

Lincoln's Black Mourners

*Submerged Voices, Everyday Life,
and the Question of Storytelling*

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Historians have long questioned the recovery of voices, thinking inventively about the limitations of documents preserved in the archives. Who generated a document, and why? How are the archives arranged, and why? Which voices are submerged or silenced? Whether working with a diary or a census record, we must ask, “Why did this person tell this story this way?”¹

My 2015 book, *Mourning Lincoln*, tells the largely untold story of personal responses to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865. John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, in Washington, DC, less than a week after the Civil War ended, throwing the nation into profound uncertainty and anxiety. Black freedom—its fate and future—stood at the center of this apprehension, not only for African Americans and their white allies but also for the vanquished and angry Confederates who remained their enemies. Moving beyond the sources most commonly invoked in accounts of the assassination (newspapers, sermons, official condolences, polished memoirs), I searched for personal responses in diaries, letters, and other relevant writings produced in the spring and summer of 1865. The archives, I found, overflowed with the writings of grief-stricken northern white men and women, gleeful Confederates, and even the minority of jubilant white northerners who despised the president for going to war over slavery.

Mourning Lincoln tells the story of a transformative event on a human scale. African Americans are central to the narrative, even as their voices are less audible by far. In my research I found Lincoln's black mourners in roughly four different kinds of sources: documents crafted for public consumption, direct personal documents, indirect personal documents, and wholly mediated (or ventriloquized) documents.

Responses crafted for public consumption were relatively easy to locate. Alongside the uncompromising and farsighted words of Frederick Douglass, editorials in black newspapers offered eloquent and nuanced lamentations (the editors of the *San Francisco Elevator* eulogized the slain president even as they noted that “we have sometimes thought Mr. Lincoln too slow” in “the elevation of our race”). Sermons delivered in black churches richly illuminated the struggle to understand God's intentions in permitting the president's death. Petitions sent to Lincoln's successor,

President Andrew Johnson, attested to the politics inherent in mourning Lincoln. A Virginia delegation, for example, alerted Johnson to the violent behavior of defeated Confederates who simultaneously donned mourning armbands for their own protection; as the black petitioners asserted, “We alone . . . wear the exterior badges of mourning, as truthful expressions of our grief.”²

Direct personal voices were few in number and briefer in scope. Edgar Dinsmore, a soldier in the famous Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, wrote a letter to a young woman at home, proclaiming the assassination “a loss irreparable.” The spare diary of Emilie Davis, a student and servant, revealed that she stood in line for hours to glimpse the president’s body, as the funeral train passed through Philadelphia, and then pronounced the corpse “a sight worth seeing.” The even sparser diary of Michael Shiner, a former slave who worked at the Washington Navy Yard, connected himself to the catastrophic event by recording that the president and Mrs. Lincoln had visited his workplace on the very day of the murder (“and on friday evening before he was assanated Mr Licoln and his Lady whear Both down at the washington navy on good friday the 14 1865”). William Gould, a former slave who had escaped into the Union navy, was en route to Lisbon in early May when, he wrote in his diary, another ship brought the “awful tidings.”³

More indirect personal sources yielded a bit more. Mary Ann Starkey, president of North Carolina’s Colored Women’s Union Relief Association, was not literate and so dictated her feelings to someone else. “It must be all right as God permitted it,” she told her amanuensis, “but it does seem very hard to us.” New Orleans seamstress Elizabeth Clark and her neighbor Mary Jones testified against a white neighbor who had declared that, with Lincoln gone, “the niggers” would return to slavery; in the course of their testimony, Clark and Jones revealed that they had felt “agitated” and “very much worried” when word of the assassination arrived.⁴

Most vivid—and most troublesome—were the fully mediated sources, in which white observers recounted, or ventriloquized, the words and actions of African Americans. From the diary of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, for example, we know that as Lincoln was breathing his last in the boardinghouse across the street from Ford’s Theatre, hundreds of black men, women, and children gathered in front of the White House, appearing to Welles to be “painfully affected.” The white journalist Jane Swisshelm likewise described a scene in the capital in which black women cried (“My good president! My good president! I would rather have died myself!”), and black men cried out for vengeance (“Just let them leave the rebels to us!”). Another white woman in Washington reported a former slave who said that even the trees were weeping for Lincoln (“It seems

the whole world is a-weeping: looks like all the trees is a-weeping”). A white northern missionary in the South recorded a former slave who felt “nearly deranged” with grief, and a white minister wrote of a young boy who asked if he would be returned to his master.⁵

