



A Voice  
Ringing O'er  
the Gale!

The Oratory of  
**Frederick  
Douglass**

Read by Ossie Davis



**AFRICAN  
AMERICAN  
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*A Voice Ringing O'er the Gale!*

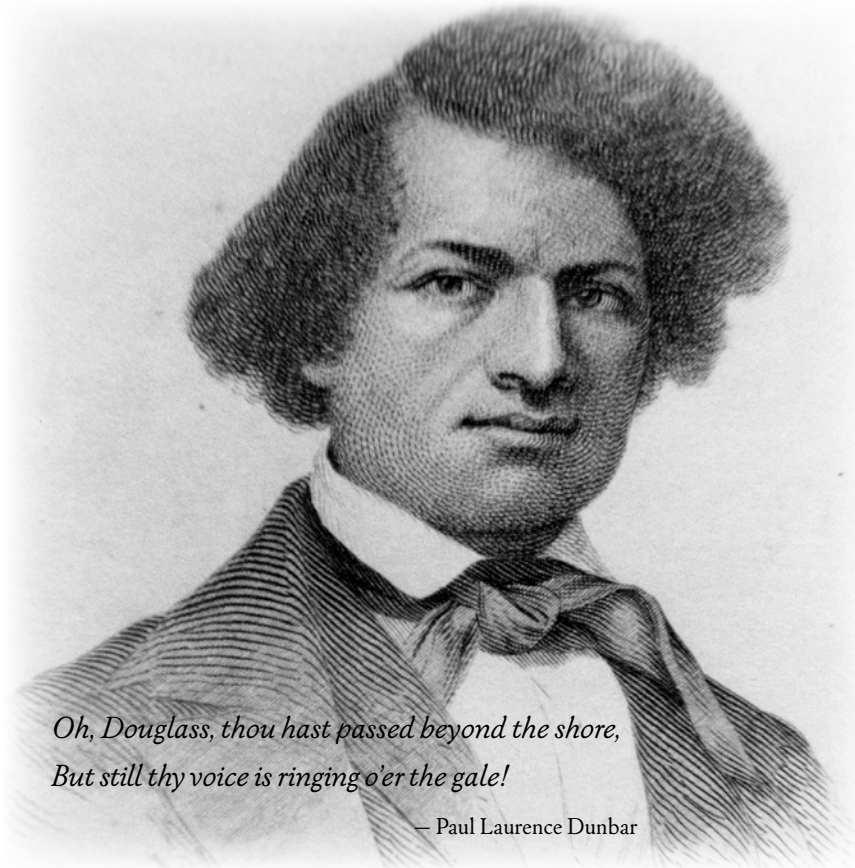
## **The Oratory of Frederick Douglass**

*Read by Ossie Davis*

- Track 1*    **“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July”** 24:47
- Track 2*    **“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” (cont.)** 17:06
- Track 3*    **“If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress”** 12:42
- Track 4*    **“A Plea for Freedom of Speech”** 8:01
- Track 5*    **“Why I Became a Women’s Rights Man”** 3:21

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*Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore,  
But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!*

— Paul Laurence Dunbar

## INTRODUCTION

by Robert H. Cataliotti

Over a century after his death, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) is known to the world primarily through the words he wrote—the texts of the speeches he delivered; the articles he wrote for newspapers; his correspondence with family, friends, colleagues, and an impressive array of national and international figures; and, most significantly, through his three autobiographies: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1881). These books are firmly established in the canon of the American literary tradition, and the *Narrative*, particularly, is frequently included in high school and college literature and history courses.

During his lifetime, however, Douglass was known to the world primarily through the words he spoke. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, Douglass was constantly active as a public speaker both in the United States and Europe. In *Life and Times*, Douglass articulates his predilection for oratory over writing: “I hardly need say to those who know me, that writing for the public eye never came quite as easily to me as speaking to the public ear” (938). A testimony to his renown and skill as a public speaker can be found in the titles of two biographies that were published during his

lifetime: *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (1891) by Frederic May Holland and *Frederick Douglass: The Orator* (1893) by James M. Gregory. Clearly for these biographers, the most important signifier of this man’s unparalleled public life was his oratory. The effect of the power and eloquence of Douglass’s voice on his audiences is illustrated by an article in the August 17, 1850 issue of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*: “His voice is full and rich, and his enunciation remarkably distinct and musical. He speaks in a low conversational tone most of the time, but occasionally his tones roll out full and deep as those of an organ. The effect is electrical” (Chesebrough 1998, 103). For over half a century, the voice of Frederick Douglass made a significant contribution to the soundscape of both national and international moral, social, and political discourse.

