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# Frederick Douglass: Fostering Psycho-Spiritual Resources for Resilience, Resistance, and Healing in the Age of Terror

**Danjuma Gibson**
**Calvin Theological Seminary**

> I have sometimes thought that the American people are too great to be small, too just and magnanimous to oppress the weak, too brave to yield up the right to the strong . . . He is a wiser man than I am, who can tell how low the moral sentiment of this republic may yet fall. When the moral sense of a nation begins to decline and the wheel of progress to roll backward, there is no telling how low the one will fall or where the other may stop . . . The Supreme Court has surrendered, State sovereignty is resorted. It has destroyed the civil rights Bill, and converted the Republican party into a party of money rather than a party of morals . . . The cause lost in the war, is the cause regained in peace, and the cause gained in war, is the cause lost in peace.[1]

This passage is a portion of a speech given by Frederick Douglass on 9 January 1894, at the Metropolitan AME Church in Washington, D.C. It was a little over a year before his death on 20 February 1895. Taken by itself, the reader could easily think that these words were uttered by someone in the present-day sociopolitical context. The current context includes, (1) coming to terms with the aftermath of a global Covid-19 pandemic where Black and Brown people suffered disproportionately in terms of infection and death due to the intersection of structural racism and inequity,[2] (2) navigating a racial reckoning and backlash the country has arguably not witnessed since the Civil Rights era, presumably in response to the first Black family to occupy the White House and, (3) the social and political fallout of the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol—a brazen act of violence overrun with themes of White supremacy and far-right extremism. Add to this a recent spate of Supreme Court decisions within the last decade that has undermined voter rights, women's rights, and the rights of marginalized individuals to equity and inclusion in higher education, and one could easily make the case that we are in an environment in the public sphere that strongly mirrors what Douglass experienced in the final decades of the 19th century.

For Frederick Douglass, the context that enveloped his *Lessons of the Hour* lecture involved a seismic social, cultural, and political shift from the Reconstruction era to what Southern Whites dubbed the Redemption era. Douglass was faced with the prospect of seeing a significant amount of social progress (in no small part attributable to his life's work) reversed because of the efforts of the southern states (coupled with the fraternizing and appeasing tendencies of the northern states) to reinstitute a racial caste system underwritten by White supremacy and terror. In 1883 Douglass witnessed the Supreme Court strike down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, along with the premature removal of federal troops from southern states, which all but guaranteed the return of the terror of the slavocracy and racial apartheid for Black people. In so many ways then, where Douglass found himself in 1894 is where so many find themselves today in the wake of America's first Black presidency: an undeniable backlash to ethnic minority progress. There is something

[1] Douglass, *The Lessons of the Hour*, 23–24.
[2] See Karaye and Horney, "The Impact of Social Vulnerability of COVID-19 in the U.S." in American Journal of Preventative Medicine.

hauntingly consistent and repetitious about the life-cycle stages of a nation experimenting with democracy: (1) the cries and protests of the oppressed and those forced to exist at the margins, (2) resistance and revolution, (3) sociopolitical progress and, (4) violent backlash to restore the normality of domination and oppression. These life-cycle stages can last for several generations, and then send the society into catatonic shock, as those who are conscientious or more given to deep introspection wrestle with the reality that instead of the imagined linear trajectory of so-called progress, we are instead compelled to begin again as it relates to the stages of the democratic experiment. Democracy is not static. Democracy is dynamic. Democracy is a practice. In a short essay written just a few days before his death, the esteemed congressman John Lewis, recollecting on a moment in his younger years when he heard a speech on the radio by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote:

> He [King] said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself. Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.[3]

For our purposes here, we are compelled to ask how we might sustain hope in the democratic experiment while existing in the context of extremity? To respond to this question, this essay looks to the life of Frederick Douglass to reflect on psychospiritual practices that aided him in navigating the contours of resilience, resistance, and healing in an age of social and political terror.

## "The Interpretive Power of Psychohistory and Psychobiography"

### The Pedagogy of Psychohistory and Psychobiography

James Baldwin asserts, "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals."[4] I suggest the criminality that Baldwin speaks to is one of depraved indifference and reckless endangerment in how we engage with history. It is when we waste the opportunity to learn from the human errors and atrocities of the past so that we might be better situated to act as moral agents in the present and in the future. But as a trained theologian and psychotherapist, I understand that it is psychologically and emotionally easier to assume the position of the bystander, to act in our personal best interest, and to become indifferent in times of social unrest and political mayhem. Victoria Barnett makes this point in her scholarship on the Holocaust, asserting that "the genocide of the European Jews would have been impossible without the active participation of bystanders to carry it out."[5] Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons to communicate to students who learn in the isolated silos of higher education is that life and history are far more complex, ambiguous, and intersectional. For Barnett, "the Holocaust did not occur in a vacuum."[6] Indifference and

[3] Lewis, *Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation*.
[4] Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 107.
[5] Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, 11.
[6] Barnett, *Bystanders*, 11.

apathy—the hallmark traits of the bystander, aided and abetted in the Holocaust. Barnett offers up a persuasive example of how James Baldwin expresses the criminality of devaluing history when she says of the Holocaust, "the genocide was preceded by years of intensifying anti-Jewish persecution, which much of Europe's non-Jewish population either witnessed or participated in."[7] That is say, at some point, there was a failure to learn from history. Indeed, disavowing history is more psychologically palatable.

