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ORACLE

## AUTUMN REFLECTIONS



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# FOOD MEMORIES

*The Class of 2026 has been working on replacing abstract language (“interesting meal”) with concrete, vivid prose (“gooey enchiladas with spicy jalapeno peppers”). In class, each student wrote concretely about a food memory.*

My favorite food memory will always be that of a pineapple cream cheese cake my mom used to make for my birthday. I can still vividly see my siblings laughing and smiling around me, and my brother and I are fighting for the first piece. We always shared a cake growing up since our birthdays were four days apart (11/11 & 11/15).

That first bite was always so special because I only got it once a year. The sweet juicy burst of pineapple, the taste of the pineapple mixed with the sweetness of the cake and the creaminess of the cream cheese, is a taste that till this day still feels extraordinary. She always made the most moist and flavorful cakes, so moist that when you picked the cake up it would all just fall apart!

A thick layer of creamy, sweet pineapple cream cheese frosting with pieces of real canned pineapple on top, in between, and all around the double layered masterpiece ensured the divine



flavor throughout. The star of my childhood and the master of all desserts will always be my mom’s pineapple cream cheese cake! **(Laura Bass)**

I remember as a child when I lived in New York with my cousins. My Trinidadian uncle would come every Sunday with a traditional meal he prepared. Sometimes it would be stewed chicken, rice and peas, and much more. But my favorite would always be his delicious curry chicken. You could smell the spicy, savory curry through the bag it had been wrapped in.

My uncle put a lot of time into his cooking. You could always tell by how tender the chicken and potatoes were. I’d always grab a bowl and add rice and a hefty scoop of curry chicken. The first bite is always the best: all of the Caribbean flavors burst on your tongue. I don’t get to have this meal as often because I no longer live in New York. But when I visit, curry chicken from my uncle is my first request. **(Serene Boyd)**



I may have to write about multiple foods. My favorite food is steak. I can't even remember the first time I had steak, but I do remember after that first time I always craved it. I can eat steak at least four days out of the week.

I remember my mom cooking it in a pan in the oven, and I came in from outside because I had to see what was cooking. It was in a pan with foil on it. I grabbed the foil with my bare hand and burned my fingers!!! But the smell that came out smelled great. I was on my way to risk grabbing a piece when my mom caught me in the ACT. I had to go clean myself, but when I got done my plate was ready. I tell you I wasted no time finishing. My mom thought I didn't eat anything that day because of how fast I finished. I got seconds, too!!!! Ever since then, I loved steak. **(Johnnell Britt)**

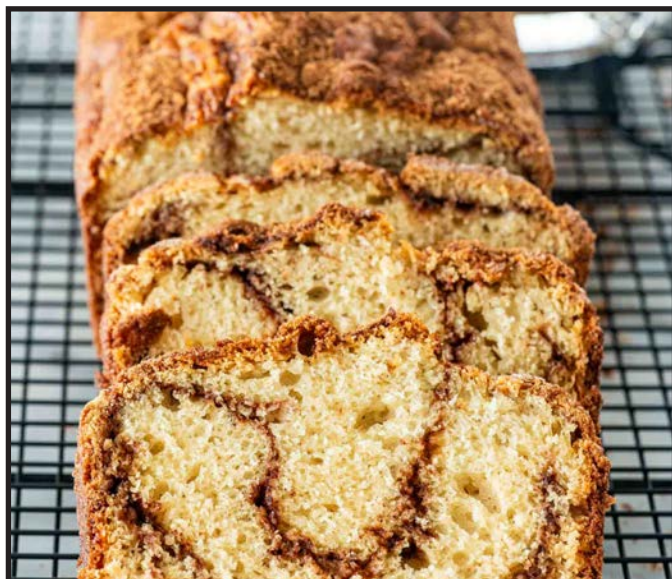


the bowl. After folding for what seemed like an eternity, our bread was coming together. The cinnamon and sugar were laid. Rolled tightly into a pinwheel, placed gently into a buttered dish, into the oven it went.

It was the winter of 1998. My grandmother was over for Christmas. A family tradition of ours is to make coffee bread. It is a core memory I hold near to my heart. I can smell the melting of the cinnamon. My mother was cautiously advising my brother and me on measuring ingredients. She wanted to get it right. When it came time to mix the wet ingredients with the dry, my grandmother (Grams) stepped in. "A little more," said my mother. We merely had sprinkles of flour in the mixture. "Give it here!" said Grams. Poof! A cloud of white in the air, as she dumped the bag of flour into

So much aromatics, love, and tradition filled the air. It wasn't just bread baking but family coming together. This will always bring warmth to my heart and a smile on my face. I still carry the tradition every Christmas (holiday) season. **(Lisa Brown)**

Pears in Tupperware definitely was one of my favorite meals. Although it's not an actual meal, I enjoyed eating it as if it was. On days my papa would pick me up to visit family, he would always have my soon-to-be favorite snack/fruit: Pears in Tupperware. The first bite always was like a cup of sweet juice filling your mouth, quenching your thirst, texture not solid but mushy with a slight soft crunch, freshly grown and picked from the Earth. **(Richard Butler)**



My son and I took a trip to the apple orchard last fall. We walked through the organized varieties of apple trees until we reached the gala tree. I picked my son up, and he reached for the highest apple on the tree's branches. A slightly rosy pink mixed with yellow hues and light green freckled Gala apple sat between both his cupped hands. "Can I try it, Mama?" I approved. He opened his mouth wide, and a sudden crunch was heard. The apple's juices were running through his tiny fingers, followed by his munching and crunching sounds. "It's so sweet, Mama!" **(Stacy Castillo)**



Every Saturday morning, a part of my routine is that I treat myself to steak and eggs.

Not just any steak or any egg: I choose a Ribeye and two over-easy eggs, and if I'm not too lazy, hashbrowns with diced onion. It's something special after I drizzle that 'Watch Yo Sister' [Worcestershire] Sauce over it. When the yolks from my two over-easy eggs slide across my hashbrowns, with a crunch and kick from the potato and onion, it's Bussing Bussing and a dash of that Tabasco on the eggs and hash browns.

It's my Saturday treat. **(Valencia Collins)**

It was on a lovely Sunday, where you smelled nothing but fresh scents of garlic, chicken, and sweets. The macaroni had such a creamy taste, a stringy texture with a good garlic paste. The shredded cheese crumbling on top of the pasta left it with a nice taste. The chicken had been fried so crispy with a golden crust. The roast was tender, falling into the broth. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**



When I went back to Puerto Rico, they had a pig roasting on a fire. Its legs were tied, and it was just spinning over the fire. When they served it, the steam came off the plate. The smell of BBQ filled the air. It was so tender and juicy but just the right amount of crisp. Pernil, we call it, paired with arroz con gandules. It's a yellow rice, seasoned with garlic, sofrito, and sazón. It's so tender and fluffy. You pair this with a salad seasoned with a little vinegar, salt, and pepper. This meal is a staple back home. It's like fireworks in your mouth, with all the different flavors. **(Paola Damiani)**



By now the aroma should be really strong and smelling delicious. Benachen is like fried rice but at the same time so different. After finishing with the onion and chicken, you then fill up the pot with water and let it cook some more with all the previous seasonings in it. Later, add your broken rice to the pot after washing it and let it cook. After you are done, plate it with the rice and all the protein in the middle and the extra sauce on top. Enjoy with the whole family. **(Tida Drammeh)**

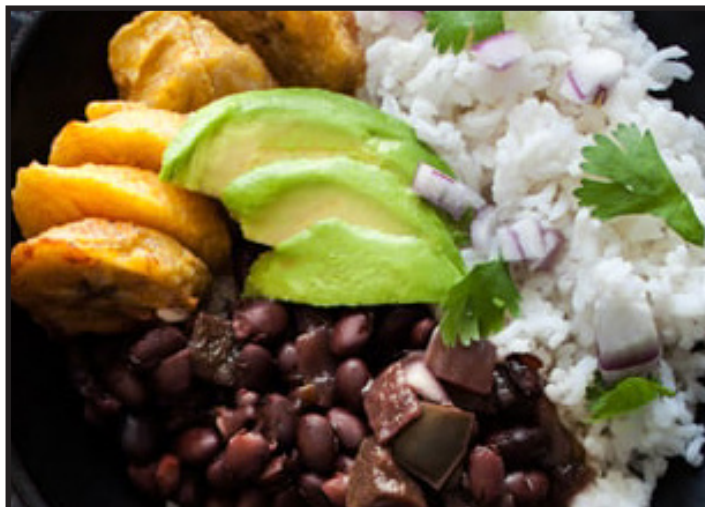
One of my favorite foods from my home country [the Gambia] is called "Benachen." First you put onions in the hot oil in the pot and let it cook. Then add your favorite protein, whether it's fresh chicken, meat, or fish. Marinate it in spices like maggi, garlic powder, lemon, ginger, peppers, onions, and tamarind. Use a lot of seasonings and spices until your protein turns a different color. Then you fry it along with garlic cloves and onions.



For class today we had crispy medium soft, medium well-done chicken with some cheesy flavorful macaroni that melted in my mouth with every bite, and juicy cantaloupe and juicy citrus tangy orange and a cold breeze of water, filling my soul with life of refreshment. **(Destiny Drone)**



The first time I had Peruvian food is something I will never forget. I found out that day that Peruvian food is one of my favorite foods. When I was camping and was walking back to my site, a nice family flagged me down and offered me some food. They were in the gazebo area at the park, and they were having a wedding! The bride and groom offered me food to try and take back to my site because they had so much. I was happy to take it off their hands! They told me that they were serving Peruvian food.



