' Those well-dressed carriage drivers did not offend the hooligans who attacked Douglass and his companions. Douglass relished his 'impudence'; equality, not color, offended. He had given definition and texture to the idea of racism".¹²¹ Douglass had certainly been shaped by other experiences like this in his life. He "'could not remember to have made a single antislavery tour' when he had 'not been assailed by this mean spirit of caste'".¹²² Douglass built his life around this cause, so it's safe to say, this ranks high in his economy of values. What Douglass does here is name a quilting point, a cultural value that people clearly get upset about. Black people in the vicinity of white people weren't the issue, but even the impression that black people were on an equal footing with whites was. What was the disruption that caused the buttressing myth that some people are more equal than others? The assumption of cultural superiority of European countries that sent colonists seeking religious freedom in America...and we're off, looking for the origins of hate. I want my students to try to go there, but it's helpful to focus on the real of the situation, what happened to Douglass and how Douglass responds. He argues on a basis of cultural values and giving examples, peels back another layer of the world.

IV: Teaching Strategies

Looking back at where we've been, the questions get more psychological as they progress. I think this is OK especially because inference is central to both historical and literary thinking. The theory behind the questions are not the questions, but the theory behind them enriches them.

The actual moment of persuasion is hard to predict, but it's important to recognize that people who are oppressed by hegemonic discourse are more likely to consider changing beliefs, and single-minded people, made possible by isolation or privilege, are less likely to change.¹²³ But a rhetor can try by providing examples of witness, by demanding attention, by valorizing stories of inclusion, by clarifying how values interface with policy, and by recontextualizing with vocabulary shifts.¹²⁴ Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth did all of these things. As teachers, we must create a culturally responsive classroom to transfer the responsibility for learning to students and empower them. This builds agency, and good questions help us get there. By studying rhetoric we are picking apart social situations and building capacity and skills for effectively participating ourselves. This is working toward competence, which confers status enough to speak without consequence. In addition, we need students to collaborate which helps build an audience, and we need a classroom culture where debate is central. We arrive at positions together, and this builds resilience.¹²⁵ Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth are our mentor texts, and I hope you see this inquiry approach to rhetoric as complicated and clear enough to be a moral method to lead students into and out of a text.

History is the study of change, and we have our change agents. The primary intervention of this unit is to look at the language and actions of people who are change advocates. The set of rhetorical inquiry questions and a bundle of activity ideas help us analyze audience-centered communication and how rhetors set up and then surprisingly complete the patterns they initiate. Students will analyze persuasive writing, narrative writing, revisions of autobiographical accounts, speeches, versions of anecdotes, primary vs. secondary sources, problematic sources, out of context appropriations, photographs, paintings, and even a statue. Special care has been taken to keep sources short and thinking long. The teaching should be done in scenes.

Thinking through what would be most helpful for teachers, I am going to provide resource and activity suggestions, sometimes with answer keys of a sort. Look for learning to be self-directed and collaborative, interpreting social and persuasive situations.

V. Activities

1. Teaching with Events. Douglass and Truth were so adept at responding extemporaneously and turning their surroundings and the events of the day into lessons for their audiences. Douglass turned the events of his life into literature. Students need to understand that history is a combination of personal experience, group experience, and how those experiences are represented. Enter current events. Students can find a news article that intrigues them, or you can curate a list to choose from to avoid hunting time. Instead of reporting the 5 W's to the class, or generating a list of comprehension questions for another student to answer, students can write a persuasive one-pager in which they use the article to advocate for change and teach their position. They would need to use at least one of the techniques mentioned above to do it: mobilizing their own witness, demanding attention, using an inclusive story to as a positive example, explaining where values and laws are inconsistent, or taking the vocabulary of an issue and shifting its meaning. The choice allows students to self-differentiate, and the options could result in anything from a personal essay to a shock piece to wordplay on the more sophisticated end of the spectrum.