Herein is the value of psychohistory and psychobiography: instead of delimiting the academic analysis on historical events, and then compartmentalizing them as unrepeatable or inconsequential human actions of the past, *psychohistory and psychobiography compels us to consider the psychological and emotional state of the individual and collective self that gave rise to the historical event in question.*[8] In his critical work on the reciprocal benefits of history and psychoanalytic theory, Thomas Kohut forcefully concludes that "an appreciation of the power of history on the psyche . . . [and] an appreciation of the power of the psyche on history, a sensitivity to the profound influence of psychological factors in the creation of defining historical events such as the Holocaust, will enhance the ability of . . . [us] to understand and improve the world in which we live."[9] The point to understand here is that history does not repeat itself by mere happenstance (as is commonly suggested). It is the similarity of the *individual and group psychology and spirituality*, across the horizon of time, that makes it seem as if history is repeating itself. Psychohistory, often in an uncomfortable way, has the potential to reconnect us with the past to show that while human innovation may progress, the human actor does not progress much, if at all. When we contemplate the emotions, psychological motivations, and the interior world of humans, we greatly shorten the gap between how we understand our historical selves, and who we are today. Psychohistory and psychobiography teach us that when we contemplate the idea of social progress, it is less about what can be attained, and more about the requisite individual and group faculties to sustain social achievement in the historical moment. That which is accomplished in history means little if we give no thought to the social maintenance of it. Psychohistory and psychobiography reveal to us that we are very similar to the historical actor—for better or worse—more often than we are willing to admit.

## Learning From Frederick Douglass

In this essay, I turn to several psychospiritual practices in the life of Frederick Douglass, self-care resources that he employed to aid him in enduring the context of terror and oppression in which he lived. Building on previous work where I conducted a psychodynamic analysis of the life of Douglass that included the qualitative examination and coding of his autobiographies, I suggest that we can learn psychospiritual practices from him—practices that foster resources for resilience, resistance, and healing in our current age of social and political unrest and racial terror.

Some of the more notable psychobiography projects in the twentieth century include Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (i.e., the reformer Martin Luther), Abraham Lincoln, Sigmund Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Edgar Allan Poe, and many several of the U.S. presidents. Over the past one-hundred years, there has been significant progress within

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[7] Barnett, *Bystanders*, 11.

[8] For more on the interpretive efficacy of psychobiography on history or historical figures, see William Runyan's *Life Histories and Psychobiography*, or Dan McAdams' *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* where he delineates the impact of history on contemporary identify formation in America. In both instances the authors make the case that the intersection of history, narrative, and psychology bridges the hermeneutical gap between historical events or the historical actor, and contemporary events and actors.

[9] Kohut, "Psychoanalysis as Psychohistory or Why Psychotherapists Cannot Afford to Ignore Culture," 235–36.

the genre.[10] The genre of psychobiography adds significant interpretive value to how we understand the historical subject and context.[11] Such understanding is crucial if history is to move us towards moral agency and a more just world. According to Runyan, "psychological processes are important for understanding the flow of historical events and processes at six different levels . . . [that include] persons, groups, organizations, institutions, nations . . . [and] international or intersocietal relationships."[12] Itzkowitz and Volkan address the question of the efficacy of psychodynamic inquiry into the categories of history and biography and conclude that "psychobiographies add depth to our understanding of their subjects . . . [while] conventional historians do not care about the internal motivations of their subjects and how these develop."[13] The authors go on to emphasize the importance of understanding the motivations of the historical subject. Otherwise, the reader of history runs the risk of undermining the potential of the pedagogical moment by unconsciously superimposing their own psychological and emotional state on the historical actor or context. For Itzkowitz and Volkan, psychobiography "takes us away from thinking of political leaders or states simply as 'rational actors,' . . . [as] the rational actor model only works when crises, negotiations, or ambitions are reasonable."[14]

While the vast majority of psychobiographies reflect a methodology whereby the stories of the target subject are read through the lens of psychological theory in furtherance of a more robust historical interpretation, my project with Frederick Douglass differs in a significant way. Instead of interpreting the life of Douglass through the lens of contemporary psychological theory, I set out to re-interpret or augment psychological theory through the lens of Frederick Douglass. That is to say—in this project I embark on a journey to discover how the first-person autobiographic narratives of Frederick Douglass that allow us to *see into and experience* his life expand how we understand a *theory of mind*. Instead of prioritizing the interpretive power of psychology, I grant hermeneutical privilege to the narratives of Douglass. In my project, I am clear about the value of this approach, as it reflects:

> a much-needed remedial exercise in anthropological value creation, giving voice to the expression of black subjectivity beyond a singular (but still crucial) modality of resistance to oppression. It is a movement toward reimagining black subjectivity through a methodology that prioritizes black lived experience, heritage, culture, and religious expression and that postulates how black subjectivity illumines what it means to be human and self-aware. Furthermore, it augments how we understand psychological and spiritual growth and development, pathology and brokenness, healing and human flourishing, and a theory of change. Like resilience studies of other human atrocities, the reality of black experience in the slavocracy calls for a psychoanalytic examination of firsthand testimony and personal narrative that chronicles antebellum and postbellum black life and religious experience.[15]

