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Madison Washington's Journey to Freedom: Protagonist Development in Frederick

Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*

by

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Frederick Douglass' novella *The Heroic Slave* stands out as this figure's only piece of fiction writing. It provides a fictional account of Madison Washington's real-life escape from slavery and involvement in the slave revolt onboard the slave transporter the *Creole*. In this event, slaves seize control of the vessel, reroute it to the then British-held Bahamas, and thereby win the freedom of over 100 others. Although *The Heroic Slave* is a work of fiction, it resembles a slave narrative in many ways. Most notable is the manner by which it employs, references, or reworks some of the recognizable and repeated conventions of the slave narrative. Douglass' novella exhibits a great deal of craft in the way that he manipulates the very slave narrative conventions that white abolitionist sponsors impose upon the works of ex-slave narrators. In other words, Douglass refashions the literary tools designed by the white authorities that dominate slave narrative production. He does this in order to critique the one-sided power arrangement between ex-slave and abolitionist sponsor. The following analysis examines Douglass' use of slave narrative conventions in his work of fiction. It identifies ways that he manipulates these conventions to serve his cause of challenging the white power that permeates the abolitionist community. This study also identifies and explores how *The Heroic Slave* models black revolutionary leadership and how it models respectful and appropriate white abolitionist collaboration with the ex-slave. Along the way, the following highlights Douglass' skill as a writer, especially as he conscientiously and effectively crafts his fiction to advance his cause. Overall, *The Heroic Slave* combines earlier narrative traditions and historical events with Frederick Douglass' genius to create a guiding work for black and white emancipation activists.

The slave narrative is literature that recounts a slave's experiences under slavery and her escape therefrom. It normally features an ex-slave narrator who provides the details of her slave life. The antebellum antislavery community plays a central role in bringing the ex-slave's story to print and to the public, and together with its amanuenses, editors, publishers, and promoters, this community oversees all aspects of the work's creation. The antislavery community's involvement with and sponsorship of such work is a distinguishing feature of slave narrative literature. One of the most influential sponsors and promoters of the slave narrative is the American Anti-Slavery Society. This organization, founded in part by William Lloyd Garrison in the eighteen thirties, seeks the abolition of slavery in the United States. It employs moral suasion to move the public towards its ends. Accordingly, their antislavery activities are decidedly pacifistic. Furthermore, Garrisonians denounce the United States Constitution since they believe it to be a fundamentally proslavery document. They argue that because this document sanctions slavery, it cannot form the basis of a truly free society. For this reason, these abolitionists refuse to work within the political system established by the Constitution. With limited avenues for achieving social reform, the American Anti-Slavery Society depends on meetings, periodicals, speeches, slave narrative literature, and other means to advance its cause. With its scenes of master cruelty, slave auctions, and other heart-wrenching details, the slave narrative is an effective tool for conveying abolitionists' message about the immorality of slavery. The abolitionist editors of slave narratives make a point to include the scenes, themes, and images that most move the work's audience. Their heavy involvement in producing and shaping this literature is one of its

defining features; and, abolitionist influence has led to the development of regular narrative conventions that bespeak the abolitionist's hand in the work.

In their respective articles titled "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" and "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," critics James Olney and John Sekora consider the unique relationship between the slave narrator, the abolitionist sponsor, and the audience. Their articles ultimately debate whether the slave narrative qualifies as an independent literary genre. While they reach opposite conclusions regarding this question, both critics problematize the disproportionately large control that white abolitionists express over the slave narrative. Olney and Sekora document the manner by which editors and sponsors of the narratives appropriate the ex-slave's story in order to advance their own cause. James Olney points out that the ex-slave's story functions as a tool for the abolitionist rather than as a standalone artifact. He writes, "The lives of the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like. Thus in one sense the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders" (51). Olney appears to adhere to a definition of art that values the work for its intrinsic worth. For this reason, he takes issue with a written form that develops in the service of the abolitionist's mission. Yet, there are countless works of art that serve a cause or fulfill a use. It is debatable whether the narrative ever exists for itself or its "own intrinsic, unique interest." On the other hand, what makes the slave narrative exceptional is the great degree to which the white abolitionist silences the ex-slave and co-opts her

