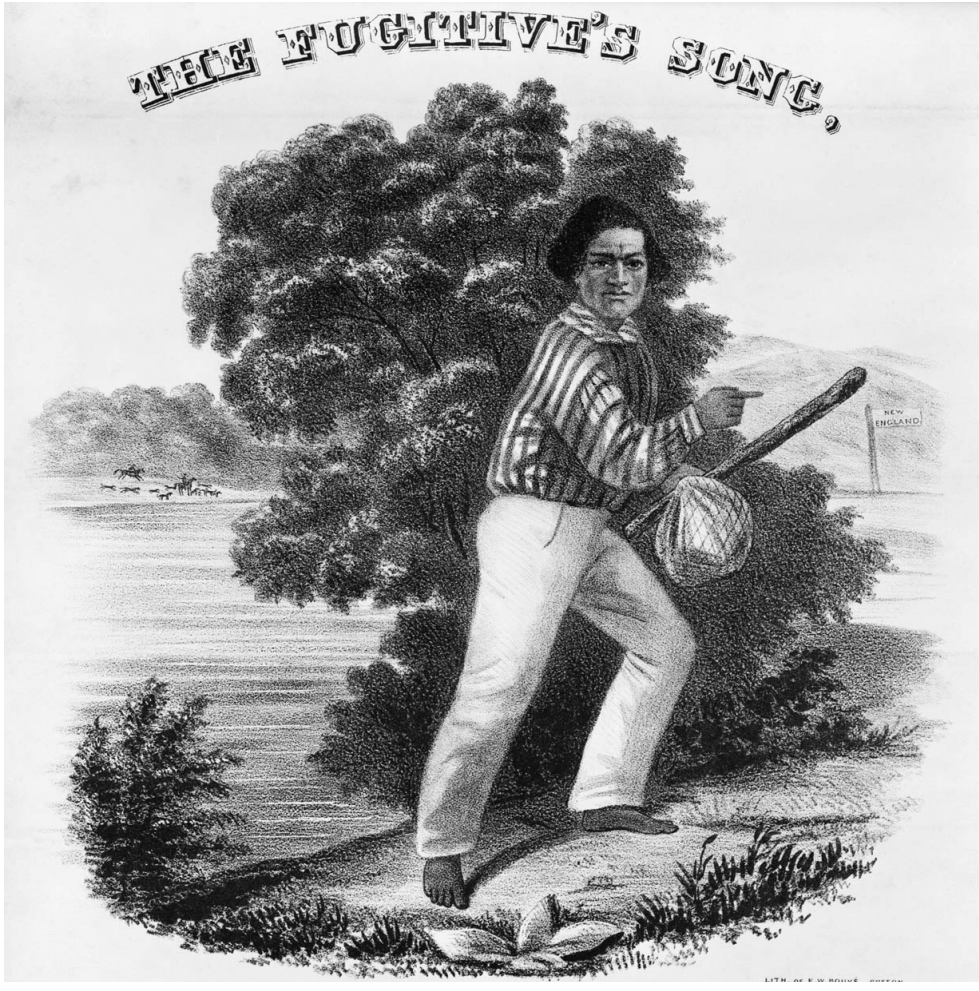
Frederick Douglass Fights for Freedom

By Bill Bigelow

ANY STUDY OF AMERICAN SLAVERY should convey its horrors, but also the numerous and varied ways African Americans resisted their enslavement—how they sought to maintain their humanity in a system that regarded them as nothing more than a unique form of property. An important document of resistance is the autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845. In this book, conceived as a tool for the abolition movement, Douglass describes his life from slavery to escape to freedom.



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Frederick Douglass was celebrated for his resistance to slavery and his many contributions to the abolitionist movement. Here his picture is used to illustrate the sheet music for an anti-slavery song.

The lesson described here asks students to empathize with Douglass' desperate confrontation with slave owners and their agents by drawing on their own experiences resisting those who would seek to control them. This is not to suggest any parity of oppression between slavery and students' lack of independence. But our imaginative capacity is limited by our experience, and it's that experience we must use as a resource if we're to attempt to comprehend the lives of others.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Generally, I read the excerpt from Frederick Douglass' narrative (pp. 4-7) to students. The structure of the language is a bit archaic and, if read haltingly, loses much of its power. An alternative is to ask one or more students to preview and rehearse the reading in advance of the class session. Before reading, ask students what they know about Douglass and to recall some of the details about his life from chapter 9 of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States.* The following are some discussion questions for the excerpt:

