



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation with Dr. Anika Prather

Lesson 14: The Great Books as a Polaris for the African American People

Outline:

The Great Books as a Polaris for the African American People

- What is the drinking gourd? It is the Big or Little Dipper. It represents Polaris.
- The slave people were masterful at disguising their frustrations about being enslaved and disguising their plans to escape.
- To enslaved people, the North Star meant freedom.
- Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Anna Julia Cooper, and Martin Luther King Jr. had a sort of North Star found in the works of the canon.

Phillis Wheatley

- She came as a kidnapped 10 year old girl, taken from Senegal.
- In Boston, she was put on the trading block and she was sold to John Wheatley, this was a devastating moment for her.
- When she came here, she was illiterate. John Wheatley educated her (Greek and all the Classics) and she really loved the classic works of Ancient Greece and Rome.
- Phillis Wheatley is the first true sign of how African people would come here to America and immediately get connected to the classics.
- Phillis Wheatley and George Washington corresponded about her poem, while she was enslaved.
- The African American people were finding ways to connect with the people they share this world with even though that relationship is rooted in awful pain.
- Phillis Wheatley went on to be the first published black author of America.
- She camouflaged her frustration about her condition in her poetry (Goliath of Gath). Her tools of using poetry was like a Trojan horse, and it created a respect of her to those who oppressed her.
- The Canon became her Polaris, and as a result of her writing she was able to earn her freedom.
- Her poetry talked about the beauty of Africa and her faith, that was her Polaris.



- She tried her hardest to find her hope in the works of the Canon.

Frederick Douglass

- Frederick Douglass was supposed to have been the son of his master.
- When he was just a baby, his mother had to be separated from him, as she was sold.
- She would walk for miles to put him to bed at night. She died when he was five years old.
- Frederick Douglass was very bright as a little child. He gained the favor of his master's wife. She began to teach him to read. His master made her stop. **He wanted Frederick Douglass to be content as a slave, so he wouldn't allow him to read.**
- At six years old and beyond, Frederick Douglass began to teach himself to read.
- Frederick Douglass bought a book, *The Columbian Orator*. *The Columbian Orator* is a collection of texts from ancient writers. He read it at every opportunity.
- He says that reading these works of the Canon gave me hope, they freed his mind. They were his hope.
- Susan Wise Bauer says, "The works of the canon are rhetoric in action."
- He was learning the rhetoric necessary to speak so that he could convince people to free his slaves. At 20 years old Frederick Douglass began his work in the abolitionist's movement, and became one of the greatest orators of all time.

Anna Julia Cooper

- She was born into slavery, the child of her slave master.
- She was emancipated at 10 years old.
- When she was freed she went on to St. Augustine's normal school.
- She became liberated in her mind.
- She continued her classical studies and received a degree in math and a Master's Degree in math at Oberlin.
- She went on to be one of the first black principals of a D.C. public school.
- She got her PhD in Sorbonne in Paris.

Martin Luther King Jr.

- Letter from a Birmingham Jail references so many works of the canon you can hardly count them.

Huey P. Newton

- He was illiterate until he was 18 years old. He taught himself to read by rereading Plato's Republic 10 times.
- He connected mainly to *The Allegory of the Cave*. He read this and thought that this was America, this is black people – they have believe what has been told



them, based on this false reality that was passed on by those who oppressed them.

These people are evidence of the liberating power of the classics.

- We do not assimilate, deny where we come from, or forget the pain of our past. We need a heritage.
- We read these texts because they tell the human story.
- The canon is something we have in common so it is unifying.
- James Baldwin read these texts that highlight the human narrative, and he found freedom.