Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845): Reading Questions

1. What is the argument of William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to Douglass’ Narrative? What purpose do Garrison’s preface and Wendell Phillips’s letter serve? In Cadet’s Restavec, Cynthis Nassano-Cadet also writes a brief preface to the autobiography. What purpose does her preface serve? Is it similar to Douglass’ preface? If so how?

2. What issues does the full title of the Narrative highlight? Is there anything ironic about the Narrative’s full title? What does the full title of Cadet’s autobiography highlight?

3. Read Robert Stepto’s handout on the characteristics of slave autobiographies. What aspects of the slaves’ experience, according to the Stepto handout, do Douglass and Cadet describe in their autobiographies? As historical sources, what do Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies reveal about the lives, culture, and psychological struggles of American slaves and Restavecs/Haitian child slaves?

4. In what ways is Douglass’ Narrative a work of abolitionist propaganda? In what ways is it a historical source on the nature and arguments of the abolition movement in antebellum America?

5. In your opinion, what are some of the main turning points in Douglass’ and Cadet’s experiences as slaves?
6. How are Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies examples of the will to be known (or the will to power) as the will to write? In other words why were literacy and reading so important to Douglass and Cadet? In your opinion, in terms of literacy and reading, does Cadet have more to overcome than Douglass? Why or why not?

7. What biblical images and influences are evident in Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies? Are there other kinds of religious practices not associated with Christianity evident in Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies?

8. What does Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies reflect about the following themes: home, power, violence, friendship, mind, manhood?

9. How might Douglass’ and Cadet’s autobiographies be read as meditations on the multiple meanings of freedom?

10. How does Douglass portray slaveholders? How does Cadet portray his slaveholder (Florence). What strategy do these portrayals serve in his story?

11. What enduring meanings or principles in these books make them relevant today?

12. What does Douglass have to say about the consequences of slavery for Americans, black and white, North and South? What does Cadet have to say about the consequences of child slavery in Haiti?

13. What clarification of his views about the relation of religion and slavery does Douglass provide in the appendix? What effect might it have had on religious readers?

Questions 1-4, 6-12 have been adapted from:

Instructions:

The above questions regarding Frederick Douglass’ and Jean-Robert Cadet’s slave autobiographies are meant to prompt deeper critical thinking about both Narratives. As part of your requirement for obtaining Honors Credit for your participation in the Douglass/Cadet Symposium, Professor Canning has mandated that you to keep a Reading Journal. In this spirit, I want you to use these questions as catalysts/jumping off points for your Reading Journal. In other words, as you are reading Douglass’ and Cadet’s slave narratives. You are to answer these questions in your Reading Journal. If you are not sure of an answer, do not worry too much about it—answer as best you can since, I believe, this will also lead to very lively discussions of both texts!