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[10] Runyan, "Progress in Psychobiography."
[11] See Anderson, "Recent Psychoanalytic Theorists and Their Relevance to Psychobiography" and Runyan, "Psychobiography and the Psychology of Science."
[12] Runyan, "From the Study of Lives and Psychohistory to Historicizing Psychology: A Conceptual Journey," 127.
[13] Itzkowitz and Volkan, "Psychobiography: Terminable and Interminable," 19.
[14] Itzkowitz and Volkan, "Psychobiography," 20.
[15] Gibson, *Frederick Douglass, A Psychobiography*: *Rethinking Subjectivity in the Western Experiment of Democracy*, 13.

The importance of reading psychodynamic theory through the lens of the autobiographic first-person accounts of enslaved people cannot be understated. This approach suggests that how we understand psychology and spirituality needs revision and augmentation. Psychoanalytic discourse does not account for the formation of human subjectivity and agency in the context of extremity. The point of departure in articulating the etiology of the human subject generally reflects the sociocultural context of the western European subject whose humanity is a forgone conclusion. The literature tends to assume the presence of caregivers or parents as a condition precedent to subjectivity. However, the slavocracy undermines each of these assumptions. How do we understand the formation of human subjectivity when the subject is born into a world of terror, violence, and dehumanization. Moreover, the violence of the slavocracy didn't allow for families to stay together, or for children to know their parents. In the slavocracy, many of the ideas of human development representing a universal linear process is turned on its head. Ultimately, there is danger in uncritically reading contemporary psychodynamic theory into the life of Frederick Douglass. The reckless interpreter of history risks minimizing or romanticizing the horrors of the slavocracy, or even idealizing a violent and radically evil period of American history, just so the subject can neatly fit into a psychospiritual theory.

Perhaps the methodological warning being made here—to read psychological literature through the eyes of Frederick Douglass, as opposed to the more common approach of reading the life of Frederick Douglass exclusively through the lens of psychology—reflects the distinction between what one Auschwitz survivor understands as common memory and deep memory. In his work on capturing survivor testimony from the Holocaust, Lawrence Langer recounts the terminology of common memory and deep memory as expressed by Charlotte Delbo, a survivor of Auschwitz. For Delbo, common memory reflects a group or collective interpretation of a historical (and in her case tragic) event. Common memory is the broadly agreed upon way of how the historical event is interpreted. Common memory is a byproduct of the professionalization of history. In many cases, common memory is constructed to favor emotional resolution when recollecting human atrocity. Individuals and groups unaffected by the history of such tragedies would rather forget than remember, as remembering has a way of triggering cognitive and moral dissonance. But Delbo contrasts common memory with deep memory, which is how she remembers her entire being and existence in the Auschwitz camp. For her, it was so horrible that it doesn't seem real, yet her body and memory represent unimpeachable witnesses as to the reality of evil that Auschwitz represented. Reflecting on Delbo's account, Langer concludes that:

> Her terms initiate a verbal breakthrough, a vital and refreshing departure from the familiar approach that tries to entice the Auschwitz experience, and others like it, into the *uncongenial sanctuaries of a redeeming salvation* [but alternatively] . . . [w]hat Delbo calls common memory might not find them so uncongenial; her deep memory, however, would consider them inhospitable.[16]

The paradox Langer presents with uncongenial redeeming salvation is compelling, as it reflects the collective attempt to redeem stories that are best left unredeemed. Reading psychodynamic theory through the words and narratives of Frederick Douglass endeavors to engage with his deep memory—memories that are accretive to augment our understanding of a theory of mind, and ultimately, how we understand what it means to be human. The alternative approach of reading Douglass through the lens of psychology (i.e., granting hermeneutical privilege to theory) while

[16] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, 5. [Italic is my emphasis.]

not inappropriate, is akin to exclusively engaging professional history or our *common memory* of the slavocracy and as such, risks undermining the anthropological value of the project. Freedgood argues persuasively that "memory and history tend to be opposed to one another . . . [as] memory is an activity in which we all participate . . . [but] history is the province of specialists."[17] Consequently, in order to read Frederick Douglass for psychospiritual practices that foster resilience and healing, we are after the deep memories of Douglass. Moreover, hidden within the *deep memory* of Frederick Douglass are psychospiritual practices that can help us cultivate contemporary resources for healing, resilience, and resistance in times of extremity.

## Reading Frederick Douglass for Resilience, Resistance, and Healing

### Hermeneutic of Affective Attunement

Among the fundamental tasks involved in reading Frederick Douglass for psychospiritual practices is to be psychically immersed into the world of the slavocracy. While this immersion is not ethnography in the proper sense of the term (i.e., living in the midst of the community being studied or researched), it is ethnographic in its approach to the text, as it requires the reader to saturate herself, as much as possible, into the world and existence of Douglass, and to empathically imagine and experience the world through the lens of the human subject existing on the underside of the slavocracy. The alternative approach would be to emotionally compartmentalize, or to appease the temptation to examine Frederick Douglass's experience through the far-removed psychological comforts of a 21st century location. To disengage the traumatological purview when reading the genre of historical narratives written by enslaved human beings is a common coping mechanism for contemporary readers. But this undermines the possibilities for ascertaining strategies of psychospiritual resilience, resistance, and healing.

Through a *hermeneutic of affective attunement*, "the reader must be self-aware and willing to immerse herself through imagination and empathy to experience the terror and horrors that Douglass experienced in order to appreciate fully the psychological tasks that he faced."[18] Indeed, the genre of psychohistory and psychobiography, coupled with a hermeneutic of affective attunement, colludes in a manner to undermine a common interpretation that argues the institution of slavery reflected a rational decision driven in large part by economic motives. The evidence of physical and psychological brutality and unrestrained evil suggests otherwise.[19] Violence against raced bodies was ubiquitous, pervasive, and arbitrary. The slavocracy reflected an age of terror underwritten by individual and collective psychopathology. It is only when we have ascertained the individual and group psychodynamics of this context that we can fully appreciate how Frederick Douglass overcame to become what he understood as a self-made man.[20]

### Interiority and the Force of Being

When considering psychospiritual resources to aid in travailing contexts of extremity, a key consideration is to determine (as best one can) how mental and emotional health and wellbeing

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[17] Freedgood, "Some Thoughts on Trauma, Autobiography, and the Work of Collective Memory," 652.
[18] Gibson, *Frederick Douglass, A Psychobiography*, 15.
[19] See Fogel and Engerman in *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* for an example of the argument that economics was the primary motivation of slavery.
[20] Douglass, *Self-Made Men*.

is being determined. Who has the power to determine what constitutes a healthy mental, emotional, and spiritual framework? While there are psychodynamic theories that shed light on this question (i.e., conflict-free zone, true-self and false-self, object relations, oedipal, relational psychology, etc.), in a practical sense, and in my experience as a psychotherapist, the question of what constitutes psychospiritual health and wholeness is more culturally and individually determined. In Emanual Lartey's project on intercultural spiritual care, he borrows from anthropological framework of Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray,[21] as he articulates the importance of imagining a dynamic personhood, stating that "every human person is in certain respects: (1) like all others, (2) like some others and, (3) like no other."[22] This framework for parsing out, in part, what it means to be human at the individual, group, societal, and even global level, is vitally important when imagining spiritual and emotional wholeness and wellbeing. Psychodynamic literature commonly makes the mistake of assuming a universal understanding of the contours of the human psyche and soul. But according to Lartey, this tripartite framework, if properly understood, compels us to ask of each person "[w]hat of the universal experience of humanity is to be found here . . . [w]hat is culturally determined about this way of thinking, feeling or behaving [and] . . . [w]hat in this experience can be said to be uniquely attributable to this particular person?"[23] In light of these questions, we are compelled to ask can we understand psychological and spiritual wholeness in the context of the slavocracy where for many—protection (or even a brief reprieve) from physical and emotional violence was near impossible and, freedom for the vast majority of the enslaved was beyond reach? To what extent can this question be answered in the person of Frederick Douglass, who unquestionably evidenced robust subjectivity and agency in his life and in his body of work? Having been born in the slavocracy (which undoubtedly was a context of extremity) are there psychospiritual practices to be found in the life and work of Frederick Douglass that can be emulated and practiced today for persons subjected to a context of extremity? How can we account for the robust subjectivity and agency we find in Frederick Douglass who was born and raised in the terror of the slavocracy?

*For Frederick Douglass and his contemporaries who were subjected to enslavement or otherwise oppressed in the slavocracy, mental and emotional wholeness was in large part a matter of interiority*. In the absence of being able to secure actual freedom (and even then, interiority was critical to well-being), the strength of a person's interiority was all they had to retreat to. In a previous work I refer to the nature of this interiority as the *force of being*, which is defined as "the interior life force that resists the threat of non-self."[24] Perhaps another way of stating the proposed interiority is that within the interior world of Douglass or any other enslaved and subjugated Black person forced to exist in the slavocracy, the force of being represented the internal desire, and subsequent drive, to experience oneself and one's humanity, as something other than an enslaved or subjugated person within the slavocracy. This understanding of mental and emotional wholeness, while in some ways is psychodynamically complex, is in other ways quite simple. When there is no external fallback position from the slavocracy and racial terror, no retreat from arbitrary violence and the abuse of power, no escape from the brutality, torture, beatings, rapes, and no reprieve from the social, political, and even religious objectification of the slave-power, *the enslaved human being is left with no alternative but to turn inward and strive to experience themselves as something other than a slave.* The terminology of the *force of being* is derived from

[21] Kluckhohn and Murray, *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture*.
[22] Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 34.
[23] Lartey, *In Living Color*, 36.
[24] Gibson, *Frederick Douglass, A Psychobiography*, 69.

the reflections of Douglass on his epic fight with Covey the negro-breaker. Douglass asserts "a man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity [and that] . . . [h]uman nature is so constituted, that it cannot honor a helpless man, although it can pity him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise."[25]