It is fitting that Douglass’s oratory, which was so integral to the formation of the American character, found a place in the catalogue of Folkways Records, the “encyclopedia of sound” that was founded by Moses Asch in 1948. Although there are no extant sound recordings of Douglass, his speeches are given sonic life through the voice of the actor, writer, producer, and director Ossie Davis. Douglass’s words and Davis’s voice were brought together by producer Philip S. Foner, a United States history scholar, a Douglass biographer, and the editor of the four-volume collection, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, published between 1950 and 1955 (a fifth volume supplement was published in 1975). Folkways released two albums of Davis’s powerfully emotive renderings of *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass* (FH 5522 and FH 5526) in 1966. Davis returned to the studio in 1972 to record selections of Douglass’s oratory. Two albums, *The Meaning of July 4 for the Negro* (FH 5527) and *Frederick Douglass’s Speeches* (FH 5528), were released in 1975 and 1977 respectively. This compact disc is a compilation of the lion’s share of those recordings.

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Previous page: **With the veracity of his anti-slavery oratory constantly challenged, in 1845, Douglass, at age 27, answered his critics with *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself*.**

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE ORATOR

Born in Talbot County on Maryland's Eastern Shore, most likely in February of 1818, Douglass was the son of Harriet Bailey, an enslaved African American woman, and a white father, who is suspected to be Aaron Anthony, the plantation owner. He was named Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, and his grandmother Betsey Bailey reared him. In 1824, he was sent to the Lloyd Plantation on the Wye River, and two years later he was sent to Fell's Point in Baltimore to serve Hugh and Sophia Auld. Even though young Douglass remained in bondage in Baltimore, the move proved fortuitous. His mistress began teaching him to read; Mr. Auld, though, who angrily charged that learning would "spoil" the young slave, terminated the lessons. This denial, however, provided a revelation for Douglass. As he relates in his *Narrative*:

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (37–38)

The lesson Douglass learned was providential; Auld's words triggered a revolution of consciousness that would transform his sense of self and, ultimately, the course of American history.

Without the aid of Mrs. Auld, Douglass embarked on a surreptitious program of self-education. One of the tools he employed would have a fundamental impact on his oratory in later years. At the age of twelve, he acquired a copy of *The Columbian*

*Orator*, a collection of famous speeches, which ranged through history from Cicero to George Washington, arguing for and celebrating liberty. He read the speeches, analyzed them, and, eventually, practiced delivering them. The influence of this classic oratory is testified to in the *Narrative*: "The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers" (42).

Douglass's self-education continued in Baltimore until 1832, when he was sent back to Talbot County; there he began an illegal "school" to teach fellow slaves to read and write. The following year, he was sent to work for Edward Covey, a farmer "with a very high reputation for breaking young slaves" (54). Working as a field hand and enduring numerous beatings from Covey, Douglass finally fought back and beat his oppressor. Like the epiphany he experienced through hearing Hugh Auld's denunciation of his



**After Emancipation, Douglass dedicated his pen and voice to numerous causes, including women's rights, the right of black soldiers to bear arms during the Civil War, temperance, labor rights, and world peace. (Drawing by Sarah J. Eddy)**

wife's reading lessons, the battle with Covey was a turning point in Douglass's journey to self-made manhood. As he asserts in the *Narrative*:

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 return 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 me, must also succeed in killing me. (65)

Douglass was sent back to the Aulds in Baltimore in 1836 and was hired out as a caulker in a shipyard. During this time he met and became engaged to a free African American woman, his future wife, Anna Murray. He became increasingly independent, and when he believed, as punishment for attending a camp meeting without permission, that he would be sent back to work as a field hand, Douglass engineered an escape with Murray's assistance. In September of 1838, carrying borrowed seamen's papers, he boarded a train for Wilmington, Delaware, and then took a steamer to New York. Murray joined him in New York, and they eventually moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he changed his surname to Douglass, based on a character in Walter Scott's romantic poem, *The Lady of the Lake* (1810).

A few months after arriving in New Bedford, where he was working as a laborer, Douglass once again had a providential encounter. He met a young man selling copies of the *Liberator*, the abolitionist newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass soon became a regular subscriber to the weekly and devoured its anti-slavery rhetoric. As he declared in the *Narrative*: "The paper became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire" (96). Eventually, he began regularly to attend anti-slavery meetings,

mostly content to listen but occasionally speaking in gatherings among friends in the black community. In the summer of 1841, all that would change dramatically when he attended a large anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Massachusetts. During the convention, Douglass was sought out and urged to speak by the white abolitionist William C. Coffin, who, unbeknownst to Douglass, had heard him speak at a New Bedford schoolhouse. Making his way to the stage, Douglass could hardly have known that he was about to begin one of the most important public speaking careers in American history. He recalls the event in *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

My speech on this occasion is about the only one I ever made, of which I do not remember a single connected sentence. It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect, or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation and stammering. I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called. At any rate, this is about the only part of my performance that I now distinctly remember. But excited and convulsed as I was, the audience, though remarkably quiet before, became as much excited as myself. (364)

Douglass's fledgling effort as an orator was witnessed by Garrison, who recalled the occasion in his "Preface" to Douglass's *Narrative*: "I shall never forget his first speech at the convention—the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind—the powerful impression it created upon the crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise—the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks" (3). Garrison, the most prominent abolitionist in America, was so inspired by what he had just heard that he made Douglass the subject of his own speech. He denounced slavery with a fiery rhetoric that Douglass described in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as "an effort of



**As a free black woman in Baltimore, Anna Murray (left) helped engineer Douglass's escape. They were married for 44 years and raised 5 children. Two years after Anna's passing in 1882, Douglass married Helen Pitts (right); the interracial marriage met with considerable backlash from both the black and white communities.**

unequaled power, sweeping down, like a very tornado, every opposing barrier, whether of sentiment or opinion” (365). This was a momentous encounter, and Douglass was immediately recruited to become a salaried agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. His career as an orator had begun.

