Introduction: Frederick Douglass Writes His Story

IN 1845, THE YEAR the extraordinary memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was published, Douglass was twenty-seven years old and a fugitive slave. Which is to say, despite escaping from bondage in 1838, marrying and starting a family, and earning wages with his labor, despite his new life with a new name in Massachusetts, where he also found a new career as a spokesman for the abolitionist cause, Frederick Douglass was still a slave. This fact was announced at every antislavery meeting—indeed, Douglass’s role at these meetings was to be The Slave Who Tells His Story—at the same time that certain details of Douglass’s story were suppressed: it was considered imprudent and dangerous for Douglass to offer his former name, to name his master, or to reveal the county and state of his bondage, for that would in effect invite slave-catchers (or even “men-of-the-law”) to seize and abduct him back into the hell of slavery. Eventually, as Douglass tells us in the memoirs that came after

the *Narrative*, his oral account of his story (related no doubt with increasing ease, wit, and irony) created more and more skepticism within his audiences: “People doubted if I had ever been a slave. They said I did not talk like a slave, look like a slave, nor act like a slave, and that they believed I had never been south of Mason’s and Dixon’s line.”¹ The response of the abolitionists was both remarkable and revealing. For their part, they pressed Douglass all the more to tell his story, urging him that it was “better to have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not” (MB 362).

This, then, is the context in which Douglass retired to Lynn, Massachusetts, to write the *Narrative*. On the one hand, Douglass had decided to “tell all” and to confront the skeptics with the names and facts related to his bondage. As he declared in an address of 1845, he would mention the names “for the sake of the cause—for the sake of humanity,” adding, “I will mention the names and glory in running the risk.”² Douglass knew full well that in publishing the names he was ensuring that this information would become a matter of public record; he was answering his Northern critics and striking back at the Southern slaveholders to the greatest extent that his hard-won literacy afforded. But he was also striking back at the abolitionists, who did not contest his history as a slave but did have fixed ideas about Douglass’s role in the antislavery movement and about his place among them as a black man. In *writing* his story in the pages of the *Narrative*, Douglass was at one and the same time conforming to the abolitionists’ insistence that he stick to his story *and* making certain that his relations with them would most certainly change. Somehow, Douglass intuitively knew that to write and craft his story as opposed to “telling it” was to compose and author himself. In doing so, he wrested his story from its “place” in the antislavery meeting agenda and created for it a life of its own.

This meant, of course, that Douglass had created for himself more of a life of *his* own. The publication of the *Narrative*, with all its revelations, forced him to flee for his safety to the British Isles for two years. But seen another way, the book's publication allowed Douglass to get away and to be more of a speaker, intellectual, and leader, and more of a man, than the Boston abolitionists would have deemed appropriate.

In the course of pursuing his personal motivations for producing the *Narrative*, Douglass wrote a truly great American book. It is, as Benjamin Quarles declared years ago, "an American book in theme, in tone, and in spirit."³ We see this especially in the ways the *Narrative* participates in so many subgenres of American narrative literature. For example, the *Narrative* is arguably a captivity narrative, not just because it portrays the perils and afflictions besetting a captive people, but also because it emphatically suggests that Douglass was saved from "the galling chains of slavery" because he was chosen. To be sure, Douglass was a "self-made man" (another veritable American theme Douglass embodied), but in the *Narrative* he clearly contends that he was put on the path to freeing himself by "a special interposition of divine Providence," a "living word of faith and spirit of hope" that was a gift from God (NFD 42). While the immediate work of such declarations is to portray a faith that is liberating and in sharp contrast to the hypocritical religion of slaveholders, the statements also place Douglass in the company of early American captivity narrativists such as Mary Rowlandson and John Marrant, who were also certain of their chosenness and of the power of their faith. Douglass's beliefs as they are expressed in the *Narrative* are one reason his voice has been described as "preacherly"; they are also a reason the *Narrative*, among his other writings, is considered to have "a scriptural significance."⁴

