

Mount Misery – Today!
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Mount Misery raises the question of whether there is some connection between slavery, racial justice and the war in Iraq and the torture and brutal interrogations that are part of the so-called war on terror. Obviously, there is no direct or causal connection but the themes of Mount Misery provoke reflections about African Americans' quest for racial justice since the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s and the response of white Americans. There several interesting ideas in the play but let me focus on two themes: absent fathers and the connection Mount Misery draws between the war on terror and the tools and tactics used to control slaves. In reflecting upon these themes I shall call upon Frederick Douglass as our interlocutor. Douglass I think has something to say to us about the aftermath of the Second Reconstruction.

Mount Misery is about absent fathers—Fred's missing father and his profound sense of abandonment and anger: "Out of shame you deny me your face, and name" he cries, "Your shame damned me into this hydra-headed monster that consumes me daily—Slavery!" Don is an absent father whose failures—his maniacal pursuit of his own ambitions—lead to Nick's descent into drug addiction. Now Don is just a run-of-the-mill failed father; Fred, on the other hand, is a victim of the rape of his mother. At least that is a reasonable inference from Douglass's statements in his autobiographies. Douglass was not unique in this regard since planters and overseers were all too often given to forcing themselves on enslaved women on their plantations. But it is also possible that Douglass's father was sold to a slave trader and transported to the Deep South, likely the Mississippi delta. At the time Douglass resided at Mount Misery, Maryland was one of several east coast states that bred slaves for export to booming cotton states of the Deep South. Historians refer to this as the second middle passage and it was every bit as brutal and dangerous as the original middle passage across the Atlantic. It doesn't matter whether we see Douglass's father as a white rapist or as a victim of the internal slave trade; in either case he (and Douglass's mother) were mere commodities subject to whims and lust and avarice of their owners.

Now one way many people tell the story of black America since the civil rights era is as a story of absent fathers. One of the things many people said the wake of the Baltimore protests over Freddy Gray's death is that Freddy Gray's life and poverty and isolation of black people in

Baltimore is a result of the failure of black men to accept any responsibility for their children—there are too many black families without fathers. In a recent panel discussion about poverty and inequality in America at Georgetown University, President Obama made the case for more public investment in poor communities but he also said that black men had to step up and take responsibility for their actions and their children. Many people explain black poverty and pronounced racial inequality after the civil rights revolution as a result of the “tangle of pathology” endemic to black families: the failure to stay out trouble, stay in school, and avoid unwanted pregnancies. I cannot count the number of times I have had people tell me or listened to speakers who say the one thing that would turn black America around is more intact families with both father and mother present. There is no question about the trends. Today around 73 percent of African American children are born to unmarried mothers; but the number of children born to unmarried white mothers or Latino mothers has dramatically increased as well (53 percent of Latino births and 29 percent of white births occur to unmarried mothers). Children in female-headed families are more likely to experience poverty than children from two-parent families, which is self-evident, and some research shows impoverished children experience more difficulty staying in school, staying out of trouble and staying out of poverty.

Where did all those fathers go? Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose 1965 report on the black family started this story, attributed the rise in the number of single parent black families to the legacy of slavery. This is odd because it was inconsistent with his evidence and besides it is not true. Moynihan’s own report argued that unemployment was mainly behind the trends in black single-parent families he observed, but he more or less ignored this in favor of the argument he pulled out of thin air: slavery destroyed the black family. The truth of the matter is that with the end of the civil war in the spring of 1865 blacks traveled all over the south seeking to reunite with their families and black couples pestered Freedmen’s Bureau agents or anyone else to marry them. Slaveholders might have broken up black families; but the freed people struggled mightily to put them back together.

So where are the black fathers? They are either unemployed, dead or in jail. *The New York Times* recently reported that 17 out of every 100 black men—about 1.5 million men—are missing; they are either dead or in jail. This means there are 1.2 black women for every black man not in jail. Of the remaining 83 men, many are likely to be unemployed and if employed working in low wage jobs. Since 1973, the black unemployment rate has average 12.3 percent,

more than double the white unemployment rate of 5.7 percent. Now as bad as they are even these unemployment figures underestimate racial inequality. And that is because they do not take account of the imprisoned black men. If we want to clearly understand what has happened to black men over the last fifty years we should.

It is common knowledge that we imprison too many people, more than any country in the world. The racial differences are also clearly known. By 2008, 11.4 percent of black men between the age of 20 and 34 years were incarcerated compared to 1.8 percent of Non-Hispanic White men. The Sentencing Project in Washington D.C. calculates that 1 in 12 white men are likely to end up in prison; for black men the odds are 1 in 3 and for Latino men 1 in 6. Michelle Alexander refers to the disproportionate black incarceration rate as the New Jim Crow and attributes it to enforcement of drug laws. We know that black men are disproportionately arrested for possession of marijuana even though survey data show that white men of a similar age are more likely to use the weed. But the problem is not just that we over enforce marijuana laws.