It is these sources, with their powerful, yet mediated, expressions that raise the thorniest questions. To dismiss such sources is to miss an enormous opportunity in the reclaiming of submerged and marginalized voices. To write these voices into our narratives, though, we must be conscientious, yet unafraid to take leaps of grounded imagination, in our invocations and interpretations.⁶

In the case of Lincoln’s black mourners, ventriloquized voices in the archives frequently provide redemptive and reductive narratives of grief and gratitude. Grief over the loss of the president and gratitude for emancipation are not in fact inaccurate representations of African American responses to the assassination—it is just that, in isolation, they lack the richness found in more direct personal sources. In particular, mourners who recorded their own reactions reveal an unexpected dimension: diary entries and letters capture the shock and sorrow, but they also capture the persistence of everyday life, without compunction. By writing simultaneously about the tasks of housework or farm labor, the tedium of garrison duty, the vagaries of health or romance, and even the pursuit of leisure, Lincoln’s mourners readily contradicted the pronouncements (of journalists, ministers, and ordinary mourners themselves) that the terrible crime had brought the whole world to a halt. By contrast, documents like newspapers, sermons, and official expressions of condolence tend to obscure the persistence of everyday life by extracting and abstracting mourners’ shock and sorrow.⁷ In the same way, the records of white observers recounting the words and actions of black mourners tend to obscure that deeply human dimension of grief.

For black and white mourners alike, the persistence of everyday life in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination served multiple purposes, including diversion, consolation, and the determination to embrace Union victory. Where African Americans recorded their own responses to the assassination, the everyday is ever present. Edgar Dinsmore, for one, proclaimed Lincoln’s death “a loss irreparable,” even as he spent most of that letter wooing his correspondent. “Dear Miss Carrie,” Dinsmore wrote, requesting his sweetheart’s photograph, “nothing would give me more pleasure than to possess your carte de visite. . . . it would give me so much pleasure to have the ‘shadow’ of my dear friend Carrie near me.” Emilie Davis, for her part, recorded the momentous occasion of Lincoln’s funeral while simultaneously writing about school, a sore throat, and her beau. Vincent (no last name survives) had accompanied Davis in her quest to view Lincoln’s body, but the young man’s comings and goings mattered

apart from the funeral train: “Vincent invisible” (three days after Lincoln died); “Vincent was up a little while” (the day of Lincoln’s funeral in Washington); “Vincent was up this evening” (the day before Lincoln’s body arrived in Philadelphia). William Gould recorded facts of the assassination (the theater, the gunman) but wrote as well about the coaling of his Union ship, mail received, and a trip ashore to a Lisbon market. For African Americans, attention to daily life served yet another purpose; as I write in *Mourning Lincoln*: “To be immersed in those activities meant to be free,” and “pursuing the commonplace activities of freedom served as a tribute to President Lincoln and to the future he had helped them bring about.”⁸

By contrast, when sympathetic white people recorded the responses of African American mourners, they nearly always omitted the concerns of daily life. Indeed, these white missionaries, teachers, and abolitionists had a stake in portraying black people in particular ways, for example as completely disconsolate, as devoutly Christian, or as determined and manly.

The limitations of ventriloquized voices are well illuminated in the archival record of children’s reactions to the assassination. In documents generated by Northern white boys and girls, the horrifying news comes intertwined with the quotidian pursuits of childhood. On the day of the president’s funeral, nine-year-old Edward Martin wrote in his diary that his school had let out early, adding, “In the after noon I played ball.” Likewise, when fourteen-year-old Mary Crawford wrote to her younger brother a few days after Lincoln’s death, she chattered on about horseback riding (“Have you learnt to leap yet?”) and the flowers they would pick when next together (“Oh! what fun we shall have, shan’t we”).⁹

Contrast these ingenuous utterances with the ways in which white allies described black children. News of the assassination was received in a Virginia schoolroom, one teacher wrote, “with heartfelt sorrow,” with some of the older students expressing anxieties that President Andrew Johnson “might not be as friendly toward the colored race.” In another Southern classroom of freedpeople, a white teacher observed “how sadly the children received the news of our good President’s death,” recording their “earnest, tearful inquiries” as to whether it was really true.¹⁰ At face value, then, we have the Northern white children’s continued enthusiasm for commonplace activities and the Southern black children’s somber sorrow and fear. While this depiction is not incorrect (the black youngsters had much more to be concerned about than their white counterparts), it very likely is incomplete, for white adults could not say whether the black children played ball or picked flowers on their way home from school that afternoon. Moreover, even had the teachers witnessed such scenes, they might have withheld them from their reports to the American Missionary

Association, given their interest in portraying newly freed people, children included, as solemnly devastated. Ventriloquized black voices must therefore be read with motives and missing context in mind.