## **A LIFE IN THE PUBLIC EYE AND EAR**

The career that was initiated on that August day in 1841 would be sustained for over half a century. Douglass's dedication to the abolitionist movement would eventually carry on after emancipation, as he agitated for equal rights for the freedmen. Throughout his life, he would also dedicate his pen and voice to other causes, including women's rights, the right of black soldiers to bear arms during the Civil War, temperance, labor rights, and world

peace. Not only would he author three autobiographies, but he also published one of the first works of African American fiction, the novella *The Heroic Slave* (1853). He founded his own anti-slavery newspaper, the *North Star*, in 1847, in Rochester, New York, his new home. In 1851, he merged his paper with the *Liberty Party Paper*, and the new *Frederick Douglass' Paper* began publishing with the motto “All Rights for All!” He had close and sometimes conflicting relationships with many of the leading politicians of the 19th century, including Abraham Lincoln and each succeeding president. Douglass had similarly complex personal and professional interactions with many contemporary social activists, including Garrison, Wendell Phillips, William Wells Brown, John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Booker T. Washington, and Susan B. Anthony.

He and Anna raised five children, and they moved to Washington, D.C., in 1872, living at first on A Street and then purchasing Cedar Hill, a home surrounded by twenty-four acres of property in the Anacostia neighborhood. President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him U.S. Marshall of the District in 1877, and in 1881, President James A. Garfield appointed him Recorder of Deeds for the city. Two years after Anna's passing in 1882, Douglass married Helen Pitts; she was twenty years his junior, a women's rights activist, his neighbor, a clerk in the recorder's office, and white. The interracial marriage met with considerable backlash from both the black and white communities. The couple toured Italy, Egypt, Greece, and France in 1887. From 1889 to 1891, Douglass held the post of Minister Resident and Consul General to Haiti. Throughout all these years, Douglass was continuously exercising his unparalleled oratorical skills, unflagging in his determination to agitate for equality, liberty, and justice for all. In fact, on the day he passed away, February 20, 1895, Douglass was home at Cedar Hill telling Helen about the address to the National Council of Women that he had delivered that morning.

## FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S ORATORY

Between that initial oratorical effort in Nantucket in 1841 and his final address in the nation's capital in 1895, Douglass was an incredibly prolific public speaker. In the five-volume *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews* (1979–1992), editors John W. Blassingame and John R. McGivigan collected more than 2,500 of his speeches, a process complicated because Douglass's collection of his writings was destroyed in a fire (most likely caused by arson) in his Rochester home in 1872. Douglass not only spoke often, but he also had the capacity to speak at great length. As David Chesebrough asserts in *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*:

Douglass's speeches were often two hours in length, not unusual for nineteenth-century orators. In a time undistracted by television, the cinema, radio or quick sound bites, audiences were prepared and willing to listen to what today would be overly long speeches. Because nineteenth-century oratory was an important source of education, information, inspiration, and entertainment, orators such as Douglass worked hard to make sure that they had something worthwhile to say and that it would be said in an engaging manner. (103)

Particularly during the first decade of his abolitionist career, it is likely that no written text of Douglass's speeches ever existed, because they were extemporaneous. Later, when he generally prepared a text in advance, he often mixed in improvised passages, responding to the attentiveness or reception of his listeners (Chesebrough, 103). The sheer volume of sophisticated rhetoric produced by this self-educated man is simply stunning.

It is important to note that Douglass's oratory was produced through the melding of two cultures: the African American oral tradition and the Eurocentric "classical" tradition. Although he was surely a quick study of the public speaking techniques and rhetoric of his

white counterparts, Douglass was deeply rooted in the oral tradition of his own people. Many of the descendants of Africans kidnapped and sold into bondage retained expressive forms and techniques from the oral traditions of the various African cultures that were brought together in American slavery. These retentions were "re-membered" to create a distinct African American oral tradition. For the enslaved African American, these oral expressions—ring shouts, field hollers, spirituals, work songs, ring games, and folk tales of animal tricksters and Flying Africans—were sophisticated survival mechanisms. They provided relief from drudgery and abuse; they provided coded instructions for resistance and subversion; they created a sense of community and a connection to a shared heritage. And, perhaps most importantly, they affirmed a human identity in the midst of a holocaust. Douglass was keenly aware of these expressions and their significance. In one of the most memorable passages from his *Narrative*, Douglass credits the sound of the spirituals with his initial inspiration to resist oppression and fight for freedom:

Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathy for my brethren in bonds. (24)

Douglass's prescient analysis of the songs, especially his identification with a kind of spiritual essence embedded in the sound of the expression, testifies to his engagement with the African American oral tradition. Surely, throughout his formative years, both on



the plantation and in Baltimore's urban black community, Douglass was immersed in these forms and was aware of their power.