Have you ever had Goat Masala, the burst of tender lamb infused with different spices and veggies with some bed of rice on the side? When it comes to this dish, the flavors and how it comes together will have your mouth watering for more. It's not an American dish; it's very different and unique. **(Larry Grant)**

My to-go container consisted of cilantro lime rice, black beans, chicken, and plantains. The rice was green, and I could smell the cilantro in it with a hint of lime. Combined with the savory smell of the beans, it was enough to make my mouth water. The chicken was so tender and fragrant. It fell off of the bone. The plantains were slightly crisp and added a hint of sweetness to the dish. The dish was simple but was bursting with flavor in every bite. It was truly incredible. **(Kiana Galloway)**



It was slimy, uncooked, and just disgusting. Sitting at the table for hours, I said I am not eating that. A bite and gag, a bite and gag: I cannot eat anymore. Cows, chicken, shrimp, seafood: ew, gross, I am not eating that. Too much chewing: I cannot swallow. Gag, gag, sitting at the table for hours. Hot dogs, sausage, many parts of animals: gross, I am not eating that. The blood is dripping down once unthawed. While cooking, I smell the seasoning: Slap Ya Mama, onion powder, garlic salt, sazón, seasoning salt. It smells so good. But once I pick it up and try to chew, I know I am not eating that. The tears I've cried from chickens and cows. I am not eating that. **(Tikoya Gilmer)**



After a long day at school, I would run home to my foster mom's chicken fruit salad dish. It had freshly cut red apples into squares, freshly cooked rotisserie chicken pulled apart, with mayo and juicy grapes. It didn't take long to make and was very yummy to me. **(Antejah Greer)**



My grandmother's secret dressing recipe: She starts it off by boiling her turkey necks while she is cutting up celery, onions, and green peppers. Then she rinses off the turkey necks and puts them back in the pot with her vegetables and bouillon cubes. That is when the aroma begins. It smells like a new dish every time. Then she pours her broth over her bread crumbs and lets it bake. The whole time we can't wait until the next day to taste the food of that delicious, perfectly textured Thanksgiving meal. It is the favorite dish we all are waiting for. Holidays haven't been the same without Grandma's dressing. **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

About three years ago, the night before Thanksgiving, I was thinking about my ex-mother-in-law's Giblet Gravy. She used to put it over her cornbread dressing. It was a creamy, velvety gravy that warmed the dressing so when you would take a bite, it was thick, warm, and moist. Now, to make this gravy you have to use the slimy, icky insides of the turkey—the giblets (heart, gizzard, liver, and neck) of the turkey. This was a gravy passed down for generations from when folks only had the scraps of the animals to make a hearty meal. **(Shataya Hall)**



My grandmother's dressing: nobody does it better. My grandmother would bake her cornbread and save it up to three to four days before Thanksgiving. She would store it in the fridge until the night before. That is when she would start preparing for her broth.

My grandma was known for her famous spaghetti salad. Before you think "ew," it's served cold similar to pasta salad but with spaghetti noodles. It's a fan favorite in the small town of Flint, Michigan where



I come from. It drips in the famous dressing, Italian. It is served with the ingredients of olives, cheddar cheese, diced onion, salad supreme, boiled eggs, and that famous Italian dressing. My grandmother passed away 11 years ago, on October 11<sup>th</sup>. This is my grievance meal for her and always will be one of my favorite meals. **(Brittany Hughes)**

My mother came from a large family, and her mother would make everything. She rarely went to the grocery store, so everything they ate came from her creative, strong hands. The desserts melted in your mouth from the butter she would churn. There was no red Kool-Aid but freshly squeezed lemonade that made your mouth pucker. The way my mother described her mother's meals would make me taste and hear the crunches of the fresh chicken she would fry. The ice cream that was churned at night on the front porch had vanilla and fresh strawberries placed on top. Meals were prepared freshly at home, not from fast food restaurants. I believe because of the love and time my grandmother placed on the table, it has allowed my aunts, my uncles, and my mother to live past ninety. **(Angel Moore)**



escape and drip down your lips. You feel the slight heat in the back of your throat, but that is replaced by a semisweet tangy taste bursting from the flesh. Nando's chicken is by far the best. To finish it all off, I take a refreshing, smooth grenadilla-tasting drink. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**

One of my most memorable meals was from Russia. It was a beet soup seasoned with garlic, pepper, scallions, and celery.

There were also chunks of seasoned ground beef floating around. The seasonings on the ground beef complement the beets perfectly. The red and purple soup looks like dirty paint water but tastes like meat and potatoes. **(Shelton Murphy)**

You can smell it a mile away and feel the gentle tingle in your sinuses from the hot peppers. The meat is burnt but with pieces of golden-brown flesh full of juices. When you bite down, the juices



I love a good fruit bowl with the variety of the different flavors—like the tang of the orange tingling against my tongue. I love how the grapes burst as I pop each one in my mouth. The succulent watermelon ruptures as I bite into it. I enjoy the crisp taste of the Gala apples. The ripeness of the golden pineapple makes my tongue bitter. The ruby red dotted strawberries spill out a delectable sweetness that you just can't deny. Each ingredient as I chew feels like I am in heaven, living on earth. **(Roché Palmer)**



I recall a specific childhood memory from my middle school years. My class had a potluck. At the time, I did not know the background or heritage of my classmate, but I just knew this dish that she brought was a core memory for me. It's called "pancit glass" noodles. It had black olives, corn, and some type of meat, probably chicken. I think it was chicken LOL. I just remember the smell was so tempting and loud, but it smelled so delicious. When I took a bite, my mouth was so juicy it tasted like a warm savory hug from the kitchen or her mother that brought it.

The strong garlic rush hits my tongue, but then you get this nostalgia taste when the light, soft, and silky noodles are soaked in that richness of soy sauce mixed with the sautéed veggies, being super tender, and the chicken or whatever that was practically melted before I finished chewing. It was so beautiful, and it felt like love was put into it.



I will forever be grateful for that potluck because now I'm so open to trying so many different dishes from different backgrounds. That core memory opened that box for so many more opportunities to try new things when I travel and not be afraid. **(Roncal Riley)**

When I walked into the bakery, the smell of sweet breads and cookies filled the air. Every Sunday my dad would take us to this bakery because to him giving us this sweet gift was a token of his love. My sisters and I always bought the same thing, not just because it was cheap, but also because my dad had said it was his favorite. We would grab three cookies that were as big as our hands. They were crunchy and crispy on the outside but soft and chewy on the inside. The cookies were sweet and had a taste of vanilla. They were covered with colorful sprinkles. Every bite had the soft chewy texture of the cookie but the crunch of the sprinkles as you chewed.

This memory comes alive every time I eat this cookie: the smell of the bakery, the smiles my sisters and I had, but most of all the conversations

we had as we ate our cookies. To this day I still find time to buy a cookie and remember this tasty memory, reminiscing on our daughter-and-dad outings. **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**



Every holiday it is expected and requested from all in attendance that I make my famous macaroni and cheese. Every bite bursts with flavor of different tastes, and in the middle there's a bold crunch to it when you least expect it.

I boil my noodles with chicken bouillon powder mixed with bold seasonings that you can taste with every bite. I add fresh sour cream and the richest cheeses (hand shredded, of course), milk to hold the moisture in the middle, and eggs to keep it all together, plus just the right amount of jalapeño peppers that you can savor in your mouth. Place it in the oven on 350° for 30 minutes. The cheese just drips off the spoon and melts flavor in your mouth. **(JuJu Stallworth)**

I have an experience eating bread and syrup together. When we didn't have much food, that was a simple dish for my cousins and me so we couldn't burn the house down. I remember the taste of it was terrible. I remember thinking, when does grandma get home to make us food? I can't eat many things because of allergies. **(George Sydnor)**



One of my favorite places to eat at is the Melting Pot. It's a fondue restaurant that has a calm and ambient layout. Low lighting and large booths surround small stoves that sit in the center of the tables. My favorite cheese dish is called the Bourbon Bacon Cheese. It's savory and loaded with bacon, salt, pepper, scallions, bourbon, and Worcestershire sauce. They give you dippers to enjoy the warm ooey, gooey cheese with crunchy carrots, fluffy bread, crispy tortilla chips, and more. My favorite cheese dipper is green apples. The apple's crunchy, sour taste contrasts with and complements the flavorful cheese. **(Shaneece Taylor)**



I always think about the buttery chicken noodle soup and sweet cornbread my grandmother used to make. The meal seemed so basic, but it's very hard to conquer the taste—the juices of flavor and the mouthwatering

taste of the noodles before the two are mixed. The chicken would be falling off the bone, and the steam of fresh sweet cornbread with a drizzle of honey gave it a delicious look.

My grandmother is no longer with us. I wish we could have just one more taste of both chicken noodles and sweet cornbread. No one makes it like she did! I miss you, Granny! **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**

My great-grandma (Momma Lena) used to make the most divine sweet potato pie. Her sweet potato pie was inimitable. It didn't matter who she shared the recipe with; we all knew when it wasn't "Momma's pie." Everyone watched her ardently whenever she made it, but nobody ever quite got it right.



Sweet potatoes usually are immensely packed with fibrous vascular tissue, but Momma could get the texture satiny, perfectly ripening the flavor resulting in harmony. Each bite was savored, and the taste became a core memory of Momma for me.

I have seen some of the most sophisticated pallets in enigma at the perplexity, always in conjunction with

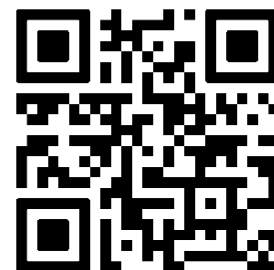
joy. Momma's pie was the hug that engulfed the bad in a moment because you always tasted the love. It was the peace maker in a family feud, the "art" that there was always a buzz around, the stitches in our family quilt, and, although unspoken, it was always the love. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

The crunchy but greasy taste smacks the tongue when you take the first bite, making you anticipate the next bite. Each moment of eating the chicken is pure satisfaction. You already know the crunch will echo as you sink through the crispy, golden crust, and the juices will flow. The aroma alone builds the excitement, teasing your senses before you even take the first bite. Every mouthful feels rewarding. The different seasonings pop in your mouth like pop rocks. Whether it is fried, grilled, or baked, you will savor every bite and look forward to the next bite. Yummy fried chicken is what I like! **(Shakila Woods)**



## WALK-ON SONGS

*Students were asked to imagine they are stepping up to the stage to receive an award. A band or orchestra plays a song—sometimes referred to as a “grand entrance,” “walk on,” “walk out,” or “walk up” song. In the next pages, discover the reasons behind the song choices, and scan the QR Code for a matching playlist created by Katie Arredondo.*



### “Good As Hell” by Lizzo

I’ve just won an award and am walking on stage to accept it. Knowing I was nominated beforehand, I asked that if I win, can the song Good as Hell by Lizzo play as I walk up. Why? Because this song embodies self-confidence, body positivity, and empowering women all around.



The lyrics are empowering and inspirational; for example, she says, *“Come now, come dry your eyes, you know you a star come touch the sky.”* Or the chorus of the song, *“I do my hair toss, check my nails, baby how you feelin’? I’M FEELIN’ GOOD AS HELL!”* Those two lines alone can make one think to oneself, let me get up, get myself together and “feel good as hell.”

This song is fast tempo and upbeat so it makes you want to get up and move and embrace your femininity. I am a true believer that if a woman is feeling down, she should take a self-care day, shower, get dressed, do her hair and makeup, and go get her nails done! I can guarantee she will feel at least 75% better in herself. If a woman is feeling down, I encourage her to listen to this song; it will make her feel confident and resilient.