Douglass's book is also an example of the great American tradition of the cause narrative. The cause in Douglass's written story is the abolition of slavery; more precisely it is the cause of promulgating the Garrisonian agenda for abolishing slavery. We see this from the beginning, when the authenticating documents (vouching for Douglass's character, veracity, and so on) are provided by none other than William Lloyd Garrison himself and by Wendell Phillips, thus giving Garrison in particular the opportunity to proclaim a chief tenet of his abolitionist platform: "NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!" Other features of the Garrisonian position appear later in the *Narrative*, as David Blight has observed: "Readers of the 1845 *Narrative* . . . will find many influences of the Garrisonian doctrines, especially the attacks on religious hypocrisy and the remarkable moment in Chapter 2 when Douglass compares trusted slaves who pleased overseers with the 'slaves of political parties.' . . . The book is as much an abolitionist polemic as it is a revealing autobiography."⁵

Blight's remarks direct us to consider that Douglass was pursuing two causes, the abolitionist cause and his own, autobiographical cause. In pursuing the former, Douglass was, in 1845, still enmeshed in the vocabulary and discourse of Garrison and other associates of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

In writing autobiography, however, Douglass was trying something new that could not be expressed by doctrine or slogan. While he was not exactly inventing a new language, he was forging a new mission for his words, the mission of employing the written word in order to present himself (as Waldo Martin observes) as both a self-made man and a self-conscious hero.⁶ To be self-made is to claim American citizenship, no matter what the laws of the land designate a fugitive slave to be; to be self-conscious is to present unabashedly one's intelligence and humanity, which is the intelligence and humanity a whole

maligned race will cultivate once the beatings end and the chains are broken.

Insofar as Douglass represents his race in the *Narrative*, he participates in yet another American narrative tradition, the narrative of representativeness or of the representative man. Douglass's own pursuit of this narrative is arresting because he portrays himself as a figure of the race's degradation ("You have seen how a man was made a slave . . .") as well as a figure of the race's strength and character (" . . . you shall see how a slave was made a man") (NFD 72). But his representativeness is accompanied by his exceptionalism. Indeed, Douglass's experience is exceptional in that from boyhood to manhood he lives within a rather benign form of slavery that offers, early on, few chores, access to a grandmother's affections, and, later, the relative "freedoms" of being a city slave in Baltimore, including just enough freedom to become literate and to earn money for an escape north.

Douglass's literacy becomes his most sought-after, prized, and exceptional possession. In the *Narrative*, his language virtually cavorts as he describes exactly what he learns when Mr. Hugh Auld forbids his wife, Sophia Auld, to instruct young Frederick in "the A, B, C":

Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner in which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded,

that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought. (NFD 45)

Each sentence of this lengthy quote presents a reversal, a kind of chiasmus, and the rhythmic repetition of these reversals or oppositions is the drumbeat of Douglass's march to literacy and freedom. Robert O'Meally takes this point further: "this figure of speech, this verbal reversal, is important to the structure and meaning of Douglass's whole book . . . For Douglass's mission was not merely to write a nicely balanced set of sentences but to undermine and reverse a system of power relations."⁷

It may also be said that Douglass seeks to undermine a system of power when he pursues one of the primary objectives of the 1845 *Narrative*, naming the places and personages of his enslavement. This he pursues throughout the book. There is power in naming, especially when a name appears in print to be forever associated with some atrocity. Thus we know by the end of Chapter 4 that Captain Anthony relished whipping slaves, notably the comely Aunt Hester, and that overseer Mr. Gore shot and killed a slave. Then there was Mr. Thomas Lanman, who killed two slaves, one with a hatchet. And oh yes, Mr. Giles Hick's wife, who beat to death with a stick a teenage slave girl (a cousin of Douglass's wife, Anna Murray Douglass), and Mr. Beal Bondly (actually, according to David Blight, his name was John Beal Bordley, Jr.), who shot an old slave man who drifted onto Bondly's property while fishing. We sense that Douglass could have gone on in this vein were there not other lists he wanted to compose, for example, his list of slaveholders who were not only purportedly religious men but also men of the cloth. Such a list appears in Chapter 10. There we encounter the Rev. Daniel Weeden and the Rev. Rigby Hopkins, the latter known in the neighborhood for priding himself

on slave management, a “feature of his government” being that he whipped slaves “in advance of deserving it” (NFD 82). In this vein, Douglass also makes it known that Wright Fairbanks and Garrison [Garretson] West, both class leaders at their church, were the white men who violently broke up the Sabbath School that Douglass had organized among the slaves and free black people.

While there is power in naming the names and writing them down, there is possibly a greater power in being able to comment on and otherwise play with the names of men whom Douglass could not have accosted verbally as a slave. Two examples readily come to mind: Douglass’s remarks early in the *Narrative* about Mr. Severe, and his “play” with Mr. Freeland’s name in Chapter 10. Records show that Douglass’s Mr. Severe spelled his name “Sevier.” While we must consider that Douglass did not know the exact spelling of “Sevier,” it is also quite tempting to think that he *did* know the spelling but chose “Severe” to vivify his portrait of slavery’s atrocities and to be true to his memory of the man. Douglass’s point is summed up in one sentence: “Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man” (NFD 23). Mr. Freeland, in some measure, was the opposite of Mr. Severe; Douglass describes him as “the best master I ever had, till I became my own master” (NFD 86). Living with Mr. Freeland kindles the desire to be truly free, as Douglass indicates in this play on Freeland’s name: “At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the Year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live *upon free land* as well as *with Freeland*; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder” (NFD 86). At the very least, we see in these passages Douglass remembering places and names and, in some fundamental way, wresting control of those memories by handling, and in that sense owning, the names of the people who once, in effect, owned him.

While naming names or not—Douglass is careful to withhold the

names of figures white and black who variously assisted him—is a way for Douglass to control the past, naming also plays a role in his forging of the future. It is noteworthy that with virtually each measure of freedom achieved, Douglass contemplates his own name and renames himself. Here is an account of such renaming from the *Narrative's* Chapter 11:

On the morning after our arrival at New Bedford, while at the breakfast table, the question arose as to what name I should be called by. The name given me by my mother was, "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey." I, however, had dispensed with the two middle names before I left Maryland so that I was generally known by the name of "Frederick Bailey." I started from Baltimore bearing the name of "Stanley." When I got to New York, I again changed my name to "Frederick Johnson," and thought that would be the last change. But when I got to New Bedford, I found it necessary again to change my name . . . there were so many Johnsons in New Bedford, it was already quite difficult to distinguish between them. I gave Mr. Johnson [an African American abolitionist benefactor] the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of "Frederick." I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the "Lady of the Lake," and at once suggested that my name be "Douglass." From that time until now I have been called "Frederick Douglass." (NFD 110)

Much is suggested here. Shedding his two middle names, probably in Baltimore while he was preparing for his escape, may be likened to an earlier moment when Douglass scrubbed off the "dead skin" and "mange" of slavery in preparation for his first trip to Baltimore: each action is a ritual cleansing. "Augustus" and "Washington," not unlike "Pompey," "Caesar," and "Zeus," and so on, are ultimately pompous, mocking given names in the context of slavery, no matter who be-

stows the names on a slave child. In planning his escape north, Douglass intended, in multiple senses of the term, to “travel light”; he did not need the “baggage” of “Augustus” and “Washington,” and so, with his new attentiveness to language, he edited his name accordingly.

Douglass’s negotiation within and beyond the name of “Johnson” is equally fascinating. He eventually complains that he was a “Johnson” in a horde of “Johnsons,” but wasn’t that at first desirable? Wouldn’t an escaping fugitive slave want in some measure to blend into the Northern black masses so as to be invisible and protected? It may well be that Douglass successfully makes his way from New York to New Bedford in part because he is at the time another Negro named Johnson. In New Bedford, however, apparently by the time of his first breakfast there, Douglass is already thinking that he is one of too many (African American) Johnsons in the neighborhood. In short, what he so poignantly realizes is that he no longer needs to be a Johnson in order to be free; he can choose his own, distinctive name. Of course, Douglass didn’t need to worry: he would have distinguished himself whatever his surname. But it is striking that he wanted a new name, and that he asked a literate New Bedford (free) African American also named Johnson to direct him to his new name. That Mr. Johnson, who had been reading Sir Walter Scott’s “Lady of the Lake” (one wonders what Samuel Clemens may have later remarked about this), suggested “Douglas” would seem faintly ridiculous if it weren’t for the fact that Douglas was a Scottish king and a “hero in search of lost patrimony,” like our Douglass, whose life’s journey was in part a search for a father and a fatherland.

In his essay on the 1845 *Narrative*, “A Psalm of Freedom,” David Blight reminds us that our readings of the *Narrative* are affected by the times we live in and by the issues at hand.⁸ Here I would like to comment on

how three books of the last decade have led me to new assessments of the *Narrative*.

