

Models of Agency: Frederick Douglass and 'The Heroic Slave'

CYNTHIA S. HAMILTON

'THE HEROIC SLAVE,' a novella by Frederick Douglass that was published twice in 1853—in *Autographs for Freedom*, a collection of writings by prominent antislavery leaders, and in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*¹—has attracted recent interest and commentary about its complex allusions, literary and historical. Some of the attention has focused on Douglass's use of the American Revolution and its ideas and heroes, on Listwell as an abolitionist role model for readers, and on 'The Heroic Slave' within the context of the

This article has been in preparation for longer than I like to recall, and my indebtedness has grown with the years. This essay began to take shape during research undertaken with the help of a British Academy-funded study leave in 1995. The *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* are a fitting place for it to appear; without my exposure to the resources available at AAS during research visits in 1998 and 1999, this essay would not enjoy the richness of primary reference it contains. I am also indebted to the help of individual archivists, particularly to Ann Wakefield, archivist at the New Orleans Notarial Archives Research Center and to Adrienne Cannon, manuscript specialist at the Library of Congress for their help in locating materials.

1. The African American Newspapers: The 19th Century, item #33089, from *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, January 21, 1853, indicates that *Autographs for Freedom* is available for purchase at that date. Item #33676 dates the appearance of the first part of 'The Heroic Slave,' in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* as March 4, 1853. Frederick Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 174–239, [65 p.]

CYNTHIA S. HAMILTON is head of American studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire, United Kingdom.

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Garrison-Douglass split. Other studies have considered such matters as the attitude toward violence in 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass's presentation of masculinity and patriarchal values, and the relationship of the novella to the historical record.² Together these studies provide a wide range of contexts within which to view Douglass's work. In this essay, which builds on recent writings, I examine the extent to which Douglass used 'The Heroic Slave' to explore the representational politics of African American heroism and various models of agency available to him for the depiction of liberation, liberators, and sentimental appeals for assistance. My study dovetails with, but reinterprets, much of what has been written.

The first section of this essay offers a brief summary of the *Creole* revolt and of the role in the mutiny played by Madison Washington. This section also offers an overview of the process by which Douglass selected and portrayed Madison Washington as an African American hero. The second section examines more generally Douglass's concern with the literary construction of a

2. On the significance of the American Revolution, the founding fathers, and revolutionary idealism, see Krista Walter, 'Trappings of Nationalism in Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave,"' *African American Review* 34 (2000): 233-46; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 185-87; Paul C. Jones, 'Copying What the Master Had Written: Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" and the Southern Historical Romance,' *Phylon* 38 (2000): 86. Robert S. Levine considers Listwell a role model for readers in "'Uncle Tom's Cabin" in Frederick Douglass' Paper: An Analysis of Reception,' *American Literature* 64 (1992): 71-93; see also Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 83-85; Robert B. Stepto, 'Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave,"' *Georgia Review* 36 (1982): 360-68. On contextualizing 'The Heroic Slave' within the Douglass-Garrison controversy, see Stepto, 'Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction,' 355-57; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104-5, 114-15. For a discussion of masculinity, violence, and patriarchal values, see Richard Yarborough, 'Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave,"' in Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 166-88; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 115-23. For a fuller discussion of 'The Heroic Slave' in relation to the historical record, see Celeste-Marie Bernier, 'Dusky Powder Magazines: The Creole Revolt (1841) in Nineteenth Century American Literature' (Ph.D. diss. University of Nottingham, 2002). Bernier speculates on the provenance of a newly located version of 'The Heroic Slave,' which may or may not have been written by Douglass, and comments on the significance of the differences between the two versions in 'Ambiguities in Frederick Douglass's Two Versions of "The Heroic Slave" (1853, 1863?),' *Slavery and Abolition* 22 (2001): 69-86.

black hero, his ideas about the possibilities and limitations of the heroic example for a wider African American community, and his efforts to expose the use by whites of heroic exemplars to define African Americans' place in society for them. The interracial politics of this process of construction and interpretation appear to have fascinated and concerned Douglass, who had good reason to be aware of it. His own involvement with the organized antislavery movement had made him feel, on a very personal level, the implications of the battle for agency. The third section of this essay examines Douglass's split with Garrison and the ways in which 'The Heroic Slave' acted as a kind of declaration of independence for Douglass. The fourth section looks at the extent to which the Douglass-Garrison split exposed the cultural politics of benevolence within antislavery culture. The final section analyzes Douglass's use of 'The Heroic Slave' to explore the personal politics of interracial cooperation within the antislavery movement and the cultural politics of agency within antislavery rhetoric.

'The Heroic Slave' reconstructs the story of Madison Washington (a quasi-historical figure) focusing attention on the dynamics of a developing relationship between him and Listwell, Douglass's generalized concept of an abolitionist. (Listwell is not given a Christian name in the story.) The novella is divided into four parts, the first three sections of which chronicle encounters between Listwell and Washington at critical points in the latter's story: the moment when he decides to run away, his appearance at Listwell's house as an exhausted fugitive, and his presence in a slave coffle as it is being taken to the port of Richmond. In the first part, Listwell comes, unannounced and undiscovered, upon Washington in the woods, and listens to him soliloquize about his condition as a slave and his determination to be free. Listwell is so moved by Washington's pronouncements that he determines then and there to become an abolitionist. In the second section of 'The Heroic Slave,' which is set at Listwell's home in Ohio, he and his wife are spending a quiet evening. The barking of the family dog tells them that someone is approaching; that person, who Listwell instantly recognizes as the

speaker in the forest, is Madison Washington. The Listwells take Washington into their home, provide for his needs, listen to his story, and help him to escape to Canada. The third part is set at a tavern in Virginia, where Listwell has stopped for accommodation and is assumed to be a slave trader by a local loafer anxious to ingratiate himself. On the morning after his arrival, Listwell makes his way to a disused bowling alley, where a group of Richmond-bound slaves is being housed. Among these slaves, Listwell is surprised to find Washington, who, he learns, had returned to Virginia for his wife and was taken prisoner in an affray in which she was shot dead. Listwell knows that he can do nothing to help Washington or the others in the slave coffle, but he travels to Richmond, where he gives three metal files to Washington as the slaves are being taken to a ship. With these tools, Washington is able to free himself and others. The fourth, and final, part of 'The Heroic Slave,' set in a coffee house in Richmond, tells the story of the slave revolt aboard the *Creole* through a dialogue between the first mate and another sailor whose derisive comments indicate his low opinion of both the mutineers and the crew of the slave ship.

Although Douglass may have composed a number of poems, 'The Heroic Slave' is his only known work of fiction.³ The novella is, in many ways, a curious work employing so many hackneyed conventions derived from sentimental antislavery literature that one is tempted to dismiss its artistic merit without further investigation. Douglass's narrative technique is somewhat off-putting. He tells Madison Washington's story through a third person narrator but shifts the point of view from that of Listwell to that of the first mate of the *Creole* in the last part of the novella. Finally, Douglass's use of a historical figure about whom so little is known appears a somewhat quirky choice. On closer examination, however, the choice of hero becomes explicable, and the subtleties of Douglass's narrative strategy begin to emerge.

3. Five poems (two of which have variant versions), in Douglass's handwriting and presumed to be authored by him are held by the Library of Congress as part of the Frederick Douglass Papers, Box 31, reel 19.

MADISON WASHINGTON:

THE SELECTION AND CANONIZATION OF A HERO

The roots of 'The Heroic Slave' are historical. Madison Washington was one of the leaders of a slave revolt in 1841 aboard the *Creole*, a brig engaged in the internal slave trade. The key source of information about the revolt and Madison Washington's role in it is the December 1841 deposition sworn by the *Creole*'s company in New Orleans and published with minor changes and omissions in several places including the *Liberator*, Douglass's most likely source.⁴ The *Creole* was sailing between Richmond and New Orleans with 135 slaves when, on the evening of November 7, 1841, nineteen slaves mutinied and took control of the ship. Madison Washington helped to ensure that the victory was achieved with as little bloodshed as possible; the captain was badly wounded, and one passenger, a slave trader, was killed. The officers' lives were spared on the understanding that the ship would be taken to a British port in the Bahamas; on November 9, the *Creole* arrived in Nassau. All but the nineteen slaves directly involved in the mutiny were invited to disembark as free men and women. Madison Washington and his fellow mutineers were held for a time but were released without charges being filed against them. Efforts to have them extradited failed.

The discovery of Madison Washington's presence in the section of the hold reserved for the female slaves apparently started the mutiny. Washington fought off two men trying to hold him and allegedly leaped to the deck, shouting: 'We have commenced and must go through, rush boys, rush aft we have got them now.' Then, calling to the slaves below, he reportedly said: 'Come up every damned one of you, if you don't and lend a hand I will kill

4. Deposition sworn by the ship's company of the *Creole* in New Orleans before William Young Lewis, notary public of and for New Orleans on December 2, 1841 ('Protest,' Act no. 1023, Volume 12: 223-30, New Orleans Notarial Archives). Among the newspapers in which the deposition appeared were *Niles Register* (January 22, 1842): 323-26, and the *Liberator* (December 31, 1841): 210. The *Liberator* credited the *New Orleans Advertiser* of December 3, 1841, as its source.

you all and throw you overboard.⁵ Despite this description of Washington's threatening language in the formal 'Protest' that was lodged by the first mate and ship's company, it is also apparent that Washington exercised a restraining hand on the slaves who might otherwise have killed those in their power. The 'Protest,' however, also makes it clear that the mutiny was not led by a single individual, but by four men working together: Washington, Ben Blacksmith, Elijah Morris, and D. Ruffin.

Although Washington was not, then, the incontestable leader of the revolt, there are subtle hints in the record as to the importance of his role. He intervened twice to ensure that the others did not kill individuals then at their mercy, negotiated the new destination with the second mate, arranged food for those slaves who had not participated in the mutiny, and ordered that all guns be destroyed before the ship reached Nassau. The 'Protest' account gives Washington a less prominent part in the action that secured the brig for the mutineers, though, than either Blacksmith or Morris.

Indeed, Blacksmith's role in the mutiny was prominent enough to prompt another fictional depiction of the *Creole* revolt to portray him, and not Madison Washington, as the leader. Like 'The Heroic Slave,' *Wolfsden: An Authentic Account of Things There and Thereunto Pertaining as They Are and Have Been*, is based on the account of the *Creole* revolt contained in the New Orleans 'Protest.' This is made clear in both the text and the appended notes of *Wolfsden*.⁶ That work does not give the *Creole* revolt a central role in the plot but describes those events instead in a short interlude sketching the fate of Blacksmith, a liberated slave of Harry Boynton. Within this short digression, Blacksmith quits his job in a foundry in the North and returns to Virginia to rescue his wife. He is captured and sold, and, along with his wife and child, is put aboard the *Creole*, headed for slavery in Louisiana. In *Wolfsden*, Ben Blacksmith is 'the Vulcan of the plantation, a fellow of herculean strength and dauntless courage,'

5. 'Protest,' 12: 224R. The punctuation is taken from the original deposition.