In another way, too, the dearth of direct sources deprives us of the full context of African American experiences. The personal writings of white mourners make abundantly clear that (unsurprisingly) the wartime loss of family members was harder to bear than the death of President Lincoln. At the same time, Civil War scholars have shown that African Americans were more willing to endure the war's enormous death toll. As Drew Gilpin Faust writes in her magisterial study of death and the Civil War, "Slavery gave the war's killing and dying a special meaning for black Americans"; Mark S. Schantz similarly writes of African Americans' "willingness to court death in the pursuit of freedom."¹¹ Faust and Schantz are both correct, yet in researching *Mourning Lincoln* I could not extrapolate that African Americans took Lincoln's death harder than they took the loss of loved ones.

That was, nonetheless, the most transparent reading of the evidence. According to the white journalist Jane Swisshelm, a freedwoman in Washington who had just gotten news of the assassination proclaimed that she would "rather have given the babe from my bosom!," and a black minister in Cincinnati pled with God, "Take father, mother, sister, brother; but do not take the life of the father of this people." Lest scholars reduce Lincoln's black mourners to a flock of the nobly selfless, however, we must not ignore that white mourners made the same kinds of claims; one woman, for example, wrote in her diary that she mourned for the slain president "as sorrowfully and far more bitterly than I mourned for my dear father."¹² These kinds of assertions, on the part of black and white mourners alike, were, I came to see, less literal truths than a means to evoke the depth of feeling occasioned by the terrible event.

This reading is supported by the extensive personal writings of Lincoln's white mourners, attesting to the fact that, while the loss of the president was unfathomable, intimate losses—of sons, brothers, and fathers in the war, or of loved ones on the home front—were unbearable. As an American diplomat in France wrote to a colleague who had sent along official condolences, "I should have taken an earlier notice of your despatch, but for the loss of my little boy whose recent death temporarily unfitted me for the office." Finding such explicit comparisons with the private losses of black mourners proved difficult, but only because the archives were so scant, not because African Americans bore those losses more righteously than did white people. Emilie Davis, the young woman who pronounced Lincoln's body "a sight worth seeing," also wrote about the death of her brother in 1865 (he had belonged to a black Union regiment). Davis's journal entries, skeletal as they are, nonetheless convey her devastation.

She was “so Sorry i Did not get to see him before he Died,” she wrote, praying for God’s comfort; “i hope i never will have another day like yesterday.”¹³ Though Davis was shattered by Lincoln’s assassination, the emotion in the few words concerning her brother far surpasses that of her remarks on the late president.

The point, then, is not to take a stand against the vexatious recovery of submerged voices in the archives. Rather, where dominant voices illuminate marginal ones, we must refrain from stopping at facile interpretations. We must, in other words, do what good historians have always done: challenge the transparency of all our sources. When David Kazanjian, in his contribution to this roundtable, found himself discouraged by the “relentless quotidian” in the archives, he decided to approach his documents as “theoretically rich” texts. Of course, no good scholar reads documents as “merely descriptive,” and Kazanjian thus makes a case for “overreading archived quotidian.” Such a process could describe my approach to the persistence of everyday life in the diaries and letters of white mourners, in tandem with attention to the absence of that dimension in the observations that whites made about black mourners. Then, just as Thulani Davis describes in her contribution to the roundtable, I searched deeply, in efforts to uncover as many traces of black voices as possible; where Davis read documents ostensibly about one thing in order to find something else, I read documents about African Americans mourning for Lincoln to discern stories more nuanced than the grief-and-gratitude template. Offering close, word-by-word analyses, Davis reveals “the quotidian as political,” a process with parallels to exposing the persistence of the everyday in documents about Lincoln’s assassination. But to unearth the experiences of Lincoln’s black mourners, I had to search harder, and even then I came up with only a comparative handful of evidence.

Accordingly, scholars whose historical actors stand at the margins of the archives must reckon with the question of storytelling: how—and how much—shall we let our readers in on the challenges of recovering those voices? Since there are many ways to write history, there is no single answer. Doubts and inquiries may be intertwined directly into the narrative, for example, or placed in a preface or introduction, an epilogue, or the footnotes. In *Mourning Lincoln*, I wanted to tell a multivocal story without interruptions about methodology and without theorizing the stories out of the narrative. My solution was to place a “Note on Method” after the last chapter, including a section describing—for readers who choose to read those pages—the challenges of working with submerged voices.¹⁴