In 1997, Saidiya Hartman published her groundbreaking study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Early on in her discussion, she makes it clear that she will not focus on the “terrible spectacles” in the literature of slavery, such as the murder of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or the beating of Aunt Hester in Chapter 1 of Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, in great part because she worries about “the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged black body.”⁹ Hartman instead sets her task as follows:

Rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle.¹⁰

For Douglass’s *Narrative*, she homes in on those moments when Douglass describes slaves reveling during the Christmas holidays or singing on their way to collect provisions at Great House Farm—moments that some readers might interpret as evidence of slave contentment, but that she reads as indications of the terrors and corrosions of slave life.

Hartman’s discussion is especially striking when she explores what she calls the “opacity of black song.” Black song has been “opaque” at

times for listeners and performers alike. For example, it can be extremely difficult to clarify, “with any degree of certainty or assuredness, the politics of slave song and performance when dissolution and redress collude with one another and terror is yoked to enjoyment.”¹¹ The opacity of black song is suggested in Douglass’s account (in Chapter 2) of the slaves singing on their way to Great House Farm:

While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. . . . I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see or hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones long, loud, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. (NFD 25)

In this passage Douglass is clear about how “opaque” the songs were to him when he was a slave and “within the circle,” part of his point seeming to be that now that he is free and literate he comprehends and understands what was coherent in the songs: “testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” It is not at all clear that everyone “without” the circle might “see or hear” as Douglass came to see and hear, but that, too, is one of his developing themes and exhortations: Become a good listener! Listen well! Enlist in the cause! Indeed, Douglass tells his reader, if you wish to be impressed with the “soul-killing effects of slavery,” place yourself in the deep pine woods near the Lloyd plantation on allowance-day, and, “in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of [your] soul” (NFD 26).

Yet Douglass’s *Narrative* begins with both the beating of Aunt

Hester *and* the “wild notes” of slave songs, not one or the other event. Douglass was no doubt well aware of the provocative and distracting elements in his description of the beautiful Hester being stripped to the waist and beaten by a crazed, jealous white man, but he told the story anyway, not just because it was “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which [he] was about to pass” (NFD 19), but because this was his aunt who was beaten! We are told of her plight in the context of Douglass’s telling, and showing, what pitiful semblance of a family slavery provided him. One could suppose that the family Douglass came to have in those early years was the “circle” of slaves who sing their laments in the woods. But that circle is described in every way except in familial terms; the loudness and incoherence of the circle is for Douglass more frightening than familial. His tears in the present-day of his *Narrative* are occasioned by recalling the songs, and if the songs cause him to recall people, too, those people sadly enough are not identified as family. They are non-descript Negroes trapped in the claws of bondage.

The fact that Douglass wants us to hear right at the start Aunt Hester’s shrieks and the songs of slaves trudging through the woods leads me to a second book: *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (2005), written by the Australian historians Shane White and Graham White (no relation to each other). In this study, a finalist for the 2005 Frederick Douglass Book Prize, White and White concentrate on the sounds the slaves made, in particular the field calls, songs, prayers, sermons, and the like, which were “the invigorating sounds of the reclamation of their humanity.”¹² Not surprisingly, when they turn to Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, they are drawn to the passage under discussion in which slaves sing long and loud while en route to Great House Farm. Their attention to the sounds of the slaves heightens our awareness of Douglass’s commitment to a profoundly different project: he wants

us to hear the sounds the slaveholders made; he indicts slavery by forcing us to listen to the cacophony that accompanies race oppression.

Consider, for example, the sounds of slavery emanating from Chapter 2 of the *Narrative*. There, Douglass describes how the slave's work day begins with the blare of the slave driver's horn: "At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field . . . and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons" (NFD 23). Those who hear not the horn are whipped, and so another sound that fills the air is the whistling of the whip interlarded with the cries of the beaten. The paragraph in which we learn this is also the one in which the overseer, Mr. Severe, is introduced, the sound of his name being unto itself a sound of bondage. Mr. Severe, we are told, is prodigiously profane as well as cruel, which introduces one of Douglass's key themes: whatever the venue, the country or the city, the profanity of the slaveholders is a sound of slavery.

When Mr. Severe dies, he is replaced by a Mr. Hopkins, who doesn't last long as the overseer. Douglass suggests that Mr. Hopkins was deemed inadequate precisely because he was not only less cruel than Mr. Severe but also less profane. After Hopkins comes Mr. Gore, another of Douglass's aptly named overseers. In portraying Gore, Douglass dwells on his "sharp, shrill voice," the sound of which produces "horror and trembling" among the slaves. The portrait continues: "Mr. Gore was a grave man, he indulged in no jokes, said no funny words, seldom smiled. His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words. Overseers will sometimes indulge in a witty word, even with the slaves; not so with Mr. Gore. He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip" (NFD 34).

Mr. Gore, in short, sounds like someone who could kill somebody,

and indeed, what comes next is Douglass's account of Mr. Gore's shooting and killing a slave named Demby. Demby's offense was that he did not obey the command—the sound—of his “master's voice” (the “master” in this instance being Gore).

The account of the event could have ended there, but Douglass, as shrewd a commentator as one might find, adds to his story another sound of slavery: that of Gore's words of justification for killing Demby. Douglass writes, “His [Gore's] reply [to Colonel Lloyd] was, (as well as I can remember,) that Demby had become unmanageable” (NFD 35). Note Douglass's inserted phrase “(as well as I can remember,)” This is a personal moment, an autobiographical moment, for Douglass: as a slave, he personally has heard the noisome noise of slavery and of a slave's murder verbally exonerated. It is another moment, like that in which he overhears Mr. Auld forbidding his ABC lessons, when Douglass earns a deeper knowledge of slavery by eavesdropping on men of power trying to explain themselves.

In one of the most polemical passages at the end of the *Narrative*, Douglass writes about how quiet he found the North to be after enduring slavery in the South. Here, for example, is how he describes the wharves of New Bedford:

Lying at the wharves, and riding in the stream, I saw many ships of the finest model, in the best order, and of the largest size. Upon the right and left, I was walled in by granite warehouses of the widest dimensions, stowed to their utmost capacity with the necessities and comforts of life. Added to this, almost everybody seemed to be at work, *but noiselessly so*, compared to what I had been accustomed to in Baltimore. There were *no loud songs* heard from those engaged in loading and unloading ships. I heard no deep oaths or horrid curses on the laborer. I saw no whipping of men [Douglass could have added that he *heard* no whipping of men]; but all seemed to go smoothly on. Every man appeared to understand his

work, and went at it with a sober, yet cheerful earnestness . . . To me this looked exceedingly strange. (NFD 111)

Douglass is no doubt exaggerating the quietude (and model efficiency) of the scene, but it is an understandable exaggeration, given his zeal for abolition and his personal gratitude for being in a new locale, a new life.

If Douglass marvels at the scene in New Bedford, it is because his own nightmarish memories of working in the shipyards of Baltimore are so vivid. At one point, he tells of being hired to a Mr. William Gardner, ship builder. His orders from Mr. Gardner were “to do whatever the carpenters commanded [him] to do.” That meant that Douglass was at “the beck and call of about seventy-five men” and that he was to regard them all as masters. Douglass recalls being “called a dozen ways in the space of a single minute. Three or four voices would strike my ear at the same moment.” It would sound like this: “Fred., come help me to cant this timber here.”—“Fred., come carry this timber yonder.”—“Fred., bring that roller here.”—“Fred., go get a fresh can of water.”—“Fred., come help saw off the end of this timber.”—“Fred., go quick, and get the crowbar.” As the passage continues, Douglass makes certain to let us know that he wasn’t always called “Fred,” to wit: “Halloo, nigger! come, turn this grindstone.” . . . I say, darry, blast your eyes, why don’t you heat up some pitch?” . . . “Hold on where you are! Damn you, if you move, I’ll knock your brains out!” (NFD 95). This went on for some eight months.

Douglass’s recollections of his work at Gardner’s Shipyard confirm that a slave’s work in the city could be as demeaning, brutalizing, and noisy as a slave’s work in the fields. They also help us understand why Douglass would declare that, compared with what he experienced in Baltimore, the wharves at New Bedford were “noiseless.” The wharves of both cities emitted the din of work, but it was Douglass’s Baltimore

that was markedly louder, for it was there that he was assaulted by the sounds of slavery.

The fact that Douglass, in writing the *Narrative*, has achieved the day when he can actually compare the conditions of Northern and Southern cities reminds us that his story is one of expanding geographies, of bursting beyond the narrow confines, geographical and mental, imposed by slavery to keep a slave “world-stupid.” It is Douglass’s great good fortune that he sees and experiences Baltimore at a young age; he knows from then on that there are, even in slavery, other places to live and other ways to live. Traveling to and from Baltimore is arguably even more important to Douglass than residing there. Once aboard a Chesapeake sloop, young Douglass experiences firsthand the near-spiritual lift of wind and wave as well as the practical knowledge of seeing and mentally recording which way the steamboats turn when they sail north. Douglass’s expanding knowledge of an American geography can be no more curtailed than his expanding ability to read and write: in the words of a famous Robert Hayden poem, he “Mean mean mean to be free.”¹³

The phrase “world-stupid” comes from the pages of Edward P. Jones’s novel *The Known World*, which won the National Book Award in 2003. This is an important book, more important than its prizes. It presents, among other main characters, Moses, a black slave who becomes the overseer on the plantation owned by Henry Townsend, a black slaveholder in Virginia. Moses is, as a fellow slave named Elias, who hates him, says, “world-stupid,” so neither the roads nor the heavens mean anything to him. Eventually, the slaves he oversees mock him, saying things like, “*Come on outa there, Mr. Moses man/ Come on out and lead us to the Promise Land*”; and as Jones’s narrator notes, “People laughed, even the children.”¹⁴ In contrast, Douglass in his *Narrative* is, as I have been suggesting, profoundly “world-smart”

or in the process of becoming so. An early moment in that process—a blues moment—is unforgettably described by Douglass as a time when he did not know the days of the month or the months of the year, but did know that he had to look for home elsewhere (NFD 41). This is the rationale he gives for spending a day in the bow of a sloop, looking ahead, when he was first shipped to Baltimore.

In Chapter 8 of the *Narrative*, Douglass is unexpectedly returned to the Anthonys and to Colonel Lloyd's plantation. Captain Anthony has died and the entire property, including young Frederick (now about eleven years old), must be "valuated." This event nakedly reminds Frederick that he is property and that he might find himself permanently returned to plantation life and to the cruelties of that condition. He observes that the other slaves are not as agitated as he is and offers this explanation: "I had known what it was to be kindly treated; they had known nothing of the kind. They had seen little or nothing of the world. They were in very deed men and women of sorrow, and acquainted with grief" (NFD 55–56). Striking in that remark is the suggestion that the other slaves were "world-stupid," something that Douglass, even at age eleven, is determined not to be. His good fortune is that when the valuation is completed and the property newly divided, he is sent back to Baltimore. Two years later, however, family quarrels among Douglass's masters and mistresses lead to his removal from the Auld household in Baltimore and return to the plantations of St. Michael's. It is during that voyage on the Chesapeake that Douglass makes careful note of "the direction which the steamboats took to go to Philadelphia." He adds, "I deemed this knowledge of the utmost importance. My determination to run away was again revived" (NFD 59).

Douglass's dream of freedom, and of freedom being found and facilitated by wind and wave, is what sustains him in the nadir of

his enslavement, his year with the “slave-breaker,” Mr. Covey. Covey’s plantation was hell itself, but a hell near the water. And so Douglass writes:

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe . . . I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer’s Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul’s complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships. (NFD 71)

With these words Douglass introduces the apostrophe that William Lloyd Garrison appraised in 1845 as the most thrilling of the *Narrative*’s “many passages of eloquence and power” (NFD 7). Many other readers over more than 150 years have offered similar praise. Rather than present a sizeable portion of that impassioned speech, I direct you to these three short sentences from the middle of the address: “It cannot be that I will live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom” (NFD 72). Little wonder, then, that the plan for the (thwarted) 1835 escape attempt involved first going up the bay by canoe.

