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Here's why Literacy Cannot Guarantee Liberation…

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"I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing"

(Douglass, 81)

Literacy's empowering potential may make Frederick Douglass' arguments about reading and writing appear controversial at first glance. Douglass contended that the outcome of learning to read and write was more like a 'curse' than a blessing (Douglass 40). He suggested that literacy offered incomplete empowerment, making it curse-like. In his own words, reading offered a view into his 'wretched condition, without the remedy' (Douglass 40). That is, despite his intellectual insight into his social position, he lacked the tools to overcome his identity-based oppression under White supremacy (Jenkins). Additionally, this 'eternal wakefulness' and awareness of one's freedom or lack thereof can create intellectual dilemmas (Douglass 40). In today's world, the word 'woke' captures this sense of awareness ("woke" adj 2"). Just because one is 'alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice' does not render them capable of solving social ills ("woke" adj 2"). Douglass' preoccupation with the relationship between identity, literacy and power will shape my discussion.

Exploring varying degrees of ability and access is crucial to the study of censorship. More specifically, censorship is a phenomenon that impacts the world of reading and writing, in both public and private spaces. I expand the question's scope to include the presentation of writing, suiting Douglass' description of both reading and writing in his statements. Arguably, the discussion of how reading is presented is incomplete without analysing its interconnectedness with knowledge production within the communications circuit (The Digital Communications Circuit). Furthermore, the literate individual's ability to access and produce information often directly enables their intellectual growth and agency. In this way, literacy as a skill, act and state of mind, threatens the mediating forces of censorship.

Across three texts, I will interrogate the ways that literacy impacts the experiences of the socially marginalised. More specifically, I will analyse the impacts of censorship on the individual reader and writer at different points in history. My discussion will include Mary

Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife,* Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* and Etheridge Knight's *Black Voices From Prison*. *The Doctor's Wife* was published in 1864 while *Black Voices From Prison* and *Beijing Coma* were published in 1970 and 2008 respectively. In these three eras, censorship shapes reading with a similar pervasiveness.

The depiction of literacy across these texts reveals how reading and writing opens up possibilities for intellectual expansion and freedom. However, they also convey how reading can create anxiety, frustration and despair. Also, influenced by Foucault's notions of the interaction between social power and 'governing epistemes', I will also explore how prevailing discourses surrounding the marginalised impacts their approaches to reading and knowledge acquisition (Wolin).

In Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, literacy holds the potential for economic gain but also social ostracism. On one hand, literacy is explored in its potential to impact the inner world of the consumer, especially the female reader. More specifically, in line with her contemporary notions of female psychiatry, Braddon depicts the young female reader as impressionable, frivolous and prone to romantic fantasy (Flint 2). These characteristics are evident in the characterisation of Isabel Sleaford. Isabel's personality as a reader is defined by an 'eternal wakefulness' about passion-filled, alternate worlds, fictions which appear more exciting than her existing reality (Douglass, 40). Isabel's reading is described as sedentary and she seems to be in a hypnotic state, 'lolling in a low basket chair, with a book on her lap' (Braddon 30). Braddon's use of the verb 'lolling' portrays a certain lethargy and passivity. This conveys a narrative of the literate consumer as having limited power and, in many ways, subject to the agenda of the author. Isabel's characterisation as an obsessive, romantic bookworm has a gendered significance, as it reinforces Victorian ideas surrounding female behaviour. Additionally, these contemporary ideals are reflected in male disapproval of her interest in