2. Biblical Metaphor for Current Events and a Reader's Influences. Not every student has Bible trivia under his or her belt, so this activity might take some examples from Douglass and Truth. You can carefully choose pairings of current events and Bible stories that students then do the writing work to connect. The Exodus story is the most frequent analogy Douglass draws, and both Douglass and Truth held Christianity as an ideal that slaveholding and racist America wasn't living up to. Exposure to Biblical stories is a literary project because of ubiquitous allusions in English letters. This also shows students that reading is at its best when memory for what you've read before resonates. By referencing the Israelites in Egypt, Douglass has set himself up to argue from the position of other Christian doctrine, touching ideological webs.

3. Mattering Maps.¹²⁶Crowley, though only mentioning them in passing, woke me to Lawrence Grossberg's mattering maps. Douglass and Truth are our models for engaging with the world in all the interesting ways you'll discuss with students using the questions, but by literalizing Grossberg's explanation of what and how things matter to us, students can see connections within themselves that impact their agency. I've included an example from my life to go with each prompt. I envision this as discussion preparation for creating a group mattering map for Douglass or Truth after the class has already spent some time with them.

Mattering Map Exercise

We are going to try to map where and how we invest in the world. This is about how intensely you self-identify with something which makes something significant to you...which is basically how you make your identity matter.¹²⁷ We are constantly trying to organize pieces of ourselves and finding ourselves at home with what we care about.¹²⁸

1. Start by drawing a circle and writing something inside that you are a huge fan of. You're a fan if it matters to you.¹²⁹ (Example: I love R&B.)

2. With a line, connect to another circle and label it “Sensibility”. Inside the circle write what holds the context of what you’re a fan of together. This can be ways you engage with it or how it operates.¹³⁰ (Example: R&B is smooth and sexy and combines elements of pop, funk, soul, hip hop, and electronic music. It is a black cultural expression. The singer is typically in his or her feelings about some aspect of love, and sad love songs to me are the most beautiful.)
3. Again from the fan circle, draw a line to another circle and label it “Ideology”. Inside this circle write how the thing you’re a fan of helps define your true picture of the world, what is natural and commonsensical to you.¹³¹ (Example: I think the highs of love always contain a deep sadness. I think this has to do with vulnerability and the release that can accompany acceptance.)
4. Connect all three of the circles so far to another circle labeled “Mood”. Mood is not emotions; it’s more a feeling of life. Different parts of our lives feel different to us, and things like meaning and pleasure we take from something change as our mood changes. Mood is important because it determines how invigorated we feel about something. Mood makes meaning less important than our willingness to engage. Write in this circle what kind of mood the thing you’re a fan of puts you in and why.¹³² (Example: R&B is relaxing to me because it contains struggle and drama which feel real, but it’s packaged in such a way that it’s hopeful in spite of lived experience.)
5. Draw an arrow from the mood circle to another circle labelled “Investment”. Investment is how, how much, and where we put energy that we have as we struggle to care, survive, and locate passion to start our own projects. Write in this circle what your investment in this fandom looks like.¹³³ (Example: I obsessively look for new music and put together playlists for my friends on Spotify. These lists function as motivation to keep up and are saturated with alternative R&B. When I write music, it is my own brand of R&B. The challenge is to write a song that is as smooth as possible.)
6. Draw an arrow from your investment circle to a circle labelled “Authenticity”. When we invest in something, we give it extra weight. Because it has more weight in our minds, we further invest, and it matters even more. Something is authentic to you when you see this excess of difference between what matters to you versus something else. Write in this circle you think what you’re a fan of is authentic and what makes it different.¹³⁴ (Example: I really do think that tenderness is how I measure R&B. Even if the tenderness is performative or sometimes hyper-sexualized, the beat needs to groove and the delivery needs to be felt. R&B is authentic because of its soul, its emotional intensity, its not-holding-back and leave-it-all-out-there quality especially in the vocals.)
7. Draw a big arrow below the map so far to a circle called “Empowerment”. Because one thing matters to us, other investments become possible. You can have more energy, feel more control of your life, or feel like you’re still alive. You continue to struggle to make a difference and feel optimistic. Write in this circle how being a fan of this thing empowers you to expand your investment portfolio.¹³⁵ (Example: When I allowed myself to embrace the catchier, poppy pieces of mainstream R&B, getting over an adolescent distaste for popular music, I was able to evolve and find what I really like. Genre of music became less of a concern when I allowed myself to listen.)