From a psychospiritual perspective, the robust subjectivity we find in Frederick Douglass represents the amalgamation of experiences or incidents, perhaps thousands, where Douglass fell back on interiority. The idea of the force of being suggests that Douglass took advantage of every opportunity, no matter how mundane, consequential, or inconsequential, to experience himself as something else other than an enslaved person—that is, as a human being. In doing so, over the long run, we see the formation of Frederick Douglass. By way of analogy, when a person is drowning, they will seek every opportunity to experience their humanity by taking in oxygen. Likewise, in the context of extremity, for Frederick Douglass, I suggest that his actions, thoughts, and behaviors, at the most fundamental level, represented this endeavor to fulfill this basic psychological, spiritual, and emotional task: to experience one's humanity, agency, and even the capacity to self-determine, no matter how frail or fragile the experience may be.

The key to the force of being is not the strength of any single self-experience event, but the fusion of self-experiential events over the long-term horizon of the human lifespan. Here, I have identified three self-care strategies—or psychospiritual practices—that Frederick Douglass implemented to foster resilience, resistance, and healing, in the extreme context of the slavocracy: (1) Douglass used sacred spaces of self-contemplation to strengthen his *capacity to imagine*, (2) he actively reconstructed his life-story over the entirety of his lifespan and, (3) he practiced enacting agency over his body.

## Psychospiritual Practices

### Reconstructing Your Life-Story

Why does a person need to write four autobiographies? In an earlier work I respond to this rhetorical inquiry, suggesting that for Frederick Douglass, the constant attention to reconstructing his life-story reflected his *force of being* in action.[26] It is suggested here that for Douglass, the act of writing the autobiographies reflected a manifestation of interiority, underwritten by his force of being and triggered by a psychological and emotional need to construct counter-narratives that undermined an unchallenged master narrative that catered to (and even normalized) White supremacy and western expansionism, and then justified—socially, politically, and religiously—the existence of the slavocracy. I have referred to this reciprocal dynamic between Douglass posting his narrative over and against a broader master narrative as an intersubjective matrix (or milieu). The psychic and emotional space that existed between Douglass and the others who were beholden to the logic of White supremacy and the slavocracy, represented a space of intersubjectivities where Douglass's social, political, cultural, and religious life-stories that affirmed his personhood intersected with the self-affirming narratives of the proponents of slavery and racial apartheid. More specifically, it is suggested that the intersubjective milieu is:

> The interpsychic space that a group of individuals or community in a specific context (be it geographic, sociopolitical, class, religion, ethnicity, race, etc.) co-

[25] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246–47.
[26] Gibson, *Frederick Douglass, A Psychobiography*.

> create and inhabit based on individual and collective subjectivity, agency, narratives, histories, cultures, or heritages.[27]

The intersubjective milieu represents confluence of narratives within the collective psychic space in which we all share. It constitutes the intersubjective emotional expanse of life-stories and narratives that exists between individuals, groups, and even nation-states.

Most of the life stories and narratives that make up the intersubjective milieu play less of a role in our conscious lives and operate more potently at the unconscious level. This matrix of stories and narratives become dangerous—even deadly—when there is a clash of narratives. Over the long run, when the emergent (or master) narrative is configured to underwrite hegemonic structures of power like the slavocracy, or to facilitate manifestations of Achille Mbembe's description of necropolitics where the life of *the raced-other* is subjugated to the regime of death, and where:

> the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die [or where] . . . to kill or let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits [and] its principal attributes [and where] . . . to be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power."[28]

The slavocracy represents the most prominent example of a hegemonic intersubjective matrix, a contagion of necropolitics that decries Black life.

Consequently, when life is at stake (as in the slavocracy) and those who are oppressed have no external support beyond themselves to sustain life, then one's interior force of being, their aptitude for life, their self-experience of their own humanity, becomes the essential psychological and spiritual task. When one is forced to exist in a toxic intersubjective milieu, reconstructing one's life-story becomes a critical psychospiritual practice for resilience, resistance, and healing. Frederick Douglass demonstrated that the act of articulating one's life-story, and then reconstructing that story as often as needed, is a potent counter-hegemonic strategy. It is an act of resistance to the degenerative effects that an oppressive master narrative can have on individual mental health and wholeness, as well as identify formation.

The act of re-storying is a psychospiritual practice that is accretive to fostering resilience and healing when one is compelled to exist in a context of extremity. While most history scholars only recognize three autobiographies written by Frederick Douglass, I am recognizing the revised edition of *Life and Times* published in 1892 that adds the "third part" to *Life and Times* published in 1881. In doing this, I am less concerned with how much of the fourth autobiography is new (when compared to the third autobiography), and more intrigued by Douglass's need to augment his life-story in the wake of the Supreme Court decision of 1883 that struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875—the heartbeat of Reconstruction—as well as the growing movement towards reinstituting racial apartheid throughout the south via mob violence, lynching, and the disfranchisement of Black people. The traumatological impact that these events had on the psychological life of Frederick Douglass (as well as his Black and Brown contemporaries) cannot be overstated.

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[27] Gibson, *Frederick Douglass, A Psychobiography*, 21.
[28] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 66.