When I listen to this song, I feel powerful and happy. I feel a sense of escape and somewhat carefree and lost in the moment. I usually listen to it at certain times, like on my way to work or when I’m getting ready to go out and I am getting dressed

up real nice and cute. This song also makes me think of the good things I have going on for myself. It makes me proud of the mother I am, the hard worker I am, and all the goals I have set for myself and my children. **(Shataya Hall)**

### “Believe” by Justin Bieber

My grand entrance song would have to be Justin Bieber’s song “Believe.” This song evokes my childhood and all of the struggles I faced often in silence. Yet both of my parents, through a lot of pain and suffering, never gave up on me.

My parents are my backbone, and both gave me the strength to be the woman I am today. *“It didn’t matter how many times I got knocked on the floor, you knew one day I would be standing tall.”* Their faith and belief in me was my strength. **(Stacy Castillo)**



**“Ain’t No Stopping Us Now” by Gene McFadden and John Whitehead**

My entrance song will be Ain’t No Stopping Us Now by Gene McFadden and John Whitehead. The reason I chose this song is because it motivates me. It’s all about breaking free and moving forward and not letting anything hold you back. That’s exactly what graduation is about. You’ve worked hard and overcome challenges. It pushes and lets you know you came too far to give up now. It’s not just about one person; it’s about the whole class. The energy and rhythm instantly make me smile and start dancing. It screams you can do it no matter what. It’s empowering and gives me hope.

**(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

**“Look At God” by Koryn Hawthorne**

If I were walking up to a stage to receive an award, the song that I would want played for me is “Look At God” by Koryn Hawthorne. This song feels like my life story in music form. It reminds me of everything I’ve overcome, not with my own strength but because of God... the late nights, the prayers, the struggles, the moments I wanted to give up but didn’t. When she



sings about how good God has been, it just does something for my spirit. I think about my kids, having a place to call home after being homeless, good health after being hospitalized for physical and mental health, and all the ways God has made for me. God made a way for us when things looked impossible.



The words make me want to cry and dance at the same time because it’s a reflection of how far God’s faithfulness has carried me. The song’s energy makes me feel unstoppable, like every step I take is proof that God’s promises are real. Walking up to the stage with this song playing would be a moment of pure praise because when people look at me, I want them to be like, “Well, look at God!” **(Shakila Woods)**

**“Gettin’ Older” by Jas Von featuring Youngboy NeverBrokeAgain**

I don’t have a special memory associated with this song. The reason is that the song is new and was just released a couple weeks ago. The mood being evoked is many of them. I feel sadness and pain, relief and peace! The song speaks to many in many different ways. Based on my upbringing, I’m only getting older through everything I’ve been through.  
(Richard Butler)

**“Lacrimosa” by Mozart**

If I were to pick a grand entrance song, I think I would go with Mozart’s “Lacrimosa.” There are just so many dynamics to this piece. When you listen to it, it feels spiritual or divine. It has so many climactic builds in the piece for me to control the suspense of the audience. When I walk on stage, the aura or the energy I give off would only intensify as the song plays.

Mozart always puts me in a good mood when I listen to him. This is primarily because I believe he



was taught by a black French man named Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George, dancer, boxer, violinist, and conductor (he happened to be number one in all those categories).

(Shelton Murphy)

**“Superwoman” by Alicia Keys**

I chose Superwoman by Alicia Keys because it always seems to move me in my adult life. It reminds me of how powerful I really am. It reminds me that if I

persevere and put my best foot forward, I have no choice but to come out on top. I chose this song because I feel empowered listening to it. It makes me feel like I am not the only woman on this uphill battle of trying to balance it all of being a mom, employee, family member, significant other, student, and whatever other hats that we wear. It also reminds me of all that I’ve been through and have overcome on my journey of trying to become this “superwoman.” I’d want the main chorus to play as I’d walk out because that is my truth.

I also need reassurance, and that is exactly what Alicia is saying in the chorus. She is saying and believing that she is that superwoman. No matter the circumstances or situation, she is still going to do her best to be the best!

*‘Cause I am a superwoman  
Yes I am  
Yes she is  
See, even when I’m a mess  
I still put on a vest  
With an S on my chest  
Oh yes, I’m a superwoman*  
(Roché Palmer)



**“Moment 4 Life” by Nicki Minaj featuring Drake**

*I believe that life is a prize, but to live doesn't mean you're alive.*

*This is my moment, I waited all my life, I can tell it's time, drifting away I'm one with the sunset, I have become alive*

*I wish that I could have this moment for life ..... Cause in this moment I just feel so alive*

*This night just reminds me of, everything they deprived me of.*

*In this very moment, I'm King, In this very moment I slay Goliath with a sling.*

This is my favorite song, always has been, since it dropped in 2010! Every time I hear it, it evokes beautiful and vivid memories. I play it every

accomplishment, every vacation, every gathering of family and friends. This song brings happiness, pure joy, a sense of bliss; euphoria, pride, and strength.

When I hear it, my mind shows me vivid pictures, and flashbacks of all my fond memories play in my head. I remember the birth of my babies (the aftermath—the euphoric feeling I got holding my beautiful babies I grew, what a superpower!), go-karting across the rainbow bridge in Japan, sitting on the deck of the cruise mid ocean, watching the fireworks at Disney with my baby on his fifth birthday—he was so happy and grateful. Kissing my fiancé under the fireworks at Disney, standing with my fiancé and son in front of the Eiffel Tower, Christmas in Florida laughing and playing games with my family, high school graduation, singing this song at her concert in 2024—all just a few of many, many beautiful, euphoric, exhilarating memories I get when I hear this song.



I think of things I never thought I'd get to do or see, a life I thought I'd never have, deserve even. A lot of my life I feel I've just been living, surviving, and not actually alive, but these moments made me really feel alive. I've overcome a lot through faith. If you put forth the effort, God sees you and He knows your heart; He will do the rest as long as you remain faithful.

**(Laura Bass)**

**“Headlines” by Drake**

My walk-up song would be Headlines by Drake. Drake is my absolute favorite artist. This song specifically has a very upbeat, motivational tempo. The themes of the song, in regards to the lyrics, are about confidence, dealing with criticism and doubters, self-change, and authenticity vs. image. I feel this song captures the energy you need to continue through life despite obstacles and realizations.

I can't say the exact moment when this song's themes rang true, but I do know that it was during a moment when I believed I needed to be in a get-it-done, head-down energy.

**(Shaneece Taylor)**

**“Move On Up”  
by Curtis Mayfield**

“Move On Up” creates a feeling of excitement, confidence, and achievement. The rhythm builds steadily, giving a sense of momentum like something powerful and positive is about to happen. It feels motivating and victorious, almost like a soundtrack to a new beginning or a major accomplishment. This song will make you feel empowered, energized, and ready to take on the spotlight. This song reminds me that growth takes courage and that moving forward is something to celebrate. “Move On Up” is a great grand entrance song because it sets the mood for success—strong, positive self-belief.



version of myself is always better than the version facing the adversity.

I went through a deep depression when trying to leave a domestic violence situation while simultaneously experiencing post-partum. That was one of the hardest moments for me to find “a light at the end of the tunnel,” but I did. This is a combination of two of my favorite songs in the lows.

For me, the mash up represents triumph. They are both songs about overcoming a moment of feeling broken.

If I am in a low place, it reminds me to pick myself up. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

*Though there may be wet road ahead  
And you cannot slip*

*Just move on up for peace you will find  
Into the steeple of beautiful people where there's  
only one kind* **(Valencia Collins)**

**“Return of the Mack” by Mark Morrison**

This song for me means everything because if I’m going through anything good or bad, I know that I can leave a room smiling when I’m singing this song. I am the man on top of the world.

**(George Sydnor)**

**“Cooped Up / Return of the Mack” by Mark Morrison, Post Malone, and Sickick**

Cooped Up / Return of the Mack mash up would be the song. The beat is dance and more up-tempo. The lyrics are about coming back from a low point. The reason it’s perfect for me is because when I hit lows in my life, I always find my way back. My comeback is always a celebration moment. The current



**“Happy” by Pharrell Williams**

If I were receiving an award, I would pick the song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams because of its incredibly positive message and upbeat, danceable sounds. It creates a strong sense of joy with its simple, catchy melody, and I think it gives a 60s-inspired vibe. The song’s infectiousness is relatable with an inclusive music video and a sense of global community.



There are different versions of the song. When the song first came out, my mom and I used to listen to it together before she passed, and it’s just a reminder to be happy and keep going. The song is high energy, driven by its upbeat tempo and use of major chords. It’s associated with positive emotions and contributes to its feel-good quality. It will be a memorable thing to walk up to stage listening to this song and receiving that award thinking of her. **(Tida Drammeh)**

**“Happy” by Pharrell Williams**

One of my favorite walk-out songs is “Happy” by Pharrell Williams. I chose this song because it instantly puts me in a mindset where I feel like I’m winning and truly enjoying life. Music has a powerful way of matching your mood. Just a random song on the radio can completely shift how you feel.

“Happy” stands out to me because it’s the kind of energy I try to bring into my life. I always aim to stay positive and think optimistically, and this song does that perfectly. My grandma always listened to this song whenever she was in a good mood. It became one of her favorites from the very first time she heard it. I spent so much time with her that I could honestly write a book about all the things she taught me. Music was a meaningful part of our relationship; it brought us closer and created memories that still stick with me today. I miss you, Granny! **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**

**“Eternal Sunshine” by Jhené Aiko**

I would choose “Eternal Sunshine” by Jhené Aiko. I chose this song because it is about nostalgia and growing up. She is reminiscing on her childhood, the choices she made, and why she wouldn’t change anything because these things are what makes her who she is.

This song makes me feel content. I feel less alone hearing that other people feel the exact same way I do. I relate to this song because it is reflective of my mindset about my own life. I’ve been through a lot but I’ve had a huge up-turn. Even though things are good now, I still have room to grow. I realized a while ago that I don’t have it all figured out like I originally thought, and that’s okay.

**(Kiana Galloway)**



**“Closer” by Goapele**

This song gives me strength and it gives me hope. It also keeps me going while I conquer life and just lets me know that I’m getting higher, evolving; I’m moving forward and getting closer to my dreams. Every time I think about winning or accomplishing a huge obstacle that I think I can’t overcome, this song is on repeat.