6. J. B. [Josiah Barnes?], *Wolfsden: An Authentic Account of Things There and Thereunto Pertaining as They Are and Have Been* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1856), 449, 504.

echoing the description of Madison Washington, with arms 'like polished iron,' in 'The Heroic Slave.'⁷ However, in *Wolfsden*, it is 'the controlling energy of the master spirit Ben [Blacksmith], communicating itself like the electric current to the sympathizing hearts about him,' that sustains the revolt.⁸ While Blacksmith breaks free from his fetters with superhuman strength, Madison Washington, 'a man of milder mood and less feared by the captors, [who] had just been unfettered that he might perform some laborious service for his masters, . . . now [sprang] to the side of Ben, and shouted "Liberty!"'⁹

It is easy to see how the 'Protest' could be used as a source for the different versions of events contained in 'The Heroic Slave' and *Wolfsden*. Both are built from meager character sketches provided there. Both also note a central irony behind the 'Protest,' which was a document designed to shield the officers of the *Creole* from claims of negligence or mismanagement. The self-serving 'Protest' inadvertently reveals the restraint, heroism, and foresight of the mutineers that were quickly recognized within an antislavery movement well schooled in using Southern testimony to condemn slavery.¹⁰ 'The Hero Mutineers,' an editorial first published in the *New York Evangelist*, and reprinted by both the *New York Journal of Commerce* and the *Liberator* in January 1842, noted that a portrait of the noble behavior of the mutineers emerges from this most unlikely source.¹¹

But why, one must ask, was it Madison Washington, and not Blacksmith, as portrayed in *Wolfsden*, or Morris, the man who fired a pistol at the start of the mutiny, who emerged, by consensus within the antislavery movement, as the hero? One answer is suggested by the movement's discomfort with the use of violence. In

7. J. B., *Wolfsden*, 414; Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), 179.

8. J. B., *Wolfsden*, 451.

9. J. B., *Wolfsden*, 450.

10. Perhaps the most effective and sustained example is Theodore Weld's *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839).

11. 'The Hero Mutineers,' *Liberator* (January 7, 1842): 1. The *Liberator* credited as its source, the *New York Journal of Commerce*, which in turn credited the *New York Evangelist*.

its *Declaration of Sentiments*, the American Anti-Slavery Society had announced that its principles forbade 'the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and entreat the oppressed to reject, the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage, relying solely on those which are spiritual.'¹² Herbert Aptheker, who argued a century later that by 1841 attitudes toward violent resistance were shifting, observed that Gerrit Smith's remarks at the Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society were not immediately denounced by the meeting; but violence never sat comfortably with the Garrisonian preference for taking the high moral ground.¹³

Indeed, the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society felt compelled to issue a disclaimer in the wake of a resolution passed at a meeting of the Liberty Party on December 29, 1841, which 'Resolved, That the slaves of the brig Creole, who rose and took possession of said vessel, thereby regaining their natural rights and liberty, acted in accordance with the principles of our Declaration of Independence, and the late decision of the Supreme Court; and have proved themselves in their whole conduct worthy of their freedom; and we trust that their noble example will be *imitated by all in similar circumstances.*' Expressing concern that such views might be confused with those of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the society's executive committee repudiated this invitation, making reference to Article 3 of its constitution, which states, in part, 'this Society will never, in any way, countenance the oppressed in vindicating their rights by resorting to physical force.'¹⁴

Despite the absoluteness of such a pronouncement, one senses a certain equivocation at times. One instance is evident in the concluding remarks of a work entitled 'The Hero Mutineers,'

12. *The Declaration of Sentiments and Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society; Together with All those Parts of the Constitution of the United States Which are Supposed to Have Any Relation to Slavery* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1835), 1.

13. Herbert Aptheker, 'Militant Abolitionism,' *Journal of Negro History* 26 (1941): 455-57.

14. 'From the National A. S. Standard. Address to their Fellow-Citizens, by the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society,' *Liberator* (February 4, 1842): 17.

which places an expressed admiration for those involved in the Creole revolt against a more general denunciation of the use of violent resistance to end slavery:

There are only two grand reasons which render it the duty of men, in any circumstances, to submit to the enforcement of such an ignominious claim on themselves and their offspring. One is the hope of obtaining deliverance by patient waiting, and the other is the impossibility of obtaining it by insurrection. *These two reasons rest over the condition of our Southern slaves at large, and sustain the true abolition doctrine of doing nothing to encourage, but every thing to discourage insurrection.*

But these reasons in the case of the Creole slaves had vanished. Before *them*, there was a splendid prospect, by valorous resistance, of immediate and perpetual liberty. Again we repeat it, *the restraining reasons had vanished, and both law and gospel justified their rising.*¹⁵

Given this conclusion, it is not surprising that 'The Hero Mutineers' contains a description of the revolt that emphasizes the restraint of the mutineers rather than the violence of the uprising. In this account, it is the mutineer's 'symbolic' renunciation of further violence that resonates most deeply for the author. 'But nothing in the whole affair appears so sublimely affecting as their conduct on arriving at Nassau,' the author notes. 'They divested themselves of all their arms, even casting them into the sea, and came before the British authorities defenceless—confiding in the justice of their cause, and in the protection of free and righteous institutions against the claims of their oppressors! Noble men!'¹⁶

Within this context of equivocal support for violent resistance, one can see the logic behind the selection of Washington as the hero of the moment in preference to either Blacksmith or Morris. It seems likely that Madison Washington's name, 'a name unfit for a slave, but finely expressive for a hero,' helped with his selection as well. 'The Hero Mutineers' calls Washington 'the master spirit' behind the revolt, applauding his 'commanding attitude and

15. 'The Hero Mutineers.' The italicized passages are as printed in the *Liberator*.

16. 'The Hero Mutineers,' 1.

daring orders, when he stood a freeman on the slaver's deck, and his perfect preparation for the grand alternative of liberty or death, which stood before him.' 'The Hero Mutineers' sees Washington's actions as 'splendid exemplifications of the true heroic.' Washington is not credited with heroic deeds of conquest; it is, instead, 'his generous leniency towards his prisoners, his oppressors' that is noted and praised.¹⁷ 'The Hero Mutineers' is an important document in the selection and canonization of Madison Washington; it set the tone and terms for the way the *Creole* revolt would be treated, especially within the Garrisonian antislavery movement. But although Madison Washington emerged there both as the hero of the revolt and as the ideological 'master spirit' and moral exemplar of the incident for the antislavery cause, his leading role in the revolt allowed others to see him as a symbol of violent resistance rather than of restraint and reconciliation.

The portraits of Madison Washington in both 'The Hero Mutineers' and 'The Heroic Slave' are based on the published 'Protest,' as is explicitly stated in the article and implicitly referenced in Douglass's novella. But here as elsewhere, the confident delineation of Washington's character is based on scanty evidence. It is clear from the 'Protest' that Washington was a large and powerfully built man. Given the officer's expression of surprise at finding him among the female slaves at night, one can only surmise that he was not guilty of any sexual impropriety and was above suspicion in this regard. Furthermore, Washington's behavior during the mutiny suggests that he was a man of courage, determination, integrity, intelligence, and compassion. Some additional biographical information on Washington is provided by a short portrait that appeared in the *Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Mass. Anti-Slavery Society. Presented on January 26, 1842*.¹⁸ (This sketch also appeared in the *Friend of Man*, and on the

17. All quotations are from 'The Hero Mutineers,' 1.

18. *Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Mass. Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Dow and Jackson's Press, 1842), 37-38.

front page of the *Liberator* of June 10, 1842.) It traces Washington's escape from slavery in Virginia to freedom in Canada, his return to Virginia in order to liberate his wife, and his resulting capture and sale. There is speculation here about whether Washington's wife was among the *Creole* slaves. The article ends with a plea for further information: 'Will not some British abolitionists obtain for us the story from Madison's own lips?'¹⁹ No answer to this question was returned, although a letter from William C. Nell, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, indicates that Washington was alive in 1852 and had made his home in Nassau.²⁰

Despite the paucity of information, Washington's potency as a symbol of noble resistance is registered by infrequent, but significant, references to him in the pages of the *North Star* during 1849 and 1850. Among the toasts proposed in honor of August 1, the day of jubilee for British slaves, recorded in a September 1849 issue, was one to Nathaniel Turner, Joseph Cinqué, and Washington. In May 1849, a letter appeared in the *North Star* under the heading 'Freedom's Martyrs,' praising the 'chainless spirits' of these three men and defending the use of violence in the pursuit of freedom. In 1849 Douglass himself used Washington's story to help make his case against colonization. And Washington was cited the following year in a resolution protesting the infamous Fugitive Slave Act, one of a series of resolutions published in Douglass's paper.²¹ Such references suggest that within the African American community, Washington's violent resistance to slavery, rather than his leniency to his oppressors, was the most significant element of his symbolic importance.

An excerpt from a speech, made in the House of Representatives, that invoked Madison Washington was reprinted in *The*

19. *Liberator* (June 10, 1842): 89.

20. 'Letter from Wm. C. Nell,' *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (March 18, 1852), item 2874, *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives, c2000.

21. *North Star* (September 14, 1849), item 19626; *North Star* (May 18, 1849), item 18131; Frederick Douglass speech at a meeting held in New York on April 23-24, 1849, 'Great Anti-Colonization Meeting in New York,' *North Star* (May 11, 1849), item 18041; *North Star* (October 24, 1850), item 22996, in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives, 2000.

Liberty Almanac for 1847. This almanac, a publication of the anti-Garrisonian American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, also helped to publicize the Liberty Party and offered strong support for its agenda and candidates. Despite the American Anti-Slavery Society's discomfort at the way the *Creole* revolt had been used by the Liberty Party to legitimize violent insurrection, the almanac reprinted under the heading, 'The Rights of the Fugitive,' an extract from Joshua R. Giddings's speech in the House of Representatives on February 18, 1846. Supporting a slave's right to defend his liberty and person, Giddings argued that a slave was justified in killing his master to defend himself and declared: 'We regard him as a hero worthy of imitation; and we place his name in the same category with that of Madison Washington, who, on board the *Creole*, boldly maintained his God-given rights, against those inhuman pirates who were carrying him and his fellow-servants to a worse than savage slave-market.'²² Washington had also been cited more indirectly by the Liberty Party in a campaign broadsheet of 1843. By implicitly presenting him as both a hero who resisted slavery and a victim of the institution, the Liberty Party used Washington to discredit the candidates of the two major parties in the presidential campaign:

Will you give the destinies of the country into the hands of a man who avowedly seeks to reconcile capital and labor (no matter of what color,) by utterly confounding the two—making the immortal laborer, soul and body, a mere item in the inventory of capital, running thus, dear reader?

SCHEDULE A.

1. 100 shares South Carolina Railroad,	\$10,000
2. Madison Washington and his wife Martha,	\$1,800
3. Race Horses, Tariff and Nullifier,	\$3,000
&c &c. &c. &c.	