sensation fiction. For instance, Mr. Raymond suggests that Isabel has 'too much Wonder and exaggerated Ideality' (Braddon 86). Here, Mr Raymond demonstrates anxieties over female emotion, marked by his use of the phrase 'too much' and the adjective 'exaggerated' (Braddon 886). Contextually, Mr Raymond's pathologizing statements mirror the sentiments in medical journals where men attempted to explain women's 'obsessive consumption' of sensation fiction books (Flint 3). Also, in 1847, Dr. Milingen suggested that female sensations are 'more vivid and acute' compared to those of men (qtd. in Flint 57). Consequently, the female reader was presented as easily overwhelmed and incapable of separating imaginary worlds from real life. Further, Victorian medical practitioners often banned 'hysteric' patients' demands to read under the rest 'cure' (Flint 60). This emerging discourse around hysteria as a female condition was closely linked to the issue of reading. Although female-directed sensation fiction is seen as threatening, Isabel's desires are submissive, to be 'the chosen slave of some scornful creature… in the ruined chamber of some Gothic castle, by moonlight' (Braddon 94). Perhaps her romanticisation of the thought of being a man's 'chosen slave' without complaint is socially conformist in the sense that it reinforces the male-female power imbalance (Braddon 94). Isabel's reading behaviour only becomes subversive because her adulterous desires for Roland threaten her husband's social status. Therefore, Braddon presents sensation fiction reading as a vehicle for female escapism that often catalyses drama and suffering. Sensation fiction, though a popular outlet for female repression, can provoke further marginalisation in a male-led world. Nevertheless, Braddon's literary success arguably proves that female suffering can become profitable through the action of writing and publishing.

However, Isabel's disempowered presentation contrasts sharply with the portrait of Sigismund Smith, the male sensation author. Smith is illustrated as a success, a 'well paid'

author, whose work aligned with audience demand (Braddon 14). Braddon presents Smith as a man with a tightly regulated imagination, separating his passionate texts from his personality. His personality may have necessarily had to contrast with his 'highly-spiced fictions' for him to maintain social respectability (Braddon 14). Generically, Smith's characterisation demonstrates how fiction's make-believe dimension perhaps allows for a temporary liberation from social, moral constraints. In writing *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon arguably seized this authorial opportunity for social commentary via fiction. Her status as an authorised voice gave her the opportunity to contribute to discourses dominated by men. However, the presentation of Isabel's reading could be understood as a cautionary tale of sorts, as her obsessive reading threatens stability in her life. Isabel's reading habit triggers a curse-like social ostracism that contrasts with the blessing of Smith's literary success. Braddon thereby reveals how men gain more from literacy than women due to their powerful weaponization and control of language.

In addition, Knight's *Black Voices From Prison* suggests that the struggle for freedom via literate communication does little to prevent brutality and dehumanisation. *Black Voices From Prison* highlights the mistreatment of black men in the criminal justice system as an institution. His emphasis in the title on the voices included being 'Black' reflects his interest in elevating voices that are feared and suppressed, under a White supremacist caste system that oppresses Black people (Jenkins). That is, he highlights the injustice faced by black people, and especially black men within institutions and wider society. He exposes the reality that the act of reading is deemed transgressive and threatening in a prison context where information flows are often tightly controlled. Knight writes, '…several blacks…were placed in isolation for reading literature written by black authors. While in isolation these men have been unsparingly harassed' (161). In effect, Knight describes a severe punishment for private

acts of cultural consumption. But regarding the socio-cultural climate of 1970s America, it becomes clearer why the literate black man, especially the literate black male prisoner, is stigmatised. America was facing a social reckoning as African Americans organised to create more social freedoms and restore their human dignity in a society that had oppressed them for a long time (Carson). Nevertheless, the imprisoned Bucky is sceptical of the idea that literacy is a sufficient tool for freedom. In fact, he suggests that violence may be the only language that translates into freedom for the marginalised African-American. Centuries after Douglass wrote about his profound disillusionment with the notion of freedom, Bucky writes: 'I also know that we are enslaved. And culture ain't never freed nobody, only guns have done that' (Knight 175). It appears that an inherent hopelessness created by White institutions is pertinent to the condition of the socially aware, socially literate black individual of the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is not simply a hopelessness, but a realisation that reading and 'culture' do not ensure true freedom.