One would think that in this geography of slavery the worst site of terror (and hence the space most distinct from the Chesapeake shore) would be Covey’s plantation. But the plantation, perhaps because it is a work place, is presented as something of a liminal space, a space where a man can be worked as a slave but also where a slave can work to become a man. Indeed, it is in Covey’s stable in the heart of the plantation that Douglass quickens into manhood and strikes back at

Covey, bloodying him in their epic two-hour battle. For Douglass, the site of unabated terror is the “thick wood,” which he immediately identifies as “a place new to me.” What is certainly new to him is to be taken into the wood by Covey for merciless beatings. The beatings begin right after Douglass arrives at Covey’s plantation and continue right up through the thrashing that occasions Douglass’s pitiful attempt to secure the protection of his master (Thomas Auld), who had hired him out to Covey. There are stories of slaves finding a respite from slavery in the deep woods and similar places. Douglass gestures toward those stories in relating that a slave named Sandy took him to “another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, it would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me” (NFD 76). He even goes so far as to declare that on the day of his marathon battle with Covey “the virtue of the *root* was fully tested” (NFD 76). But that is as far as Douglass goes in rendering this portion of his *Narrative* a “conjure story.” His struggle with Covey is to be a story of manhood, not of magic.¹⁵

Obviously, Douglass, as a slave, does not know as much about the world as he will come to know once he flees from bondage, but what does he know when he is sixteen or seventeen years of age and beginning in earnest to plot his escape? How world-smart is he while living in circumstances determined to keep him “world-stupid”? Douglass is quite explicit about what he and the brave souls planning to escape with him knew in 1835:

We could see no spot this side of the ocean, where we could be free. We knew nothing about Canada. Our knowledge of the north did not extend farther than New York; and to go there, and be forever harassed with the frightful liability of being returned to slavery—with the certainty of being treated tenfold worse than before—

the thought was truly a horrible one, and one which it was not easy to overcome. The case sometimes stood thus: At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol. We were hemmed in on every side. (NFD 87)

With these words, Douglass maps geographies and anxieties, the one being impossible to describe without the other. In passages such as this one, he tells a special truth about the ordeal of slavery, a truth about the mental travail of bondage.

Douglass's audiences of the 1840s wanted him finally to divulge the "facts" of his servitude—the names, the places, the dates. In writing the *Narrative*, Douglass supplied those facts, but he also challenged the conventional expectations of what exactly a fact of slavery might be. This occurred because he was writing a narrative that was to be as personal as it was historical. Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* is a great American book because it is a great American autobiography. Like so many fine autobiographers who followed him, Douglass knew that both his "objective" facts and his "subjective" facts were true, and that offering both was a key to telling his story well. Telling his story was part of daring to be free. Writing his story was a next step in inventing himself, a step confirming his hard-won literacy and his intention to take his place in the world.

Notes

1. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855, reprint, New York: Dover, 1969), p. 362. All future page references are to this edition and are accompanied by the letters "MB."
2. Frederick Douglass, "My Slave Experience in Maryland: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 6 May 1845," in John W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 1, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 27–34.

3. Benjamin Quarles, "Introduction," in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845, reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. xix. All future page references are to the present edition and are accompanied by the letters "NFD."

4. Robert O'Meally, "Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative: The Text Was Meant to Be Preached," in Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds., *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), pp. 192–211; Quarles, "Introduction," p. xix; David Blight, "Introduction: A Psalm of Freedom," in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845, reprint, New York: Bedford Books, 1993), pp. 1–23.

5. Blight, "Introduction," p. 8.

6. Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 253–278.

7. Robert O'Meally, "Introduction: Crossing Over: Frederick Douglass's Run for Freedom," in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845, reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), p. xxvi.

8. Blight, "Introduction," pp. 18–19.

9. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

12. Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon, 2005), p. ix.

13. Robert Hayden, "Runagate, Runagate," in Frederick Glaysher, ed., *Robert Hayden Collected Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1985), p. 59.

14. Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: Amistad Harper Collins, 2003), p. 332.

15. In 1888, forty-three years after Douglass shared his story about a slave named Sandy and the special root that could protect a slave from white folks, Charles W. Chesnutt published "Po' Sandy," a conjure story in which Sandy's wife, a conjure woman named Tenie, turns him into a tree in the hope of giving him some respite from the master. Unfortunately, Sandy is milled into boards for a new kitchen. Their stories are different, but might it

be that Douglass's story about a slave named Sandy occasioned Chesnutt's story? Chesnutt was well versed in Douglass's writings and career. He authored the biography of Douglass in the Beacon Biographies of Eminent Americans series: Charles W. Chesnutt, *Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1899).