   - Douglass decides to walk seven miles from Covey's place to his master's. Why might Douglass have felt that his master would be more sympathetic than Covey?
   - How is Douglass affected by Master Thomas' refusal to act on his complaint?
   - Both Covey and Douglass' master use violence and the threat of violence to get what they want. Why was violence so much a part of the slave system?
   - What would you have found most difficult about Douglass' situation? How would you have wanted to respond?
   - In addition to Douglass' fight with Covey, what other acts of resistance do we see in this excerpt? [You might draw students' attention to the fact that Bill refuses to help Covey beat Douglass even though he is ordered to do so.]
   - How does the battle with Covey change Douglass? *Why* does it have this effect on him?
   - At the beginning of the excerpt, Douglass writes, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." How was a slave made a man?
   - How might Douglass' defiance have affected other slaves?

2. Tell students you want them to reflect on their own lives as a way of empathizing—if only partially—with Frederick Douglass' defiance. As Douglass himself points out, "He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled the bloody arm of slavery." But by digging into our own experiences, we can try. Ask students to think about a time in their lives when they refused to accept someone's control over them. It could have been a time when, like Douglass, they fought with someone physically, but it could also have been a time when the defiance was not physical, and perhaps even quite subtle. Offer some examples from your life: when you refused to teach the assigned curriculum because it was insulting to students' intelligence; when the college administration wouldn't let you and a number of students live off campus and you responded with letters, parent pressure, and appeals to sympathetic faculty; when you quit an athletic team rather than perform the way the coach demanded, etc. Encourage students to think about different arenas in their lives: family, school, work, athletics,

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relations with legal authorities. Give them a few minutes to list some experiences.

3. Ask for several volunteers to offer short, couple-sentence descriptions of incidents from their lists. Write these on the board to preserve as prompts for other students who may have difficulty thinking of appropriate experiences. My wife and former teaching partner, Linda Christensen, frequently begins writing assignments by leading students in a "guided visualization." When she first introduced me to this technique, I thought it sounded hokey, and too "touchy-feely" for my pedagogical tastes. But it clearly made such a difference in the detail and depth of people's writing, as well as in their capacity to begin their stories, that I became a convert. A visualization might proceed something like this: Once you sense that every student has selected an incident to write about, close the blinds in the classroom and turn off the lights. Ask students to put their heads on their desks and to close their eyes. Say, "Recall where you were when this happened. Were you inside or outside? Was it clear or rainy? What was the temperature? … [Pause about 30 seconds between your questions, indicated by ellipses.] Who was there? One by one recall the faces of the people involved. … Did any of them speak? Did you speak? What was said? … Play the whole experience out in your head, as if it was all caught on video. … Try to remember how you felt during this experience. Did you feel anger? fear? sadness? … What was the straw that broke the camel's back—what triggered your defiance? … How did you feel when you realized that you weren't going to allow yourself to be controlled? … How did you feel after this was all over? … When I turn the lights on I don't want anyone to talk. Just begin writing." Even in classes that are definitely not listen-to-the-pin-drop groups, the guided visualization seems to enlist students' imaginations in ways that make them want to record their thoughts. Whether or not the guided visualization is used, it's important that students have an opportunity to begin writing before they leave class. In my experience, to finish something as homework, students need to have begun the piece in class.

4. Either in small groups or in a full-class circle, ask students to share their stories. Before they begin, ask them to take notes on the "collective text" the class read-around creates. Specifically, they might listen for:

- What made us feel *able* to resist being controlled by someone else? [Point out that frequently we want to stand up for ourselves, but don't feel able to do so. What was different about the times described in these stories?]
- How do the feelings that we had after our actions compare with Frederick Douglass' feelings after his fight with Covey?
- What other patterns do we notice in these stories?

Before discussing these questions after the read-around, ask students to take a few minutes to write on one or more of these. The more they've reflected on the broader implications of the stories, the better the discussion will be. ■

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HANDOUT

AN EXCERPT FROM

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

I HAVE ALREADY INTIMATED that my condition was much worse, during the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's, than in the last six. The circumstances leading to the change in Mr. Covey's course toward me form an epoch in my humble history. You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. On one of the hottest days of the month of August, 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes, a slave named Eli, and myself, were engaged in fanning wheat. Hughes was clearing the fanned wheat from before the fan. Eli was turning, Smith was feeding, and I was carrying wheat to the fan. The work was simple, requiring strength rather than intellect; yet, to one entirely unused to such work, it came very hard. About three o'clock of that day, I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb. Finding what was coming, I nerved myself up, feeling it would never do to stop work. I stood as long as I could stagger to the hopper with grain. When I could stand no longer, I fell, and felt as if held down by an immense weight. The fan of course stopped; every one had his own work to do; and no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time.