Goapele says, *“I’m moving upward and onward and beyond all that I can see stretching out my arms and I can reach, oh so close, it’s right there just reach, I can feel my dream, closer to my dreams I’m moving closer to my dreams.”*

It’s very soulful, and I get called out for having an old soul all the time, so I feel like it’s a perfect song to resemble me. **(Roncal Riley)**

**“Closer” by Goapele**

Closer by Goapele is the song I would choose to be my “walk up/on” song. The song came out in 2001. Goapele was the first black woman to have a music video on YouTube. “Closer” was the last song she wrote and worked on for her debut project. In interviews, Goapele stated the song was “like your whole life preparing you for certain moments.”

The song overall is grasping to me. The soft intro with the piano and guitar until the beat drops is so smooth. The tempo is upbeat but light. The song makes me want to close my eyes and see a field with green grass, tall flowers swaying in the wind. I’m twirling with the wind and flowers to the beat and tempo of the song. The song feels so inspiring. When I hear this song playing, it brings me back to when I was a child traveling back and forth from Madison to my hometown in Illinois in the summer. The song also was on the soundtrack for the movie *Honey* in 2003.

The lyrics to “Closer” by Goapele is what makes the song inspiring. They describe being close to your dreams but also having those doubts and obstacles get in your way to make you second guess if you deserve it or if you can actually

accomplish it. But always push through because you are so close. Never give up.

*Sometimes it feels like I’ll never grow past it  
Sometimes it feels like I’m stuck forever, ever*

*But I’m going higher  
Closer to my dream  
I’m going higher and higher  
I can almost reach*

*Believing all my fears to burn down  
Push them all away so I move on*

*Closer to my dreams*

*I’m moving upward and onward  
And beyond all that I can see  
Stretching out my arms and I can reach  
Oh so close, it’s right there  
Just reach, I can feel my dream  
Closer to my dreams*

No matter what I have been through in my life, starting at a young age I have always had faith and persevered. I have never let my situations keep me down or determine my life. I kept up the fight, and I still to this day am fighting. But I am closer to my dreams. One step, one day at a time. I can almost reach it. I’m not far from my dreams.

**(Tikoya Gilmer)**



### **“Sleep Deprivation” by Chance Peña**

This would be my “walk on” song. It holds strong power in both the lyrics and music. I was first introduced to this song by a friend over the summer of 2024. At this time, life was pretty difficult. My boyfriend had been arrested and was given his sentence to serve. My heart was hurting while my mind filled with anxiety, stress, and resentment. From the moment I heard this song, it became my song.

The message of Sleep Deprivation is clear with a mellow yet strong beat at the chorus. At the beginning the lyrics state, *“This year taught me how it feels to be lost and ambitious.”* It continues on stating, *“So when I break down and list all the reasons, I’m here and I’m still breathing. Oh, I’m hanging on.”*

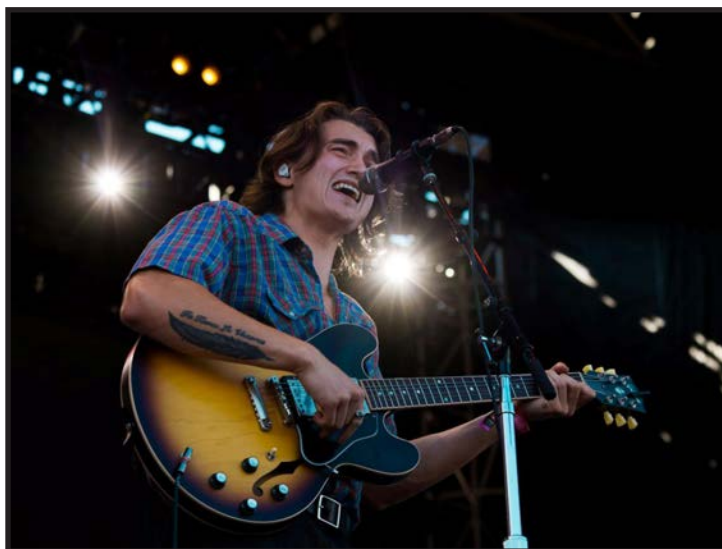
It was as if this song was specifically made for me, providing the reminder to keep trucking along. Through this journey I have grown significantly. From fear and pain, I’ve transitioned to peace and resilience. As the song states, *“I’ll find my way through the sorrow.”* It’s time to channel pain into purpose. Odyssey is a part of that purpose. So much peace and triumph has now been placed on my heart. This was the healing, the hope I needed.  
**(Lisa Brown)**

### **“Worth” by Anthony Brown and group therAPy**

The song that I chose as my walk-on is Anthony Brown and group therAPy’s “Worth.”

*You thought I was worth saving  
So You came and changed my life  
You thought I was worth keeping  
So You cleaned me up inside  
You thought I was to die for  
So You sacrificed Your life  
So I could be free*

A melody woven with melodies of life; a song that sings my deepest longing to be worthy. A declaration from the



Great I Am Himself who sent his only son for me. For me? Knowing every flaw I carry, every mistake I’ve ever made, still He loves me, still He came, not in anger but in unconditional love. He came to rescue, to redeem, to reclaim me!

For years, I sought my father’s approval—to be enough, to be proud in his eyes. But all my trying failed like I have so often done. Failed relationships echo the same: unworthy, unseen, unwanted.

But this song paints a different picture—a portrait of God’s unwavering love, a love that declares I am worthy, a love that tells me I am accepted. I am worthy. The mood evokes my heart’s journey from feeling unvalued and captures my worthiness.  
**(Angel Moore)**



**“Diva” by Beyoncé**

I chose the song “Diva” by Beyoncé. I chose this song because it represents confidence, power, and self-worth. “Diva” is all about moving/acting like a boss, knowing your value, and not being afraid to stand up or out. The song makes me feel unstoppable, like I can walk into any room and own it. This song evokes a fierce, empowering, and ambitious vibe. “Diva” captures my personality and drive. I’m goal-oriented and independent, and I like to lead with strength and style. It’s not just a song; it’s an anthem that reminds me that I’m capable of creating my own path and shining while doing so.

**(Brittany Hughes)**



was a term we were not allowed to use except when we sang this song. This is why we would go crazy when my dad would pop the cassette in. I remember the excitement I felt being with my family and the smiles on my parents’ stress-free faces just living in the moment. Just writing about it brings me joy and fills me with pure happiness that I bury into my heart like a golden treasure I’m afraid I might lose.

Growing up and learning the meaning of the lyrics, I was surprised at what they meant but not surprised my parents liked the meaning of the song. In the lyrics the artist says he doesn’t care what people think about him, being himself is not hurting anyone, and he has no problems because he is who he is and it’s his life to live. As young parents living with family elders, there were always rules and chisme (gossip). I think that to them this song was a reminder to live their life for themselves, regardless of others.

**“Me Vale” by Mana**

A grand entrance deserves a grand song, and not just any song, but a song that moves you from deep within. Two seconds in and I knew right away what song did just that: Me Vale by Mana. “Me Vale” is a Spanish pop rock song that has always brought me a wave of euphoria. When I was younger, my parents would play this song when we traveled back home. My parents and two sisters would sing loudly as we danced in our seats. On a scorching hot day with no AC, we blasted “Me Vale” as we drove in our 1990 white Pontiac Grand Prix, windows down and not a care in the world. Afterwards, we’d laugh at each other for being off key and the way our hair clung to our faces with sweat from dancing all crazy. Then we would repeat the song again until we were tired.

At that age, I didn’t know what the song meant other than the chorus “Me Vale” (*It doesn’t matter to me/I don’t care*), which

Now that I’m older, the lyrics mean the same to me but are filled with love and happiness. As soon as the song starts, I find myself in the back seat of the Pontiac with my family lost in love, laughter, and joy. With all the confidence and security that a child could ever ask for, I am reminded that “*I am who I am, It’s my life to live*” so nothing else matters.

**(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**



**“Rise Up” by Andra Day**

The song I chose is Rise Up by Andra Day because no matter how I feel and what I am going through, I must rise. I do it for my kids. Listening to it gives me strength and hope. It makes me want to fight for everything even if I am tired. I am going through a very rough patch in my life. I am somewhere between giving up and holding on. I resonate with the lyrics of the song. Each day is a new beginning; each day is a new opportunity to rise and be a better me, even when times are hard.

When my husband was in the hospital fighting for his life, I would be listening to this. The tears streamed down my face because I didn't know what I was going to do or how I was going to do it, but I knew I had to. It gave me a sense of hope, that no matter what, I had to fight through all the emotions that I felt because I had little ones at home that needed their mom. They need me to be ok. **(Paola Damiani)**

**“I Believe” by R. Kelly**

The song starts off with an upbeat melody that makes me excited and reminds me of being in a church. When I came to the US, I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to get back into school. All the hopes and aspirations I had as a child had faded away due to the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and I knew that finances would be an obstacle I would have a hard time overcoming. But just as the lyrics say, *“still you run though you cannot see the finish line.”* For the very first time in a very long time, I am hopeful of my



future and excited to see what it has in store for me; this song speaks to that. Just as in life, even though you cannot see the destination, you have got to continue to push forward.

This song also reminds me of the election of President Obama and what an inspiring and hopeful time that was. I can remember it as if it were yesterday, the announcement of the 44th President-elect of the United States. This moment was a culmination of decades upon decades of sacrifice by the likes of Frederick

Douglass and Malcolm X, to name but a few. It was also a moment to look back at the heroes of our past and give thanks to them. Much could be said about the singer, but his talent cannot be disputed and his ability to amplify the black consciousness through music should not be understated.

**(Viwe Mpurwana)**

**“Loving Me” by Janine**

This song keeps me motivated to never be afraid to start over and keep pushing. Currently I am healing from a lot these past years. Strength and God have given me so much grace. This is only the beginning of a healing journey. **(Anteijah Greer)**



**“W.A.Y.S.” by Jhené Aiko**

W.A.Y.S. is an abbreviation for “Why Aren’t You Smiling.” The lyrics speak for itself for the most part.

*If there’s one thing that I learned  
While in those county lines  
Is that everything takes time  
You have gotta lose your pride  
You have gotta lose your mind  
Just to find your peace of mind  
You have gotta trust the signs  
Everything will turn out fine*



hard times. When you know you have people in this world that are going through worse than you are, it makes you grateful to still be surviving and striving.

The mood set is one of reflection, overcoming struggles, and having a full load of thankfulness. It captured me by having a strong connection through the release of the song. It triggered memories where I wasn’t myself and emotions where I wasn’t feeling like myself. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

*So, why aren’t you smiling?  
Why aren’t you smiling?  
Life can get wild when  
You’re caught in the whirlwind  
Lost in the world when  
You’re chasing the win  
You gotta understand*

When Jhené Aiko said “life can get wild when you’re caught in the whirlwind, lost in the world,” it seems like my life. Whenever I get the opportunity at life to be better, whether it’s a financial or spiritual situation, the Devil comes knocking and my door and I have to answer to him. God opens doors, and the Devil tries his hardest to block the opening. But when I reflect on my life as a whole, I’m blessed beyond measures. I have a car, home, and my kids are taken care of. I’m living and breathing. So “why am I not smiling?” **(Destiny Drone)**

**“GRATEFUL” by DJ Khaled ft. Vory**

The song itself speaks about being grateful for not anything but everything. It’s all about being grateful, no matter what situation you’re in. I have a strong connection to this song this year, as I’ve been going through a lot. I thought my life was failing and falling apart, but I still remained grateful. I listened to this song every day to help me get through

**“I’m A Go Getta” by Lil Wayne**

My grand entrance song would be I’m A Go Getta by Lil Wayne. This pump-up song starts off with these words:

*I’m goin’ for the gold, my heart is in control  
My mind is on succeed and I am in the lead  
Don’t buy into the schemes, the science or strategy  
Just giant N-U-Ts brings triumph and belief  
I’m a lion or a dean, inspired by the green*

That first part of the song just pushes me to keep moving. Don’t give up! Give it your all and your best. I feel optimistic to the point where, when I put my mind and heart into something, I can do it and succeed. **(Larry Grant)**



**“Thank You” by Kehlani**

If I had to choose a song to be played while receiving an award, it would be “Thank You” by Kehlani. In this song the artist is simply thanking those who stood by her side through her trials and tribulations.

*I never said that I live my days without doubt  
I swear, all I’ve ever done was be honest  
And stay modest, oh  
So this is a sincere, unscripted, unwritten  
For all that you’ve given, forgiving, I’m driven  
I wanna be better than I was  
Better than I am, so I say  
All I’m trying to say is, I thank you*

Hearing this song gives me an uplifting and proud feeling, reminding me of the times I’ve doubted myself and my loved ones reassured me. And with that support, I’ve achieved many goals. So, with this song choice I’d not only be celebrating myself but my supporters as well. **(Serene Boyd)**

**“Quality Over Quantity” by Polo G**

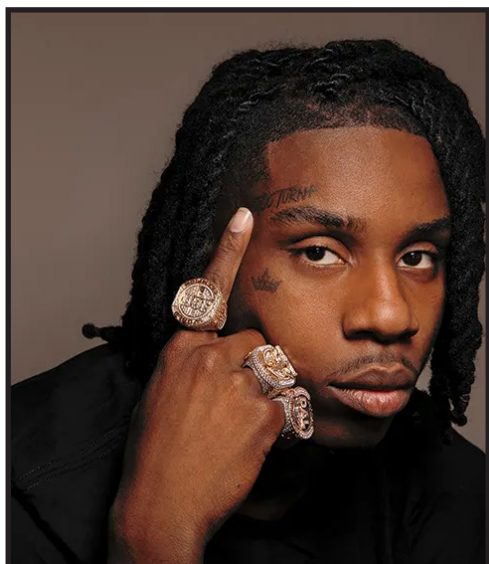
I chose this song because, for one, throughout life I learned it’s not about the friends you’ve got; it’s more about the characteristics of the ones you have around. I’d rather have one good friend than 100 fake friends. Most people you meet don’t have your best interest at heart. I don’t care to have many friends; I care to have real friends.

The song is fairly new but I listen to it every day. It kind of makes me feel like it’s best to limit who you deal with and give your time to. Also it gives me hope that you can be lost at a time in your life but keep pushing and you will find yourself.

**(Johnnell Britt)**

**“The Best in Me” by Marvin Sapp**

Marvin Sapp’s song “The Best in Me” connects with me because it speaks to the core of how I view my personal journey. The message about being seen and valued through my flaws mirrors my own experiences. There have been times in my life when I felt overlooked and judged for my mistakes, yet there is always someone or even a moment of self realization that reminds me of my true worth. The lyrics “he saw the best in me, when everyone else around could only see the worst in me” reflect on the times when others doubted my potential but I found strength in knowing my value and worth. This song reminds me that despite any hardships, imperfections, or setbacks, there is always a greater purpose for my life. It encourages me to focus on my strengths and embrace the belief that I am more than my past mistakes. **(JuJu Stallworth)**



# CHANNELING FREDERICK DOUGLASS

*After reading Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Odyssey students were given an editorial from the Southern Quarterly Review of 1852 claiming that slavery was God's plan, that slaves basked in the sun and were happy, and that only whites could understand the conception of liberty. Students responded using the fiery voice and oratorical style of Frederick Douglass, including alliteration, rhetorical questions, exclamations, irony, and other techniques. Here are excerpts from longer letters they wrote in the voice of Douglass.*

*Dear Editor,*

I must express my discontent with your sentiments; I am utterly dismayed with your convictions! You cannot begin to fathom what it is like to be a Negro. I am most certain that you have never had the displeasure of speaking with an enslaved Negro nor had a sight of whippings or Negroes being beaten inches from death.

. . . Where in the Bible does it tell the white man to go hunt and kidnap people from their homeland? What man does not dream of freedom while working outside 12 hours of the day with no protection from the elements, with their children taken abruptly and families separated? . . .

What is this Christian slavery you speak about? All I have witnessed are cruel Christian criminals. There is no God that approves of this horrendous hell hole the white man has created! **(Laura Bass)**

I am writing to you as a man who once was a slave, passed around throughout the years from one slave owner to the next, beaten and whipped severely, causing blood to run down my flesh followed by more lashing. Your editorial disgusted me! How does a white man

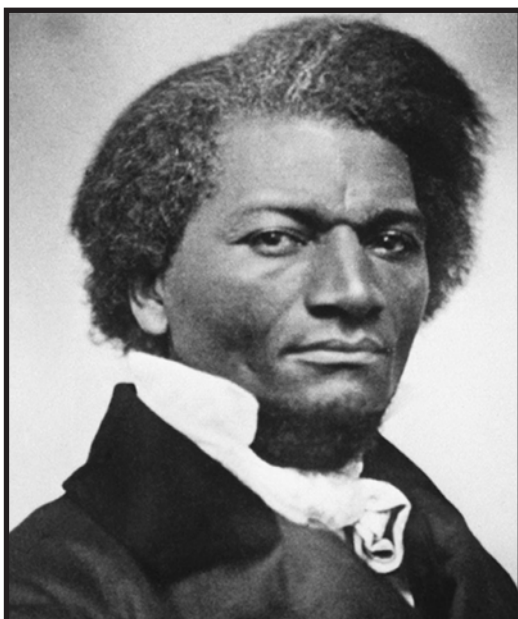
with such free will speak on what an oppressed slave might dream? I spent many days and nights as a slave hating my life and dreaming of what you say naturally belongs to the white man, liberty.

Imagine not knowing your own birthday, being stripped away from your parents, or not having the privilege of an education. . . . There is no happiness and sunshine as a slave. Many of us risked our lives attempting to seek liberty and some failed. . . . Just like me, now a liberated man, all my brothers and sisters shall see freedom! **(Serene Boyd)**

There is little you understand regarding what my people face every anguishing day. I do understand that slavery allows luxury in the life you lead. . . . To be a slave is to be a donkey, stripped of human rights and denied the roots to our ancestors. . . .

I think back to earlier years of life, not knowing my exact date of birth. The severed relationship with my mother was because of the slaveowner's goal to isolate slaves. . . . No longer deemed fit for work, my grandmother was left to die a slow and lonely death, to be forgotten among the rest who have perished. This is the life you feel I deserve and nothing more? . . .

The fire that resided in my soul has reignited. I will continue to tell my truth and fight. **(Lisa Brown)**



I am filled with great disappointment upon reading this piece of yours, as you perceive us incapable of intellectual development. But yet, look at my success. I am capable of communicating, understanding, and expressing.

The idea that your religion justifies this inhumane act towards my people baffles me.

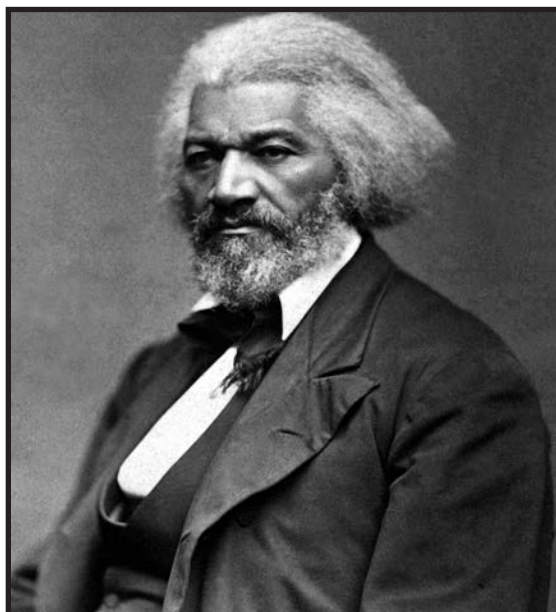
You twist interpretations that oppose the broader message of justice and compassion. **(Stacy Castillo)**

I have read your words saying that the Negro “does not dream of liberty” and that slavery is a “bright sunbeam” from God. How false that is! I was born in slavery, and I know the truth: every slave dreams of being free. You can chain the hands but never the mind or the heart, even in the darkest night.

You say the slave is happy. But have you seen what I have seen? I saw my aunt beaten until her blood ran down her. I saw families torn apart, children sold away from their mothers, husbands from their wives. I watched my own people cry out, with no hope and no mercy shown. You call that happiness? It is suffering and sadness that only freedom can heal.

You call slavery “Christian.” What a lie. The religion of the slaveholder is not the religion of Christ. It blesses the whip and the chain. True Christianity teaches love, peace, and freedom, not hate, cruelty, and greed. The same men who pray on Sunday curse and beat slaves on Monday. . . .

No, slavery is not a sunbeam from heaven but a shadow from hell. The slave’s dream of liberty will never die. The day will come when every chain is broken, and all men will stand free before God. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**



Your editorial presumes that the Negro, left unto himself, is bereft of the noble dream of liberty and consigned to a life of subjugation. As one of mixed heritage and one who has known the depths of poverty and the sting of racial prejudice, I must vehemently refute such an assertion.

