

Frederick Douglass and George Teamoh



Anxieties of influence in the postbellum slave narrative

Once upon a time, there was a southern-born woman living in Harlem who would chastise her granddaughters with these words: “Remember, girls, you’re not anyone: you’re Virginia Teamohs!” I constituted half of the team of those wide-eyed miscreants and chafed under the awesome and vague burden of a Reconstruction-era politician ancestor. Little did I imagine, as a girl in 1960s New York City, that George Teamoh, my great-great-grandfather, suffered from his own anxiety of influence—and that I would one day write about Teamoh’s “problem” with his dominating literary ancestor, Frederick Douglass.

Most readers familiar with Douglass have likely read the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of a Fugitive Slave*. His later autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), are less on the stack of well-read slave narratives. It’s safe to say, however, that fewer have read Teamoh’s *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave* than any of Douglass’s books: it was not even published until the early 1990s and only then by a small southern university press. Teamoh, however, has an important role in the

history of black autobiography, particularly the postbellum slave narrative.

In the pages of his autobiography, Teamoh demonstrates a sharp memory and a sense of humor that Douglass would have appreciated. Where Teamoh and Douglass notably intersect is in their joint incursions into the chilly waters of post Civil War black autobiography. As the critics William Andrews and Frances Foster have noted, the attitude of the audience for the post-1865 slave narrative was signally different from that for those published before the onset of the Civil War. Later narrators, Andrews and Foster have agreed, argue for reconciliation and cooperation; although they do not shrink from detailing the abuse that was slavery, such autobiographers were often inspired by the first fruits of Reconstruction to urge cooperation between whites and blacks, if not to acknowledge the tangled bonds remaining between the formerly bound and the freeborn.

By the 1870s and 1880s, Douglass and Teamoh had become international travelers and political activists, achieving varying measures of fame. Yet the causes of their people, and thus their own books and good works, became—as the nineteenth century neared its close—overshadowed by what the historian Rayford Logan termed “the nadir,” commonly called Jim Crow.

But while I was still a graduate student, the historian Peter Kolchin urged me to look into my ancestor’s experience and explore in greater detail the genesis of his narrative. Perhaps, I came to believe, it was time for Teamoh to join Douglass in the pantheon of great narrators of the slave experience.

Assembled in two sections—the first in 1874, the appendices in 1883, around the same time as Douglass’s *Life and Times*—the eighteen blue-fronted copybooks in which Teamoh wrote his life story reside in the Library of Congress’s Carter Woodson papers.

Teamoh did not publish—perhaps was not able to publish—his autobiography during his lifetime and in fact noted in a preface that he wrote at “the request of many friends.” Whether during his lifetime any of those friends laid eyes on the text, to give feedback, offer corrections, or just satisfy personal curiosity, I cannot say.

Such readers might have found that Teamoh was not the stylist of his better known peer. *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave* has neither the tight economy of Douglass’s 1845 narrative nor the rhetorical surety of the Marylander’s 1855 autobiography; neither does it share the heft of Douglass’s *Life and Times*. Teamoh, though, saw himself quite clearly as an author, one taking his place in a tradition of African American writers. And the biggest star in that tradition at the time of his manuscript’s composition was Frederick Douglass.

There are several occasions on which Teamoh’s readers can see the long shadow of Douglass. The first comes in that preface mentioned earlier. Teamoh introduces his manuscript in the following manner:

It but rarely falls to the lot of one ... a slave of fifty years ... to narrate, in any intelligent form[,] the history of his life ... it seems almost incredible, when we learn of those who have done so ... Frederick Douglass, whose towering intellect, out stripping all who have preceded him in this country, has been ... the most successfull [sic] of self-made men ... the editorial genius of all Europe has pronounced in his favor.

Teamoh invokes other forebears, notably William Wells Brown, whose books exhibit “exalted thought great originality, comprehensiveness and scholarship.” Yet he returns, pointedly, to Douglass, noting that “I have seen ... ‘My bondage and my freedom.’” Curiously Teamoh then asserts that “the crudity of [Douglass’s] writings however is plain evidence of his never having been schooled, or at least not so by routine.” What do we make of an assessment that at once acknowledges Douglass’s “towering intellect” and yet dismisses *My Bondage and My Freedom*—viewed today by some critics as the apogee of Douglass’s autobiographies—as an awkward, unschooled effort?

We might approach this question by first recognizing that Teamoh and Douglass shared a generation—they were born a year apart (and would die within a decade of one another); similarly, both were born into bondage, and both experienced the work regime of slavery, as field hand and shipyard worker. The two men shared another important trait as well: both fled their enslavement and both made their way to freedom as sailors, although they did so fifteen years apart (Douglass self-liberated in 1838; Teamoh in 1853). Each spent a brief amount of time in New York City as new runaways, and each went on to live and work for a time in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Both men would return to the South after the Civil War—a hallmark of the postbellum slave narrative, as William Andrews has pointed out—although only Teamoh returned to his native state to live.

Perhaps these commonalities are not surprising given the small numbers of former bondspeople able to commit their experience to autobiography, but Teamoh and Douglass had much else in common as well. Teamoh moved in the circles of men and women who counted Douglass among their friends and fellow abolitionists: Teamoh and Douglass each knew the noted antislavery figure William C. Nell; Teamoh was a member of Nell’s “Lyceum” or Adelphic Union Library Association. Nell’s presence in Teamoh’s life and narrative points to the additional possibility that Teamoh and Douglass actually knew each other.

