5. Discussion Guide

Discussion Guide:

Douglass, Frederick. THE CLAIMS OF THE NEGRO, ETHNOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED, 1854.

In 1854, Frederick Douglass addressed literary societies during commencement week at Western Reserve College, which is now Case Western Reserve College. This occasion marked the first time a Black person had given a commencement speech at a major US college. After Douglass was invited by the graduating class, there was enormous pressure from the faculty, trustees, and president to withdraw the invitation. Douglass, who was well aware of the controversy and had considered not coming, spoke for two hours to a crowd of around 3000 people, some of whom had arrived hoping to see an embarrassing display. More people attended Douglass's speech than later came to the commencement, itself. Reporters recounted a transfixed crowd, and following the commencement address, the published speech appeared in newspapers across the country. Read more about his speech at Western Reserve College here.

Douglass begins his speech by defending the humanity of Black people, responding to the claim that Black people can be denied "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" because they are not people. This sentiment was a prominent theme in the Richmond Examiner, a widely-distributed weekly paper published between 1848 and 1863 from the confederate capital in Richmond Virginia. When Douglass refers to "advocates of a diverse origin of the human family," he is speaking of those who adhered to the idea of polygenesis, a belief that races of people originated from multiple creation events. Most enslavers and their defenders, including prominent American scientists, believed that polygenesis justified the kidnapping and enslavement of other humans because they were created as lesser beings. The opposing idea of monogenesis claimed that the creation of humans was a singular event, although most white defenders of this version thought that people dispersing from the center of creation (located somewhere on the Eurasian continent) degenerated over time, especially as they moved into hotter areas of the planet. They found enslavement practices to be abhorrent in part because they acknowledged a common origin for humans, although recognizing this did not necessarily translate into a belief in human equality. Biologists today also believe in a single origin for all humans; however, they point to evidence of human lineages evolving in eastern Africa beginning several million years ago rather than a creation event.

Douglass was clearly a monogenist who also believed in human equality. He tells us that at the heart of the controversy is the issue of power and the division of resources:

In truth, this question is at the bottom of the whole controversy, now going on between the slaveholders on the one hand, and the abolitionists on the other.… It is the question whether the rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by some ought not to be shared and enjoyed by all. p. 13

He exposes the cynicism in the claims of the “Southern pretenders to science,” and calls them out by name, confronting their ideas head on. He also proposes alternative explanations for what these men propose are immutable fixed biological differences between the so called races.

Discussion Questions

1. At the bottom of page 7, Douglass exposes the disingenuousness of crafting definitions and conditions (what constitutes a “man,” in his example) that are designed at the outset to be exclusionary. In what ways do the scientists critiqued by Douglass do this?

2. Douglass critiques the scientific enterprise starting at the bottom of page 9, drawing attention to scientists’ propensity to categorize, divide, and “analyze until all doubt is set at rest.” Why is Douglass suspicious of this approach?

3. On page 14, Douglass discusses the possibility of arguments for and against slavery becoming entwined in self-interest both for himself and those who purport to have evidence for the non-humanity of Black people. Why do you think he addresses this issue?

4. On page 15, Douglass refers to the “Southern pretenders to science.” According to Douglass, why is their approach unscientific?

5. Read through sections of Douglass’s speech where he mentions the leading American scientists of his time (Gliddon, Nott, Agassiz, Morton on pgs. 15-17,20-21, 28). Analyze how he confronts their ideas.

6. What evidence does Douglass use to counter ideas of racial typology? Which of these are still relevant?

7. On page 29, Douglass turns his attention to the effect of social neglect on the mental and physical well-being of Black people. What points does he make?

Created 2026-10-04 22:06:44 UTC by Ramanda
Updated 2026-10-04 22:09:51 UTC by Ramanda