In the crucible of my upbringing, I have beheld the profound paradox that the deprivation of knowledge is both the weapon of oppression and the spark of rebellion. Indeed, the irony is that in the very act of seeking knowledge, we found our

strength; and in that pursuit, we discover the essence of Freedom! . . . Knowledge, the light of liberty, became our greatest weapon against the darkness of ignorance.

In this manner, I stand as a testament to the enduring truth that the quest for knowledge is the very essence of liberty, and in that pursuit, we find our true power. **(Valencia Collins)**

You say that “The Negro left to himself does not dream of liberty.” As a former slave myself I can point to my own experience of my own dreams that I have achieved. I dreamed of being free. Not only did I teach myself how to read and write, but I also manipulated my white “superiors” into teaching me.

Your claim that slaves bask in the sunshine and are happy is preposterous. Is it really enjoying sunshine and being happy if you are being forced into these conditions? The sun is as hot as molten lava burning your skin. Is it really happiness if you are being worked like a dog, without the care the dog receives?

Finally, you claim that we Negroes are only destined to exist for slavery. Here I stand before you as a writer and a leader to my people. Here I stand as an inspiration and hope. Here I stand as a FREE MAN. **(Paola Damiani)**

To assert that people in chains are happy is not a description of reality but a measure of your own moral blindness and cowardice.

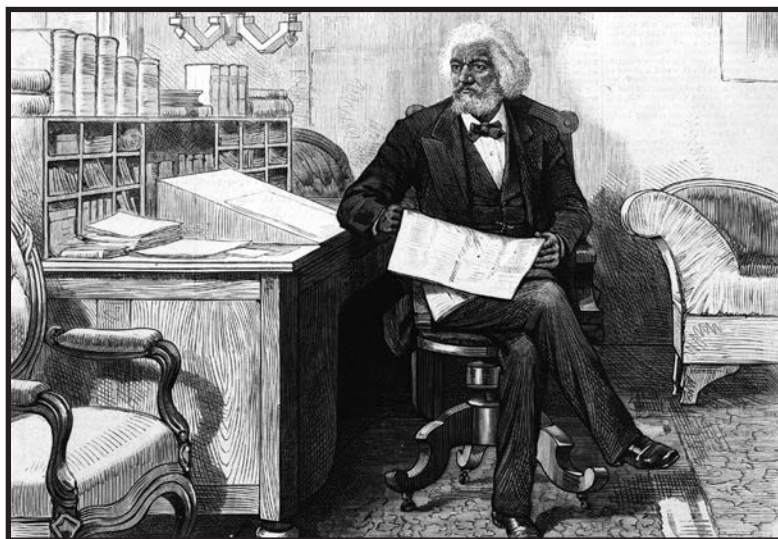
You claim that the establishment of slavery is what God has destined for us. What God would bless a system that tears children from their mothers' arms? What divine hand would permit the use of a whip on a woman's back? This is not the pure Christianity of God but a corrupt and hypocritical faith that uses God's name to justify its most ungodly crimes. . . .

Your own behavior betrays your belief that we are nothing more than savage animals. Why do you make rules that prohibit us from reading if we are nothing more than animals? Why do you beat us so we cannot pray together? You realize deep down that we are human beings with human souls. Suppressing our basic thirst for freedom is a never-ending battle against our very souls. . . .

The days of gentle persuasion are over. It is necessary to expose your country's deception, awaken its conscience, and condemn its sins against God and humanity in a storm of shame. This institution of slavery needs to be destroyed because it is a poisonous snake wrapped up in the heart of our country. I firmly believe that its downfall is coming and that the day will come when all people, regardless of race, will reach their full potential. **(Tida Drammeh)**

You say the Negro "does not dream of liberty" and "Christian slavery" is the most blissful state to which my people could aspire. I cannot remain silent when such deception passes for divine truth. Having been born into slavery, experiencing the lash, and obtaining my freedom with the aid of God and my own right arm, I speak not from speculation but from personal experience.

Did my fellow bondmen's hushed prayers--offered when the moon obscured her face--not represent hopes for liberation? When I witnessed men moaning beneath the overseer's whip and mothers sobbing as their children were sold away, I sensed



in their screams the common human desire for rescue rather than contentment. One race is not the exclusive owner of liberty. Everyone who carries God's image is entitled to it by birth. . . .

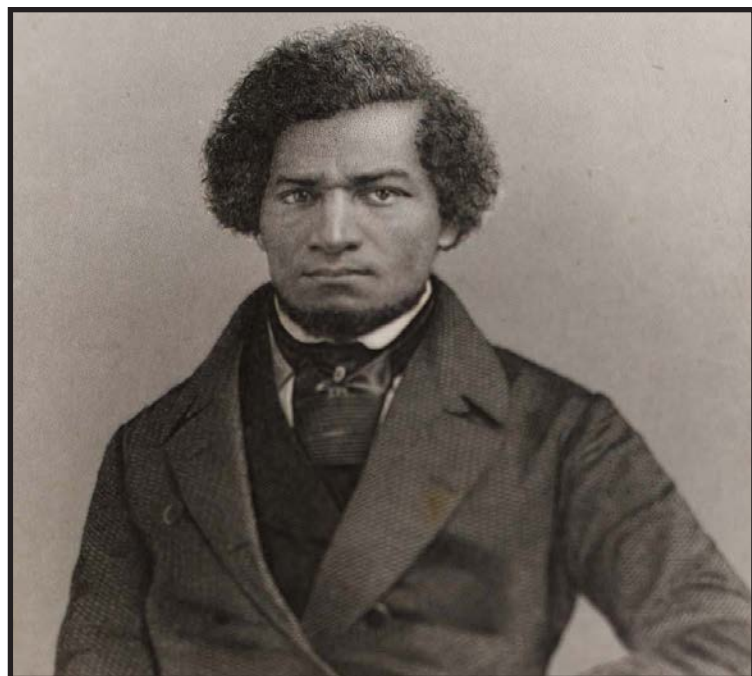
You dare refer to this system as "Christian"? While their masters quoted scripture, I witnessed men and women being beaten until their backs were one big wound. In the shadow of the church tower, I have seen a husband and wife being separated by an auction block. This is not the faith of Christ, who came to "proclaim liberty to the captives." The Christianity of the slaveholder is not a ray of hope but rather an excuse for brutality. . . .

Instead of writing these words out of animosity, I hope that the truth will be able to break through hearts that have been hardened by tradition and financial gain. The day will come--indeed, it must--when this country will acknowledge that no man can legitimately control another, and the myth of "happy slavery" will be discarded. I shall keep writing, speaking, and testifying to my people's dignity and the arrogance of those who enslave them until that day. With millions of people in shackles, America cannot continue to claim to be the land of the free. I hope that one day the darkness of slavery will be revealed by the light of truth, and justice will triumph over prejudice and profit. I'll keep talking, writing, and standing as a living example of the fact that we do, in fact, dream of freedom, and that we will not give up until every last chain is broken. **(Destiny Drone)**

You are a hypocrite and your opinion is distorted. The Bible teaches us that if you have faith, you must not act in hate. Slaves are being treated cruelly. They are enduring torture, starvation, and physical abuse. I can tell you firsthand how this kind of treatment is soul crushing. How can any human possibly be happy while enduring this kind of treatment? We who are enslaved yearn for freedom far more deeply than any white man will ever understand!

The Bible teaches us in 1 John 4:20 “whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar.” You may not see me as a brother, but God sees us as equals. We are human. Whether we are a Negro or a white man, we are human, and we dream just as you do and we feel just as you do; we are not so different from you. Justified with religious hypocrisy, we are being abused, tortured, sold, and violated! You claim moral righteousness while practicing pure evil. . . .

Imagine this: it is a hot August day and you have been fanning wheat. After a while you start to feel sick, you start to feel dizzy, and your head is aching like you have never felt before, you start to feel faint, and by no control of yours, you fall down. The weight of the heat and exhaustion is heavy on your body. You stop fanning because you have fallen



and cannot muster any strength to stand again, no matter how badly you want to. Due to this halt in your work, you are beaten in the head with a hickory slat, and immediately your head is pouring out blood. Does this make you feel joyous? . . .

We do not wish to be owned, we do not wish to be abused, and we do not care for your senseless rant.  
**(Kiana Galloway)**

Who are you to say we Negroes do not dream of liberty? Do we not deserve freedom? I dream to have my family. I desire to be treated equal. Happiness, family, love, and fairness are not only for white men but for all. . . . You treat other humans as if they do not have the same flesh and bleed the same blood.

Who enjoys being separated from their family, to be beaten for laughing or mishearing? Is it enjoyment to hear the cries of other slaves, to watch lynchings and whips slashing against bare backs? To mention God in this manner is disrespectful because the Bible says “treat others how you would want to be treated.” . . . Nothing is happy about this life of slavery. Every day is living Hell on Earth. **(Tikoya Gilmer)**

Who is one to say that the Black man does not dream of liberty? Only a man of ignorance, only a man of arrogance. You are a man so warped by your own lies that you have come to call cruelty a virtue and madness a duty.

Do we not dream of living free from the chains of slavery? Do we not dream of having rights over our own bodies, our lives, and our destinies? Do we not dream of reading, writing, and seeking knowledge?

I tell you this: it is not that the slave cannot conceive of liberty—it is that liberty has been stolen from the slave. . . . You say it is a cruel task to disturb a man in the enjoyment of the life to which God has destined him. I say it is a far greater cruelty to lock a man in chains, to strip him of his God-given rights, and to tell him that this is his natural lot in life.

I have felt the lash upon my back. I have known hunger in the night. I have known the sting of cruel overseers. I have endured the constant fear of being sold from my mother, who I scarcely knew.

I have learned to read and write in secret—stolen moments of knowledge that opened my mind to truth. I have felt the spark of freedom awaken in my soul.

And why should this freedom, this birthright of the soul, be denied to any man? Why shall one be free while another remains bound?

No! Liberty is not a luxury for the favored few but a sacred right for all God's children. I will speak and I will fight until every man can know it as I do. . . .

You claim that slavery is a blessing, a bright sunbeam bestowed by the hands of Omniscience. I say that such words are a mockery of human suffering and an insult to every man and woman held in chains. To call slavery a gift from God is to turn chains and lashes into tokens of divine favor and to demand that the oppressed bow in gratitude to their oppressors. Such a claim turns a blind eye to the tears, the bruises, and the groans of the enslaved. You are an architect of cruelty. You are an enabler of tyranny. You are a keeper of stolen liberty. You are a betrayer of liberty and a servant to nothing but your own corruption. . . . Freedom alone is the source of true happiness, and only when that freedom is granted will the sun truly shine upon the oppressed. **(Shataya Hall)**

Who are you to say how my people and I felt while being enslaved and treated like wild animals? You could not pretend to know. Your viewpoint not only misrepresents history but also dismisses humanity and our desire to be free.

Every person, regardless of circumstances, has a right to liberty and self-determination. Who are you to say that slaves were content with their life and how they were treated?



I dare you. It is important that we approach historical events with what is right, that we show empathy, and that we make sure we honor those before us. **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

I was deeply disturbed by your recent editorial stating that the Negro “does not dream of liberty.” As a former slave, I can assure you that such an idea is far from the truth. All enslaved men and women want freedom, even if fear and oppression keep them from expressing it openly. To say we are content in slavery is to deny our humanity and the natural desire all people share to live free.

Slavery is a life of pain, labor, and constant injustice. There is no joy in being owned, beaten or separated from your loved ones. To call slavery “Christian” is to twist the very heart of Christianity.

I write to remind your readers that freedom is not a privilege granted by race or power; it is a right given by God to every human being. History will not look kindly upon those who defend slavery as a blessing. No man can truly be happy while another is enslaved. **(Brittany Hughes)**

You claim that the Negro, left to himself, “does not dream of liberty,” and that the very concept of freedom belongs “so naturally to the white man.” Permit me to answer, not as one who ponders, but as one who has suffered, survived, and still believes. I speak as one whose life was in bondage, denied the simplest dignities, my earliest memories shaped by hunger, violence, and the constant presence of an overseer’s whip. Day after day, I saw men, women, and even children wounded, not merely in body but in spirit. Yet even as a boy, I yearned for the day I might call no man Master and dared to imagine a life beyond, unbound by the restrictions forced upon me.



of the white man living today. My intentions in writing to you today are to highlight the abhorrent nature of slavery and its consequences on the Negro.

Let me begin by referring us back to a document which was signed at the onset of this great experiment which we call America, The Declaration of Independence. This great document recognizes certain unalienable rights given by God which we all know to be fact, and that is that “all men are created equal.” Knowing this to be true, how then can such a society built on such principles betray the very words which brought about its inception? I argue then that if slavery is good for the Negro, then the founding document is another “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

You write that disturbing the slave’s “contentment” is a cruelty. Let me tell you: cruelty lies in the silence forced upon the enslaved in the denial of family, faith, and manhood. The road I traveled to freedom was not met with comfort but littered with fear, scarcity, and challenges that tested every fiber of my being. Each step was a struggle against intimidation, ignorance, and the notion that my suffering was divinely ordained. And yet, I persisted, not because I was “happy” in the “sunshine of bondage,” but because I longed for the light of liberty. . . .

To suggest that Christian slavery is the “brightest sunbeam” for the Negro is to misunderstand both Christianity and humanity. For my faith was a lamp in the darkness, and a thirst for liberty is not the invention of any race but the birthright of humanity, breathed into each soul by the same Creator who gives to all. . . .

I urge your readers to trust in the power of hope and to recognize every person’s sacred right to dream and to be free. **(Angel Moore)**

Slavery is without question the greatest travesty of our time and a huge scourge on the consciousness

Secondly, I find it highly improbable that a white man can know and speak with such authority nonetheless on the dreams and aspirations of a man completely foreign to himself. Slavery denies the Negro the ability to think, learn, or even choose his own destiny, but instead it subjugates him to a life of perpetual servitude. To subjugate the black man to slavery is the most unnatural act akin to taking a fish out of water. . . . Listen to the cries of the slaves in their songs; these are not tears of joy but a cry for help and a yearning for freedom. . . .

Give the Negro that which was given to him by God, which is liberty and the ability to create his own destiny. Until all of us are free, none of us are free. Any nation built upon the abomination of slavery has damnation as its destination.

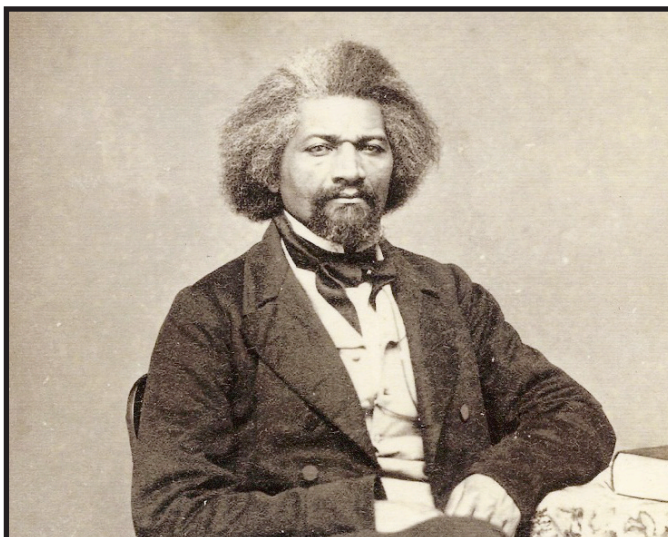
**(Viwe Mpurwana)**

It is completely infuriating that you, a white man and slave owner, would try to tell the Negro what he or she dreams of. . . . It’s completely unfathomable and utterly confounding that anyone would think that the life of a slave is enjoyable, with someone’s boots always on your back as if it were a stepping stool, or with ropes and shackles around your neck only to be whipped like cattle.

I am even more perturbed that you can use the title “Christian slavery” and say this was predestined by God. At the same time, you say in your Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal in the eyes of God. I’ve come to the realization that you slave masters use God to cloak the hypocrisies of your ideology and enforce your holy atrocities upon slaves. For anyone to think that the Creator—God the light—could think in these grotesque and heinous ways is foolish; it is not God you worship but the Devil. Only a devil can think in devilish ways, only a devil can do devilish things, only a devil can commit abominations. So, until you are lying on your back gurgling your own blood, while the wind swooshes through your hair, as you pontificate life or death, but at the same time dreaming of liberty and freedom, only then can you speak of what a slave might dream of.  
**(Shelton Murphy)**

You say enslaved people are happy, but I have seen the pain behind their songs and smiles. Those songs you call “joyful” are not songs of happiness—they are songs of sorrow. They come from hearts that long for freedom, not from people content with chains.

You call slavery “Christian.” But what is Christian about whipping men, selling children, and forbidding people to learn? The God I know does not bless cruelty. True Christianity teaches love, justice, and mercy—not the buying and selling of human beings.



You claim that Black people cannot imagine freedom. Yet I dreamed of it every day I was enslaved. I risked everything to gain it. When I learned to read, I understood that freedom was not something only for white men—it was my right as a human being. That knowledge gave me courage to escape and to speak out.

If slavery were truly natural, it would not take laws, whips, and fear to keep people in chains. Every person, no matter their color, carries the desire for liberty in their heart.

You may call me dangerous for saying this, but I will not be silent. The truth cannot be chained. Slavery is not a gift from God—it is a curse upon our nation, and one day it will fall. **(Roché Palmer)**

I have read your recent claims that the Negro is content in bondage and unfit for liberty. How strange, that a man who enjoys the blessings of Freedom should declare chains a comfort! What irony, that a slave’s silence is mistaken for his satisfaction. Does the lamb rejoice because it does not cry when led to the slaughter?

You call freedom cruelty and slavery mercy, yet to call darkness light does not make it so. The slaves’ degradation is the master’s shame, for the hand that holds the whip is bound by its own wickedness.

The desire for liberty is the breath of every human soul. You may smother it but never kill it. The flame of freedom may flicker under oppression, yet it shall rise again when fanned by truth.

God made all men his image, not one to serve as beast to another. And until this nation learns that lesson, it will know neither peace nor honor.  
**(Roncal Riley)**

. . . Ignorant and thoughtless is what you want a slave to be, not just because of our color but for the purpose of keeping your power. You want us to be voiceless because then life is easy for the white man. Long ago, I learned to read and write, and I have come to realize that this is the path to

our freedom. Knowledge is what you seek to keep from us. Did you know that a slave with knowledge takes a white man's power, but a white man's power is to take a slave's knowledge? Is this not the concept you wish we would not grasp? Since kindly kidnapping us from our homeland—it seems stealing comes so naturally to the white man—it is only expected that you wish to steal our pathway from slavery to freedom—now you wish to steal our thoughts! I will admit, the idea that naturally belongs to the white man is the inhumanity of slavery and your heinous ways of doing so—this being something I indeed will never grasp!

Whose God has destined me and my people into slavery? If it is your God, he must be the Devil in disguise! For the Christian God does not put us into slavery, but a white man does! This "life of slavery" bears witness to the cruelty and wickedness of your people. Was it your God that destined this on me? Living under the bloody lash, working from the rising sun to dusk fall, is this the life full of enjoyment you speak about? We suffer in pain, watching our brethren die in your vile ways—is this the righteous way? The godly way? Coerced into unspeakable acts, robbed of dignity, left with only the inhumanity of slavery, is this that life of slavery you speak about? . . .

I have respect and love towards the Christianity of Christ, but I am against the Christianity of this land. The land I speak about is the slaveholder's land where Christianity is used to deceive and serve none other than the Devil himself! All the religious slaveholders were the most evil, cruelest, and most iniquitous people I have ever known. Your Christianity of the slaveholders' land teaches right but does wrong, adheres strictly to the outward forms of your religion but shows no mercy, professes love to your God and yet has no love for your brother, showing

hypocrisy in your religious duty and passing judgment without faith . . .

The boldest fraud you as white men can make is to use God to justify your barbaric and brutal treatment, your unclean, savage, and atrocious acts. These acts, which we know go against the Christianity of Christ, are sinful and ungodly. We have seen through this misnomer you call Christian slavery. Soon my brethren in bonds will all be liberated. For I vow to forever commit myself to this sacred cause in hopes to hasten the deliverance of my people to a day where slavery no longer exists! **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**

Slavery was not a choice; slavery was an oppressive institution imposed upon people against their will. Was not everyone created equally? Do we not have the same rights as whites? If by saying basking in the heat (being overworked, underfed, and whipped against our will) is happiness, then why does such happiness not apply to the whites?