Another opportunity for Douglass to be exposed to and learn the intricacies of the African American oral tradition—one that would have particular relevance to his future as an orator—would come through his involvement with the black church. As a teenager in Baltimore, Douglass experienced a religious conversion. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he credits this spiritual awakening to hearing “a white Methodist minister, named Hanson” (231). But it was through a friendship with an older black man, Uncle Lawson, that Douglass found his true spiritual mentor: “This man not only prayed three times a day, but prayed as he walked through the streets, at his work—on his dray—everywhere. His life was a prayer, and his words, (when he spoke to his friends,) were about a better world” (232). Lawson assured Douglass that he would be engaged in “great work” and urged him to pursue his program of self-education: “He threw my thoughts into a channel from which they have never entirely diverged. He fanned my already intense love of knowledge into a flame, by assuring me that I was to be a useful man in the world” (233). Surely, Douglass absorbed the manner—the tone, the inflections, the phrasing—with which Lawson and other African American preachers delivered their spiritual message.

Incensed at the separate and unequal treatment he found in New Bedford's white churches, Douglass joined the local congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and in 1839, he received his license to preach. It was in this setting that the white abolitionist Coffin first heard Douglass speak in public, which ultimately led him to urge this unknown young black man to deliver that initial oration in Nantucket. There can be no doubt that Douglass's roots in the African American oral tradition, with its creative building blocks of call-and-response, improvisation, and rhythmic sophistication, played an essential role in his power and effectiveness as an orator.



**Douglass had close and sometimes conflicting relationships with Abraham Lincoln and each succeeding president. This photo, taken at Kodak Park, Rochester, NY on Memorial Day, 1892, includes Douglass with President Benjamin Harrison.**

Entering into the anti-slavery movement, Douglass soon mastered the tradition of formal rhetoric and oratory that stretched back from America to Europe and through ancient Rome and Greece. His independent studies with *The Columbian Orator* had initiated him into this realm. In his “Introduction” to Gregory's *Frederick Douglass: The Orator* (1893), W.S. Scarborough, a professor of New Testament, Greek, and Literature at Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, declares that “eloquence is a spontaneous outburst of the human soul” and compares Douglass to Themistocles, Pericles, and Demosthenes, representatives of “the three ages of Greek eloquence”: “The negro's cause



was his cause, and his cause was the negro's cause. In defending his people he was defending himself. It was here that the brilliancy of his oratorical powers was most manifest. It was here that he was most profoundly eloquent" (9). His earliest experiences in the abolitionist movement exposed Douglass to many outstanding orators who had been formally trained in this tradition. According to Ronald K. Burke's *Frederick Douglass: Crusading Orator for Human Rights* (1996):

When he ran away from slavery and arrived in Massachusetts he became a constant companion of anti-slavery activists who taught him much about oratory. When he learned who the abolitionists were and what they were about he desired to learn as much as he could about public speaking. At first he participated as an audience member at the anti-slavery meetings in New England. He would learn by listening to the fiery pronouncements of famous leaders like Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison. (14–15)

Appearing on the same rostrums with the leading abolitionist orators of his day, Douglass recognized, learned, and combined the oratorical rhetoric he heard with his own impassioned testimony and invective to become a highly personal anti-slavery speaker who was both visceral and sophisticated. Burke's analysis of Douglass's oratorical skills illustrates the commanding arsenal that Douglass developed:

The rhetorical forms, figures and techniques Douglass used at the peak of his career were the following: hypothesis, explanation, illustration, personal example, irony, definition, refutation, expose, testimony from authority, personification, comparison-contrast, narrative, dramatic scenarios, naming names, denunciation, the rhetorical question, *catachresis*, *accumulatio*, *anaphora*, *reductio ad absurdum*, antithesis, apostrophe, the pointed term, metaphor, analogy, visual aids [advertisements, wanted

posters, books, ankle irons], slogans, invective, the rhetorical jeremiad, and biblical and classical allusions. (121)

Burke goes on to assert that the list of rhetorical devices mastered by Douglass did not assure his oratorical effectiveness: "But what it does project is the notion that he would go to great lengths to find another method to convey his message" (121).