Now that you know how this works, you can think about how it applies to stakeholders (fanbases) for different issues, people, and cultural productions in the world. Before we have a discussion, think about what we know Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth were fans of. We’ll create a mattering map together for one of them.

4. Constitutional Interpretation. Recently, I was watching a John Oliver episode about how U.S. History education is bungled frequently in our country. He said succinctly what I was imagining for this exercise--that it’s possible for the Constitution to be revolutionary and racist at the same time. Students could get some good practice with counterargument by reading the Constitution as if they were Frederick Douglass

interpreting this founding document as anti-slavery. Some counterargument sentence stems could be provided, and students would need to acknowledge the parts of the Constitution that are pro-slavery on the way to making Douglass’s argument for him. You can tie back to the rhetorical inquiry questions by referring to values, beliefs, movement of difference, and by encouraging students to hook into the circulating discourses in the document to make their point. This activity is practicing being a rhetor instead of a rhetorician. It could be done in groups with collaborative roles assigned to attend to different rhetorical concerns. Special focus should be given to the Preamble and the amendments prior to the abolishment of slavery, even though the incarceration crisis in our country does require a close look at the wording of Amendment XIII.

5. Evolution of Thought: Across the Autobiographies and the White Poor. When I’ve taught Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, even though it’s short, I don’t necessarily teach every chapter. Schedules often shift, so a nice approach for considering Douglass over time is to use episodes and compare across his first two autobiographies, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855). The third, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), is less highly regarded and less useful for pedagogical purposes. It’s up to you to decide which telling and re-telling you want to juxtapose, but this chart sets you up to consider general shifts across several categories¹³⁶ :

Douglass in 1845	Douglass in 1855
Religious language and elements of a spiritual autobiography	Language of social action and change
His own experience	Generalizing the life of a slave
Freedom derived from Providence + initiative	Freedom derived from intelligence
Introspective and artful, personal	Aware of his role in society, systemic thought
Quest for literacy	Literacy’s political power
Political and spiritual	Strengthens political views: group awareness and call for rebellion
Stark, economical style	Every detail has a background and explanation

This exercise draws attention to subtle language shifts, and how they impact author purpose. Again, this is a way to extend, challenge, and complicate the habits of mind cultivated with the rhetorical inquiry questions.

The first two autobiographies have very different motives, but Douglass was always open-minded and curious. Take for instance how he pivoted his opinion about the white poor during his first trip to Ireland. At first, he felt “accosted” when people would say the Irish lived like slaves, saying that “slavery was not what took away any one right or property in man: it took man himself”.¹³⁷ But Douglass was there during the beginnings of the potato famine, so he ended up drawing some comparisons--that the rich “would as willingly sell on the auction block an Irishman, if it were popular to do so, as an African”.¹³⁸ Then nearly ten years later in *My Bondage, My Freedom* he shows a deeper understanding of class, “...the poor white of the South are wage-slaves whose enmity toward blacks is encouraged by the slave-holders in order to keep both groups politically impotent”.¹³⁹ These statements show growth and a developing nuance for diagnosing society. So often my students read in monotone: what is on the page is the document, and that’s the way it is. Zooming out to a life puts growth mindset on display. Giving students these three quick statements, even asking them to attempt to order the movement of ideas, and then asking them to craft a belief statement at the root of this evolution could work nicely. A journal beforehand asking them to think about the circumstances around which

they have changed their mind in the past might make this transition exercise more effective. Rhetoric is about trading ideas which is how we advance the collective brain.

6. Comparing Douglass and Truth. There are many overlaps between our hero and shero. If you are working through this unit in a detailed way, here is where I encourage you to buy the Blight and Painter biographies. I'll explain Douglass and Truth's interactions with Lincoln to show how the comparisons work, but their views on black community uplift, black colonies, and women's suffrage are also up for grabs.

When Truth met Lincoln in October 1864, she described it in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* as heart-warming and playful. She compared Lincoln to Daniel, still surviving the Lion's Den (the Civil War). She called him "the best president ever" and gave him one of her photographs. He signed her autograph book and showed her beautiful Bible that black people from Baltimore had given him, and she noted the irony that just recently black people weren't allowed to read. She says glowingly that she was treated with "kindness and cordiality" by the "great and good man Abraham Lincoln". She admitted she had never heard of Lincoln before he entered the highest office in the land, and he said he had heard of her many times. Other reports of the meeting aren't as effusive. Lucy Colman, who accompanied Truth to the White House said they had to wait for three and a half hours. Lincoln was "tense and sour. He called Truth 'Aunty' as he would his washerwoman." Colman thought Lincoln was annoyed to be loved as the Great Emancipator.¹⁴⁰

Douglass first met Lincoln late in 1863. He also called Lincoln a "great man" and he relished telling the story to crowds of "a black man at the White House," how he "felt big there" in the inner sanctum of power. He turned this encounter in a kind of comedy routine where he elbows his way past white patronage seekers, the office is cluttered, and Lincoln stands to tower over him. Lincoln also says to Douglass, "I know you". They sat and talked about policy, and Douglass thought Lincoln honest and forthright even though it was tough to take when Lincoln told him poor treatment of black troops was necessary for them to serve at all. Douglass described Lincoln as having a "transparent countenance" and called the encounter a "flying visit". As Douglass was leaving, Lincoln signed Douglass's pass to go South to recruit black soldiers.¹⁴¹ The second time Douglass met with Lincoln, August 19, 1864, he was invited. He had been critical of Lincoln in speeches, and Lincoln asked his advice about how to spread the news of emancipation and get slaves in the South to rebel. Douglass said he was "treated...as a man" by Lincoln and found him to have "a deeper moral conviction against slavery" this time, but there are reports that Lincoln swapping Sambo stories later that day.¹⁴²

Just like will be discussed later with photographs, what's interesting here is the difference between the ideal and the real. When given these brief episodes, students have an opportunity to question if Douglass and Truth's versions are accurate or not and why or why not. Douglass typically didn't hold back his criticism; Lincoln sought him out at his harshest. But it would perhaps be in Douglass and Truth's best interest to make the president look good. He was the best there was to offer, even though his Reconstruction plan included paying slave owners for their slaves and establishing a black colony outside of America.¹⁴³ Also, if Lincoln patronized them, that story would not square with the respectable image they both crafted.¹⁴⁴ I would use side by side stories like these to get students to write compare/contrast paragraphs, using frames if necessary, to practice the language moves required.

After Truth died, her dedicated friend Frances Titus commissioned Frank C. Courter to paint Truth's meeting with Lincoln.¹⁴⁵ This piece of art could be interrogated. How is it different from the actual encounter? Why have people used it so often as if it was painted from life? How is it derivative of Truth's photographs? Getting students to flood an image with questions can reveal its mysteries. Sometimes to develop detail awareness, I break a photograph into quadrants. When the photograph is reassembled, students see it

differently.

7. Using Douglass and Truth. As mentioned early on, Truth’s touchstone moments are imagined by white women who effectively turned her into a brand, a symbol so persistent that even though in scholarly circles it’s known that “Ar’n’t I a woman?” was never said by Truth, academics insist on using it especially in the context of feminism.¹⁴⁶ A question to ask students is: why, even after learning the truth about something, do people cling to the made up version? This will point students back to how ideology is difficult to penetrate.

