

## Racism in the North: Frederick Douglass on “a vulgar and senseless prejudice,” 1870

### Introduction

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In 1870 Thomas Burnett Pugh, an ardent abolitionist prior to the Civil War, invited Frederick Douglass to participate in the “Star Course” lecture series he had organized at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. However, Douglass “learned with some surprise considering our recently improved civilization, that in servile deference to a vulgar and senseless prejudice against my long abused and proscribed people, the Directors of that popular Hall persist in refusing to allow it to be used for a lecture to which my race shall be admitted on terms of equality with others.” In this strongly worded letter refusing the speaking engagement, Douglass conveyed his disgust not only with the academy’s policy but also at the “intensity of [Philadelphia’s] wolfish hate and snobbish pride of race.”

### Excerpt

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I believe that the “City of Brotherly love” with its hundreds of Altars to the “Lamb of God” stands almost alone in the intensity of its wolfish hate and snobbish pride of race. It clung longer to proscription on its cars and other modes of travel than any other city of the North, and the “Jim Crow pew” is retained there more extensively than in any other place North of Mason and Dixon’s line. Nevertheless, I do not despair of speedy improvement, and can well afford to confine my labors to other towns and cities, until such time as shall bring more favorable conditions than the Christian, and enlightened Directors of the Academy of Music would impose.

### Questions for Discussion

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Read the introduction and study the letter. Then use your knowledge of American history and evidence from the letter to answer the following questions:

1. What did Douglass learn regarding the policies of the Philadelphia Academy of Music?
2. To which historical development is Douglass alluding when he refers to “our recently improved civilization”?
3. List the examples Douglass provides of race-based discrimination in the city of Philadelphia.
4. In what ways did Douglass combat the “vulgar and senseless prejudice” he encountered throughout his life? Draw upon your reading of the letter and your knowledge of Douglass’s autobiographical writings.
5. Douglass writes in 1870 that he “do[es] not despair of speedy improvement” in conditions for black people in American public life. How “speedy” was this improvement? How many years would it be before the passage of legislation forbidding institutionalized racial discrimination in the United States?

## Racism in the North: Frederick Douglass on “a vulgar and senseless prejudice,” 1870

### Transcript

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Washington D.C. Nov. 17. 1870

My dear Sir:

Since accepting your kind invitation to deliver one of the lectures of the “Star Course” now in [*struck*: Pro] progress in the Academy of Music Philadelphia, I have learned with some surprise considering our recently improved civilization, that in servile deference to a vulgar and senseless prejudice against my long abused and proscribed people, the Directors of that popular Hall persist in refusing to allow it to be used for a lecture to which my race shall be admitted on terms of equality with others. This course on the part of these Directors, who thus make [*struckout*] themselves the devoted ministers of a rapidly decaying caste, will oblige you, if I lecture in your “Star Course” at all to go out of your “Star Course” at least so far as the Hall is concerned and thus make my lecture an exception. Hoping that you will not deem me too sensitive on the point, I beg to decline any such an arrangement as the procurement of another Hall and if it must be so, I prefer to wait the progress of enlightenment and liberality, which will yet surely open the doors of the “Academy of Music” as freely to me and my [2] race as to other men and other races.

I believe that the “City of Brotherly love” with its hundreds of Altars to the “Lamb of God” stands almost alone in the intensity of its wolfish hate and snobbish pride of race. It clung longer to proscription on its cars and other modes of travel than any other city of the North, and the “Jim Crow pew” is retained there more extensively than in any other [*inserted*: place] North of Mason and Dixon’s line. Nevertheless, I do not despair of speedy improvement, and can well afford to confine my labors to other towns and cities, until such time as shall bring more favorable conditions than the Christian, and enlightened Directors of the Academy of Music would impose.

I am, dear Sir,

Very truly yours

Frederick Douglass

T. B. Pugh Esqr

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Frederick Douglass to Thomas B. Pugh, November 17, 1870, p. 1 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01954)



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 Frederick Douglass

T. B. Pugh Esq

Frederick Douglass to Thomas B. Pugh, November 17, 1870, p. 2 (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01954)