Mr. Covey was at the house, about one hundred yards from the treading-yard where we were fanning. On hearing the fan stop, he left immediately, and came to the spot where we were. He hastily inquired what the matter was. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring wheat to the fan. I had by this time crawled away under the side of the post and rail-fence by which the yard was enclosed, hoping to find relief by getting out of the sun. He then asked where I was. He was told by one of the hands. He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter. I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and succeeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with which I was feeding the fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the hickory slat with which Hughes had been striking off the half-bushel measure, and with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst. In a short time after receiving this blow, my head grew better. Mr. Covey had now left me to my fate. At this moment I resolved, for the first time, to go to my master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection. In order to do this, I must that afternoon walk seven miles; and this, under the circumstances, was truly a severe undertaking. I was exceedingly feeble; made so as much by the kicks and blows which I received, as by the severe fit of sickness to which I had been subjected. I, however, watched my chance, while Covey was looking in an opposite direction, and started for St. Michael's. I succeeded in getting a considerable distance on my way to the woods, when Covey discovered me, and called after me to come back, threatening what he would do if I did not come. I disregarded both his

calls and his threats, and made my way to the woods as fast as my feeble state would allow; and thinking I might be overhauled by him if I kept the road, I walked through the woods, keeping far enough from the road to avoid detection, and near enough to prevent losing my way. I had not gone far before my little strength again failed me. I could go no farther. I fell down, and lay for a considerable time. The blood was yet oozing from the wound on my head. For a time I thought I should bleed to death; and think now that I should have done so, but that the blood so matted my hair as to stop the wound. After lying there about three quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, and started on my way, through bogs and briers, barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet sometimes at nearly every step; and after a journey of about seven miles, occupying some five hours to perform it, I arrived at master's store. I then presented an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron. From the crown of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master, humbly entreating him to interpose his authority for my protection. I told him all the circumstances as well as I could, and it seemed, as I spoke, at times to affect him. He would then walk the floor, and seek to justify Covey by saying he expected I deserved it. He asked me what I wanted. I told him, to let me get a new home; that as sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I should live with but to die with him; that Covey would surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it. Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself get hold of me. After threatening me thus, he gave me a very large dose of salts, telling me that I might remain in St. Michael's that night, (it being quite late,) but that I must be off back to Mr. Covey's early in the morning; and that if I did not, he would get hold of me, which meant that he would whip me. I remained all night, and, according to his orders, I started off to Covey's in the morning, (Saturday morning,) wearied in body and broken in spirit. I got no supper that night, or breakfast that morning. I reached Covey's about nine o'clock; and just as I was getting over the fence that divided Mrs. Kemp's fields from ours, out ran Covey with his cowskin, to give me another whipping. Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding. He seemed very angry, and searched for me a long time. My behavior was altogether unaccountable. He finally gave up the chase, thinking, I suppose, that I must come home for something to eat; he would give himself no further trouble in looking for me. I spent that day mostly in the woods, having the alternative before me,—to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death. That night, I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave with whom I was somewhat acquainted. Sandy had a free wife who lived about four miles from Mr. Covey's; and it being Saturday, he was on his way to see her. I told him my circumstances, and he very kindly invited me to go home with him. I went home with him, and talked this whole matter over, and got his advice as to what course it was best for me to pursue. I found Sandy an old adviser. He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where

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there was a certain ~root,~ which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it ~always on my right side,~ would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. This was Sunday morning. I immediately started for home; and upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to meeting. He spoke to me very kindly, bade me drive the pigs from a lot near by, and passed on towards the church. Now, this singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was something in the root which Sandy had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be something more than I at first had taken it to be. All went well till Monday morning. On this morning, the virtue of the root was fully tested. Long before daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged, whilst in the act of throwing down some blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed. He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold

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of me again. "No," thought I, "you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before."

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped.

It was for a long time a matter of surprise to me why Mr. Covey did not immediately have me taken by the constable to the whipping-post, and there regularly whipped for the crime of raising my hand against a white man in defence of myself. And the only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me; but such as it is, I will give it. Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker. It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me—a boy about 16 years old—to the public whipping-post, his reputation would have been lost; so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished.