

---

## OPPRESSION, FREEDOM, AND THE EDUCATION OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Brian R. Warnick  
Ohio State University

---

When I first read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* several years ago, I was not expecting a detailed historical account of an illiberal education program. Clearly, Douglass's account of his climb toward liberation is central to the narrative, but this personal journey plays out against the backdrop of a certain educational system—a system complete with teachers, classrooms, and methods of instruction—explicitly pushing its “students” away from freedom toward subjugation. Slavery, I began to understand, is not entirely characterized by physical confinement and intimidation; it also arms itself with pedagogical tactics meant to squelch the ability to be free. These tactics deserve our analysis. Educators who wish to liberate would benefit from knowing about these tactics of oppression.

In what follows, I will describe the “educational methods” employed in the chattel slavery of the antebellum American South. I will limit the voluminous possibilities of historical sources by looking to Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* (first published in 1845) to supply most of the historical data. In addition to laying out the particular pedagogical tactics of this institution, I will explore how these methods might prove potent in actualizing oppression. In the end, I will also use this data to suggest positive ideas for an emancipatory pedagogy.

The subtle techniques found in Douglass's narrative can, for purposes of illustration, be broken down into five categories, some of which are already well known. The slaveholders used tactics that were intended to (1) decrease the slaves' confidence in their abilities to act freely, (2) deny the skills of a painful literacy, (3) rob the slaves of a liberating silence, (4) increase slave sense of “gratitude,” and (5) dismantle any relationships of family and community.

Before describing these tactics in detail, two preliminary points need to be made. First, I should note that these tactics were not always successful. The slaves in the American South often fought their bondage both brilliantly and valiantly. Douglass's pathway to freedom is itself an example of slave resistance. Moreover, Walter Johnson has argued that slaves resisted on both a philosophical level (for example, by refusing to accept slaveholder ideology) and a practical level (say, by resisting their sale).<sup>2</sup> In the end, this resistance often counterbalanced the weight of oppressive education. Still, the widespread use of these tactics found in Douglass's narrative suggests that oppressive education was perceived to be at least partially successful in overcoming slave resistance. To the extent that these tactics of oppression were effective, it seems

plausible that they point to certain human psychological responses relating to freedom and oppression. The slaveholders saw these peculiarities as “weak points” and exploited them in oppression, but such knowledge need not only benefit the captor. Emancipatory educators who understand these practices, for example, might know better what to avoid. In addition, it may be possible to reverse these tactics of oppression so that they promote freedom instead of constrict it. Although it is doubtless much more complicated than simply reversing the methods (going to an opposite extreme, after all, might be just as oppressive in its own way), in what follows I will briefly explore what such a tactical turnaround would look like.

Second, it is important to ask whether the observations of Douglass are historically reliable. These tactics are not useful for our purposes if they are mostly fiction. The answer to this question appears to be that Douglass is a dependable historical guide. Douglass’s original account has stood up to considerable scrutiny. Subsequent studies have shown Douglass to be accurate in his memory of names, places, and events.<sup>2</sup> There is room for caution, however, in attributing all of the “philosophy of slavery” found in the pages of Douglass’s narrative to Douglass himself. As Johnson reminds us, slave narratives (particularly those of Douglass) were shaped to fit the needs of white antislavery groups; thus, authentic descriptions of slaveholder practices may have been distorted. Also, the narratives of Douglass and other escaped slaves offer an incomplete sample of slavery. After all, these are the stories of men and women who achieved freedom and tend to emphasize exciting tales of escape. They do not dwell particularly on a slave’s everyday life. In spite of these difficulties, Johnson concludes, “The nineteenth century narratives remain the best source for the history of enslaved people.”<sup>3</sup> It seems, then, that we are warranted in pressing forward with the task of using Douglass to describe slaveholders’ educational philosophy.

#### TACTIC ONE:

#### DECREASE THE SLAVES’ CONFIDENCE IN ACTING FREELY

According to Douglass, slaveholders wanted slaves to feel uneasy with thoughts of freedom. During the holidays when the slaves were not working, Douglass saw the slaveholders actively encouraging their slaves to get drunk. With this observation, Douglass reconstructs the mind of the slaveholder:

Thus, when the slave asks for virtuous freedom, the cunning slaveholder, knowing his ignorance, cheats him with a dose of vicious dissipation artfully labeled with the named of liberty....Many of us were led to think that there was little to choose between liberty and slavery....So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a deep breath, and marched to the field,[] feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery....The mode here adopted to

disgust the slave with freedom, by allowing him to see only the abuse of it, is carried out in other things.<sup>4</sup>

This tactic, of course, could merely be seen as a crude attempt at classical conditioning, that is, as the pairing of a stimulus (perceived freedom) with a response (physical sickness). Douglass's subsequent recollection of slaveholders attempting to disgust a would-be molasses "thief" with an excess of molasses demonstrates that they knew of these primitive psychological principles.

However, Douglass's statement that slaves were "led to think" a certain way, and that they were "deceived into a belief," entails that slaveholders also wanted to alter their slaves' thoughts about themselves. They wanted the slaves to think a certain way about how they would act if given their freedom. They wanted the slaves to think of themselves as failing when left to their own devices, in other words, as failures in freedom. A slave possessing self-doubts would have been less likely to seek escape, since they would be less likely to see themselves as being successful if they did escape. After all, why would a slave value liberty when it would end in failure?

This tactic still has relevance today. I doubt, of course, that many educators or policy makers want their students to think of themselves as failures in freedom. There do seem to be certain trends in policy, though, that might produce the same effect. The current incarnation of No Child Left Behind stipulates that all children in the United States—including children from under-funded schools and special-education students—will be at the "proficient" level as measured by state mandated tests by 2014. This seems doomed to failure, and it is likely the case that the majority of American schools will be labeled as "failing" if this stipulation remains unchanged. When students find that they go to a failing school, the message is this: we tested, you failed. The message of failure is similar whether it involves public drunkenness or failure to pass a test.

#### TACTIC TWO: DEVELOP THE SKILLS OF A PAINFUL LITERACY

The passages where Douglass is introduced to reading are among the most famous of his narrative. Mrs. Auld begins to teach young Frederick the ABCs and basic spelling. When Mrs. Auld's husband discovers her "crime" he rebukes her and tells her that teaching a slave to read is unlawful and unwise:

If you teach a nigger to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (*NL*, 58)

---

Mr. Auld's words proved prophetic. Douglass continued to learn to read and, as he did so, he became unfit for slavery□ he became unmanageable, of no value to his master, and unhappy. Douglass mentions reading several books on emancipation. These books sparked a tremendous change in Douglass's worldview. Where before he had sensed the injustice of slavery, now he had arguments proving contradictions and inconsistencies.

Reading such books was not an enjoyable experience, however, as it showed to Douglass new possibilities in life that were then unavailable to him.

As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. (*NL*, 67)

Douglass's emotional experience, I think, is key: He "writhed under" his "curse" of literacy. Douglass did not read because it was always fun (clearly it was not), or because a teacher had taught him the "joy of reading" (however important that may be), but because he recognized reading as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of life, even with all the pain and contradictions this entails.

Applying Douglass's narrative reveals that reading should, at least sometimes, make us uncomfortable. Truly challenging reading exposes us to disconcerting arguments and, more important, allows us to experience alternative worldviews and life possibilities□ a necessity for meaningful self-creation. One may choose a life possibility that others have chosen, or in the diversity merely see that variation is possible and, with this realization, start out on uncharted paths. Yet the experience of alternative possibilities, while Douglass shows us its pain, is equally necessary. What is the antidote, then, to the oppressor's denial of literacy? The antidote resides in giving the skills of literacy, obviously, but not just any literacy□ liberation requires a certain kind of literacy. The literacy that is called for contains an imperative to read widely, seriously, and in a way that challenges and discomforts the reader.

