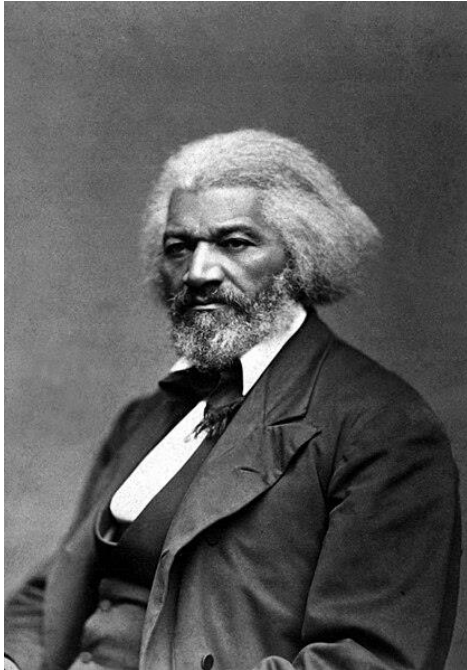


Activity 2: Exploring Diverse Perspectives Through World's Fair Speeches

Perspective 2: Frederick Douglass



Born into slavery in Maryland around 1817, Frederick Douglass escaped to the North and became an abolitionist and social reformer. He was a talented writer and orator and one of the most prominent advocates for African American civil rights in the nineteenth century.

Organizers blocked African Americans from having any meaningful authority over the Columbian Exposition, excluding them from positions on the National Exposition Commission and mostly excluding their art, inventions, and other works from the exhibit buildings. Black people were only allowed to participate as visitors, performers, and low-level employees. Ida B. Wells-Barnett and other Black activists petitioned for a designated African American pavilion, but their request was denied. Wells called for a boycott of the fair. In an effort to appease Wells-Barnett and other Black leaders, fair organizers designated August 25, 1893, as “Colored Americans Day.”

Wells-Barnett saw this as an empty gesture, but organizers were able to persuade Frederick Douglass to give the keynote address, which is excerpted below.

In response to Black exclusion from the fair, Wells-Barnett prepared a pamphlet with contributions from Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett. Titled “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition,” it was published and ready for distribution on August 30. The pamphlet condemned white America for Black oppression, especially for the convict-lease system and lynchings, and called attention to Black achievements. With no designated building for African Americans, Wells-Barnett and Douglass made the Haitian Pavilion their base of operations on the fairgrounds. Douglass had served as U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Haiti from 1889-1891, and Haiti had appointed him co-commissioner of its pavilion. From the Haitian Pavilion, Douglass and Wells-Barnett distributed 10,000 copies of the pamphlet to fairgoers from around the world. Douglass passed away only a few years later in 1895.

Excerpts from Douglass’s Address

“The South hates you,’ continued Mr. Douglass, addressing himself to the white northerners before him. ‘It was the South that kept the color[ed] race from a share in the glories of this great exposition. Fourteen states have abandoned their courts and judges and juries, and a wild mob invariably sits as a burlesque dispenser of justice to the colored men. These same states

were your enemies; they fought to trample in the dust the grandest republic the world can ever have. Why, in the name of bare justice, are we not treated with as much consideration as your foes? We gave legs to your lame, shelter to your shelterless and tenderly bound the gushing wounds of your sons, riddled and torn with rebel bullets. Yet in your fawning upon these same cruel slayers you slap us in the face, and with the same shallow prejudice which keeps us in the lower rank in your estimation, this exposition denied mere recognition to eight millions and one-tenth of its people.

Kentucky and the rest objected, and thus see not a colored face in a single worthy place within these grounds. Give us only as much as you give your unforgiving enemies and we will cease to raise a voice in complaint. Treat us only as you do those who despise with unrelenting spleen your very selves and the colored man will begin to take a place he hopes by brains and education to acquire. The sunny south does not love you; it never [did]. We do. Yet why in heaven's name do you take to your breast the serpent that stung and crush down that race that grasped the sabre that helped make the nation one and the exposition possible?...

Judge us not by the splendid Caucasian civilization; judge us now in comparison with the depths from which we have come... Up, up from the bottom, from the lash, and the barbarous masters we have come. At the next centennial anniversary of Columbus' discovery we will rank with the other races. We have come from Dahomey to our present standing, but even now we get less recognition from the Fair than do the African barbarians.

The great problem before the American people is whether they shall become christian and loyal and patriotic and live up to the constitution which their acts so tremendously slander. Just after the war you thought a good deal of us. What has dimmed your memory? Did we not fight and face the bullets and prove faithful to our country? The bitterness of the South and its resultant outrages are entirely consistent with the barbarous education of the old masters. The southerners are the ones who humiliated us before all the visiting foreigners, and they are the ones before whose wishes this fair and this government cowered and put its friends farther d[o]wn than its everlasting enemies...

It is well to let the world know that we are conscious of what is due us as part of the American people, but it is well also to let others know we can be cheerful even in the absence of justice and fair play. We are not here to assail in violent words the managers of the World's Fair, nor to bewail in gloomy desperation that we have not been permitted to share in the honor. Considering that we contribute nearly one-tenth of the population of this country, we simply ask the world to witness a practical illustration of the perennial prejudice which keeps us at the bottom..."

Excerpts from Frederick Douglass's speech on Colored American Day at the Columbian Exposition as printed in the *Daily Morning Astorian* (Astoria, OR), Aug. 31, 1893, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn96061150/1893-08-31/ed-1/seq-1/>.

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