Consider the brief passage in which Teamoh speaks admiringly of the black activist and historian Nell. “His whole life ... has been one eternal round of devotion to the slave,” Teamoh wrote. But what immediately follows this tribute is the telling observation,

Douglass, on a certain occasion while speaking of the many who from time to time had in his employ as Clerks, writers, &c. after calling them over severally by name, said he, “then there is Nell, the only one I have ever known who was willing to work without any pay.”

On what occasion Douglass made this remark Teamoh does not say. Yet at the time to which Teamoh refers—the mid-1850s—he and Nell were both residents of Boston, and Douglass, a frequent visitor. It's not such a stretch to assume that Teamoh either heard this remark in a private conversation with Douglass or heard it in an address, perhaps delivered before a Lyceum meeting.

Whether or not the two men actually had conversational exchanges, there is no disputing the commonality of their experience. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the two men's reflections on that famous fugitive's asylum, not to mention the land of wealth, New Bedford, Massachusetts. Here was not just a common destination for these two self-liberated former slaves but also a touchstone for the ideals of freedom and citizenship both sought.

For Douglass, his new home "took him by surprise, in the solid wealth and grandeur there exhibited." Fifteen years later, the city still impressed: the newly arrived Teamoh called it "that wealthy city." The seaport indeed boasted the ability to make men's fortunes—and support a multiracial, multicultural community.

Perhaps the most signal event for black southerners in "the Fugitive's Gibraltar," a phrase perhaps coined by Teamoh himself, was the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. When Douglass arrived, with his free wife Anna Murray Douglass, much of the burden of his capture would have laid with his putative owners; by the time Teamoh set foot in the unabashedly abolitionist whaling town, southern slave owners could successfully command northern governments to do the dirty work of remanding Americans back into perpetual slavery—and worse.

Between Douglass's and Teamoh's arrivals, New Bedford's fugitive slave population nonetheless increased. This could in part explain one fundamental difference in the two autobiographers' experiences. In 1855, Douglass recalled, "I put on the habiliments of a common laborer, and went on the wharf in search of work ... Happily for me, I was not long in searching. I found employment, the third day ... stowing a sloop with a load of [whale] oil." Nevertheless, Douglass did not experience some sort of multiracial utopia in New Bedford. After deciding to pursue his previous career as a skilled caulker, Douglass found that "every white man would leave the ship" the minute he came aboard to caulk. Still, Douglass was able to take some solace in the fact that he found work with relative ease, possessed all of his pay, and "supported ... self and family for three years." In the midst of it all, he also found time to join a church and become involved in the antislavery movement.

Teamoh knew work would be hard to find when he arrived during the winter of 1853-1854. With the "cold weather ... now fast putting in," he found himself forced to ask for help, "notwithstanding [the townspeople's] repeated manifestations of kindness." Teamoh also notes—again, I think of the ever-increasing numbers of fugitives in the 1850s—"Once there you were 'free indeed,' and then thrown on your own resources after a few weeks of indulgence." Teamoh similarly found prejudice among white skilled laborers in

the shipyard, although unlike Douglass, Teamoh was in his thirties when he arrived, a man who had worked on the USS *Constitution* while a slave. Now literate, he wrote a letter of protest to the local paper—and was satisfied to see black caulkers hired. Yet employment remained difficult, particularly during the winter off-season, and Teamoh eventually left, first for Providence and then Boston, the last northern city in which he would live.

In Boston, a half-brother would help situate him within the black world of the city's west end, and his friendships with movers and shakers like William C. Nell would help him find work.

One could say that Douglass left New Bedford to rise within the ranks of antislavery activists, propelled by his talent for oratory, good looks, youth, and perhaps good fortune; Teamoh would leave in search of work and connections, lonely for the family sold away from him down south.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass closes with the words, “never forgetting my humble origin, nor refusing, while Heaven lends me the ability, to use my own voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race.” For his part, Teamoh hopes that his story may be “the last book that will ever be written by the untought [sic] Negro of this country” and plaintively avers that “with bleeding feet I pressed my weary way over the flinty rocks of life which have been so amply bridged for *others* of my race” (emphasis mine). Douglass and other black men who took to the stage during Reconstruction did not, like Teamoh, have their homes foreclosed and their political ambitions thwarted by their own Republican party. Nonetheless, Teamoh struggled to end on an optimistic note, closing with the comment that he “can only trust that this good work [of racial uplift] will be pushed forward with a zeal commensurate with the cause” (106).

In March of 1867, almost two years after the Civil War ended, the newspaper of the AME Church, the *Christian Recorder*, carried an item submitted by George Teamoh. The announcement requested any information regarding two of his three children; they had been sold away from their mother in 1853 and might, he noted, be in Texas. A few years ago and over a century and a half after Teamoh's oldest children were taken from their parents, I received an email from the Reverend Dana Teamor. “I am your cousin,” she wrote; “I found out about *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave* and wanted to tell you that I am one of George Teamoh's sibilings' descendants—and that there are a number of us.” I have learned, too, that the Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Old Dominion University in Virginia hosts a George Teamoh Colloquium series. While I may never locate Teamoh's grave, I am finding his influence has yet to disappear. Despite his somewhat pessimistic assessment, Teamoh and his legacy remain with us.

The author would like to thank Samuel Otter and Robert Levine; an earlier version of this essay aired at the Melville-Douglass Sesquicentennial at the

New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Further Reading:

See two important essays, one by William L. Andrews, "Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum* 23:1 (Spring 1989): 5-16, and the other by Frances Smith Foster, "Autobiography after Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley," James Robert Payne, ed., *Multicultural Autobiography. American Lives* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1992): 32-63.

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