Then, in order to keep African Americans central to the story of personal responses to Lincoln’s assassination, I needed to reckon with both content and structure. For content, I employed a strategy of radical inclu-

sion. That meant finding a way to incorporate virtually every direct and indirect black voice I found, no matter how meager, while drastically reducing my use of the voluminous white voices available in the archives. For structure, I borrowed a strategy I had tried in my first book, *White Women, Black Men*, in the chapter on lynching. There, instead of placing white defenses of lynching first, followed by black protests, I placed the black dissenters first, followed by white apologia, as a way to recast the story away from white action and black reaction, to just the opposite. In *Mourning Lincoln*, wherever I had a black voice to illustrate a key point in which black and white mourners responded in similar ways, I considered making that voice the leading piece of evidence, followed by transitions like “the same was true for white mourners,” “some white mourners drew the same comparison,” or “white soldiers who supported Lincoln felt the same way”—even if I had twenty white voices and only a single black one.¹⁵

Even so, in the end, tactics of inclusion and arrangement could not entirely compensate for the dearth of preserved African American responses to Lincoln’s assassination. (The “Note on Method” thus explains that the papers of Frederick Douglass contained little that was personal, the detailed diary of Charlotte Forten Grimké skipped the year 1865, the papers of black Civil War regiments turned out to hold the writings of white officers, and the papers of black Reconstruction politicians commenced after the war.) No good historian should take a stand against the recovery of voices that are already submerged in the archives. Those voices—fleeting, fragmentary, cursory, dictated, transcribed, mediated, and ventriloquized—are critical for the imperfect recovery of what would otherwise be lost entirely. We must keep searching for unheard voices, and when we find them we must listen hard, reading with rigor and writing with creativity, to move beyond mere recovery.

Notes

This essay draws and reflects on material published in the author’s book *Mourning Lincoln* (Yale University Press, 2015).

1. See, e.g., Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” and Carr, *What Is History?*

2. *San Francisco Elevator*, Editorial; Committee of Richmond Blacks, “From Committee of Richmond Blacks.”

3. Dinsmore to Carrie Drayton, Saint Andrews Parish, SC, 29 May 1865, Dinsmore Papers; Davis Diary, 22, 23, 24 April 1865; Shiner Diary, 15 April 1865; Gould Diary, 6 May 1865.

4. Starkey to “My dear Friend,” New Berne, NC, 20 April 1865, in Edward W. Kinsley Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; testimony of Elizabeth Clark and Mary Jones, in Patrick Shields Case, file OO934, Court-Martial Case Files, entry 15, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), Record Group 153, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

5. Welles Diary, 15 April 1865; Swisshelm, Letter; *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society*, 6; P. B. S. Nichuston to George Whipple, Roanoke Island, NC, 22 April 1865, no. 100001, microform reel 169, American Missionary Association Archives; Edward Williams Morley to Sardis Morley, Fortress Monroe, VA, 18 April 1865, Morley Papers.

6. See Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; Dorsey, "Transnational Lives," 178–79.

7. On the persistence of everyday life, see Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 168–85.

8. Dinsmore to Drayton, 29 May 1865, Dinsmore Papers; Davis Diary, 17–19, 24, 26 April 1865; Gould Diary, 6, 7 May; Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 182.

9. Martin Diary, 19 April 1865; Mary (Crawford) Frazer to Francis Marion Crawford, "Bonchurch," 18 April 1865, item 1118, Margaret Chanler Family Papers, MS Am 1595, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; the fragmentary letter ends here, so we cannot know if she wrote about Lincoln in later pages.

10. Edward Williams Morley to Sardis Morley, Fortress Monroe, VA, 18 April 1865, Morley Papers; Hope R. Daggett to George Whipple, Norfolk, VA, [no day] April 1865, letter H1-7058, and H. C. Percy to George Whipple, Norfolk, VA, 7 May 1865, letter H1-7112-16, microform reel 210, American Missionary Association Archives.

11. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 55; Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 152. On the loss of loved ones, see Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 189–205.

12. Swisshelm, Letter; Shelton, *Discourse upon the Death of Abraham Lincoln*, 4; Emerson Diary, 28 May 1865. Nell Irvin Painter has noted that scholars tend to present "all slaves as strong people" ("Soul Murder and Slavery," 138).

13. George W. Van Horne to John Bigelow, Marseille, France, 9 May 1865, box 15, John Bigelow Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library; Davis Diary, 20–23 December 1865.

14. Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 275–78. James Goodman in "For the Love of Stories" writes against the idea of narrative as a return to conservatism, and against the contention that narrative masks power, contradictions, and contestation, contending that narrative can be radical.

15. Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 187–208; Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 100, 111, 120 (see also, e.g., 66, 121, 123, 130).

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