In his interpretation of cultural trauma, Eyerman distinguishes it from trauma induced by a physical injury, or a significant psychological loss or emotional wound. For him, cultural trauma reflects the "dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion."[29] While I believe there are significant limitations to Eyerman's interpretation of trauma in relation to Black life, it is nonetheless useful in how it points to the corrosive nature that *toxic meaning making* about historical events can have on personhood and peoplehood. Moreover, this traumatological impact is more corrosive if it is allowed to metastasize in preconscious or unconscious thought life. In his work on narrative, history, and culture, Freeman uses the terminology of narrative unconscious to describe how the hermeneutics of history and culture influence our psychological lives. According to Freeman, the narrative unconscious emphasizes the formational and pervasive nature (for better or worse) of unattended narratives, or according to him, "distal aspects of psychological life that are in the background . . . [where] our lives [are] bound up with history and culture, the tradition into which we are thrust and which, in its own obscure ways, infiltrates and constitutes being."[30] Roger Frie goes further and makes the connection between the narrative unconscious and individual wholeness and wellbeing. By paying attention to how the interpretation of history and culture influence our emotional lives, Frie believes this enhances the therapeutic space and contributes to healing and change—a position that challenges a commonplace trend in the mental health field that suggests history, or what is commonly referred to in everyday nomenclature as *the past*, has no useful value in therapy, and that the focus should be on *moving on*. But according to Frie, "attending to the narrative unconscious makes it possible for patients . . . to develop an awareness of the constitutive role of culture and history in human life . . . [as] psychoanalysis [and by extension mental and emotional wellbeing] is not just about the multiplicity of emotional experience but concerns our very existence as social, cultural, and historical beings."[31] This is precisely what Douglass was in pursuit of in his lifetime autobiographic project. He knew that what was at stake was not just his own welfare, but the health and sustainability of the entire democratic experiment.

From a psychospiritual perspective, it should be more clear as to why it is suggested that Frederick Douglass penned four autobiographies: it was a manifestation of his will to live—his force of being—in the context of terror and extremity. The importance of narrative and life-story as it relates to identity formation and mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being is a key tenant in the field of caregiving. Whether doing it consciously or unconsciously, human beings are inherently makers of meaning. How we understand and order our lives, in part, is determined by the meaning we assign to life occurrences, circumstances, and experiences. This was no less the case for Frederick Douglass. In his work on healthy family systems, Thomas Young captures how the story of a person's life contributes individual and/or collective human flourishing, suggesting that at any given point in time, we all have:

> two concurrent versions of any narrative—a personal or private version and a social or public version—that reciprocally shape each other . . . [and that] all narratives, both personal and social, are the products of conversations and therefore emergent or continually evolving . . . [and that] personal narratives have a strong, if not binding, influence on behavior . . . [and that the] successful revision of one's

[29] Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, 2.
[30] Freeman, "Why Narrative Matters: Philosophy, Method, Theory," 142.
[31] Frie, "On Culture, History, and Memory: Encountering the 'Narrative Unconscious,'" 341.

> personal or private narrative depends on finding a conversant . . . with whom one can reconstruct one's private, personal narrative through a public . . . conversation"[32]

Meaning making is an inherent component of what it means to be human. Whether it is consciously acknowledged or not, we are constantly in the process of assigning meanings and interpretations to life occurrences, as well as how we understand history and culture. The individual and collective memory and interpretation of culture and history has a lasting impact on individual mental and emotional health, especially when the collective memory is damaging to those who have been forced to live and exist on the underside of modernity. Being intentional about narrative reconstruction over the horizon of our lifespan, and being attentive to re-storying our lives because of changes in our external context that are beyond our control, or navigating the inevitable changes in our interior world as we progress through lifecycle stages, all reflect a healthy psychospiritual practice that was useful for Frederick Douglass in his context, and can be useful for us today.

Spaces of Contemplation and Imagination

The following excerpt is a well-known passage from the first autobiography of Frederick Douglass as he watches boats pass by from the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. I quote him at length because of its example of the power of imagination and creativity in contexts of extremity:

> Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships . . . You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free . . . Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing.[33]

In times of great peril or tragedy, people usually resort to the primary psychological defenses of fight or flight. This is understandable, as survival becomes the preeminent task. However, this becomes problematic when the peril or tragedy does not represent an acute event, but is more chronic and systemic in nature. *In contexts of extremity, the first human faculty that is*

[32] Thomas, "Using Narrative Theory and Self Psychology within a Multigenerational Family Systems Perspective," 144–45.
[33] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 64–65.