In addition, a strong atmosphere of frustration runs throughout Knight's text, revealing the limits of reading and education in creating social change. Knight suggests that this frustration can boil over into collective action of some sort, which may be violent. This frustration is more complex than a sheer frustration with oppression under White supremacy. It signifies an additional identity crisis due to a divisive in-group dynamic (Jenkins). In 1970s America, there are arguably only two types of black man, the switched-on revolutionary who is ready to take action by any means necessary, and the Uncle Tom, who panders to White respectability politics. The prisoners in Knight's account seem to embrace the revolutionary side of the spectrum. Bucky is bold in his ideological fervour, 'I will fight wherever the battle is, here, on the streets, or in hell' (Knight 174). Bucky's use of the semantic field of warfare and the notion of struggle paints an emotive sense of his position. Additionally, his use of

religious language with ‘hell’ denotes the strength of his conviction. And Bucky’s actions reflected his fervour, as Knight details his violent action that involved a fire and mass confrontation with prison guards that Knight described as ‘immaturely staged’ (173). However, Bucky’s action was provoked by pressure and manipulation at the hands of prison authorities. By reading black literature with his peers, he was tagged a radical threat by institutional authorities afraid of the ‘radical politics’ and Black Power ideologies that drove intellectuals and leaders like Malcolm X (Fellion and Inglis, 277). And they were right to fear this, as the prisoners used unconventional ideologies to resist ‘authority’s sting’ (Collins, 64). After all, reading under imprisonment had radicalised and empowered thinkers like Malcolm X to transcend White respectability and make social and religious choices deemed subversive (Mamiya). Also, Bucky was made to withstand bleak conditions, spending almost a month ‘on concrete, half-rations and a cup of water a day’ (Knight, 179). Additionally, Bucky knew that he had to respond to this punishment by halting his progressive reading. He stated, ‘I had to tom my way out by promising to give up the teaching of my history and remain silent’ (Knight, 179). This description of Bucky’s silence shows that there is no escaping the censorship of a White supremacist system, only different ways of responding to it. Tomming is an act of survival in a system where punishment is life-threatening. Knight’s *Black Voices From Prison* demonstrates the ways that the White supremacist caste system controls and removes black people’s freedom to consume, in an attempt to depoliticise and limit their awareness of their marginalisation. Therefore, we see that the marginalised black man’s freedom to read and consume knowledge is constrained. Like the Victorian woman, the black man is pressured to rely on the White man’s guidance in order to survive.

Also, in Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma*, literacy appears to be a skill that can uncover power imbalances, thereby a direct threat to the political elite. Similarly to the portrayal of the

vulnerable female reader in *The Doctor's Wife*, in *Beijing Coma*, the state's control infantilises the public, carefully measuring out the content, quantity and quality of information accessible (Jian 65). Additionally, the public are portrayed as prey or tools of the government. Jian expresses this idea through animal imagery when Old Fu speaks about the government's intimidation tactics. Old Fu says 'They're the chickens, you are the monkeys. The authorities will kill the chickens to frighten the monkeys' (Jian, 113). He refers to the civilians as 'chickens' to express the way in which they may be reduced to casualty statistics when used as examples of the consequences of social deviance (Jian, 113). The badly behaved less controllable 'monkeys', the students will be warned by the death of those external to their agenda.

The socially aware Chinese individual is tormented by a restlessness or an 'eternal wakefulness' about their social existence. After Dai Wei learns intimate details about the horrific massacres of the Cultural Revolution, he is overwhelmed. Dr. Song relates that '3523 people were murdered and of those, 350 were eaten' (Jian, 63). In a regime where facts are tightly controlled and selected, Dr. Song's statistics hold a cultural significance as they expose buried, suppressed stories. As a researcher, a literate man attempting to unveil a neglected narrative and event, he poses a threat to the government. He is aware of the constraints of government censorship on his research when he says 'Only five copies of these chronicles have been published. I doubt the public will ever get to read them.' (Jian 65). As a researcher, interested in uncovering factual information, Dr Song also recognises that without readers, his work will not have a significant social impact. This case of suppression demonstrates how censorship takes agency from the reader by preventing access to facts, by erasing history (Fellion and Inglis 356). What the individual cannot read, they cannot know, which effectively defeats action. However, knowledge accessed can be like teleportation,