Disproportionate incarceration is only one part of what I would call the disciplinary state, a vast array of governmental policies and institutions dedicated to the control and incarceration of individuals that politicians of both parties built over the last thirty-five years. The disciplinary states includes not just the enormous growth of prisons in America but the vast expansion of stop and frisk actions of the police, coercive work policies of welfare reform, and zero tolerance policies in elementary and secondary schools and public housing. Ostensibly colorblind, the disciplinary state is racially conscious. Large numbers of African Americans are now subject to behavioral regulation and control by the police, prison officials, parole officers, welfare workers, school teachers and administrators, and public housing officials. For example, the U.S. Department of Education recently reported that black school children account for 39 percent of all expulsions but make up only 18 percent of students. They call this the school to prison pipeline. The use of sanctions and punishment under TANF, the 1996 welfare reform law, fall heavily on black women and there is striking evidence of explicit racial bias in administering these sanctions. I wonder: is there a parallel here with Ed Covey's efforts to pacify and break people of color in his academies?

These intrusive policies have had devastating consequences for black communities. We are only beginning to see the accumulated effects on black opportunity and mobility of nearly

four decades of prison expansion. Incarceration dramatically diminishes an individual's capacity for employment and annual income—one scholar estimates that incarceration reduces the annual income of black men by 37 percent. At the same time, the vast movement of prisoners out of and back into disadvantaged black neighborhoods has diminished both community stability and local economic opportunities. It has a profound effect on marriage in black families and the capacity black men to support their children. But it has not lifted the burden of violence from those communities: after nearly forty years of mass incarceration, according to the criminologist Elliot Currie homicide reduced the *average* life expectancy of black men in poor neighborhoods in Los Angeles by five years. (Crime has come down in many cities and black communities and they are safer today, but there is no explanation that commands a consensus).

What might Frederick Douglass have to say about all this? One clue might be found in an 1862 speech he gave to the Emancipation League in Boston. Asked what northerners should do for slaves once they were emancipated, Douglass shocked his audience by famously saying “do nothing with them; mind your business, and let them mind theirs. Your *doing* with them is their greatest misfortune. They have been undone by your doings Do nothing with us, for us, or by us as a particular class. What you have done with us thus far has only worked to our disadvantage. We now simply ask to be allowed to do for ourselves.” Now Douglass was not saying that the North should simply withdraw from the south; instead he was railing against unjust discriminatory laws and patronizing, paternalistic abolitionists who thought that what emancipated slaves needed was moral improvement. Douglass told a prominent leader of one of the Freedmen's aid societies on the eve of Reconstruction, “The negro needs justice more than pity, liberty more than old clothes.” What Douglass demanded was fairness, not abandonment. What he feared were laws and policies that could be turned against African Americans or that could disadvantage them.

I suspect if Douglass were to comment on the last 60 years one of the things he would point to would be the way public policies have contributed to racial inequality. The predicament of black Americans in Baltimore and many other cities, including San Francisco, can be traced to federal housing and urban renewal policies beginning in the 1940s that promoted racial segregation and have led to concentrated black poverty. He would also point to the creation of a disciplinary regime and demands for personal responsibility in place of more expansive social policies that would rectify our very long history of racial oppression and exploitation. Here the

parallel with the war on Iraq and the war on terror is apparent. When Ed Covey tells Don Rumsfeld that “nigras’ are just like the violent Muslims he wants to destroy in the name of saving America, Don denies it, “Don’t call them that. It’s apples and oranges.” Indeed, Don struggles to distinguish his treatment of terrorists from Ed’s demand to control slaves. Believing black families have failed, we have used draconian policies to instill what many regard as necessary measures of personal responsibility and discipline. To say that the policies are misguided and destructive is an understatement.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, an African American writer and national correspondent at the Atlantic Magazine, recently observed that “there is no evidence that black people are less responsible, less moral, or less upstanding in their dealings with America or with themselves. But there is overwhelming evidence that America is irresponsible, immoral, and unconscionable in its dealings with black people and with itself.” Neither Coates nor any black leader or writer going back to Douglass has ever denied the relevance of American precepts of self-reliance, hard work, and discipline to black prosperity and success. Douglass after all was the original self-made man and he gave many speeches extolling the virtues of such men. For Douglass a self-made man was one who had overcome his circumstances to rise in the world; the credit for rising was “brave, honest, earnest, ceaseless heart and soul industry,” he said. What makes a self-made man is WORK! WORK! Douglass often sounds like a contemporary culture of poverty warrior but he was not mesmerized by some vision of rising black Horatio Algiers. He believed in mutual responsibility and the interdependence of citizens upon one another. In his speeches he often admonished self-made men for their arrogance in neglecting to admit that they were the product of a community. There are no self-made men in the world he said as “that term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist.” This belief illuminates what Douglass meant by fair play. “It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing,” he remonstrated in a speech, “while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. . . .” Douglass goes on to say in this speech “Should the American people put a school house in every valley of the South and a church on every hill side and supply the one with teachers and the other with preachers, for a hundred years to come, they would not then have given fair play to the negro.”

To Douglass, fair play meant, among other things, taking responsibility for slavery. Douglass often said there “is no freedom from responsibility for slavery, but in the abolition of

slavery.” Douglass accused William Lloyd Garrison and white abolitionists of starting “to free the slave [but] ends, by leaving the slave to free himself.” Similarly, he criticized those abolitionists who assumed their work was done once the slaves were emancipated. They could not avoid responsibility for the future of the freedmen. So today Douglass would say to us that we cannot evade our responsibility for the palpable racial inequality that persists long after the Second Reconstruction.