story. In the relationship between ex-slave narrator and white editor, the narrator has very little authority over the literary product. The white abolitionist essentially divests the ex-slave of her story in order to advance his cause in a way that mimics how the slave master steals the slave's labor to meet her needs. Thus, the abolitionist's controlling relationship with the ex-slave replicates the power dynamic that exists between master and slave. The power and influence that the abolitionist editor and/or sponsor express over the work is so great that it leaves little room for the narrator's personal articulation of her story. Abolitionist control determines major aspects of the work including its structure, conventions, and voice. According to John Sekora, abolitionist intervention is so prominent that it drowns out the ex-slave narrator. He writes that the genre "as a whole is defined by a suppression of the personal slave voice" (510). This literature conveys the sponsor's interests and message over the narrator's identity, personal expression, and wishes. The sponsor's designs for the work are detectable amid this literature's themes and conventions. Stated otherwise, many of the slave narrative's features reflect the abolitionist's mission. For example, her desire to expose the horrors of slavery results in the work's depiction of abuse, slave auctions, and other acts of violence. Her need to establish the honesty and character of the ex-slave narrator results in a testimonial or authentication of the work and/or narrator by a white abolitionist. Overall, editors, sponsors, and others impose on the narrative the literary techniques, styles, and themes that they feel are most effective in moving their target audience and ultimately defeating slavery. This practice leads to the development of very specific and regular slave narrative conventions, which James Olney characterizes as the "nearly invariable conventions of slave narratives" (46). He adds that the elements of the

narrative “come to be so regular, so constant, so indispensable to the mode that they finally establish a set of conventions a series of observances that become virtually *de riguer*—for slave narratives unto themselves” (50). Olney proceeds to provide a “master outline” (50) that draws the general structure and conventions of the slave narrative with remarkable detail. His outline plainly enumerates many of the slave narrative conventions such as the work’s inclusion of a signed engraved portrait, a testimonial or authentication, an opening statement that begins with the phrase “I was born,” accounts of whippings and auctions, details of the narrator’s escape, and an appendix with additional materials that support the narrative or denounce slavery. His outline shows how abolitionist influence, the constant behind most slave narratives, molds the story into useful conventions. They rely on these so regularly that they become “nearly invariable.” While the particular details of each work vary based on the life of the narrator, they are still made to conform to the general narrative conventions that are made to serve the sponsor.

Closely following his escape from slavery, Frederick Douglass becomes part of the abolitionists’ speaking circuit and authors his own slave narrative *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* that is produced under the auspices of William Lloyd Garrison in 1845. Douglass’ personal narrative and his close work with the Garrisonian abolitionists as an activist and public speaker in the 1840s acquaint him well with their involvement in the slave narrative and treatment of African American colleagues. He exposes their overbearing control and patronizing attitude in his second narrative titled *My Bondage and My Freedom* and produced in 1855. This work comes some years after Douglass’ irreconcilable break from William

Lloyd Garrison and his brand of abolitionism. Although there are likely numerous reasons for this break, the Garrisonian abolitionists' condescending treatment of him, which he documents in his second narrative, seems to be a very large factor in his decision to separate. Moreover, many political differences also fuel this break. For example, in his policy statement printed in *The North Star* titled "Change of Opinion Announced" Douglass publicly announces his and his supporters' change in opinion regarding the United States Constitution. In direct contradiction to the Garrisonians, Douglass declares that the Constitution is not a proslavery document. He writes that he and his supporters "had arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution, construed in the light of well-established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble; and that hereafter we should insist upon the application of such rules to that instrument, and demand that it be wielded in behalf of emancipation" ("Change of Opinion" 173-174). According to this statement, Douglass not only argues that the Constitution is not proslavery, he proposes that it—particularly the preamble—can serve the cause of abolitionism. His works demonstrate this belief when they reference words and ideas from the preamble. In addition to his divergent view of the Constitution, Douglass breaks from the Garrisonian policy against working within the political system by publically supporting Gerrit Smith, a New York politician, congressman, and three-time presidential candidate. In fact, he dedicates *My Bondage and My Freedom* to Smith. Finally, Douglass renounces pacifism and supports the use of violence to effect emancipation. One clear sign of this is his work recruiting black soldiers for the Union Army. In addition, his work *The Heroic Slave* honors and fictionalizes an actual slave revolt.

Frederick Douglass' 1852 novella *The Heroic Slave* follows his split with Garrison. The analysis at hand maintains that it is no coincidence that his novella resembles a slave narrative. Douglass deliberately borrows and modifies slave narrative conventions in his fiction writing. According to Robert Stepto in his article titled "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass' 'The Heroic Slave'," Douglass is well acquainted with the slave narrative form and is thus able to purposefully manipulate it in his novella. Stepto argues that Douglass "knows the slave narrative convention, partly because he has used it himself...he seems to have an understanding of how to exploit its rhetorical usefulness in terms of proclaiming the existence and identity of an individual without merely employing it verbatim" (361). Stepto concludes that this signals a small first step towards the development of an African American literary tradition rooted in slave narrative conventions. Frederick Douglass' craft as a fiction writer can be found in the way he inventively takes from and transforms the preexisting slave narrative conventions. Key to his success is his decision to engage in fiction writing in *The Heroic Slave*. This act enables him to break from the slave narrative's excessively standardized conventions and accompanying abolitionist control. With a form that allows creative expression, Douglass manipulates and revises slave narrative conventions in order to advance his own cause, which is a celebration of black heroism and an exposure of the racial hegemony behind said conventions. In as early as its opening paragraph, *The Heroic Slave* sports an example of how its author subverts a particular slave narrative convention. James Olney points out that many narratives open with the phrase "I was born..." or a similar variant. This convention exists in order to "attest to the real existence of a narrator, the sense being that the status of the narrative will be

continually called into doubt, so it cannot even begin, until the narrator's real existence is firmly established" (52). This practice is undoubtedly a response to the skepticism of a biased audience that questions the veracity of an African American narrator. In contrast to this convention, Douglass' opening discusses the protagonist's rather transient qualities. It draws attention to the fact that Madison Washington's life has not been adequately documented as it ironically ponders how "by some strange neglect" Virginia's great African American hero "lives now only in the chattel records of his native State" (220). Instead of providing proof of its hero's existence with supplemental materials such as bills of sale, the novella suggests that there is an ephemeral and mysterious nature to Madison Washington. It reads, "Glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented. He is brought to view only by a few transient incidents, and these afford but partial satisfaction" (220). Hence, while the typical narrative strives to establish the basic existence of its narrator and main character, Douglass' novella admits that much of its hero's history is unknown. The typical narrative serves to quell the reader's doubts about the main character, while *The Heroic Slave* refuses to entertain such doubts. In the typical narrative, the onus is on the text to prove the narrator's legitimacy. In Douglass' novella, the onus is on the reader to either accept or reject a story that admits to lacking details. *The Heroic Slave*'s opening compels the audience to reckon with the incomplete information provided. This example demonstrates how Frederick Douglass alters a slave narrative convention and thereby undermines the racial bias that underpins it. Essential to this project is Douglass' turn to fiction, which liberates him from the confines that overly determine African American writing in the slave narrative genre.

The following essay looks at other ways in which Douglass crafts his novella to respond to the abolitionist control that dominates the slave narrative tradition. First, it examines how the novella reworks two closely related slave narrative conventions. The tendencies to replace the narrator's personal history with an institutional account of slavery and to exclude her internal or moral growth from the narrative find no home in Douglass' novella. John Sekora documents how abolitionist editors depersonalize the ex-slave's account in order to promote the institutional literary form of abolitionism. He maintains, "What remains ever at the center is an institutional form or experience. What is meanwhile pushed to the periphery is the unique and distinctive experience of an individual life" (503). This practice serves the abolitionist's mission to increase support for emancipation in a variety of ways. It distills the narrator's experiences into an easily understood narrative that attempts to capture the overall experience of slavery. It provides consistent messaging of abolitionism without distracting ancillary personal details. Yet, slavery is a multidimensional institution that is as varied and complex as the ex-slave narrators. The benefits of adhering to the abolitionist's institutional form come at the expense of casting aside the unique details and personal identity of the ex-slave narrator. The other characteristic of the slave narrative that *The Heroic Slave* drastically alters is the emphasis on the narrator's physical rather than mental life. Slave narratives generally unfold chronologically and episodically — i.e., from one material event to the next. According to Olney, "what is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator" (51). This style of narration portrays slave life in physical terms thereby assuming that this is the most prominent and important experience of slavery.