We have two versions of the Akron Ohio Women’s Rights Convention speech by Sojourner Truth. The first was written by Marius Robinson, a friend of Truth’s, who served as the secretary of the convention, and one written 12 years later by Frances Dana Gage who was in charge of the convention but wrote the article in response to Stowe’s “Libyan Sibyl” article.¹⁴⁷ It was popular to write about black people in the news at that time, and both women would have been paid for their work. Chapter 18 of Painter’s biography contains Gage’s version, and Chapter 14 contains Robinson’s. Students should think about which version carries more weight and why. I would turn this into a Family Feud style list of important differences, and after reading both accounts aloud in class, students would prepare for the game. Here is list of 10 from the reading:¹⁴⁸

Akron Family Feud

Length	Who Truth addresses
Dialect	Partial disrobing
Amount of drama	13 children
Antiblack setting	Biblical use
Entrance	Asking permission

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s article also provides turns of phrase that Truth was known by as well as proof that white people can’t hear themselves sometimes. Stowe is responsible for the convention that whatever Truth said, was enough. Her title for Truth, the “Libyan Sibyl” (ancient oracle from Libya) came from a sculpture by William Wetmore Story who apparently sculpted it after hearing stories of Truth from Stowe.¹⁴⁹ This is a great opportunity to compare the Libyan Sibyl from the Sistine Chapel ceiling to Story’s version using semiotics which I will describe in the next section. Michelangelo’s Sibyls “represent humanity’s loss of knowledge in the pagan world”.¹⁵⁰ Story’s problematic explanations of his work on pages 158-159 could give students some historical insight to how racist language and images proliferated in the 1800s.

Douglass has been used since his time to cosign many different views because he did sustain some complicated positions that could be easily taken out of context. Blight’s biography will likely be given piecemeal to students, but his opinion piece in the New York Times called “How the Right Co-opts Frederick Douglass” would show students a longer but still short example of his writing. To practice looking for textual support for argument, read all or part of Douglass’s “Self-Made Man” or “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves” speech with students, and provide them with a list of conservative and liberal ideals. Let them craft one-sentence arguments for both sides by folding quotes from a speech into their own sentences.

8. Douglass and Truth in Images. As touched on in the unit’s Introduction, Douglass and Truth “practiced photography”¹⁵¹ I haven’t read them yet, but Douglass toured speeches about his photographic theories which were very optimistic about the medium; study, criticism, self-improvement, and social change can happen because we see ourselves differently with distance and in the way that other people see us.¹⁵² He went as far

as to say “picture making and picture appreciating” is what separates us from the animals and saw photography as a democratizing art--a “universal tool of self-representation”.¹⁵³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called Douglass, “Representative Man because he was Rhetorical Man”.¹⁵⁴ Putting visual culture studies alongside literary studies expands the concept of argument and creates a “site for new identities”.¹⁵⁵

Because Truth was an oral, not a written, communicator, her “embodied presence” in photographs takes on extra significance and gives her independence from how other people represented her.¹⁵⁶ Both she and Douglass saw their images as a way to direct advancement and to battle racist, anthropological specimen images in circulation.¹⁵⁷ America was more photograph-obsessed (cartomania) than other countries, and pictures were sold as inspiration to the masses and during the Civil War, as anti-Confederate propaganda.¹⁵⁸

I want to introduce semiotics, the study of signs, as a way for students to unpack these self-representations that Douglass and Truth took so much care to design. A sign is some form of understandable communication that is made up of the signifier, what conveys the meaning or the medium that communicates, and the signified, the meaning or concept the signifier refers to.¹⁵⁹ I recommend making a chart with blanks next to pictures of both Douglass and Truth (easily searchable online). You can provide either the signifier or the signified drawing attention to the use of props, or not, clothing, posture, gaze, background, and captions.

The Black Lives Matter movement has its own set of signs that students can display and unpack. Even the fact that protests of Summer 2020 are happening during the Covid-19 pandemic with people wearing masks gives the images extra meaning. In Richmond, the transformation of Confederate monuments, the highly trafficked grounds, and uses of the projection technology bring home how images can be persuasive. I even saw one picture of Frederick Douglass’s face shining brightly on Robert E. Lee’s tagged-up pedestal. His images continue to speak.

VI. Annotated Resources

Teacher Bibliography

Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2018.

Blight’s biography is very complete with so many stories you can use the rhetorical inquiry questions to analyze. I tried to sneak a decent amount of them into this unit. Blight proves his thesis that Douglass is a prophet.