The combination of Douglass's rhetorical skills with his resounding voice and striking physical appearance must have had a staggering effect on an audience. Obviously, his public speaking career flourished without the aid of sound amplification. There are numerous reports of his ability to project his voice throughout a hall despite adverse conditions: poor acoustics, disruptions by hecklers, and, on some occasions, mob violence. In December 1841, the *Concord Herald of Freedom* featured a description of a Douglass speech delivered the preceding month in Providence, Rhode Island:

The fugitive Douglass was up when we entered. This is an extraordinary man. He was cut out for a hero. In a rising for Liberty he would have been a Toussaint or a Hamilton. He has the "heart to conceive, the head to contrive, and the hand to execute." A commanding person over six feet, we should say, in height, and of most manly proportions. His head would strike a phrenologist amid a sea of them in Exeter Hall, and his voice would ring like a trumpet in a field. Let the South congratulate herself that he is a fugitive. It would not have been safe for her if he had remained about the plantation a year or two longer. . . . As a speaker he has few equals. It is not declamation—but oratory, power of debate. He has wit, arguments, sarcasm, pathos—all that first rate men show in their master efforts. His voice is highly melodious and rich, and his enunciation quite elegant, and yet he has been but two or three years out of the house of bondage. (Foner 1964, 48)

In fact, Douglass's oratory was so eloquent, so sophisticated, so erudite that he was actually urged by his white abolitionist associates to narrate the story of his life in slavery in a plainer and simpler manner, and leave the argumentation to them. As he relates in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "It was said to me, 'Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not, 'tis not best that you seem too learned.'" He understood their advice because pro-slavery advocates were constantly challenging the veracity of ex-slaves' testimony; however, he declared: "I must speak just the word that seemed to me the word to be spoken by me" (367). Perhaps there was no way the testimony of this potent anti-slavery spokesman could go unchallenged:

At last the apprehended trouble came. 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 they believed I had never been south of Mason and Dixon's line. "He don't tell us where he came from—what his master's name was—how he got away—nor the story of his experience. Besides, he is educated, and is, in this, a contradiction of all the facts we have concerning the ignorance of slaves." (367)

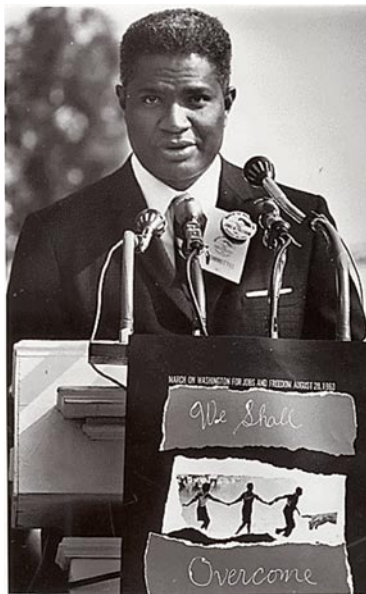
His response to these attacks was to write his *Narrative*, revealing both his and his former master's identity and exposing himself to the threat of capture and re-enslavement. Of course, as in so many other instances in his life, Douglass turned what could have been a setback into an advancement of the anti-slavery cause. Arrangements were made for him to travel to Great Britain, and until his abolitionist associates could secure his freedom, over the next two years his oratory found its way to the ears of an international audience.

## **"A VOICE STILL RINGING O'ER THE GALE": OSSIE DAVIS AND THE FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS**

In 1893, Douglass hired the twenty-one-year-old poet Paul Laurence Dunbar to assist him in his role as commissioner of the Haitian Pavilion at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. On April 25 of that year, "Colored People's Day" at the Exposition, Douglass had arranged a program to feature his oratory, his grandson Joseph's violin performance, and Dunbar's recitation of his poetry. Douglass had prepared a speech for the occasion, "The Race Problem in America"; however, when he was interrupted by a group of white hecklers, he put aside his text and extemporaneously lectured the unruly crowd for an hour, refusing to be deterred by white racism. A witness to the power of Douglass's voice, Dunbar in 1895 wrote "Frederick Douglass," his elegy to the recently deceased leader with its conviction that Douglass's words would live on as inspiration in the ongoing struggle of African Americans to gain equality in America: "Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore, / But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!" (Dunbar 1998, 614). As Dunbar anticipated—although in a way he could not have foreseen—Douglass's words have been brought to life through the meeting of 20th-century technology and the voice of another African American artist and activist who dedicated his life to bringing about social change.

Ossie Davis (1917–2005) was born in Cogdell, Georgia, and it was there that he was first exposed to the oratory of Douglass. As he explained in "What I Found on This Campus," a speech he delivered as part of Howard University's Annenberg Lecture Series in 2003:

My education was much like that of tens of thousands of other black boys and girls in the South, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, spelling, and plenty of annual doses of



Ossie Davis speaking at the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., August 8, 1963.

Negro History Week. The poetry of Phillis Wheatley and of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the stirring orations of Frederick Douglass, the burning heroic deeds of Harriet Tubman, Toussaint-Loeuverture, Nat Turner, and Booker T. Washington. (63)

Davis attended Howard University, working with the renowned African American scholar, Alain Locke. He made his professional theatrical debut with the Rose McClendon Players in Harlem in 1939. After service in World War II, Davis met Ruby Dee in 1945, during rehearsals for *Jeb*, in which he made his Broadway debut the following year. Davis and Dee were married in 1948, beginning a long and fruitful personal, professional, and activist life that endured for over half a century. Both together and individually, Davis and Dee amassed a spectacular array of film, theater, and television acting, directing, and producing credits. Like her husband, Dee recorded for Folkways, bringing to life the words of historic African American orators. Two volumes of *What*

*if I am a Woman?: Black Women's Speeches* (FH 5537 and 5538) were released in 1977, and included Dee's interpretive readings of selections by such famous orators as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Sarah Parker Remond, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Angela Davis, and Shirley Chisholm.

The choice of Davis by Philip Foner to record the words of Douglass for Folkways was truly inspired, for Davis possessed both a powerfully distinctive voice and the interpretive ability of a master actor. It would seem that his engagement with Douglass's words, both through the mid-1960s recordings of the autobiography and the early-1970s recordings of the oratory, had a profound effect on Davis, drawing him intimately into the world of this 19th-century African American hero. In 1978, he published his first children's book, a play about the life of young Frederick Douglass, *Escape to Freedom*. His fledgling effort was honored in 1979 with both a Coretta Scott King Award from the American Library Association and a Jane Addams Children's Book Award. In his preface to the second edition (1989), Davis clearly articulates his debt to Douglass's life work:

Sometimes I feel like sitting some place very quiet, and taking my hat off, and thinking the biggest thoughts I can think about Frederick Douglass—such a giant of a person was he, both in his own life and in the history of black people. Fred—were he alive today—would be about one hundred and sixty-two years old; but he is still one of the most modern and up-to-date Americans I know . . . my hero . . . my role model.

Testimony to the awe that Davis felt for Douglass is also found in his 2002 speech, "The World of Hunger and Me," a reaction to a *New York Times* article revealing the stark details of world hunger and the depletion of natural resources through "wasteful consumption." Davis responds: "If this report is true, it would seem to me that the world as I know it is being divided more and more between the have and have-nots. Which seems to indicate

that sooner rather than later, I, my children, and my grandchildren will have to decide: Which side are we on?” (56). He follows his rhetorical question with a roll call of historical activists, individuals who he knows with certainty would take a stand on the side of the have-nots—Harriet Tubman, John Brown, W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Phillip Randolph, Mary McLeod Bethune, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and, of course, Frederick Douglass:

And what about Frederick Douglass? He escaped from slavery in Maryland and went north, where he, too, could have chosen to stay put and make a name and a life for himself and his family. But no, not Frederick Douglass. He was a newspaper man, an orator, and an agitator. He wouldn't let the country rest as he boldly put himself in harm's way, raging up and down demanding freedom for his enslaved brothers and sisters, until he finally got it. I know what side he was on. (57)

Clearly, for Ossie Davis the opportunity to record the words of Frederick Douglass was more than just another performance. It represented an extension of both Douglass's and his own work for justice, another opportunity where he could reiterate the stand that both he and his hero took on the side of the have-nots, and, literally, a chance for him to enable the voice of Frederick Douglass to continue “ringing o'er the gale!”

## THE SPEECHES

### TRACK 1: “WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY”

Delivered on July 5, 1852, at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” is certainly the most famous speech delivered by Douglass. The Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society organized the event, and Douglass put considerable effort into composing the speech. According to David Chesebrough's *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*: “Douglass reported that he spent all of his spare moments during the last three weeks of June preparing the text of this address. Whether he read the speech that day in Rochester, or whether it had a more extemporaneous quality, it is not known” (107). The text was published four days later in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the following week as a pamphlet. In this recording, Ossie Davis delivers about half of the published text.

While ceremonies in honor of the Fourth of July were common in 19th-century America, the audience of five to six hundred who paid twelve and a half cents to enter Corinthian Hall on that morning heard anything but a reverent encomium saluting the virtues of America and her foundational principles. As James A. Colaiaco asserts in *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (2006): “Every word had to be directed toward awakening the nation to the urgency of abolishing slavery. On a day when Americans reflect upon the nation's accomplishments and destiny, Douglass compelled privileged white citizens to look at the nation from the perspective of the free black and the slave” (26).

The opening section of the recording (0:00–5:31) is delivered in a calm, measured, reasonable tone, yet Douglass quickly employs the biting irony that befits a former slave asked to extol the glories of American liberty: “You will not,

therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high-sounding exordium.” His use of the word “exordium” signals that, despite what he has just said, things are going to be markedly “high-sounding.” He also makes it clear to his audience, and continues to do so throughout the speech, that what is going on is “your” celebration of the Declaration of Independence and not his or any other black person’s.

Douglass directs praise toward the founding fathers “and the principles they contended for” in the second section (5:32–10:14). However, like a preacher delivering a jeremiad, he condemns the descendants of these revered men as backsliders: “Their solid manhood stands out more as we contrast it with these degenerate times.” He describes the founders’ accomplishments as “fundamental work,” implying that there is still much work to be done by the current generation of Americans.

In the third section (10:15–17:47),

Douglass bluntly asks a series of rhetorical questions that point to the essential contradiction of a country celebrating its love of liberty while a whole segment of its population is in bondage. He clearly sets himself up as a communal spokesperson for his race with such phrases as “those I represent” and “identified with the American bondsman.” Establishing the distinction between the black and white inhabitants of America, he rebukes his audience and inserts an extended quote from Psalm 137, evoking the familiar comparison of the oppression of the Bible’s Chosen People and enslaved African Americans. His invective reaches a crescendo as he charges: “I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on the Fourth of July.” He could not have been any more devastatingly ironic: a righteous black man labeling American morality with its own pejorative use of the quality of blackness. Determined to condemn American hypocrisy, he concludes

the section with a quote from Garrison: “I will not equivocate; I will not excuse.”

