

**Subject:** Thoughts for Black History Month

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As we conclude Black History Month, I would like to share a selection that Natalia Menendez began using in her English classes when she was first hired. When I first heard of these selections, I visited her class and noticed the pushback she received from some of her students, particularly some older students. Their reason was that some of their readings were not well-published authors, but the writings of slaves. These students were probably thinking: how could the work of authors who were slaves be worth reading in an English class?

You be the judge.....

*Henry and John were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others too. They very soon mustered up some old spelling books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching my fellow-slaves how to read. Neither of them knew his letters when I went there. Some of the slaves of the neighboring farms found what was going on and availed themselves of this little opportunity to learn to read. It was understood, among all who came, that there must be as little display about it as possible ...*

*I had at one time over forty scholars ... of all ages, though mostly men and women. I look back on those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed .... These dear Souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn .... And I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency.*

From *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Chapter X*

*Written by Himself*

Published in 1845

(Modern Library College Edition, 1984)

This excerpt is poignant, literary, and revealing. Furthermore, as Natalia points out, “this passage ... tells us that the slaves were intellectually inspired. .... (Douglass) refers to his fellow slaves who do not even know the alphabet yet as ‘scholars.’” And the looming threat of “thirty-nine lashes” for slaves to try to learn to read is all too palpable, as the law at the time dictated that slaves would be punished for trying to learn to read. I hope each of us can pause for a moment to reflect on this reading as we conclude this important month.

Best regards,  
**Bernadine**

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