22. Joshua R. Giddings, 'The Rights of the Fugitive,' *Liberty Almanac for 1847* (New York: William Harned, [1846]), 41. The published extract is from Giddings's speech on 'Indian Annuities,' *Appendix to the Congressional Globe, for the First Session, Twenty-ninth Congress: Containing Speeches and Important State Papers*, New Series, 1845-46 (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1846), 432. The fact that Giddings was expelled from Congress as a

Is this the man to be honored by the suffrages of Massachusetts freeman?²³

As the continuing, sporadic references to Washington hint, the *Creole* case remained a live issue, with calls for reparations continuing until the case was finally settled with an award of \$110,330 by the Anglo-American Claims Commission in 1853.²⁴ By this time, Washington was commonly accepted as the hero of the *Creole* revolt, but his significance had not been fixed: different sections of the antislavery movement had attached different symbolic significance to his actions and had used him in the service of very different political agendas.

Although such references indicate that Washington's name retained a certain resonance in the 1840s and early 1850s, it would be wrong to suggest that he ever achieved the level of celebrity accorded to the *Amistad* captives, who were two days away from their departure from the United States when news of the revolt on the *Creole* reached New Orleans. In contrast to the wide public attention granted to the *Amistad* group, particularly to Cinqué, there was little interest in the personalities of the enslaved Americans aboard the *Creole*. No poetic tributes to Madison Washington appeared in the *Liberator*, such as those written for Cinqué and other heroes of the day. The lack of interest in the *Creole* mutineers did not escape Douglass's notice or comment; given the timing, it would be surprising if it had.²⁵ Douglass noted the difference in attitude toward the *Amistad* captives and the *Creole* slaves in his introductory

result of this speech is a further indication of the consternation felt by many with regard to any sanctioning of violence to achieve the liberation of slaves. For this point about Giddings and for her other helpful suggestions, I would like to thank Manisha Sinha, associate professor of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

23. 'Emancipator Extra. September 28, 1843. Tract No. 4. Don't Throw Away Your Vote,' 2-3. Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection, Cornell University.

24. Edward D. Jervy and C. Harold Huber, 'The *Creole* Affair,' *Journal of Negro History*, 65 (1980): 208.

25. See Maggie Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 120. Sale compares the handling of the *Amistad* and *Creole* revolts by the popular press.

remarks to the final part of 'The Heroic Slave,' commenting on the hypocrisy of condemning the African slave trade while tolerating the injustices of the internal slave trade. 'The inconsistency is so flagrant and glaring,' he wrote, 'that it would seem to cast a doubt on the doctrine of the innate moral sense of mankind.'²⁶

With the *Creole*, public attention focused on Britain's role in the case, and on the resulting demands and diplomatic negotiations.²⁷ In *War or Peace*, his initial commentary on the tense diplomatic situation, William Jay praised Madison Washington, writing: 'The sagacity, bravery, and humanity of this man do honor to his name, and, but for his complexion, would excite universal admiration.' Nonetheless, Washington all but disappeared in the ensuing diplomatic maelstrom.²⁸ The 'sagacity, bravery, and humanity' displayed by Washington were overlooked as attention focused on the legitimacy of Southern 'property' rights and the defensibility of the internal slave trade. By the time Jay published *A View of the Action of the Federal Government in Behalf of Slavery*, his narrative of the *Creole* case made no mention of the heroism of Washington; attention had shifted to the political and diplomatic wrangling over the case.²⁹

GREAT MEN AND THE POLITICS
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HEROES

Describing both Frederick Douglass and Toussaint L' Overture as heroes requires little immediate explanation, for the fame of

26. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 225-26.

27. See Jervey and Huber, 'The Creole Affair,' 196-211, for an account of the revolt and the subsequent diplomatic wrangling over the release of the slaves. For an abolitionist perspective, see 'The Duty of the Free States: or, Remarks Suggested by the Case of the Creole,' *Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1872), 853-907; for a Southern perspective, see 'The Creole Case,' *Southern Quarterly Review* 2 (1842): 55-72; for the reaction of British abolitionists, see the memorial presented to Lord Aberdeen by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in Lewis Tappan, 'Correspondence of Lewis Tappan and Others with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society,' [Part 2], *Journal of Negro History* 12 (1927): 216-18 (notes).

28. William Jay, *War and Peace: The Evils of the First, and a Plan for Preserving the Last* (1842; New York: Oxford University Press, 1919), 21. Jay's comment is quoted in *The Creole Case, and Mr. Webster's Despatch; With the Comments of the N.Y. American* (New York: New York American, 1842), 30.

29. William Jay, *A View of the Action of the Federal Government in Behalf of Slavery* (Utica: J.C. Jackson for the New York Anti-Slavery Society, 1844), 102ff.

both has been augmented rather than diminished by history. The politics of including Madison Washington, known today principally in relation to Douglass's fictionalized portrait of him in 'The Heroic Slave,' follows a different model. In contrast to Douglass or Toussaint, Washington did not maintain and develop his position of leadership over an extended period. As an ordinary man who behaved with exceptional coolness, sagacity, and character in one moment of crisis, however, he could become a symbol of what ordinary men might achieve. Lydia Maria Child included a biographical sketch of Madison Washington in *The Freedman's Book*, published in 1865. For this book, written to provide role models for newly emancipated men and women, she chose Toussaint, Douglass, and Washington as men whose characters made them worthy of emulation, and whose deeds made them worthy of notice.

Almost three decades after the publication of 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass, who had played a large role in keeping the name and deeds of Madison Washington from fading utterly from the public memory, sought to extend still further the definition and recognition of greatness of character. In an unpublished manuscript on 'Slavery,' he argued that it was not only those who had risked all to resist slavery who deserved recognition, but those who had endured with stoic fortitude. 'While heroes have their place in the economy of human progress,' he wrote, 'it is fortunate for mankind that heroes are exceptional and that the masses have acted upon principles more conservative than that indicated by the fire-flashing sentiment of the eloquent Patrick Henry, or the glorious example of John Brown.'³⁰ Douglass observed that throughout the tenure of slavery, African Americans were taunted with their failure to strike for freedom, and to this he responded: 'Without excluding the heroic from human life, I find real greatness of character to consist in the qualities that enable a people to bear and forbear, and to submit to wrong for the moment and

30. Douglass, typescript of 'Slavery,' Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress, Container 30, Microfilm Reel 19, 7.

bide their time for the opportunity and ultimate right. . . .³¹ Douglass pinned his hopes for the future, he said, on the fortitude and faith that blacks had demonstrated both during slavery and after emancipation. In this statement, as he generally did, Douglass demonstrated an acute awareness of the political context within which he was operating and within which all African Americans were forced to operate. Douglass sought the recognition of agency not just in the deeds of exceptional individuals of his race but in the lives of all African Americans. Indeed, as John Sekora has shown, when Douglass revised his presentation of the Covey incident for *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it was the relationship between one individual's victory and the community's support that made possible the victory that Douglass sought to emphasize.³²

The significance of Douglass's claim, both historically and politically, should not be underestimated. Before the Civil War, abolitionists tended to present themselves as the primary agents of liberation. After the Civil War, the 'Negro Problem' was defined in terms of the need to elevate a race degraded by slavery. Throughout, the African American was seen as a victim in need of sympathetic benevolence. In this view, the self-reliant efforts of African American communities and individuals were obscured. Independent efforts by African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction to husband resources, obtain educational advantages, and use what property and skills they possessed to obtain a livelihood remained relatively invisible, and this invisibility expanded the dimensions of the 'Negro Problem' in the popular imagination.

Within this context, Douglass clearly recognized the limitations of using a 'great men' argument to demonstrate the capac-

31. Douglass, 'Slavery,' 9.

32. John Sekora has pointed out changes in the presentation of the Covey incident from a personal, individual battle to a communal right of passage between Douglass's *Narrative* and his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass shifts to an emphasis on slave solidarity and the contribution of members of the community to the victory of an individual, Sekora, in "Mr. Editor, If You Please": Frederick Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint, *Callaloo* 17 (1994): 608-26.

ities of African Americans. In his address at the opening of the Douglass Institute in Baltimore, on September 29, 1865, he commented: 'It is the misfortune of our class that it fails to derive due advantage from the achievements of its individual members, but never fails to suffer from the ignorance or crimes of a single individual with whom the class is identified. A Benjamin Franklin could redeem, in the eyes of scientific Europe, the mental mediocrity of our young white Republic, but the genius and learning of a Benjamin Banneker of your own State of Maryland, the wisdom and heroism of Toussaint, are not permitted to do the same service for the colored race to which they belong.'³³

By the time Douglass uttered these words, a rhetorical tradition had developed that held up the achievements of exemplary black individuals as a demonstration of the equal capacity of those of African and European ancestry for improvement. And within this tradition, the example of Toussaint loomed large. In *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), Child had made just such an argument. Citing Africa as the probable source of scientific enquiry and high civilization, Child went on to extol the deeds of numerous individuals of African descent, including, inevitably, Toussaint. He and his native Santo Domingo, she argued, provided ample demonstrations of the capacity of the non-European population for cultivation. 'Santo Domingo produces black legislators, scholars, and gentlemen,' she told her readers. 'The very negroes who had been slaves, formed a constitution that would do credit to paler-faced statesmen—Americans may well blush at its *consistent* republicanism.'³⁴ The secret of the 'degradation' of the 'descendants of wise Ethiopia and learned Egypt' was to be found in the institution of slavery, and not in the innate incapacity of the people, Child argued.³⁵

33. *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5 vols., Series One, *Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 4: 91.

34. Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), 168.

35. Child, *An Appeal*, 169.

Wendell Phillips began his acclaimed lecture on Toussaint with a statement of purpose: to present, through the biography of the great general and statesman, 'an argument in behalf of the race from which he sprung.' Like Child, Phillips used the Saxon race as a telling point of comparison.³⁶ America's Saxon forefathers had endured as slaves for about four hundred years without resistance, he noted, before adding: 'There never was a slave rebellion successful but once, and that was in Santo Domingo. Every race has been, some time or other, in chains. But there never was a race that, weakened and degraded by such chattel slavery, unaided, tore off its own fetters, forged them into swords, and won its liberty on the battle-field, but one, and that was the black race of Santo Domingo.'³⁷ Toussaint himself, Phillips argued, was pre-eminent among the heroes of many races and nations.

The recognition of Toussaint's greatness extended well beyond abolitionist polemics. In *Lights and Shadows of American History*, the popular children's author Samuel Goodrich, writing as Peter Parley, treated his young readers to a heroic account of Toussaint's career, describing him as 'one of the most extraordinary characters of modern times,' someone who 'exhibited proofs of genius and elevation of character which give him a high rank in the annals of great men.'³⁸ Goodrich's sketch concluded with these words: 'Possessing force and elevation of character which triumphed over all obstacles, he became an able general, a wise statesman, a sound patriot, a great and good man, an honor not merely to "the African race," but to human nature.'³⁹

But as Douglass appears to have recognized, such hyperbole, even when deserved, could produce unintended consequences.

36. When Phillips used the term Saxon, he was following the custom of other nineteenth-century authors such as Child, whose story is titled 'The Black Saxons.'

37. Wendell Phillips, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture,' [Lecture delivered in New York and Boston, 1861], in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), 492. Available through University of Michigan, *Making of America*.

38. S. G. Goodrich, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture,' in *Lights and Shadows in American History* (Boston: C. H. Peirce and G. C. Rand, 1848), 183.

39. Goodrich, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture,' 191-92.

The height of the pedestal upon which the great man was placed measured the distance that separated him from the mass of men, whose potential he was intended to demonstrate. As the distance became greater, the argument could appear more strained, for genius has always assumed the aura of a special case. Douglass tackled this problem directly in his lecture on the 'Self Made Man.' While he acknowledged the different capabilities of individual men, some shining with brilliance, others 'as dull as lead,' he sought to emphasize that 'industry and application, together with a regard to favorable circumstances and opportunities were the means of success.'⁴⁰ Using Toussaint as an example of the self-made man, he cited Toussaint's limitations as well as his achievements in a way that preserved him as an accessible role model. Douglass noted that Toussaint was 'a slave during fifty of the best years of his life. A poor scholar, yet rising up in troublous times, and in an age of great men he towered among the tallest of his times.'⁴¹ Douglass, himself a self-made man who had been compared with Toussaint early in his speaking career, sought to extend credit beyond the realms of greatness: 'The credit,' he said, 'belongs and must be ascribed to brave, honest, earnest, ceaseless heart and soul industry. By this simple means—open and free to all men—whatever may be said of chances, circumstances, and natural endowments—the simple man may become wise, and the wise man become wiser.'⁴² As Douglass noted, the self-made man was not without his faults: 'A man who is indebted to himself for himself, is apt to think no small pumpkins of himself,' he confessed.⁴³ Douglass also sought to place ethical limits on the competitive individualism associated with the self-made man. Sale has argued in her account of 'The Heroic Slave' that Douglass

40. Douglass, 'The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men: An Address Delivered in Halifax, England on 4 January, 1860,' *Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series One, Blassingame, ed., 3: 290, 294. This is the earliest surviving text of the lecture, though it was given earlier, in February 1859, on a tour of Illinois and Wisconsin.

41. Douglass, 'The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,' 297.

42. Douglass, 'The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,' 294.

43. Douglass, 'The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,' 299.

amended the more aggressive and acquisitive aspects of Jacksonian individualism in favor of an individualism restrained by respect for others and by recognition of moral imperatives.⁴⁴

This is not to propose that Douglass denied or rejected the utility of the heroic example. In numerous speeches he proudly held forth the example of the achievements of persons of African descent. But he seemed to prefer the examples of Benjamin Banneker, William Tillman, and Madison Washington to the great Toussaint. One could argue, of course, that it was natural for him to give preference to his countrymen. Certainly, when Douglass evoked the deeds of Tillman or those of Washington, he was dealing with material that was fresher and more topical.

Douglass was also adept at selecting material to predispose his audience favorably toward his argument.⁴⁵ In speeches given during his stay in Britain after the publication of his *Narrative* in 1845, Douglass made repeated references to the diplomatic negotiations between American and British authorities late in 1841 after the slave mutiny aboard the *Creole*. After the mutineers landed in Nassau, he pointed out, Britain sent black soldiers to protect property on the ship while inviting the slave passengers to gather their possessions and leave at their pleasure.

The ways in which Douglass invoked particular heroes depended upon the impact he wanted to make. In his speech in Cork, Ireland, on October 23, 1845, Douglass used the example of Madison Washington to refute the charge of a want of strong affection in slaves for their families with the reminder that Washington had risked his own freedom in an attempt to rescue his wife.⁴⁶ Before predominantly white audiences in the United States, on the other hand, Douglass used Washington as an example of black anger and

44. See Maggie Sale, 'Critiques from Within: Antebellum Projects of Resistance,' *American Literature* 64 (1992): 702-3.

45. Douglass was certainly not unique in this regard. Donald G. Mathews has argued that this was common practice among abolitionists, see Mathews, 'The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Movement,' *Journal of Southern History* 33 (1967): 167.

46. Douglass, 'American Prejudice Against Color,' *Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series One, Blassingame, ed., 1: 67.

resistance. 'There are many Madison Washingtons and Nathaniel Turners in the South, who would assert their right to liberty, if you would take your feet from their necks, and your sympathy and aid from their oppressors,' he told members of the New England Anti-Slavery Society at their annual convention in 1848.⁴⁷

But there is more behind Douglass's choice of example than national pride or political expediency. In his celebration of the deeds of Washington, Tillman, Robert Smalls,⁴⁸ and others, Douglass seems to have preferred the heroic deeds of unexceptional individuals to the exploits of extraordinary men. In this respect, Washington, Tillman, or Smalls were more useful representatives of the capacities of the ordinary man than someone such as Toussaint. In a tribute to Tillman, who had succeeded, with the help of only one other person in retaking the *S. J. War-ving* after its capture by a Confederate ship, Douglass praised the man's character, courage, and self-sufficiency. He did not seek to present Tillman as a man of extraordinary abilities. Said Douglass: 'The soldier who marches to the battle field with all inspirations of numbers, music, popular applause, "the pomp and circumstance of glorious war," is brave; but he who like Tillman, has no one to share danger with him, in whose surroundings there is nothing to steel his arm or fire his heart, who has to draw from his own bosom the stern confidence required for the performance of

47. Douglass, 'The Slave's Right to Revolt,' *Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series One, Blassingame, ed., 2: 131.

48. Robert Smalls (1839-1916) was born into slavery on April 5, 1839. Taken to Charleston as a youth, he learned sailing skills, becoming the de facto pilot of a Confederate transport steamer, the *Planter*. Before dawn on May 13, 1862, while the ship's white officers slept in Charleston, Smalls smuggled his wife and three children aboard the *Planter* and took command. With his crew of twelve slaves, Smalls hoisted the Confederate flag and sailed the *Planter* out to sea. He delivered the *Planter* to the commanding officer of the Union fleet. The ship was received as contraband, and Smalls and his black crew were welcomed as heroes. Later, President Lincoln received Smalls in Washington and rewarded him and his crew for their valor. He was given official command of the *Planter*; was made a captain in the United States Navy, and served throughout the war. After the war, Smalls served in the South Carolina Senate, and in 1875 he was elected to Congress for the first of five terms. For more on Smalls, see Edward A. Miller, *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

the task of man-slaying, is braver.⁴⁹ Douglass placed Tillman in a tradition of heroism inspired by the love of liberty, a tradition within which Tillman could sit beside Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Madison Washington, and Toussaint. Placing Tillman within this tradition, Douglass managed, at a stroke, to defend the common, representative element in Toussaint's character and to seek recognition and applause for the achievements of a man of more ordinary talents. Tillman's exploits did receive recognition in the press. The *New York Tribune* expressed, as Douglass noted, the nation's indebtedness to Tillman for 'the first vindication of its honor on the sea.' In response to this tribute, Douglass asked: 'When will the nation cease to disparage the Negro race?'⁵⁰

Douglass was only too aware of the bias in the construction and presentation of the black hero: newspapers published by white editors, speeches given by white orators, testimony given by white witnesses, and sketches written by white writers played a key role in shaping public perception. Douglass knew white abolitionists' predisposition to present themselves as authoritative interpreters of black heroism. While he praised Victor Schoelcher's even-handed biography of Toussaint, in a manuscript that was clearly intended as an introduction to an American edition of Schoelcher's biography, he discussed the difficulties of writing a just appraisal of an eminent individual of African descent. 'It is the misfortune of a man of African descent to be heavily shadowed by a cloud,' Douglass wrote. 'They must wait to have it dispelled before they can be properly seen either by themselves or by others.'⁵¹ It was not just racial prejudice against the black man that acted as an impediment to just judgment, Douglass argued, but the tendency toward blind praise on the part of

49. Douglass, 'A Black Hero,' in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Philip S. Foner, ed., 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, c. 1952), 3: 134. This was first published in *Douglass' Monthly* (August 1861).

50. Douglass, 'A Black Hero,' 134.

51. Douglass, 'Toussaint L' Ouverture,' Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress, Container 31, Microfilm reel 19, second manuscript in the folder, 2.

his defenders. 'I do not know whether I have been more amazed than amused, by some descriptions I have read and heard of the negro's perfections, some making him out a very angel of piety, a natural born Christian and a very lamb in docility and the like.'⁵² No one familiar with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will wonder at this comment. 'I will not extol [Toussaint's] merits,' Douglass said in his lecture on the self-made man. 'He is already a hero of history, poetry, and eloquence. Wordsworth has encircled his memory with a halo of fadeless glory, while Wendell Phillips has borne his name heavenward in a chariot of matchless eloquence.'⁵³ One is forced to wonder whether Douglass's rather bombastic praise is not imbued with a small touch of irony. In a similar vein, the rather overblown and highly conventional terms describing Madison Washington in 'The Heroic Slave' may be seen as an ironic mirroring of this tendency to blind praise, a tendency that Douglass would later criticize more directly. Washington is introduced as a person with the 'strength of a lion', arms like 'polished iron,' and brow 'as dark and as glossy as a raven's wing.' In fact, his 'whole appearance betokened Herculean strength.'⁵⁴ When white abolitionists portrayed African Americans as exceptionally hopeless or heroic, there was little scope for nuances of human character, as Douglass clearly recognized.

However one interprets Douglass's comments in these instances, one thing is clear: he was acutely aware of the interracial politics involved in the presentation of black heroes.⁵⁵ This process is at the core of Douglass's agenda in 'The Heroic Slave,' visible in his decision to emphasize the role of white observers and interpreters in the presentation of Madison Washington's story rather than obscuring their role, as Child and William Wells

52. Douglass, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture,' 5.

53. Douglass, 'The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,' 289.

54. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 179.

55. See Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, 'History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner,' *American Quarterly* 23 (1971): 487-518. The article by Gross and Bender, written in the wake of the controversy over William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, is instructive, for it examines both the paucity of information about the man and the politics of representation behind the myth building associated with Turner.

Brown would later do.⁵⁶ These later accounts, both published against the background of Reconstruction, used a technique that disguised the paucity of information available about Washington and the nature of the sources of this information. Douglass, on the other hand, chose to confront his audience with the problematic nature of an account written under these handicaps.⁵⁷ Using imagery that he would employ again in his introduction on Toussaint, Douglass began the sketch with a discussion of the difficulties of giving a full and just account of Washington. 'Glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented,' he tells the reader. 'He is brought to view only by a few transient incidents, and these afford but partial satisfaction. Like a guiding star on a stormy night, he is seen through the parted clouds and the howling tempests; or, like the gray peak of a menacing rock on a perilous coast, he is seen by the quivering flash of angry lightening, and he again disappears covered with mystery.'⁵⁸

Douglass recognized that whether one was dealing with the great Toussaint or the much more modest abilities of a Madison Washington, the process of reconstructing the individual as hero could conceal more than it illuminated. Within this process, the issue of agency looms large and takes on a number of different dimensions. On the surface, the agency of the individual who is given heroic status would appear to be unquestionable. That individual's ability to define himself and to set his own course of action is what is being celebrated, or what appears to be celebrated. Nonetheless, the identification of indi-

56. Lydia Maria Child, 'Madison Washington,' in *The Freedmen's Book* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 147-54; and William Wells Brown, 'Slave Revolt at Sea,' in *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and his Fidelity* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867), 26-36.

57. William L. Andrews suggests that Douglass's emphasis on the paucity of information available on Madison Washington provided Douglass with the opportunity to claim authority over the text without recourse to the usual textual conventions of authentication that had been so much a part of the slave narrative. See Andrews, 'The Novelization of Voice in Early African Narrative,' *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 105 (1990): 23-34.

58. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 176.

viduals with heroic potential and the interpretation of their social significance are beyond the control of the individual being valorized. Within this wider framework, the question of agency becomes more complex, particularly within the interracial politics of the nineteenth century. Within this wider context, the politically astute Douglass grappled with the question of who was drawing the dimensions of the hero of African American descent and how the exemplary construction of this individual was deployed within the ever-present, nineteenth century debate over the capabilities of African Americans. Douglass was also acutely sensitive to the real politics that resulted. As he well knew, the roles allocated to exemplary individuals of African American descent had a direct impact on the actual tolerance shown to individuals who sought to define themselves and to control their own lives.

DOUGLASS AND GARRISON:

DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE

In chronological terms, the 1853 publication of 'The Heroic Slave' fits neatly between the publication of Douglass's first account of his life, the *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, in 1845, and his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855. Douglass wrote the *Narrative* three years after his escape from slavery, posing as a sailor. One can trace his emerging sense of himself in speeches that he gave during the next decade. As these show, Douglass grew in self-confidence, refined his diplomatic powers, and developed his capacity for leadership during what has recently been labeled his 'liberating sojourn' in Great Britain and Ireland from 1845 to 1847. Douglass's experiences abroad helped transform him from an agent of the Anti-Slavery Society to leadership within the anti-slavery movement. It was unthinkable that this new Douglass would again exhibit himself in public, as he had done early in his speaking career, as a lacerated victim of slavery. The Douglass who returned from England, prepared to direct his own future,

was no longer willing to accept the role assigned to him by Garrison and his associates.⁵⁹

Douglass had long chafed under the discipline of the antislavery leadership. His decision to launch his own newspaper on his return brought him into direct conflict with Garrison. When Douglass defected to the political wing of the antislavery movement, the rift with Garrison became unbridgeable. The break with Garrison, who had acted as his mentor, was a painful rite of passage that shattered Douglass's sense of obligation and freed him to view his fellow antislavery workers from a new perspective. That is what makes the publication of 'The Heroic Slave,' two years before *My Bondage and My Freedom*, so suggestive. The former, with its positive portrayal of violent resistance, was a pointed criticism of Garrison's position of 'non-resistance.'⁶⁰ In the novella, with the killing of the captain as well as the owner of many of the slaves, Douglass pointedly made the revolt more violent than it actually was.

The mode of publication was equally significant. The novella was first published in *Autographs for Freedom*, an anthology published to raise money to support Douglass's paper, which began serializing it a few weeks later. Similar gift books had long helped to channel funds into the coffers of Garrison's paper, the *Liberator*; indeed, successive volumes of the *Liberty Bell* became a yearly feature of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Fair. The founding of the *North Star*, the precursor to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, precipitated the break with Garrison, and it was the merger between *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *Liberty Party Paper* that had been, for Garrison, the unpardonable sin. It is unlikely that the ironies surrounding the publication of 'The Heroic Slave' escaped

59. For a discussion of the interpersonal, political, and ideological dynamics behind the Douglass-Garrison split, see Tyrone Tilley, 'The Inevitability of the Douglass-Garrison Conflict,' *Phylon* 37 (1976): 137-49. On the racism within the slavery movement: Sekora, "Mr. Editor, If You Please," 608-26.

60. For a discussion of the wider significance of the break between Douglass and Garrison, see John Demos, 'The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent Means,' *New England Quarterly* 37 (1964): 501-26.

Douglass's notice. After denouncing him publicly, Garrison had managed, in 1851 at the annual meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, to block further funding for Douglass's paper.⁶¹ 'The Heroic Slave' was, in part, Douglass's response to Garrison's efforts to strangle *Frederick Douglass' Paper* financially and to silence Douglass's independent voice, which no longer chimed with the Garrisonian agenda. In this respect, Douglass's decision to use the *Creole* revolt as the subject of his novella was particularly barbed. In the wake of the *Creole* case, Liberty Party resolutions justifying violent resistance and making specific mention of the revolt had been countered by an official and extended denunciation from the Garrisonian leadership of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Within the text of 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass's direct, laudatory reference to Gerrit Smith, a prominent member of the Liberty Party and advocate of active resistance to slavery, sharpened the barb.⁶²

More subtle indications of Douglass's repositioning of himself with regard to Garrisonian ideas in 'The Heroic Slave' are found in its two 'pre-texts.' The first is a public address delivered by Henry Highland Garnet at the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, New York, on August 16, 1843. Douglass was present at this convention and pushed for rejection of the views expressed by Garnet in his 'Address to the Slaves of the United States of America.'⁶³ Douglass, at this point, was still following the Garrisonian position of moral persuasion and nonviolence. Garnet, invoking the heritage of the American Revolution, used the language of the founding fathers both to call attention to their hypocrisy and to shame African Americans into action. Garnet recalled that the colonists had blamed England and had de-

61. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 215-16.

62. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 195.

63. Henry Highland Garnet, 'An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,' in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley et al., 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 3: 403-12. More background on this convention and on Garnet's address may be found in Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, 24-29.

clared their intention to rid themselves of slavery if they could. Despite such principled declarations, the founding fathers had not liberated their slaves but had added to the security of their 'peculiar institution.'⁶⁴ Using Patrick Henry's famous words, Garnet addressed his audience: 'Fellow men! Patient sufferers! Behold your dearest rights crushed to the earth! See your sons murdered, and your wives, mothers, and sisters, doomed to prostitution! In the name of the merciful God! And by all that life is worth, let it no longer be a debatable question, whether it is better to choose LIBERTY or DEATH!'⁶⁵ Although Garnet's call for 'RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE!' was not an imperative call to arms, Garnet did invoke Vesey, Cinqué, and Madison Washington, 'that bright star of freedom,' who 'took his station in the constellation of freedom,' as models of heroic self-liberation for his hearers, placing them beside Moses, John Hampden, William Tell, Robert Bruce and William Wallace, Toussaint, Lafayette, and George Washington within the pantheon of revolutionary heroes.

Garnet asked his listeners to look on Madison Washington and his companions as stars in the firmament of history, but Douglass sought to make his audience notice the cloud of racism and indifference that obscured the stars of African American descent. Despite the activism that made Garnet's plea so shocking to his contemporaries, his picture of slavery as degradation and victimization was one that chimed with the general antislavery literature of the period. Unfortunately for Garnet, the tactic of shaming his hearers into action was a double-edged weapon, for his words resonated with the stereotypes that supported the image of the slave as degraded victim. It was left to Douglass to draw attention to these representational politics.

The second candidate as a 'pre-text' for 'The Heroic Slave' is an open letter, dated July 4, 1843, from John Quincy Adams to the

64. Garnet, 'Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,' 406.

65. Garnet, 'Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,' 409.

residents of Bangor, Maine. The text of the letter was published as a Liberty Party tract, *Liberty Incomplete*. Given the role of the Liberty Party in Douglass's split with Garrison, it is tempting to speculate on the importance of this tract as a point of intertextual reference for 'The Heroic Slave.'⁶⁶ As *Liberty Incomplete* explains, Adams had been invited to address a celebration to mark the anniversary of British emancipation in the West Indies on August 1, and while he declined the invitation partly on grounds of health, he also expressed his view that it would be inappropriate for Americans to celebrate the anniversary, given the grip with which the slave power held the nation. Writing his response on Independence Day, Adams reflected on the progressive movement that had been initiated by the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. As progress toward the full implementation of these revolutionary ideals, Adams praised British emancipation as an important landmark and looked to a time when the United States would follow Britain's noble example, setting out a new marker on the road to full social justice.

Liberty Incomplete suggests a new context for interpreting the much debated significance of Douglass's use of the slaveholding Founding Fathers as a point of reference for Madison Washington's heroism.⁶⁷ Douglass's reworking of key themes from Adams's published letter indicates that in this, as in other aspects of 'The Heroic Slave,' his commentary is extremely self-conscious and knowing. The novella echoes the manner in

66. John Quincy Adams, 'Emancipator Extra (Oct. 5, 1843). Tract No. 5,' in *Liberty Incomplete* (Boston: J. W. Alden, 1843). [Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Pamphlet Collection, Cornell University.] By the time the tract was published, the letter had appeared in both the *Liberator* (August, 18, 1843): 131, and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (August 24, 1843): 45. Given Douglass's admiration for Adams, it is unlikely that the letter escaped his attention. It is worth noting that Adams's last public address in Congress was reported to be his protest against the payment of reparations to the slave dealers who had lost money as a result of the *Amistad* case. The circumstances of Adams's last public address were recounted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (April 21, 1854), after the publication of 'The Heroic Slave.' The Giddings speech reprinted by Douglass had been delivered on December 21, 1853, also after the publication of 'The Heroic Slave.' What the speech and its reprinting in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* demonstrate is the extent to which the repercussions of the *Amistad* case were still being felt at the time Douglass was writing.

67. Jones, 'Copying What the Master Had Written,' 86.

which Adams presented the American Revolution and revolutionary thinking as a precursor to the abolition of all slavery and oppression. Douglass also echoes Adams's letter by drawing attention to the problematic nature of the Founding Fathers' commitment to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, but with a different emphasis. Adams focused on the limited nature of the Founding Fathers' dedication to freedom and directed his irony at the reputations of established figures: 'Among the signers of the Declaration of Independence, there were at least twenty slave-holders—or probably, thirty. They could not stomach the application of the self-evident truths to themselves, and they lopped it off as an unsightly excrescence upon the tree of Liberty. But [Jefferson's] grandson and executor has carefully preserved it in the double form of print and facsimile, in the edition which he has published of his writings, and there it stands, an unanswerable testimonial to posterity, that in the roll of American Abolitionists, first and foremost after the name of George Washington, is that of *Thomas Jefferson*.'⁶⁸ Douglass deals with the practical impact of this hypocrisy on the enslaved. 'Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry,—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson,—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State.'⁶⁹

Adams's ironic praise of Washington and Jefferson also served as a point of contrast between the achievements of the American and British abolitionists. Adams and Douglass make broadly similar use of the contrast. In both texts, Britain, and not America, has become the land of freedom. Adams suggests that after liberating themselves from the tyranny of colonial oppression

68. Adams, *Liberty Incomplete*, 3.

69. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 175.

under Great Britain, Americans had allowed themselves to be re-enslaved by a slave power within their own nation. While Adams focused on the implication of this situation for his mainly white readers, Douglass demonstrates the implications for the slaves themselves as he alludes to the different definitions of 'property' that came into play once the *Creole* reached Nassau.

In his letter, Adams had recognized Madison Washington as a heroic figure, but in keeping with the representational politics of benevolence, he presented 'The Heroic Slave' as a potential victim. He called upon those who supported antislavery principles to liberate themselves, their country, and their enslaved countrymen when he asked: 'Are not the journals of our Senate disgraced by resolutions calling for *war*, to indemnify the slave pirates of the *Enterprise* and the *Creole*, for the self emancipation of their slaves, and to inflict vengeance, by a death of torture, upon the heroic self-deliverance of Madison Washington?'⁷⁰

For Douglass, the use that abolitionists had made of Madison Washington within the white-dominated antislavery movement was of greater concern than the often invoked ironies of the Revolutionary heritage.⁷¹ By the time he wrote 'The Heroic Slave,' his political position was much closer to Garnet's than to

70. Adams, *Liberty Incomplete*, 7.

71. Antislavery publications that referred to the ideals of the American Revolution and pointed out the double standard of a nation founded on a dedication to liberty and equality and yet embracing the institution of slavery were not a novelty in the 1850s. For example, 'The fragment of an original letter on the slavery of Negroes; Written in the Year 1776, by Thomas Day, Esq.,' is a broadsheet printed in Philadelphia by Francis Bailey in 1784 that points out the hypocrisy of the founding fathers' commitment to freedom for themselves, but not for their slaves. An 1844 broadsheet, 'Address to the Legal Voters of the Town of Roxbury,' produced by the Liberty Party treats the contradictions involved in the colonists' fight for freedom in a vein similar to that used by Garnet in his 'Address to the Slaves.' The text refers to Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence and laments the betrayal of the Revolutionary ideals when slavery was protected by the United States Constitution, yet notes: 'But the spirit of '76 was not dead in these illustrious men. They viewed slavery as an inconsistency—as a curse—as a blot on the fair escutcheon of the nation to which they had given freedom.' In 1850 a committee comprised of Lewis Hayden, John T. Hilton, William Crafts, Henry Watson, William C. Nell, and Isaac H. Snowden for the colored citizens of Boston, issued a broadsheet as Friends of Freedom. Comparing themselves with their Revolutionary forefathers, the committee declared: 'The American people glory in the struggle of 1776, and laud the names of those who

Garrison's. But Douglass was also ready to expose the way so much antislavery discourse, even antislavery discourse referring to the revolutionary ideals of the founding Fathers, could deny agency to the very people it was designed to emancipate.

ANTISLAVERY CULTURE AND AGENCY

Conflict between the ambitious and strong-willed Douglass and the equally strong-willed Garrison was inevitable, but the nature of the conflict was broadly indicative of the tension that resulted from the interracial politics of benevolence within the antislavery movement. Garrison and other antislavery leaders were fond of portraying themselves as wise friends of the slave and expected their advice to be accepted with gratitude. Abolitionist literature, speeches, and poetry celebrated their ability to help the helpless slaves. Child's biography of Isaac Hopper, for example, celebrated Hopper's deeds in a manner that placed the fugitive slaves very much in the background. Though Child recounted incidents showing fugitive slaves outwitting their masters or effecting their escape through courageous acts, a white man, Hopper, was the hero of the book, the protector of the fugitives armed with courage, cunning, and a detailed knowledge of the law. Hopper's single-handed rescue of Levin Smith from an upper story room guarded by 'five or six' men was one of his more striking exploits. Hopper's first rescue attempt appeared to end precipitously when the guards 'seized him violently and pitched him out of the chamber window,' but he picked himself up, climbed in through a window, cut the cords binding the hostage, and commanded: 'Follow me!' In doing so, the fugitive left the guards so 'utterly astonished' that 'Friend

made the bloody resistance to tyranny. The battle cry of Patrick Henry of Virginia—"GIVE ME LIBERTY, OR GIVE ME DEATH,"—and that of General Warren, "MY SONS SCORN TO BE SLAVES," are immortalized, and we are proud in not being an exception to that inspiration. It warms our hearts, and will nerve our right arms, to do all, and suffer all for Liberty.' 'Declaration of sentiments of the colored citizens of Boston, on the fugitive slave bill . . . October 5, 1850' (Boston: George C. Jenks, 1850).

Hopper and the liberated captive were in the street before they had time to recover their wits.⁷²

As active benefactors, abolitionists required passive victims in need of assistance, and the image of the slave victim served this need well.⁷³ Theodore Weld's famous *American Slavery as it is: The Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) is perhaps the most extreme example of the tendency to present the slave as absolute victim. In presenting the slave in this way, the slave's own ability and will to resist oppression were not acknowledged. It is telling, I think, that when two poems by the slave poet George Moses Horton were adapted for inclusion in Edwin Hatfield's antislavery songbook, *Freedom's Lyre* (1840), a work compiled at the request of the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the voice of resistance was excised. Interestingly, the poems were attributed to James Horton, who held the poet as his slave at that time, effectively denying the real poet's authorship.

'The Slave's Complaint' was originally published in 1829 as part of a collection of twenty-one of George Moses Horton's poems. The collection was appropriately titled *The Hope of Liberty*, for it was intended to raise sufficient money to allow Horton to purchase his freedom. The book was not, in this respect, successful, and Horton was not freed until well into the Civil War. Even here, Horton's authentic voice was supplanted by that of the publisher, the regional secretary of the American Colonization Society, who promised in his introductory remarks that after obtaining his freedom, Horton would emigrate immediately to Liberia.⁷⁴ As published in *The Hope of Liberty*, the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas of 'The Slave's Complaint' are as follows:

72. Lydia Maria Child, *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Co., 1853), 90.

73. Mathews has argued that the idea of the helpless slave was central to the logic of antislavery arguments in support of the need for abolition; see Donald G. Mathews, 'The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Movement,' *Journal of Southern History* 33 (1967): 176-79.

74. See Joan R. Sherman's introduction in *The Black Bard of North Carolina: George Moses Horton and His Poetry*, Joan R. Sherman, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 13.

Worst of all, must hope grow dim,
 And withhold her cheering beam?
 Rather let me sleep and dream
 Forever!

Something still my heart surveys,
 Groping through this dreary maze;
 Is it Hope?—then burn and blaze
 Forever!

Leave me not a wretch confined,
 Altogether lame and blind—
 Unto gross despair consigned,
 Forever!⁷⁵

The version of these verses published in *Freedom's Lyre* was very different.

Or, worst of all! Must hope grow dim,
 And thus withhold her cheering beam?
 Oh! Rather let me sleep and dream
 Forever!

Yet leave me not a wretch confin'd,
 Oppress'd, and shackled, lame, and blind,
 To sorrow and despair consign'd
 Forever!⁷⁶

In addition to adding a stress to each line, the 'The Slave's Complaint' is stripped of its hopeful fourth stanza. By excising the one active, hopeful stanza in the poem, Hatfield significantly

75. Horton, 'The Slave's Complaint,' in *The Black Bard of North Carolina*, 79.

76. James Horton, 'The Slave's Complaint,' in Edwin F. Hatfield, *Freedom's Lyre: or, Psalms, Hymns, and Sacred Songs, for the Slave and His Friends* (1840; reprint, Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969), 18.

altered the meaning of the stanza that follows to emphasize the slave's hopeless condition. The addition of the words 'oppress'd, and shackled' in the second line of the fifth stanza further magnifies the impression of the slave's victimization.

Hatfield did Horton a similar disservice in 'Liberty and Slavery,' which became, in *Freedom's Lyre*, 'And am I born for this?' Needless to say, it was not the verses on slavery that were cut, but the three final stanzas dealing with liberty. The final stanza of George Horton's 'Liberty and Slavery,' one of the three excised, envisioned the healing power of freedom:

Oh, blest asylum—heavenly balm!
Unto thy boughs I flee—
And in thy shades the storm shall calm,
With songs of Liberty!⁷⁷

Within antislavery literature such active resistance was problematic, for as the slave became active in his own cause, the abolitionist's role contracted.

Had the abolitionists limited the self-aggrandizing strategy to depictions of themselves, the impact of the image of the slave victim would have been less damaging. Unfortunately, the slave victim was used as the basis for more general appeals, inviting the public to help the helpless slave as well. To popularize the cause of antislavery, the Garrisonians pandered to the self-image of their audience when they did not play upon their fears. To empower the potential antislavery supporter, the slave was stripped of agency. Sentimental antislavery culture focused attention on moments of overwork, violence, or deprivation, calling on the reader, viewer, or listener to do something to alleviate the suffering. Sentimental antislavery culture also developed a lexical framework for understanding slavery that defined the slave as a

77. George Moses Horton, 'Liberty and Slavery,' in *The Black Bard of North Carolina*, 75-76. See also James Horton, 'And am I born for this?' in Hatfield, *Freedom's Lyre*, 19.

helpless victim.⁷⁸ Within this framework, as a result of repeated use, particular scenes and postures became generic: the slave weeping over the sale of a loved one; the old slave dying in misery and loneliness; the young slave woman with downcast eyes, the object of her master's lust; the barbaric rituals of the auction block; the undeserved whipping; the hunted fugitive; the chained, weeping slave; the exhausted slave toiling in the field; the bare board and bed of the slave cabin; the desperate slave praying for deliverance; and the hungry, exhausted slave hiding from his master's wrath.⁷⁹

The iconography of the antislavery movement reinforced the politics of such positioning. The often-reprinted illustrations in the *Anti-Slavery Almanac* for 1840 offer an extreme example of this tendency.⁸⁰ The antislavery emblem offers a more pervasive example, with its kneeling, manacled slave raising his arms in supplication to an unseen benefactor. 'Am I not a man and a brother?' asks the much-used caption. In this emblem, designed by Wedgwood and reproduced endlessly in the United States on broadsides, writing paper, pottery and textiles, it is the need for assistance that is emphasized.

78. For a very different reading of the dynamics of sentimentality, see Philip Fisher, 'Making a Thing into a Man: The Sentimental Novel and Slavery,' *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 87-127. Levine's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass Paper,' presents 'The Heroic Slave' as a text that argues for the power of sentimental constructions, and the right feeling that they promote, to transform attitudes and promote politically progressive action and racial harmony. Within this argument, Listwell is a key figure who is converted, first to sympathy, then to radical action, by his encounters with Madison Washington. Levine argues that this is an allegorical presentation of Douglass's relation with and impact upon Harriet Beecher Stowe (71-93). If Levine is correct in his analysis, one is left with the problem of explaining subsequent disquiet with the presentation of black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I would argue that the dynamics of the discourses of antislavery rhetoric, through which sentimental antislavery texts were read, help to explain both the way *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was reviewed and consumed during the antebellum period and the way it has subsequently been problematized. Douglass was such a politically aware reader of culture that I must agree with Levine that 'The Heroic Slave' was, in part, Douglass's response to Stowe's work. However, I would see the terms of Douglass's response as being of a very different order to that argued by Levine.

79. See Elizabeth B. Clark on the use of set-piece scenes in slave narratives: "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,' *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 468-69.

80. *American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840* (New York and Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1840).

The same pressures were at work within the slave narratives of the period, although it would be wrong to see these simply as a reflection of the abolitionist agenda. Nonetheless, these accounts did reflect the rhetoric of sentimental victimization. In the slave narrative, as in other antislavery literature, the abuses of slavery were the focus of attention, with a large proportion of the narratives dedicated to scenes of barbaric punishments, cruelty, harassment, or the forced separation of families. The way slaves chose to tell their stories reflected a realization that their audience was more interested in the victimization at the hands of their masters than in the support structures at work within the black community that enabled individual resistance. The rhetoric of victimization is also visible in the way slave narratives used reductive character delineation to engage and direct the sympathy of the reader. The slave narrative had its own stereotypes, culled from factual, biographical material: brutal overseers; dissipated, licentious masters; strong, manly, rebellious slaves (often the narrators themselves); delicate, mulatto slave women whose virtue was under threat; and jealous and bad-tempered mistresses. The factual basis of the slave narratives did not prevent such typing. In these narratives, a rhetoric of victimization coexisted with a record of resistance. The resulting tension is less striking than might have been the case because the narrator often distanced himself from the victimization either by presenting others in the role of victim or by presenting a younger self in that role. This device was used by Moses Grandy, Douglass, and William Wells Brown in their narratives. The self-liberated slaves who told their stories did not present themselves as devoid of agency; to do so would have been an act of self-denial.⁸¹

81. For a discussion of the historical background to the development of the slave narrative, see Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave's Narrative: Its Place in American History*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Howard University Press, 1988), 1-49. For a discussion of the textual politics of the emerging genre, see Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 1-31, and Sekora, 'Black Message/ White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,' *Callaloo* 10 (1987): 482-515. For a discussion of the popularity of the slave narrative, see Charles H. Nichols, 'Who Read the Slave Narratives?' *Phylon* 20 (1959): 149-53.

William Andrews has argued that Douglass's break with Garrison allowed him 'to see signs of "oppression" in the very "form" of the fugitive slave narrative that he had written in 1845.'⁸² Douglass's apparent desire to distance himself from the representational politics of the slave narrative is understandable, particularly given the conventions and expectations associated with it. After his return from England, Douglass was no more likely to use a literary form that required him to display himself as a slave-victim than he was to use rhetorical appeals that required him to display his scars, rhetorically, from the lecture platform. Douglass's second account of his life uses exemplary autobiography rather than the slave narrative to give it structure.⁸³ This does not mean that his interest in the formal conventions of the slave narrative was exhausted, however. In 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass sought to expose and exorcise the spirit of liberal racism from the generic conventions.⁸⁴

'THE HEROIC SLAVE' AND THE SLAVE AS HERO

'The Heroic Slave,' which depicted the slave as hero, provided Douglass with a perfect vehicle for an intellectual declaration of independence that expressed his disenchantment and anger, as well as his new insights. The fact that it was a novella, rather than an autobiographical work, allowed him greater freedom of expression. Even so, the politically astute Douglass chose to attack his targets with irony rather than invective. 'The Heroic Slave'

82. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 217. Stepto sees Douglass's use of the novella rather than the slave narrative genre within 'The Heroic Slave' as a statement of the legitimacy and usefulness of going beyond the facts of his own life in his storytelling; Stepto, 'Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction,' 361.

83. Sekora discusses the extent to which Douglass sought to distance himself from the form of the slave narrative in his second autobiographical work, in 'Mr. Editor, If You Please,' 608-26.

84. Krista Walter argues that while Douglass's framing of Madison Washington within a patriotic discourse associating him with the founding fathers makes him more accessible to a white audience, the strategy effectively takes away Madison Washington's racial identity, supports a Eurocentric view of history, devalues the deeds of African Americans within American history, and sacrifices Douglass's feminist principles. See Walter, 'Trappings of Nationalism in Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave,"' 233-46.

foregrounds the dynamics of the subtle power battles over the definition of heroism and the attribution of agency within the antislavery movement.⁸⁵ In this regard, Paul C. Jones's argument that Douglass's novella fits neatly within the tradition of the plantation novel is telling, for the ease with which Douglass combined intertextual references to this overtly racist popular genre with the more subtle racism of abolitionist fiction underscores the painful ironies that are at the heart of the text.⁸⁶

What Douglass did in 'The Heroic Slave' was to expose a lack of interest in black agency, resistance, and heroism on the part of the abolitionist press.⁸⁷ No historical account of the events from Madison Washington's point of view exists. Information about Washington thus had to be distilled from the self-serving accounts by white participants, as Douglass emphasized in the

85. Unlike Stepto, I do not find the portrait of Listwell to be the most important aspect of Douglass's novella, nor is Listwell Douglass's idea of the ideal abolitionist. See Stepto, 'Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction,' 365-68.

86. Jones makes a plausible case for Douglass's debt to the Southern plantation novel and the historical romance and is particularly convincing on the parallels between the opening of 'The Heroic Slave' and the opening of John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn*. As I argue in this essay, Douglass made astute use of intertextual reference to anti-slavery popular generic conventions in his novella, and I see no reason why he should not also have made ironic use of allusions to the plantation novel. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that Douglass's treatment of his grandmother's declining years in *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* seems a rejoinder to the treatment of the elderly retainer in the tradition of the plantation novel. Jones's view of Douglass's depiction of Madison Washington's heroic stature is also plausible, but two central points need to be considered. First, whatever heroic stature is accorded to Madison Washington in 'The Heroic Slave,' he was not accorded recognition in life, a point made by Douglass in various ways. Second, the proliferation of generic traditions employed by Douglass to present Madison Washington help to underscore the extent to which the 'real' Madison Washington remains unknown. See Jones, 'Copying What the Master Had Written,' 78-92; Cynthia S Hamilton, 'Frederick Douglass and the Gender Politics of Reform,' in Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 73-92.

87. James Fulcher has argued that unlike other types of antislavery literature, black abolitionist fiction provided a means of exploring the 'forbidden' area of black resistance. Although his identification of a formula behind black abolitionist fiction of the 1850s rather overstates the case, he rightly argues that a number of works share a similar plot line that follow a rebel who runs away from slavery, returns to rescue those still enslaved, is captured, and resists. Such a plot highlights the slave's own agency rather than that of the abolitionist, indicating why it was favored by writers such as Douglass, Delany, and Webb. See 'Black Abolitionist Fiction: The Formulaic Art of Douglass, Brown, Delany and Webb,' *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1980): 583-97.

fourth part of 'The Heroic Slave.' Douglass told that part of the story from the first mate's point of view, describing how in defending his own honor the ship's officer extended an involuntary tribute to suggest Washington's courage, strength and resourcefulness. A similar internal logic can be found in both the original deposition and the published 'Protest,' though the deposition's account of events differs significantly from Douglass's fictionalized account. Douglass also changed the form in which the information was presented. By writing a dialogue between the first mate and another sailor in a coffee house, Douglass was able to capture the skeptical reception any account of Washington's heroism was likely to receive.

In the first two parts of 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass used different techniques to make the same point. These sections of the novella cover a time in Madison Washington's life about which no biographical or autobiographical information is available. In writing these parts, Douglass borrowed heavily from sentimental fiction and antislavery literature. The language is stilted, and the descriptions rely heavily on stock postures, gestures, and expressions. The overheard soliloquy is a feature of sentimental novels of the period. The reduction of the slave experience to tropes of absolute victimization, such as the brutal, undeserved whipping and the forced separation of families, no doubt struck a chord with those familiar with abolitionist literature. From the slave narratives of the period came the abolitionist's injunction that the fugitive tell a story of his hardships. Antislavery accounts celebrating the heroism of abolitionists informed the episodes that Douglass wrote for Listwell, wherein Washington is used to validate Listwell's moral worth. Listwell's heroic decision to aid the fugitive, despite the consequences to himself and his property, and the manner in which Listwell acts decisively on the fugitive's behalf are other examples of themes taken from abolitionist literature.

In the first two parts of 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass focused attention on the extent to which, in the absence of more detailed information—or because of indifference to the need for more

detailed information—accounts of African Americans too often substituted the generic for the individual. Douglass used stereotype self-consciously. For Washington's soliloquy in the forest, it would have been possible to substitute a score of antislavery poems. The image of the fugitive who walks toward Listwell's home 'with a stick in one hand, and a small bundle in the other,' is the runaway slave of countless illustrations. Even the title reflects this tendency. As a type, everything about 'The Heroic Slave' is known, but as an individual, nothing can be said of him, for the individual is invisible, lost due to indifference, in the mystery of unrecorded history.

'The Heroic Slave' does more than expose the erasure of African American agency from the historical record, however. The first two parts also display other aspects of the ignorance and prejudice of those well-meaning abolitionists who used race as a meaningful category for making judgments—what Douglass called 'ethnographical' thinking.⁸⁸ In 'The Heroic Slave' it is clear that the Listwells, committed abolitionists both, are inclined to use the ethnographic standard. 'Consider yourself, if you please, under the roof of a friend; for such I am to you, and to all your deeply injured race,' Mr. Listwell tells Washington. Mrs. Listwell's relief that the fugitive has eaten cooked foods during his flight identifies her with the civilizing tendency of antebellum womanhood, but her concern that he might have survived on raw meat is tinged with racist overtones.

Douglass also explored the politics of the attribution of agency in the first two parts of 'The Heroic Slave.' Here, the depiction of the symbiotic relationship between fugitive and abolitionist is central to Douglass's purpose, and both Listwell and Washington benefit from it. That Madison Washington gains important

88. Douglass, 'Toussaint L' Overture,' 8. See William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, 'Antislavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, Race,' *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 682–95 for a discussion of the racial prejudice that afflicted many 'whites' engaged in the antislavery movement and a consequent ambivalence over the exact nature of the goals for which they worked. Pease and Pease also note a tendency to see slaves not as individuals in a particular situation, but as an abstract intellectual concept.

THE FUGITIVE'S SONG.

WORDS
 composed and respectfully dedicated to the spirit of confidence shown to
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
 A Graduate from the
“PECULIAR INSTITUTION”
 for his fearless advocacy, signal ability and wonderful success in behalf of
HIS BROTHERS IN BONDS.
 (and to the FUGITIVES FROM SLAVERY in the)
FREE STATES & CANADAS.
 by their friend
JESSE HUTCHINSON JUNR

BOSTON. Published by HENRY FRENTESS 35 Court St.

Entered according to act of congress in the year 1843 by Jesse Hutchinson in the clerk's office of the district court of Massachusetts.

Fig. 1. A musical tribute to a heroic slave, 'The Fugitive's Song,' by Jesse Hutchinson, Jr. The dedication to his friend Frederick Douglass reads 'for his fearless advocacy, signal ability and wonderful success in behalf of his brothers in bonds (and to the fugitives from slavery) in the free states & Canadas.'

material assistance is obvious; what is less obvious, and is emphasized by Douglass, is the extent to which Listwell gains a new identity and a sense of purpose from this encounter. What Douglass also shows is the extent to which that new identity encroaches on the ostensible beneficiary of his actions. This is pre-figured at the beginning of the novella in the way Listwell invades Washington's private space by eavesdropping. Later, the invasive nature of the relationship is demonstrated by Listwell's request for information on Washington's past suffering, hardships, and adventures, information that is not necessary to the task at hand, of getting Washington safely to Canada, but which is needed both to confirm Washington as a deserving candidate for benevolence and to validate Listwell's sense of the importance of his benevolent action. Finally, the invasive nature of this symbiotic relationship is shown in the way Listwell assumes the role of active agent, with Washington as passive beneficiary. Within the relationship Douglass has depicted, we see the outlines of a quiet struggle to define and assert individual identity and to attract recognition for heroic agency. This is not a struggle that takes place directly between Listwell and Washington, of course: it is an interpretative dilemma forced upon the reader, a dilemma that highlights the issues involved in naming and defining a hero.

The interpretative conflict that results has led to scholarly debate over the relationship between Listwell and Washington. Richard Yarborough suggests that the role given to Listwell detracts from Washington's stature; it implies, he argues, that blacks are less self-reliant, and that they need assistance from white benefactors.⁸⁹ Robert Levine, on the other hand, sees the friendship between Listwell and Washington as evidence that 'the white sympathy and assistance that help to produce the slave's revolutionary action in no way compromises the self-reliance or heroism

89. Richard Yarborough, 'Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave,"' in Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, 179.

of such action.⁹⁰ Levine suggests that Washington's influence on Listwell is more significant than the material assistance supplied by the abolitionist. Both interpretations are generated by the forces set in motion by this struggle for agency, suggesting that Douglass was not making summary assessments of the costs *or* benefits of interracial cooperation, but was presenting a more nuanced examination of the costs *and* benefits of such cooperation. The bonds of sympathy that bind Listwell and Washington are at once liberating, intrusive, and constraining. This is a lesson Douglass had learned about his relationships with his own 'dear friends' in the abolitionist movement, and he reflected on the complex dynamics of such relationships in 'The Heroic Slave.'

Ultimately, of course, the title of the novella declares Washington to be the main protagonist and hero, but without substantial internal support for such a position, the title could be seen as demeaningly ironic. It is the third part of 'The Heroic Slave' that supports the claim for Washington, predisposing the reader to construe the evidence of the fourth part as confirmation of Washington's heroic status. In part three, Listwell is brought into direct contact with individuals supportive of slavery and indifferent to the injustice and cruelty of the institution. Within this environment, Douglass shows, the abolitionist's ability to act is severely limited, and although Douglass credits Listwell with providing Washington with the files he will use to break his fetters, it is Washington who is presented as the stronger figure—more self-possessed and more in control of the situation. It is Washington who tells Listwell when he must leave the area to avoid suspicion, and when he can return to hear Washington relate his story. It is Washington who advises Listwell that any attempt to buy his freedom would be useless. And it is Listwell who confesses, 'I fear I can do nothing for you. Put your trust in God. . . .'⁹¹ It is in part three that Washington reclaims his agency and his heroic stature despite his chains, preparing the reader for his dramatic role in the mutiny.

90. Levine, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper,' 84.

91. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 222.

In the fourth part of 'The Heroic Slave,' Madison Washington's actions amply support his status as hero, but the manner in which Washington is presented in this section of 'The Heroic Slave' also suggests the distorting process of reconstructing the man as hero within antislavery rhetoric. Douglass's Madison Washington is given the larger than life dimensions familiar to readers of paeans like 'The Hero Mutineers.' Douglass credits Washington with removing not only his own fetters, but those of the other eighteen mutineers as well. As this implies, Douglass's plaudits reach a point at which overblown hyperbole begins to implode, hinting at irony. As Washington makes his appearance in this section, Douglass's depiction begins with plausible inferences from the historical record but quickly moves to territory in which his claims are much less plausible, a technique often used in parody:

The leader of the mutiny in question was just as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand. The name of this man, strange to say (ominous of greatness,) was MADISON WASHINGTON. In the short time he had been on board, he had secured the confidence of every officer. The negroes fairly worshipped him. His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose. The only feeling with which we regarded him was, that he was a powerful, good disposed negro. He seldom spake to any one, and when he did speak, it was with the utmost propriety. His words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster. It was a mystery to us *where* he got his knowledge of language; but as little was said to him, none of us knew the extent of his intelligence and ability till it was too late.⁹²

The humor in this passage is complex as the jokes multiply and double back on themselves in a manner not unlike Twain's ironic humor. The role given to Washington by the 'Protest' makes it

92. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 233.

clear that he took an active part in the decision making of the four leaders and that he displayed considerable shrewdness and foresight in his reactions to the developing situation. Douglass's claim that Washington was as well fitted for his role as 'any one white man in ten thousand' seems eminently just and is in keeping with the New Orleans testimony. The 'Protest' also makes it clear that Washington had the confidence of the officers. That he was worshipped by the other slaves is more problematic; the 'Protest' suggests that he was feared and records Washington's threat to kill and throw overboard those who would not join the fight. The commentary on Washington's erudition is wildly speculative. We have reached the 'nub' of the joke: the final sentence of the passage carries the message that produces the pointed humor: no one knew Washington's true abilities because no one encouraged him to speak of and for himself. The joke is not at Washington's expense, but at the expense of those who treated him as a mere chattel and, on another level, of those who would worship a hero constructed to their own specifications, overlooking, in the process, the true dimensions of the man.

The description of the mutiny in the fourth part of 'The Heroic Slave' is a subtle and accomplished piece of writing. To be effective—and it is effective—the narrative must walk a thematic tightrope: Douglass must reinforce his message about the way the antislavery movement shaped Madison Washington to its own specifications, while not pushing his irony to the point of debunking his hero as a credible example of African American heroism and resistance. Douglass uses a number of devices to achieve this end by setting up a series of telling contrasts between the first part of the novella and the concluding section. Both deal with liberating moments in Washington's life, the first marking his mental liberation, the latter his standing forth in active resistance to enslavement. The setting also helps to bring these two sections into juxtaposition. While the settings of the second and third sections of the novella are social—the second in the North, the third in the South—the settings of the first and final parts are natural,

using the natural freedom of the woods and the sea to complement and frame Washington's moments of liberation.

In the first section of 'The Heroic Slave,' Douglass emphasizes the paucity of information about Washington's previous life. In the fourth part, he directs the reader's attention to the absence of evidence concerning Washington's role in the battle for the ship, knocking the narrator senseless at the very start of the action and leaving him unconscious until the fighting is over. As a result, not only is Washington's role unknowable, but the active resistance of the mutiny lies hidden in a narrative lacuna.

Douglass also suggests the unknowable mystery of Washington's thoughts and feelings through enigmatic, but suggestive descriptive comments. A few minutes before the mutiny begins, the first mate recalls seeing Madison Washington, with his head above the hatchway, staring at the waves, waves that become associated with natural freedom as the story progresses. 'I think I never saw him look more good-natured,' the mate comments.⁹³ Given the impending bloodshed, the incongruity of this comment prompts the reader to attempt to enter Washington's thoughts and to define them. The reader, like the abolitionist commentators, is left to speak for Washington. Later in the section, the process is repeated, but with the mate interpreting Washington's behavior for the reader. At this point in the story, the mutiny is over, and Washington is at the helm of the storm-tossed ship. Washington appears to be in control, his agency affirmed; but while his actions shape events, the significance of his heroism is defined, not by himself, but by another. As Washington stands, 'with his eye fixed upon the binnacle,' setting the direction that the ship will take, others chart the developing course of his image.⁹⁴ The irony of the situation is subtle, but clear.

Even when Douglass allows Washington to speak for himself, the words he gives to Washington are not those of the man, but

93. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 233.

94. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 237.

the words a hero must utter to support his lofty status. The 'Protest' quotes two comments made by Washington. When found in the hold, he is asked to confirm his identity, and he responds: "Yes sir it is me," and instantly jumped to the Hatchway and got on deck saying "I am going up. I cannot stay here." When the mutiny begins, the 'Protest' again suggests that it is recording Washington's actual words: 'Madison then shouted "We have commenced and must go through, rush boys, rush aft we have got them now" [and] calling to the slaves below he said, "Come up every damned one of you, if you don't and lend a hand I will kill you all and throw you overboard."'95 These words are not used in 'The Heroic Slave' but are swallowed in the narrative lacuna of the mate's loss of consciousness. The words placed in Washington's mouth in the fourth part of 'The Heroic Slave' are from a different register, more in keeping with the extraordinary linguistic abilities with which he is credited, and more in keeping with the formal literary language of antislavery rhetoric. His words in the fourth part recall the elevated and convention-ridden language of Washington's soliloquy in the first part, which begins:

'What, then, is life to me? It is aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless. Those birds, perched on yon swinging boughs, in friendly conclave, sounding forth their merry notes in seeming worship of the rising sun, though liable to the sportsman's fowling-piece, are still my superiors. They *live free*, though they may die slaves. They fly where they list by day, and retire in freedom at night. But what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a *slave*,— even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs. How mean a thing am I.'96

In this soliloquy, Washington continues to think through his dilemma, doubting, then affirming his courage, he concludes, using

95. 'Protest,' 223V, 224R. The words quoted are set off in quotation marks within the 'Protest.' The punctuation is duplicated from the 'Protest.'

96. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 177.

the rhythms of formal oratorical rhetoric: 'If I am caught, I shall only be a slave. If I am shot, I shall only lose a life which is a burden and a curse. If I get clear (as something tells me I shall,) liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man, precious and priceless, will be mine. My resolution is fixed. *I shall be free.*'⁹⁷ As Madison confronts the mate in the fourth part of the novella, his language quickly shifts registers from the conversational to the rhetorical as he points out the wider social context of killing and the hypocrisy of those who would condone killing in the name of liberty in one context and condemn it in another: "'Sir," said he, 'your life is in my hands. I could have killed you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now. You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work. I have done no more to those dead men yonder, than they would have done to me in like circumstances. We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, *so were they.*'⁹⁸ Here, as in the first part, the words placed in Washington's mouth are those of conventional antislavery polemic; indeed, such phrasing would fit well in John Quincy Adams's *Liberty Incomplete*. But while the register may be artificially inflated, the sentiments behind the rhetoric are historically accurate: the 'Protest' records that 'the nineteen said all they had done was for their freedom.'⁹⁹ The actual words of the mutineers are not given, but their actions are recorded. 'The Heroic Slave' seems to reflect on this, setting up a subtle interplay between the historical record and the text, and between the actions of African Americans and the rhetoric of white abolitionists. Ultimately, 'The Heroic Slave' suggests that the elided actions, Madison Washington's active resistance, are more eloquent than the impassioned rhetoric of antislavery discourse.

97. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 178.

98. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 234-35.

99. 'Protest,' 226V.

Douglass never undermines Washington's utility as heroic exemplar, but he does reveal the inscrutability of the man behind a well-defined symbol. And he clearly recognizes that there are limits to Washington's symbolic import, as the mate's summary praise suggests: 'I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man,' the mate announces, and continues, 'had he been a white man, I would have followed [him] willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise.'¹⁰⁰ The mate's comment eerily echoes William Jay's encomium, reminding us once again of the ingrained racism that plagued antebellum America: 'the sagacity, bravery, and humanity of this man do honor to his name,' Jay wrote, 'and, but for his complexion, would excite universal admiration.'¹⁰¹

What 'The Heroic Slave' does, then, is to demonstrate not only the process by which the agency and heroism of the African American are displaced by the abolitionist in conventional anti-slavery writing, but also the motivation behind that displacement. The story clearly shows the wider significance that the identification and definition of heroic agency have for the self-regard of both the slave and the abolitionist. 'The Heroic Slave' exposes the implications of the cultural politics of benevolence that gave fixed roles to the abolitionist and to the slave. As Douglass shows, virtually everyone had a stake in the selection, construction, presentation and interpretation of Madison Washington. But there is one final irony: the rhetoric of sentimental victimization had come to seem so 'natural' that the techniques Douglass used to expose this discourse did not register.

100. Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave,' 237.

101. Jay, *War and Peace*, 21.

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