The final section (17:48–24:49) of this track testifies to the brilliance of Douglass’s rhetorical strategies. He assumes the hypothetical voice of a white audience member urging him to “argue more and denounce less” and “persuade more and rebuke less.” Returning to his own voice, he categorically rejects any further need for argument or persuasion in regards to the imperative of abolishing slavery. Then, in a stroke of pure genius, he delivers a detailed, reasoned argument against the need to argue or persuade any further. Douglass concludes his argument against argument by declaring the need for “biting ridicule, lasting reproach, withering sarcasm and stern rebuke.”

## TRACK 2: “WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY” (CONT.)

The title of the speech is derived from the rhetorical question that opens this sec-

tion (0:00–7:22). Returning to a calm, reasoned analysis, Douglass denounces the inhumanity and brutality of America’s “internal slave trade,” mocking the hypocritical distinction made with the illegal “foreign slave trade.” He then employs a rhetorical device, an apostrophe, a direct address to the listener; he intones: “Behold the practical operation of this internal slave trade, the American slave trade, sustained by American politics and American religion.” Here Douglass is saying that he wants his audience to come with him on a journey, and he will show them, these people comfortably ensconced in their lecture hall, what it is like for a human being to be bought and sold. He uses his descriptive powers to capture the audience’s imagination with visual, aural, and tactile details that bring the horrific scene alive. In the next section (7:23–11:21), he immediately follows his imaginative journey with the cold, hard facts of his firsthand, eyewitness testimony: “I was born amid such sights and scenes.” He concludes the section by

denouncing the perpetrators of this inhuman trade for their “lust, caprice, and rapacity.”

In the recording’s concluding section (11:22–17:12), Douglass returns to exposing the hypocrisy of American democracy. He mocks America’s condemnation of foreign tyrants and her willingness to welcome with open arms fugitives from oppression abroad. He then reconnects with the theme of the day, evoking the Boston Tea Party and quoting from the Declaration of Independence. Douglass ends the section with a warning, comparing slavery to a venomous snake, a “hideous monster,” that must be torn from the nation’s breast and flung away. Although this metaphorical image provides a dramatic conclusion to the recording, the original text included an additional section that interpreted the U.S. Constitution, in contradiction to a great deal of contemporary opinion, as an anti-slavery document.

### TRACK 3: “IF THERE IS NO STRUGGLE, THERE IS NO PROGRESS”

Although this speech is most commonly referred to by what is probably the most oft-quoted phrase from Douglass’s oratory, the title it was given when he published it in a pamphlet was “The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies: An Address delivered in Canandaigua, New York, On 3 August 1857.” When he delivered it to a crowd of over one thousand predominantly African American listeners at the Ontario County Agricultural Society fairgrounds amphitheater, it was most likely considered a “‘First of August’ speech, commemorating the anniversary of the emancipation of British West Indian slaves in 1834.” Douglass had delivered a “First of August” speech ten years earlier in Canandaigua at the Academy Grove (Blassingame and McGivigan 1979–92, 3:183–84).

The recording by Davis features about the final one-fifth of the original text. Early in the speech, Douglass recalled his appearance in Canandaigua for the same occasion ten years earlier. He honored a number of participants who had passed away in the interim, and he recognized fellow participants who had returned. Douglass also remarked on changes that had occurred in America over the decade, mentioning the Mexican War, the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the war over the introduction of slavery in Kansas. He also discussed the impact of emancipation on the West Indies. Just prior to the opening section of the recording, Douglass condemned “the stolid contentment, the listless indifference, the moral death which reigns over many of our people.”

The section (0:00–4:50) that begins the Davis recording focuses on the need to fight for oneself. Douglass provides examples of self-fought liberation movements throughout the world, including those in Ireland, Hungary, and Turkey. He

demeans African Americans who he feels are subservient to white abolitionists like Garrison (with whom Douglass had split), comparing them to “Seapoys” fighting under British officers in India.

The “If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress” line is contained in the next section (4:51–8:56), along with one of the most famous maxims from Douglass’s pen: “Power concedes nothing without demand.” He provides a roll call of ex-slaves who fought for their own freedom, including Margaret Garner, who killed her own child rather than allow her to be taken by slave catchers (she is the woman upon whom Toni Morrison based her character Sethe in the award-winning novel, *Beloved*); William Thomas, a wounded escaped slave who swam out in the Susquehanna River and refused to submit to the rifle fire of federal marshals and was rescued by the citizens of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; Horace (probably Addison White), an escaped slave who shot a federal marshal attempting to arrest

him near Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; William Parker, an ex-slave who shot a white Maryland planter as the latter was trying to recapture two escaping slaves that Parker was harboring; and Shadrack (Frederick Wilkins), a fugitive slave who was captured and dragged into a Boston courtroom, only to be rescued by a crowd of free blacks (Blassingame, 3: n. 204–05). Douglass also honors the courage of Joseph Cinque, the hero of the *Amistad* rebellion, and Madison Washington, the leader of the revolt on the *Creole* and the person upon whom Douglass based his novella *The Heroic Slave*.

