Slavery: Acts of Resistance

In this activity you compare an excerpt of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) interview with an ex-slave with a more famous statement by Frederick Douglass to arrive at your own interpretations of slave resistance. This lesson is designed to work with the film Doing As They Can.

Objectives

1. You will compare two statements by former slaves to identify and interpret acts of resistance.
2. You will create a journal entry from the perspective of a slave describing how he or she would respond to the conditions of enslavement.

Instructions

1. **Step 1**: You will split into small groups of 3-5 people. Individually, you will read the two documents, "No Progress Without Struggle!" and Josie Jordan's description of *malitis*.
2. **Step 2**: In your groups, you should discuss and answer the following questions.

   **Questions for "No Progress Without Struggle"
   
   - Reading comprehension: Underline or list vocabulary words that you believe are key to understanding Douglass's message. Look them up in the dictionary, if necessary. What do these words mean? How do they contribute to the message Douglass is trying to get across?
   - List and discuss examples of specific actions you believe Douglass wanted slaves to take in response to their enslavement. At the same time, what specific behaviors or actions do you believe Douglass might have critiqued?

   **Questions for "Malitis"
   
   - Reading comprehension: What was "malitis"? Summarize the actions of the slaves on this plantation.
   - Analysis of the source's "point of view" (not opinion, but vantage point): Whose point of view is revealed here? How does this source's point of view compare with that of Douglass?
   - How might Douglass have responded to this story? Would he have considered these slaves' actions to be a form of what he called "resistance"? "Agitation"? "Struggle"?
   - How might a white observer such as a journalist visiting from the North, or the master himself, have interpreted these slaves' behavior and their attitudes about slavery?
   - Read/review pages 9-10 of Doing As They Can Viewer's Guide and consider what you saw and heard in the video. List and give examples of the various ways in which slaves responded to their situations. Into which category would you put Douglass and his message? What about the slaves from the "Malitis" reading?

3. **Step 3**: Still as a group, you should use the worksheet to construct an identity for a particular slave on a plantation and to discuss how that slave might react to his or her situation.
4. **Step 4**: Next, you are to individually write journal entries, from the perspective of the characters you created in Step 3, about what that persons' situation was like and what strategies he or she would have taken in response. Your journal entries should draw upon what you have learned form the documents and your group's discussion (and the video and viewer's guides).
5. **Step 5**: When finished, and if time allows, we will share our journal entries and discuss the following questions:
   - How and to what extent did the identities and situations of particular slaves affect their responses to enslavement?
   - What major conclusions and further questions emerged from the group about the slaves and their responses to slavery?
Historical Context

In the antebellum period, many southern as well as northern commentators on slave life countered abolitionist opinion by arguing that slaves were content with their existence. Well into the twentieth century, historians tended to agree. To support their argument historians often noted that massive slave revolts, while common in Latin America and the Caribbean, were rare in the United States (the 1831 revolt of Nat Turner being a major exception). In recent decades, though, based in part on the study of new sources such as interviews with ex-slaves concluded in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (a New Deal Agency), scholars have suggested that African Americans were resistant and resourceful within the harsh confines of slavery.
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Journal Entry

Step 1: As a group, construct an identity by choosing one option from each column. Circle your choices from columns A – D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Teenager</td>
<td>• Field hand</td>
<td>• No family on plantation</td>
<td>• Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Young adult</td>
<td>• House servant</td>
<td>• Family</td>
<td>• Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Elderly person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 2: In your group, discuss how this particular slave might have responded to enslavement on a southern plantation.

Step 3: Individually, write a journal entry about your situation and the decisions you have made and the actions you have taken in response. Draw upon the group discussion as well as what you have learned from the documentary Doing As They Can and viewer’s guide, Frederick Douglass’s “There Is No Progress Without Struggle,” and Josie Jordan’s description of “Malitis.”
Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reforms. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . .

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the roar of its mighty waters.

The struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, or it may both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will. Find out just what a people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong, which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted in the North, and held and flogged at in the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages, and make no resistance, either moral or physical.

Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppression and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and, if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

CREATOR | Frederick Douglass
ITEM TYPE | Speech
A Former Slave Recalls an Outbreak of "Malitis"

The following excerpt is from an oral history interview with Mrs. Josie Jordan, conducted as part of the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s. Jordan was seventy-five years old at the time. The interview took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The WPA interviews of Jordan and thousands of other slaves were assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves.

…I remember Mammy told me about one master who almost starved his slaves. Mighty stingy, I reckon he was. Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they ribs would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny too, Mammy said.

They was seven hogs, fat and ready for fall hog-killing time. Just the day before Old Master told off they was to be killed, something happened to all them porkers. One of the field hands found them and come a-telling the master: "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter." When the master gets to where at the hogs is laying, they's a lot of negroes standing round looking sorrow-eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: what's the illness with 'em?"

"Malitis," they tells, him, and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't no more meat on the place. He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but that's because he's afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs' got malitis.

"Don't you know what malitis is?" Mammy would ask the children when she was telling of the seven fat hogs and 70 lean slaves. And she would laugh, remembering how they fooled Old Master so's to get all them good meats.

"One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning," Mammy would explain, "long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, malitis set in mighty quick, but it was a uncommon disease, even with hungry Negroes around all the time.

CREATOR | Works Progress Administration
INTERVIEWEE | Josie Jordan
ITEM TYPE | Oral History