### TACTIC THREE: ROB SLAVES OF A LIBERATING SILENCE

Douglass experienced several phases when it appears that his desire for freedom had been drained. In these moments, he became quiescent, compliant, and submissive. Two instances were particularly troubling. These two moments correlate with times when he was given insufficient time to read, and above all, to think□ he was overworked and his intellect lay dormant. The first instance occurred while we worked for a Mr. Covey, a notorious slave breaker:

Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first

went there, but a few months of this discipline tames me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed...the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (*NL*, 94[5])

Mr. Covey's cruelty surely played a role in temporarily breaking Douglass at this time. But what Douglass emphasizes is the constant *work*. This continual activity demanded by Covey sapped Douglass of physical, intellectual, and spiritual reserves, causing a nadir in his quest for liberation.

A similar low point occurred after Douglass's first escape attempt. He was sent to live with one Mr. Gardner in Baltimore where he worked in the shipyards and succumbed to a similar passivity. Again, it was constant work that crushed Douglass's spirit. He writes, "When in Mr. Gardner's employment, I was kept in such a perpetual whirl of excitement, I could think of nothing, scarcely, but my life; and in thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty" (*NL*, 132). Douglass here again reports that constant distraction can inhibit emancipatory thinking. The master, it seems, must continuously occupy the mind of the slave.

Opposing this endless distraction and activity might be what some people have called "silence." Silence, in this sense, is characterized as a time free from exterior distraction; it consists of quiet moments, time to reflect and to dream. Many have noticed the connection between self-creation and this type of silence. These quiet moments, it is often argued, help us realize who we are and what we are capable of becoming. Essayist Thomas Merton argues that in silence "we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday lives."<sup>5</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that only in quiet of solitude do we hear the call of intuition, freedom, and independence:

These are the voices we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members...It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.<sup>6</sup>

Douglass and these other authors are not calling us to hermit's life. As I will soon point out, Douglass also sees community connection as a vital ingredient to projects of freedom. What these author's are saying is that our busy lives, even our lives within strong communities, need to be punctuated by sustained moments of quiet reflection.

The reversal of this tactic seems straightforward: educators concerned with liberation should supply unstructured moments dedicated to reflective thought—time to think about the possibilities of life, time to let the mind wander, time to plan, time to reflect. Long readings, more homework, and

---

bustling classrooms□ work, work, work□ is not always the best policy if freedom is our goal.

TACTIC FOUR:  
INCREASE SLAVE DEPENDENCY THROUGH GRATITUDE

Douglass relates many ways in which slaves were reminded of their dependent status. The slaveholders, for instance, highlighted the slaves' dependency by linking rewards of position and comfort to faithful service. The will of the master and slave were linked by these offers of positions and rewards within the oppressive system. Douglass writes of his early years:

Few privileges were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms, than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm....They regarded it as evidence of great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account...that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for. The competitors for this office sought diligently to please their overseers, as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people. (*NL*, 35)

The overseer thus becomes the bestower of reward and office, the slave the grateful and dependent recipient. The slaves see all good things as contingent on pleasing the master.

The slaveholders worked to make their slaves grateful. Contained in the concept of gratitude is a dependency. We tend to be grateful to those whom we depend on. We thank those who have done us a service, and by so doing, acknowledge their role in sustaining us. The slaveholders used this link between gratitude and dependence to solidify their own position. This is particularly clear during the holidays as Douglass writes:

[Most of the slaves] engaged in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky; and this latter mode of spending the time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters. A slave who would work during the holidays was considered by our masters as scarcely deserving them. He was regarded as one who rejected the favor of his master. (*NL*, 106)

The slaveholders were not simply taking from the slaves the physical resources accumulated in the year's work (which might otherwise have improved the slave's material condition). By providing a holiday, slaveholders were also intent on making the slaves act in a grateful manner. In this way, the slave's position of dependency was thus reinforced.

By demanding gratitude, the slaveholders inculcated the view that they were the bestowers of good things, and that the slaves should see themselves as the thankful, passive receivers. Similarly, Paulo Freire's account of banking

education, for him a pedagogy of oppression, is based on establishing dependency of knowledge: “The scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who know nothing.”<sup>7</sup> Freire urges us to beware educators bearing gifts.