transporting the receiver of information into a frightening moment or context. Though Dr Song lists the atrocities as factual statistics, that almost intensifies their impact. The protagonist Dai Wei's increased awareness about these events causes him intense anxiety. For instance, Dr Song's 'revelations' deprived Dai Wei of sleep as he related, 'I didn't dare close my eyes' (Jian 67). Jian's use of the word 'dare' illustrates a strong sense of anxiety that overrides the natural instinct to sleep. It suggests that the historical vulnerability of citizens can create paranoia in the knowledgeable citizen. This historical knowledge does not appear to facilitate quick change. Also, the sense of wakefulness to Western knowledge is not a guarantee of freedom. For instance, Dai Wei's father's status as a dissenting rightist caused social ostracism and shame in Dai Wei and his mother long after his death. In this way, the government could be said to be practising censorship by association, whereby the ideological transgressions of one's family member or associate can create a domino effect, lowering the quality of one's life. This social facet of censorship proves effective, as one's ideologies become the basis of the right to live. This is evident in the way that Dai Wei is refused treatment for his coma due to his involvements in the protests (Jian 509). With the intergenerational ostracism in the Dai Wei's family, Jian therefore presents reading as a matter of life and death. Contextually, Jian's status as a social provocateur was life-threatening as Beijing Coma was published in exile, away from China (Fellion and Inglis, 356). As a writer, his ability to express civil discontent was only obtained beyond the censorious borders of the Chinese state, which suggests that the freedom offered by reading varies depending on the social context one occupies. Like the Victorian female reader and the literate black prisoner, the Chinese citizen is subject to dominant discourses that coerce the reader and writer in pervasive ways. Also, Dai Wei's position as the comatose, former student protester shows that wakefulness to social injustice often reaps no fruit, that there is no

guarantee that progress or empowerment will be obtained. As he lies in a coma, Dai Wei's memories of the Tiananmen Square protests resurface. Dai Wei's recollection of the protests paints a scene of immense brutality and visual carnage. The once outspoken, vibrant students were reduced by military force to 'a mass of silent, flattened bodies' (Jian, 656). In this case, this bleak imagery suggests that state ordered murder is a form of censorship, as the dead are silent and cannot protest. Initially, the protesters started out aiming to '…wake the Chinese people from their slumber!' (Jian 619). The use of the noun 'slumber' exposes the censorious state's ability to suppress collective wakefulness to social injustice. Ultimately their dissenting efforts resulted in them being permanently silenced. Additionally, the death of protesters is described in vivid, grotesque detail. One protester was described as having a 'flattened megaphone' and 'the bones of his legs were splayed open like flattened sticks of bamboo' (Jian 656-657). The metaphor of 'flattened sticks of bamboo' denotes a vivid image of distorted broken limbs, manipulated and used like natural resources. Also, Jian's repetition of the adjective 'flattened' reveals the way violence lowers morale among the dissidents. The students have been physically mutilated and literally flattened but also psychologically and culturally, a movement has also been flattened and crushed. Overall, Jian's bleak presentation of reading in *Beijing Coma* reveals the limits of imagination and knowledge under a controlling, censorious government. The vivid memory of the comatose protester suggests that human memory inherently resists censorship by bearing witness to difficult histories.

In conclusion, these texts prove that literacy cannot fully liberate the individual from the wretchedness of their identities. As a formerly enslaved man, Douglass knew that his ability to read proved insufficient in shifting oppressive, anti-Black social attitudes. In a world of White supremacy, Douglass' sentiments are convincing, as literacy alone does not secure liberation (Jenkins). The modern Chinese citizen, the formerly enslaved black man, the black

male prisoner and the Victorian woman share a unique plight in the complex ways their marginalised identities impact their approaches to knowledge and freedom. Overall, these texts prove literacy's transformative potential, its ability to expand the intellectual horizon of the individual, pushing the boundaries of censorship. However, they prove that literacy is only one small step on the path to the freedom of the marginalised. Reading may empower the marginalised to imagine social change but does not fully guarantee true social freedom.

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Originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice;

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