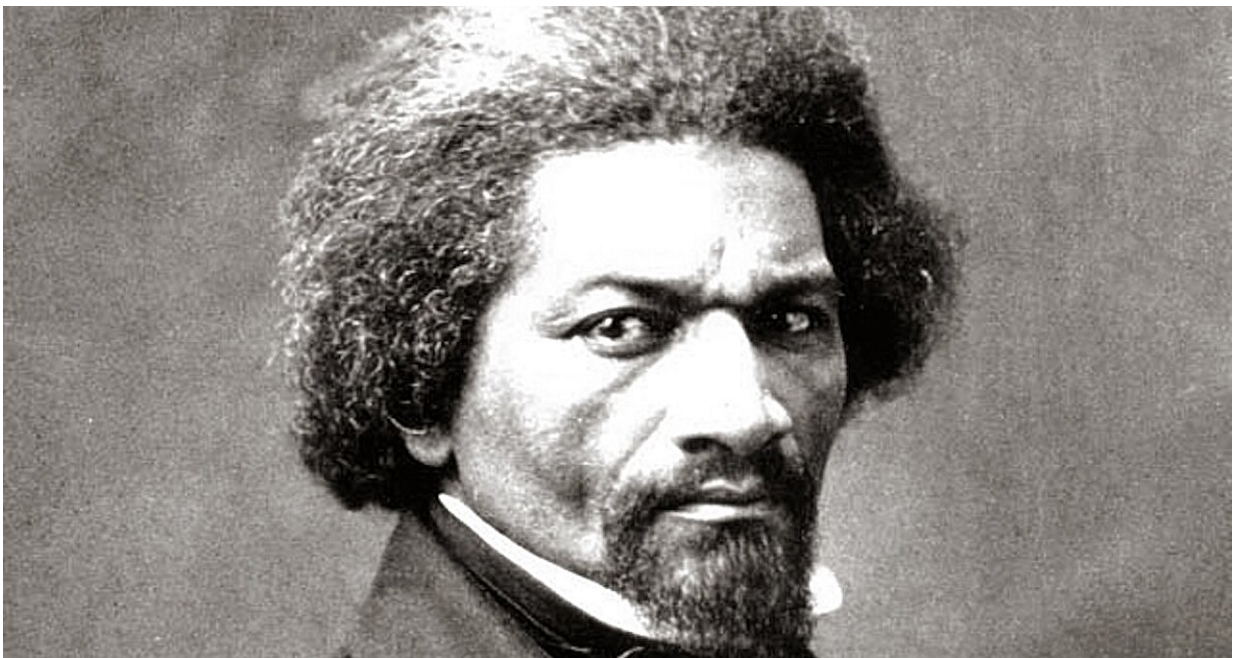


Douglass' relationship with audiences illustrates 'outsized impact' of public speaking in politics, scholar says

June 17 2024, by Erinn Barcomb-Peterson



Frederick Douglass in an 1866 photograph. Credit: New York Historical Society via Wikimedia Commons

The late 18th to the mid-19th century was the golden age of public speaking. Part education, part entertainment, being a good orator was critical—particularly in certain social circles.

For writer and reformer Frederick Douglass, public speaking was among the vehicles he used to tell his story of enslavement, to call for abolition and to defend Black Americans' rights.

A new scholarly article from Laura Mielke, "["The Sea of Upturned Faces': The Rhetorical Role of Audience in Frederick Douglass's Constitutional Interpretation at Midcentury.](#)" examines Douglass' relationship as an orator with his audiences—both present and imagined—and how this give-and-take was present during a notable shift in his thinking. The research is published in the journal *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*.

Mielke is the Dean's Professor of English at the University of Kansas, where she also serves as interim chair of the Department of History. The article appeared in the journal MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States).

Douglass was acutely aware of his audiences, both those in the room and the audience that would read written accounts of his oration in newspapers and other publications. In fact, Douglass advised fellow anti-slavery organizers to make sure the venues for lecturers had the audience illuminated.

"I imagine how Douglass wanted to see his audience so that he was constantly gauging their reaction, shifting his delivery and his tactics based on what he saw," Mielke said. "He could shift from fire to comedy, from condemnation to satire."

Mielke, whose scholarship has delved into the impact of theater on the anti-slavery movement, said Douglass and his contemporaries understood how to leverage the art form's popularity, even incorporating imitations of pro-slavery preachers and politicians.

"We can have a negative connotation with performance, but he was a talented performer," Mielke said. "He knew it was important for him to perform—to capture imaginations—but also to counter the racist performances of popular theater," Mielke said.

In her article, Mielke explores Douglass' ideological transformation from seeing the U.S. Constitution as a pro-slavery document to seeing it as an anti-slavery document through the lens his relationships with his audiences. What has otherwise been described as Douglass' personal and intellectual transformation, Mielke sees having taken place in the presence of his many live audiences, as well as other writers, thinkers, readers and activists.

"He had shifted from lectures that were primarily focused on his autobiography to lectures that are more about what he is reading, what others should read—the sense of it being a collective project," Mielke said. "Thinking about [audience](#) and the way he was seeing audiences and they were seeing him led him down this road toward reinterpreting the Constitution."

Particularly in a presidential election year, the term "political theater" is a charged one. Yet the way candidates relate to and play off their audiences matters, even to those who aren't present to witness it.

"Today it might be too easy for us to say politics are all about social media and the internet," Mielke said. "I would suggest that public speaking still has an outsized impact on the American political scene."

Case in point, the amount of coverage given to candidates' audiences as well as the candidates themselves—not unlike newspaper coverage of Douglass in the 1800s.

"Live public speaking and its reception are very powerful, even when we

are encountering them in a written record," Mielke said.

The written record of Douglass' life is a particular area of interest for Mielke, who has been involved in KU's observance of Douglass Day, a nationwide event during which volunteers transcribe documents related to Black history to make the content digitally accessible.

"I love participating in Douglas Day because I love looking at old documents and learning about history," Mielke said. "But I also have a sense that if I'm going to do scholarship in the field of 19th century African American literature I should do something to help sustain it. Anything we can do to help sustain community around the preservation of that history and the dissemination of those documents is important."

More information: Laura L Mielke, "This Sea of Upturned Faces": The Rhetorical Role of Audience in Frederick Douglass's Constitutional Interpretation at Midcentury, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlae009](https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlae009)

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