The reversal of oppressive tactics would probably be an education that strives for the recognition of independence. If the oppressor tells the oppressed that good things in life come from living up to the oppressors’ standards, the educator for freedom sends the message that standards should come from within the individual. The need for independence is not as simple, though, as many have thought. As we learn from Douglass, an education for freedom is not just about severing certain connections that bind us to others, but it is also about building and strengthening certain connections as well. This need for connection relates to the last of the slaveholders’ tactics: separating families and communities.

#### TACTIC FIVE:

#### DISMANTLE RELATIONSHIPS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

There is a linguistic link between liberal education and concepts of freeing, climbing, and growth. Research suggests that the linguistic roots of freedom are not just growing, however, but growing in community. Claude Meillassoux has discussed a link between community and freedom.<sup>8</sup> He first points to Emile Benveniste’s semantic analysis of the concept “free” in Indo-European languages which demonstrates that the primary meaning of “free” was not “released from something.” The concept of freedom originally was related to membership in an ethnic stock described by a metaphor taken from plant growth. This ethnic membership has its privileges—namely, economic and political rights and privileges—that are unavailable to the alien or slave. According to this analysis, free people are those “who were born and have developed together.”<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux finds a similar linguistic link has been found among the African Maninka. The concept of freedom, then, was originally tied linguistically to the privileges granted to one’s place within a community.

Given this conception of freedom, it is easy to see why slavery has been characterized by its negation of community, particularly its negation of family. The separating of children from their families is a common element of campaigns that seek to impose foreign values and lifestyles. For example, attempts to “civilize” Native American children were ineffectual when done near family and tribe, hence, the creation of Indian Boarding Schools.<sup>10</sup> During American slavery, Johnson observes, “every advance into enslaved society—every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation—held within it the threat of its own dissolution.”<sup>11</sup> Slaves, and other oppressed people, were systematically prevented from forming the security of family and community ties.

---

Douglass describes this practice in this way:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant[] before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (*NL*, 24)

Note that Douglass implies a method to the slaveholders' madness. He suspects that this practice was not just implemented for economic reasons, that is, it was not only about placing able-bodied family members where they would be the most productive. Instead, Douglass suspects that the separation was done for another reason, namely, to break natural ties of affection.

Why would slaveholders want to destroy family and community ties? Douglass's narrative hints at why this was done. For example, there is a correlation between the times Douglass most actively sought to escape oppression and the times when he acknowledges forming the closest personal relationships. Douglass's first attempt at escape coincided with his creation of a Sabbath school attended by some fellow slaves who were to become his dear friends. Of these relationships Douglass writes:

We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love strong than any thing I have experienced since....I have never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow-slaves, and especially those with whom I lived at Mr. Freeland's. I believe we would have died for each other....We never moved separately. We were one.... (*NL*, 114[]6)

Thus, when Douglass firmly determined to escape, it was a community affair: "I was anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life giving determination" (*NL*, 116). Unfortunately, Douglass's first escape attempt in 1835 was a failure before it had begun, and he was separated from his co-conspirators and the community of the Sabbath school.

In 1838, Douglass, then in Baltimore, determined to escape for a second time. This impetus arose, again, when Douglass was surrounded by a close community. Upon contemplating the second escape, his only hesitation was that "I had a number of warmhearted friends in Baltimore,[] friends that I loved almost as I did my life" (*NL*, 142). Note that precisely the same type of relationship is described: a relationship valued as much as life itself. While admitting regret at having to leave this community, it was then that Douglass

attempted his escape. This time the escape was successful; he passed into the North and later became the legendary orator and abolitionist.

This correlation between Douglass's escape attempts and the closeness of his social surrounding offers one clue to why slaveholders feared community: At least in the case of Douglass, the times when he made his most determined efforts to attain freedom are also the times when he was surrounded by particularly close personal relationships. So it makes sense that oppressive forces would seek to dissolve family and community ties. But why should a drive for freedom be linked to such relationships in the first place?