Crowley, Sharon. *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2006.

Crowley’s book, while a little dense, sets out to figure out how fundamentalists and liberals can have a real conversation, and in doing so she brings values back into the conversation of rhetoric. I used this book as the backbone for how we can get students thinking more deeply about text. Everyone values something, so this is a great background knowledge jump off for my students.

De Pietro, Thomas. “Vision and Revision in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass.” *CLA Journal* 26, no. 4

(1983): 384-396.

De Pietro writes about the general differences between the first and second Douglass biographies that I turned into an activity idea.

Jenkins, Henry, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd. *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

I built on one line from the book (which is organized like a conversation) to think about what students need to participate in the world. This unit aims to provide a few handholds.

Grossberg, Lawrence. "Is there a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom." In *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, 50-65. London: Routledge, 1992.

Grossberg does a really nice job showing how mood impacts what matters to us and how we invest ourselves in the world.

Hanna, Loren. "Semiotics Lesson." November 13, 2019. Video, 10:33.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3XvJDxjlpU>.

I needed a quick primer on semiotics, and this was high on the Youtube list. Hanna has great examples and teaches more than I the surface-level information that I include in the unit.

Lerner, Bernice, "Why Teach Biography?" *Education Week* 24, no. 27 (2005): 37.

This article was part of our seminar reading. Lerner quickly shows how studying lives refocuses education on who we're educating. Lives help to make ideas concrete.

Levi, Giovanni. "On Microhistory." In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Burke, 93-113. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

Levi's article is heavy duty, but he really drove home for me that as rhetors we are looking for gaps in the systems with which we interface. He also reminds us that we do is always self-portrait.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Painter's biography is my third major text. We have less information about Sojourner Truth than Douglass, but Painter's treatment of the moments that her legacy is built on were illuminating and perfect for classroom application.

Scott, Joan W., "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773-797.

Scott's article showed me that language is the site of history's enactment. Social categories and personal understanding and available language all come together in how we think the self.

Wallace, Maurice O. and Shawn Michelle Smith. Introduction to *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, 1-17. Edited by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

I want this book, but I just read the Introduction to glean some of Douglass's theories of photography. The

photography section of this unit could be much more in depth than how it sits right now.

Wineburg, Sam. *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Wineburg gives us a different way to read online and give us hope that students know what a cultural hero looks like.

Student Reading List

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003.

Blight, David W. "How the Right Co-opts Frederick Douglass." *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2018.

Classroom Materials

See embedded charts and teacher guides.

VI: Appendix on Implementing District Standards

I'm from Virginia, and we use the Standards of Learning (with the unfortunate acronym SOL). Eleventh Grade covers American Literature. By leaning into rhetoric, this unit dwells primarily under the Communication heading in the standards by responding to diverse perspectives (11.1d), anticipating and addressing opposing perspectives (11.1f), and evaluating techniques to construct arguments (11.1g). This unit does spend time on biblical allusion (11.3e), and it focuses on the social and cultural function of literature during abolition (11.4d) and how context (11.4e) and language structures support an author's purpose (11.4h). Looking at biographical stories instead of a printed speech helps make context clear. Multiple texts (11.5f), Douglass vs. Truth, about similar topics are used and bringing values conversations in argument really expects inferences using textual support (11.5e). When it comes to writing and research, we are synthesizing information from primary and secondary sources (11.8b): the productions of Douglass and Truth themselves and biographical projects. Students will produce arguments (11.6b) about themselves and practice the techniques found in our mentor texts.

Notes

¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 203-204.

² From the documentary *I am Not Your Negro*, from James Baldwin's unfinished book "Remember This House"

³ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 93.

- Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 29.
- 4 David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 88.
- Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 74.
- 5 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 178.
- 6 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 177.
- 7 Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 197.
- 8 David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), xiii.
- 9 These questions were part of every seminar conversation we had. Seminar led by David Engerman.
- 10 Bernice Lerner, "Why Teach Biography?" *Education Week* 24, no. 27 (2005): 37.
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²⁷ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 126.

²⁸ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 103.

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³⁴ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 159.

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