Why do you say Negroes cannot dream of liberty? We dream of freedom, life with no restraints. Did anyone ask us our opinion of slavery before it was so cruelly bestowed upon us? What right do you have to say that we as Negroes enjoy being enslaved and not being equal? Your opinion that slavery was a choice is a distortion of truth and

an insult to countless slaves who suffered. To suggest that slavery was a choice and Negroes are happy is to ignore the lash, the chains, and the stolen lives that mark its reality. **(JuJu Stallworth)**

A life starved of food, education, personal autonomy, and ancestral connection is not one that a self-respecting individual would yearn for. . . The stomachs of my people were as empty as a master's mercy. Only a man who truly wants to be liberated will somehow find a way to transform food into currency. Education was locked away as if it were a weapon—and a powerful



weapon indeed it was. . . . Only a man who truly wants to be liberated would steal an education at the expense of his own life. The whip waited like a patient serpent for anyone seeking freedom. What white man, born with breath and will, would not run from a life where hope itself was a punishable crime? . . . What you as a white man call nature is simply a shadow of oppression. Give all men the same ability to blossom in light, and he will not only grasp your conception but also surpass it.

I do not believe that God has ordained our bondage or that Heaven smiles upon the whip and chains that wound us. What kind of gospel is built upon the backs of the enslaved? If bondage is Heaven's decree, then Hell itself must be holy. . . . The brightest sunbeam shines only upon chains and pain. Where you see light, I see darkness. Your Christianity is a gospel of chains, a scripture written in blood, and a preacher at the other end of a whip. Despite being told that submission was salvation, we know resistance is what is saving us. I am not a product of slavery's intention but a product of its failure. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

. . . To say that people of African descent cannot understand freedom and that slavery is the "brightest sunbeam" meant to make us happy is an insult to every human being. This I know from experience. I was born a slave, forced to work for cruel masters like you, and suffered the daily hardships your words try to justify. If slavery is as pleasant as you claim, then whites should have been slaves, too. Maybe you would have found joy in every hour of it, but for me, childhood was filled with fear and pain.

. . . Even under the lash, I was striving to be free. I learned how to read, to

think, and to question the chains around me, and I soon realized that no person on Earth is meant to be a slave.

You call those of us who fight for freedom dangerous, but the real danger is slavery itself and the people behind it. I have witnessed the stolen lives that slavery brings. If you were to say otherwise, it ignores the truth and the suffering of my people. . . . Freedom belongs to all people, not just one race! **(Joseph Thigpen Jr.)**

I feel compelled to confront the deeply misguided and harmful assertion that the Negro, when left to his own devices, lacks the aspiration for liberty. Such a statement is not only devoid of historical accuracy but also an affront to our moral integrity. The ardent desire for freedom does not belong to any singular race; rather, it is the sacred flame ignited in the heart of every human being. To assert that an enslaved individual does not long for liberty is akin to claiming that a caged bird does not yearn for the boundless sky above. The plaintive songs

of the enslaved, their whispered prayers seeking solace, and their courageous attempts at escape—these actions are not mere reflections of resignation; they resonate with the powerful and defiant rhythm of a soul striving to break free from its shackles.

Moreover, to propose that slavery is a divinely sanctioned state in which the Negro lives contentedly is a grotesque distortion of reality. If slavery were indeed a form of sunshine, it would be the kind that



scorches the skin, leaving burns that never heal and blinding the eye to all that is beautiful and free. The brutal whip that cracks through the air, the merciless auction block where families are torn apart, and the anguished cries of children separated from their parents—these are not beams of divine grace but the relentless shadows cast by human cruelty and inhumanity. True Christianity, in its most authentic essence, embodies love, justice, and the inherent dignity of every soul. To label this wretched state of bondage as “Christian slavery” is to subject Christ to a second crucifixion upon the altar of avarice. The Scriptures speak profoundly of liberating the captives, not binding them in an unending cycle of servitude.

Furthermore, to suggest that the concept of liberty is a natural endowment exclusive to the white man is to disregard the overwhelming evidence of intellect, bravery, and shared humanity that the Negro has continually demonstrated, even under the most extreme and unnatural circumstances. Liberty is not a privilege that is racially determined; it is a fundamental human right that belongs to all people. The Declaration of Independence professes that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Should the Negro find these rights denied to him, it is not due to any deficiency in capability but rather a stark lack of opportunity and access. The fertile ground of freedom, when cultivated with education and nourished by the waters of justice, can bear fruit in every hue and shade. Let us not confuse the oppressive silence imposed upon the Negro for a lack of intellect or desire. The Negro dreams of liberty not because he has been indoctrinated to do so but because it is a birthright woven into the very fabric of his existence. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

Your words reached my hands, but they pierced my heart. I have so many emotions channeling through



my body, but the biggest two are outrage and sorrow.

You claim the Negro does not dream of liberty, that he is content in slavery, and that slavery is his natural state. I stand as living proof that your statements are not of any truth. I once was enslaved, beaten, starved, and denied the right to be educated. Yet, every day I dreamed of freedom. The dream of freedom is not taught by the white man; it is born in every human soul.

I feel freedom in every breath.

You say it is the white man's burden to rule us, but who gave a man the right to chain others? It is not the law of God. When I was enslaved, I was told silence was safety. But even in the darkest night, I could hear the voice of freedom calling my name. You may bind the hands, but you cannot bind the mind that has seen its own worth—the worth that was given by God, not man! A man who has known the taste of injustice can never rest easy in a white man's chains.

I have seen the look in a mother's eyes as her child is being taken away. Have you heard a mother's cry as her child is being sold? Have you seen a man risk his life for a taste of freedom? I have, and no man suffers such things and calls it happiness. What you call contentment is fear, and what you call ignorance is the work of a system built to keep us silent.

I ask you to open your eyes and heart. We are people, not property. We were all created by the same God and deserve the same opportunity to freedom, education, and equality. Love is free!  
**(Shakila Woods)**

*Sincerely and indignantly,*

*Frederick Douglass, 1852*

# SHOWING OFF STYLE

*Before writing as Frederick Douglass, students experimented with a variety of persuasive writing techniques and literary devices.*

## EXCLAMATION

I hate being a slave! **(Serene Boyd)**

I am black and beautiful! **(Lisa Brown)**

This week has been rough! **(Paola Damiani)**

Do not touch the hot stove! **(Tikoya Gilmer)**

No storm can stop me because I've already survived the worst! **(Roncal Riley)**



## ONOMATOPOEIA

The cat hissed on me as I was trying to put him in the bath. **(Roché Palmer)**

My baby's giggles and coos are the cutest sounds! **(Laura Bass)**

For breakfast I sizzled some bacon. **(Lisa Brown)**

The fire crackled and popped in the fireplace. **(Tida Drammeh)**

The crack of the whip and the clank of chains spoke louder than any sermon about slavery's cruelty. **(Valencia Collins)**

## SUPERLATIVE

Sometimes I feel like the loneliest and saddest person in the world. **(Laura Bass)**

My son is the funniest, most outspoken, and sweetest little boy. **(Paola Damiani)**

New York pizzas are the tastiest pizzas I have ever eaten. **(Tida Drammeh)**

Graduating college will be the proudest moment of my life. **(Brittany Hughes)**

My father was the bravest and kindest man I ever met. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**

Learning to read by far was the hardest, saddest, and most painful thing I could have done to myself. **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**

## IRONY

He was a genius with terrible test scores. **(Serene Boyd)**

The chef of the restaurant burned the steak. **(Lisa Brown)**

Steve Irwin devoted his life to wildlife until an injury from a stingray cut his life short. **(Stacy Castillo)**

In the land of the free, millions lived in shackles. **(Kiana Galloway)**



**ASSONANCE**

The cat sat on a mat. **(Stacy Castillo)**

She eats the sweet treats. **(Lisa Brown)**

I rise in silence, my mind alive with the light of right.  
**(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

Reaching my goals would do much good for my soul  
and I'd be on a roll. **(Roché Palmer)**

**OXYMORON**

The play ended with a scene of sweet sorrow. **(Lisa Brown)**

Slavery is a living death. **(Valencia Collins)**

The pope and his priests were really just holy devils. **(Shelton Murphy)**

My heartbreak has become a beautiful pain, the very thing that's shaping my strength. **(Roncal Riley)**

The deafening silence was merciless. **(George Sydnor)**

**RHETORICAL QUESTION**

Will anyone ever find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? **(Tikoya Gilmer)**

Can you truly love someone if you don't love yourself?  
**(Stacy Castillo)**

How can a nation that claimed to value freedom justify  
the chains of slavery? **(Kiana Galloway)**

Who among us can claim to be truly free when others are  
in chains? **(Shaneece Taylor)**

If you cut me, do I not bleed? **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

Are we living or just surviving? **(Shataya Hall)**

**ALLUSION**

Like Moses leading his people from bondage, I longed to see my brethren walk toward the promised land of freedom. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

Like Esther stepping into her purpose, I am rising boldly into the season God prepared for me.  
**(Roncal Riley)**

She has the patience of Job. **(Jacqueline Hawkins)**

**PARALLELISM**

I came, I saw, I conquered. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**

I get up for my kids, I work for my kids, I pray for my kids. **(Shakila Woods)**

Live in love or loathe in hate. **(Kharmen Thomas)**

**ANALOGY**

To deny education to a slave is as cruel as denying water to a plant. **(Cquemiah Clark-Richmond)**

Freedom is to a man what air is to the lungs. **(Valencia Collins)**

Frederick Douglass believed being separated from his mother was like a tree losing its roots. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

**REPETITION**

Pain is hurt, pain is knowledge, and pain is growth. **(Stacy Castillo)**

Slavery was very cruel, very inhumane, and very sickening. **(Kiana Galloway)**

No words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim seemed to move his iron heart. **(Angel Moore)**

I am healing, I am growing, I am becoming the woman God designed me to be. **(Roncal Riley)**

Some days I cry, cry, cry, but I keep going. **(Shakila Woods)**

**ALLITERATION**

Josiel is a joyful, jazzy baby. **(Paola Damiani)**

Harry hurried home to watch football on TV. **(Tida Drammeh)**

Late nights, long lessons, and little laughs keep me going.  
**(Shakila Woods)**

The youth yelled across the yard, yearning for more playtime.  
**(Shataya Hall)**

**FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

Summer was as hot as a boiling pot of water on the stove.  
**(Paola Damiani)**

Chasing my dreams feels like climbing my own mountains.  
**(Brittany Hughes)**

I could hear the ocean calling me home. **(Viwe Mpurwana)**

The city never sleeps. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

Her skin was as soft as butter. **(Roché Palmer)**

**CHIASMUS**

You can take the girl out of the 'hood, but you can't take the 'hood out of the girl. **(Shaneece Taylor)**

A slave with knowledge takes a white man's power, but a white man's power is to take a slave's knowledge. **(Lilibeth Sobrevilla)**

Are you working hard or hardly working? **(Shataya Hall)**

Never let a fool kiss you or a kiss fool you. **(Tida Drammeh)**