Douglass leaves a hint in the following passage:

If any one thing in my experience, more than another, served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother. She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age....To cap the climax of their base ingratitude and fiendish barbarity, my grandmother, who was now very old, [was] virtually turned out to die! If my poor old grandmother lives, she lives to suffer in utter loneliness. (*NL*, 76[7])

Thus, Douglass's most vivid realization of the injustice of slavery did not come from a harm perpetrated on himself, but rather, when he realized the injustice inflicted on a loved one. This observation suggests one reason why slaveholders might have feared the formation of close communities so intensely. In the case of Douglass, seeing injustice performed on someone he loved was the most infuriating experience of his captivity, and infuriation can bring motivation to change. This helps us understand one possible reason for the tactic of separation.

Are there other reasons why this was done? First, there is the practical side of things. Slaves often turned to family and friends for practical help in escaping bondage. Johnson: "Families and friends helped some slaves escape the slave trade entirely and gave others a chance to negotiate the terms of their sale into the trade."<sup>12</sup> Second, the relationship of family and friends creates competing obligations that interfere with the slave's total involvement in the needs of the master. Community gives people status, obligations, and responsibilities. Although family relations are themselves involuntary, the sense of duty and obligation they invoke rivals the sense of obligation the oppressors wish to instill toward themselves. For the slaveholder, this competition is dangerous; family separation is thus the logical policy. Third, the emotional connection between family and friends provides insights into possibilities of human relationships. When a slave experiences loving family and community relationships, she is able to compare and contrast those relationships with the master-servant relationship. The experience of multiple

---

possibilities makes available a valuation process; indeed, with this the oppressed might find that one sort of relationship is better than another. But doesn't it seem obvious that slaves would be aware of new possibilities in relationships even with separated families? According to the narrative, it is not that simple. Douglass writes, "I suffered more anxiety than most of my fellow-slaves. I had known what it was to be kindly treated; they had known nothing of the kind" (*NL*, 75). It seems, then, that the realization of better sorts of relationships made slavery even more intolerable than before. Having a new sort of relationship—knowing what it was to be treated kindly—opened up a sense of increased dissatisfaction.

The fact that slaveholders acted to separate members of a family, as in the case of Douglass, should give pause to the more radical libertarian authors who have argued for symbolically "freeing" the child from the family. Such authors may supply a needed critique of abusive and authoritarian families and communities, but they may underestimate the resources of self-creation that families and communities provide. The details of how this might work are far from clear, but there may exist a connection in all this between a liberal focus on individual autonomy and a focus on intimate communities—the community, ironically, seems necessary for projects of individual creation. When Friedrich Nietzsche complains, "Our longing for a friend is our betrayer,"<sup>13</sup> or when Emerson asserts, "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls,"<sup>14</sup> they are probably teaching something important about freedom and self-creation—our immediate social relations can often embody the status quo; they themselves can operate within the rules of oppressive system and reinforce them. But ironically, as I hope Douglass has demonstrated, close communities can also work to liberate.

#### CONCLUSION

If this analysis of Douglass is accurate, an oppressive education undermines an individual's sense of independence. It destroys the self-confidence that is required to act both freely and successfully. It prohibits a painful literacy, disallows time for quiet reflection, and negates community relationships. These tactics offer some tentative suggestions for those who seek to educate for freedom. Frederick Douglass is only one writer, though, among many who have left personal descriptions of systems of oppression. The American slave narratives alone doubtless hold many clues about what characterizes an oppressive education. If freedom is our goal, we need to examine such texts and, in so doing, become better students of oppression.

---

## NOTES

1. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
  2. Benjamin Quarles, "Introduction," in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), xxi.
  3. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 9–10.
  4. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 108. This work will be cited in the text as *NL* for all subsequent references.
  5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), 39.
  6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 178.
  7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 53.
  8. Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 23.
  9. *Ibid.*, 23.
  10. K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 3.
  11. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 22.
  12. *Ibid.*, 20.
  13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 82.
  14. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 179.
-