In the final section (8:57–12:45) of the recording, Douglass argues that, although the emancipation of the West Indian slaves came about through an act of the British government, the rebellious acts of these slaves motivated the passing of the legislation. He concludes by drawing a parallel between Nat Turner and the West Indian insurrectionists.

#### TRACK 4: “A PLEA FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH”

On December 9, 1860, at the Music Hall in Boston, Douglass gave his frequently delivered lecture, “Self-Made Men.” When he concluded, he asked “to be allowed to make some remarks” (Blassingame, 3:420). Six days earlier he had been scheduled to speak at a program at Tremont Temple, marking the one-year anniversary of the death of John Brown. The meeting was disrupted by a mob, and one newspaper account reported that Douglass fought back “like a trained pugilist” and was eventually thrown “down the staircase to the floor of the hall” (Foner, 188). His additional remarks at the Music Hall, which were interrupted by hecklers, addressed the attempt to silence him at the Brown program. The Davis recording is the full text from that morning.

The opening section (0:00–4:49) addresses Boston’s history as what he thought was a bastion—with its historical

landmarks from the Revolutionary era—of free speech: “Here, if no where else, we thought the right of free speech was an accomplished fact.” He reviews the events at Tremont Temple and compares this attempt to suppress free speech with the oppression of slave owners.

In the second section (4:50–8:04), Douglass challenges the citizens of Boston to stand up for this right because to “suppress it is a double wrong”: both the speaker and listener have been denied their right. He concludes by calling for all men—rich or poor, black or white—to enjoy the same rights: “The simple quality of manhood is the solid basis of the right—and let it rest there forever.”

#### TRACK 5: “WHY I BECAME A WOMEN’S RIGHTS MAN”

The original Folkways album identified this recording as “Women’s Rights,” a speech Douglass delivered on March 31, 1888, to the International Council of

Women in Washington, D.C.; however, none of the text of that speech appears on this track. The selection that Davis is reading is excerpted from Chapter XVIII, “Honor To Whom Honor,” from *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Certainly, Douglass was a “Women’s Rights Man.” He attended the women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 and was the only man who publicly endorsed Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s resolution for women’s suffrage. He published an account of the convention and his support for the resolution, “The Rights of Women,” in the *North Star*. Throughout his career as an orator, he made numerous speeches, including one on the day he died, in support of women’s rights. The excerpt clearly illustrates that Douglass truly believed the motto that his newspaper bore, “All Rights for All!”



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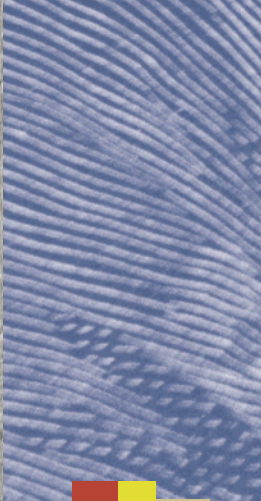
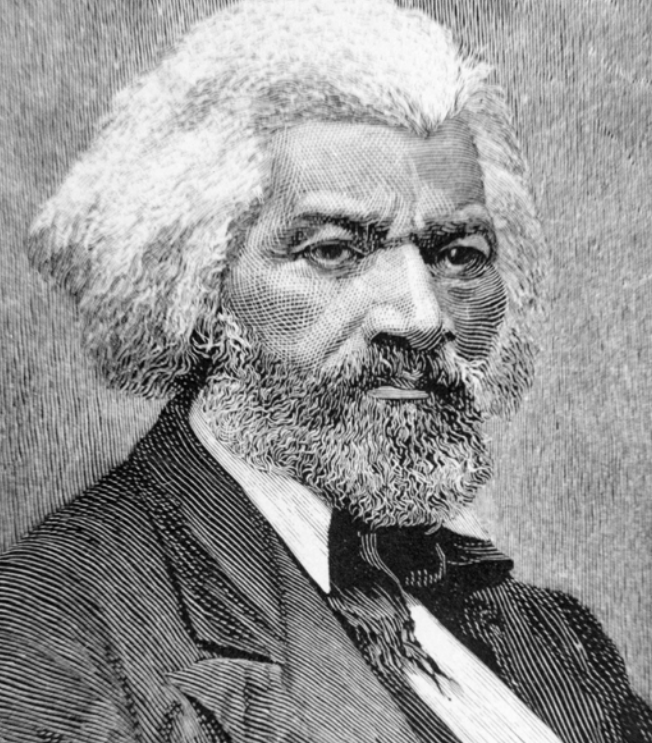
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Back cover: **Douglass, at age 68, from the 1886 booklet, *Reminisces of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Times*.**

Tray: **Douglass works in the study room of his Washington home, Cedar Hill (c. 1885–1890s). He was appointed U. S. Marshall of the District in 1877 and in 1881 became Recorder of Deeds.**



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