

Film Clip #2: Tim McCarthy

Context:

- “Stories of Slavery and Freedom”, a undergraduate History and Literature seminar with 16 students in Fall, 2016
- The two-hour class was focused on exploring the notions of what it meant to be free as a Black person in early 19th century America, drawing on autobiographical slave narratives by both Frederick Douglass and William Grimes.
- For each session, two students work with Professor McCarthy (drafting a plan, meeting with McCarthy in advance, etc) to serve as discussion provokers, tasked with directing and energizing the conversation. Jeremy, the first person to speak in this tape, is one of the provokers.
- The segment we are watching starts in the fourth minute of a two-hour class, and the provokers have just introduced the session and built up to their first question, which is where this clip begins.

Transcript:

JEREMY: OK. I guess we'd like to start by just getting your guys' thoughts on what these passages reflect about Douglass's experience and the desire of white people at the time to limit black people from gaining skills or et cetera. I just want to get your thoughts on things that struck you in these passages or anything else that seems related to that from the readings.

STUDENT: Well, in the second paragraph that you guys pointed out there's one line that kind of summarizes the point that came up in one of the essays we read towards the beginning of the semester about how the new US tried to deal with issues of class by sort of pacifying lower class white people by introducing this thing of race. So when it says on page 580-- sorry, I just lost the sentence. But that they would-- oh, yes. "And, taking advantage of Mr. Gardner's necessities, they broke off, swearing they would work no longer, unless he would discharge his black carpenters." So that sort of puts the ultimatum and just makes an ultimatum out of it. It's like either you choose the white workers or you choose the black workers. But there is no way- - the white workers will revolt, unless you suppress the black workers.

MCCARTHY: Yeah.

STUDENT: Well, in your email you said we'd be thinking about this in terms of the election and the results of the election. I think this like anxiety and sense of replacement is really important too. Like the fact that the white workers seem to interpret inclusion of black workers as their exclusion. And this idea that there can't really be both at the same time, and that we have to choose between one and the other. That's quite sad.

STUDENT: Oh, and I think both passages, when taken together, would have implicitly recognized the potential for blacks to be equal, and not, if he's allowed to read, he has the potential to gain all the skills of a white person, which is why it says in the second passage, "Poor white men will be thrown out of employment." So in bringing them up to their potential privilege for white humanity, as we were talking about last week, it described in that context that they have the ability to be equal. And that's why the white men will never let them be equal.

STUDENT: I think also the idea of displacement leverages the idea of race as something-- or the idea of economy, I guess-- as something that there's only a certain amount of the pie. Or there's only a finite amount of pie to go around, which limits the question of where are the other jobs, or how do we revitalize the economy to make room for everyone, and to give everyone a place in the American system or the American dream? Rather, it is like this idea of either/or of fighting each other rather than fighting a system, or fighting a leadership.

MCCARTHY: Does that seem to be pre-existing? A number of you have pointed out to this idea that there's a finite amount of equality, or a finite amount of freedom, or a finite amount of opportunity. And you pointed out that there's an either/or, right? That there's a sense that both can't coexist. Both can't happen at the same time-- black freedom, white freedom, black opportunity, white opportunity. But in both of these passages there seems to be a preexisting assumption that that's the reality that exists-- that these two things are incompatible, or they can't be coexistent. Where does that come when you see that there? Yeah.

STUDENT: I don't know if I see that. I see that from the white perspective. But it doesn't seem that Douglass is writing it as if he believes that black equality would mean the end of white--

MCCARTHY: No, I was talking about the white folks who are trying to foreclose those opportunities, whether it be literacy or whether it be employment. Like there is a preexisting sense that white opportunity, freedom, and inclusion presupposes the exclusion or denial of rights to black people.

STUDENT: Well, I wonder how much of this preexisting supposition is tied to a lot of rhetoric that...