*usually compromised is the capacity to imagine and to be creative*. When life and circumstance get hard, as human beings, our interactions and tasks take on a transactional nature. The activities or functions that contribute to physical survival are prioritized, and even valorized. Those activities that do not have a direct correlation to physical survival are deemed secondary, inconsequential, and even irrelevant. Over the long run, the sequestering of imagination is problematic, as it is reflective of a maladaptive psychology and spirituality. Imagination is a fundamental ingredient in the cultivation of the human spirit, no matter the context, culture, or social location. In times of great peril, imagination cannot be delimited to the category of conspicuous consumption, as is often the case. Alternatively, what we see in the referenced passage from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is the power of imagination. On the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, the thoughts of Douglass are not initially on deciding to run away from his captors. Instead, he is taken aback by the beauty of the abundance of boats and white sails that populated the bay. He is emotionally taken by the beauty of the wind in the sails of the boats—a wind that caused the boats to move freely. It was this momentary sacred space of contemplation, of becoming a partaker in the sight of beauty, that served as a condition precedent to Douglass finalizing his decision to actually run away. This moment was sacred for Douglass because it allowed him to imagine his personhood, even if only for a brief moment, in a life-giving way that affirmed his humanity and dignity, and that like his captors, he too was created for freedom—not bondage.

While the category of resistance (i.e., activism, protest, intellectual, etc.) is indispensable to the health of the democratic experiment, it is mentally, spiritually, and emotionally unhealthy for it to be the central defining element in relation to individual and group identity formation for the oppressed. To define oneself—*exclusively*—in polar opposition to hegemonic structures of oppression represents a death-dealing internalization of the ideology of the oppressor. Imagination cannot be reduced to mere optionality for human flourishing, it is an absolute mandate for health and wholeness. On the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, Frederick Douglass demonstrated radical interiority by activating his imagination and cathecting with the beauty of what he witnessed in the bay. For a brief moment, he became one with such beauty. And it was this momentary reprieve that led to action. Had it not been for that moment of imagination at the Chesapeake Bay, the world may not have known of Frederick Douglass. In his work on human development and the concept of play, pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott differentiates mental health and illness, in part, as a distinction between the capacity for imagination and play, as compared to the emotional need for compliance to represent the governing life energy. According to Winnicott:

> *It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living*. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for *most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine. This second way of living in the world is recognized as illness in psychiatric terms. In some way or other our theory includes a belief that living creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life*.[34]

[34] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 65. [Italic is my emphasis.]

For Winnicott, the capacity to play, to imagine, or to be creative, was not only a key feature of sound mental health, but also necessary for an individual to derive a sense of worth out of life. For Douglass, the slavocracy was a life that derived its meaning solely from compliance, being "caught up in the creativity of someone else or of a machine." His imagination on the shores of the Chesapeake reflected his force of being in action, as he sought to define himself beyond the hegemonic logic of slavery.

In an earlier work, I reflect on the individual and collective therapeutic implications of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century, what could perhaps be described as a Winnicottian space of play and creativity in the midst of a Jim Crow social order and brazen racial terror.[35] Alain Locke, considered by many to be the leading intellectual voice that recognized the renaissance of Black art and creativity emerging in Harlem, New York, was a philosopher and professor at Howard University, and a vivacious aesthete. Central to his thought, life was the belief that Black identity and subjectivity must transcend resistance to racial apartheid and the work of securing justice and equity for Black people. Such a position obviously put him at odds with many of his contemporaries like W.E.B. DuBois who believed that the Black arts should be more aligned with expressing the lived experiences of Black people in America and the work of resisting White supremacy. I suggest that both positions are sound, but that perhaps Locke was a person before his time. He knew that Black cultural identity understood fundamentally in relation to resisting racism was tenuous at best, and not sustainable over the long run. Even before Winnicott, Locke understood that culture, aesthetics, and beauty were not merely incidental to a meaningful life, but foundational to it. For Locke, Black identity and agency must be underwritten and crafted on its own terms. In her research on the Harlem Renaissance, Cheryl Wall surmises that the telos of the project, in part, "was to achieve through art the equality that black Americans had been denied in the social, political, and economic realms."[36] And as it pertained to Locke, while he "was no radical [and] . . . [h]is essays do not propose political strategies or economic policies . . . [t]he terrain on which they wage the struggle for equality is cultural."[37] Frederick Douglass showed us that even in the context of terror, culture, creativity, and imagination can still push the human spirit towards capacities for resilience, resistance, and healing.

Practicing Agency Over Your Body

Perhaps one of the most well-known passages in the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass is his fight with Edwin Covey—the plantation hand responsible for "breaking" recalcitrant persons enslaved and victimized on Thomas Auld's plantation. For Douglass, his physical altercation with Covey was less about winning, and more about him not allowing the brutalization of his body to go unchallenged, even if it meant his death. In reflecting on the epic battle, Douglass asserts that it "revived a sense of my own manhood" and that he had a "renewed determination to be a freeman."[38] This last psychospiritual practice emphasizes the importance of having a healthy

[35] Gibson, "Self-Care and the Liberal Arts."
[36] Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*, 1.
[37] Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 26.
[38] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246.

relationship with one's body as a way of fostering resistance, resilience, and healing when having to endure contexts of extremity or terror.

In my professional experience as a psychotherapist, more often than not, care seekers delimit their understanding of psychological health and wholeness to their cognitive or affective faculties. The body is often neglected, or outright overlooked. There is a burgeoning amount of quantitative and qualitative research being conducted that demonstrates the connection between body movement, body perception, and psychospiritual healing and recovery.[39] Here I suggest that Douglass's body movement, as manifested in his fight with Covey, was essential to the emergence of a robust interiority. His summation of the incursion emphasizes mental and emotional healing and resilience, and a spiritual renaissance:

> It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom. I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but, my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of manly independence. I had reached the point, at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in form.[40]

After this battle with Covey, in another passage, Frederick Douglass talks about being liberated from "slaveholding priestcraft."[41] The idea of priestcraft reflects a paradoxical play on a clergyperson (i.e., priest) being involved with, or endorsing actions and circumstances that are akin to witchcraft. With the term priestcraft, Douglass accentuates the practice of church officials using religious resources to justify slaveholding. While Douglass presents this in his autobiography after his battle with Covey, I suggest that he was liberated from "slaveholding priestcraft" just before his fight with Covey, when he presented his battered and bloodied body to Thomas Auld after Covey had initially beaten Douglass (without resistance) because he felt Douglass was not working hard enough. In reflecting on how the priestcraft was broken, Douglass asserts:

> My religious views on the subject of resisting my master, had suffered a serious shock, by the savage persecution to which I had been subjected, and my hands were no longer tied by my religion. *Master Thomas's indifference had severed the last link. I had now to this extent "backslidden" from this point in the slave's religious creed*; and I soon had occasion to make my fallen state known to my Sunday-pious brother, Covey.[42]

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[39] A fuller treatment of research on body, neuroscience, and mental health goes beyond the scope of this essay. But a sampling of such research includes: (1) Sarah Coyne et al., "Beliefs, Practices, or Culture? A Mixed-Method Study of Religion and Body Esteem," (2) Richardson and Lamson, "Understanding Moral Injury: Military-Related Injuries of the Mind, Body, and Soul," (3) Julie Staples et al. in "Mind-Body Skills Groups for Treatment of War-Traumatized Veterans," (4) Kaylee Kruzan et al., "Identity, self-blame, and Body Regard in NSSI (non-suicidal self-injury)," and, (5) Cheng-Cheng Wu et al., "Dance Movement Therapy for Neurodegenerative Diseases." Each of these research articles highlight the importance of the treatment and condition of the body, or body movement, as they relate to neurosis, pathology, or healing and recovery.

[40] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246.

[41] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 275.

[42] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 241. Italic is my emphasis.

Douglass's change in his religious views on resisting the slaveholding power did not originate with cognition. The serious shock that his religious views incurred, the evisceration of the hold that priestcraft had on his life, did not come from a resource that Douglass read. In what I refer to as *body-epistemology*, *Frederick Douglass allowed his broken body to teach him*. His suffering body served as the source of intellection that caused Douglass to "backslide" from the slaveholding religion, and to reorient himself to a lifegiving spirituality that rejected the justification of his bondage.

In contemporary times, the recognition of body, the enactment of body movement, and attention to body-epistemology, can each be activated through religious tradition and practice. In a previous essay on surviving Covid-19 and mental health, I argue for "a radical reclaiming of the multiplicity of worship modalities historically found in black religious heritage [in order] to increase the distribution channels of mental health resources available for black and brown people who are experiencing hopelessness and nihilism" because of structural racism and oppression.[43] Examples of these embodied worship modalities have included dance, singing, yoga, martial arts, theatrical performances, and a host of other activities that emphasize the movement of the body. Here, I argue for augmenting our understanding of the implications of these worship modalities to include their therapeutic value. Black sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has long recognized Black church tradition as a container for fostering mental and emotional health through its practices. In one place she observes that "for black professionals who worked in overwhelmingly white settings, the cultural comfort of these black churches provided therapeutic relief from the micropolitics of being black in a white and unpredictably hostile world." She goes on to recognize that "for black women, the black church not only continues to function as a therapeutic community, but it also reinforces women's sense of importance by thriving because of women's gifts and support in ways that are observable to the entire community in spite of the institutional sexism."[44] Practicing agency over the body, enacting body movement (in whatever form it may take), and doing work to enhance and improve one's relationship with their body, is indispensable to assisting individuals and communities to heal and resist in times of great distress. We ignore our bodies at our own peril.

## Conclusion

This essay turned to the life of Frederick Douglass to discover the psychospiritual practices he used to foster capacities for resistance, resilience, and healing in the context of systemic oppression and peril. It is suggested that when there was little that Douglass could do to change his external circumstances (i.e., escape enslavement), he fell back on a robust interiority that allowed him to experience his humanity, or to experience himself as someone other than an enslaved human being. The psychospiritual practices he engaged included re-authoring or reconstructing his life-story, engaging his ability for creativity and imagination, and practicing agency over his body. Furthermore, the psychospiritual practices outlined here do not reflect contemporary psychodynamic theory uncritically superimposed onto the life of Frederick Douglass. Instead, it reflects an effort to expand our current understandings of a theory of mind, and the methodological approaches to psychobiography and psychohistory, by visualizing contemporary theories of human subjectivity through the lens of Douglass's life-story. It is further suggested that in similar circumstances today, those who find themselves in contexts of extremity

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[43] Gibson, "Black Religion, Mental Health, and the Threat of Hopelessness dur the COVID-19 Pandemic," 255.
[44] Gilkes, "Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church," 108, 115.

and at the edges of meaning can also engage in similar psychospiritual practices to foster resilience, resistance against systemic oppression, and healing in their own lives.

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