This practice, which gives very little consideration to the narrator's internal life, insights, and opinion, reveals the American Anti-Slavery Society's racial bias that doubts the African American's mental capacity. It denies the narrator's intellectual life, which is an important component of humanity. In the slave narrative tradition, the abolitionist performs the paternalistic role of determining how to express the slave's life. This results in works that stifle individual and intellectual expression. This practice closes off an important avenue to capturing the experiences deemed important by the slave. In addition, it inhibits others, including abolitionists, from understanding slavery better, which is to understand it through the eyes of the slave. Abolitionists' practices counter the ideal logic that the person with the most intimate knowledge of slavery should articulate it freely and personally and that this individual should state the needs, values, and future goals of the slave. This practice is one way to present and preserve the African American's best interest. It is problematic that Anglo American-led institutions determine the message and direction of abolitionism while silencing the many that rely on such organizations. Such tactics leave no room for input from those who are directly affected by abolitionists' work. It is in this way that, even in its quest to abolish slavery, abolitionists maintain white hegemony. *The Heroic Slave*, on the other hand, is an artistic project that breaks from the slave narrative tradition in order to challenge the white authority behind Garrisonian abolitionism and its productions. It counters both aforementioned slave narrative conventions by spotlighting its protagonist's individual internal growth. Madison Washington's intellectual development is part of what makes him a singular and heroic slave. His physical journey across the North American continent includes his successful escape from slavery, his return to Virginia to rescue his

wife, and his leadership role in the successful rebellion on board the *Creole* slave transporter, which leads to his and about 130 other slaves' liberation. Said travels attend his psychological development or what critic Maggie Sale in her article "To Make the Past Useful: Frederick Douglass' Politics of Solidarity" terms his "psychic journey to liberation" (42). Sale views the protagonist's internal growth as an essential aspect of the novella arguing that "the novella represents as central the process through which the protagonist comes to recognize and overcome his inner sense of enslavement" (42). Part of the way he overcomes his "inner sense of enslavement" is by learning of his psychological connection to others and subsequently revising his understanding of liberty. He initially adheres to an individualist and physical conception of liberty. He expresses this view when he announces his intention to be free by escaping alone to Canada. This belief gradually transforms in conjunction with his physical journey so that, by the end of the work, the protagonist understands liberty to be an interdependent and partly psychological experience. The novella signals this growth in his brave, revolutionary, and collaborative struggle for liberty on the *Creole*. The lessons that Washington learns and their prominence in the novella signal a break from and reversal of the slave narrative tradition that greatly ignores the slave's internal and personal development.

Second, the following essay identifies how *The Heroic Slave* models ideal actions for blacks and whites. The text reimagines a healthy relationship between white abolitionist and black activist. The white Ohioan farmer Listwell undergoes his own transformation in the text. As a result of his contact with Madison Washington, he becomes an abolitionist, a friend and helper to the protagonist, and an accessory to the

Creole revolt. Listwell's growth and relationship with the protagonist signals a reversal in the typically one-sided relationship between abolitionist and black activist as outlined above. Commonly, the abolitionist exerts power over the activist by controlling her words. In *The Heroic Slave*, the slave expresses influence over the abolitionist by effecting his personal transformation. Importantly, no group wholly dominates the other in this new relationship. They are interdependent equals that share, understand, and support one another. As he learns how to be a friend to the slave, Listwell exemplifies respectful behavior towards Madison Washington. He shows the slave deference by listening to him, allowing himself to be moved by him, and acting out of the slave's best interest. According to Maggie Sale in her work *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity*, Listwell's character serves as an example for white readers (188). She maintains that through his contact with the protagonist, Listwell gains "the vision to move toward a new awareness" (*Slumbering* 193). This "new awareness" is an understanding of the values and needs of those affected by slavery as articulated by themselves. It is a willingness to defer to those affected by slavery. This "new awareness" is distinct from Garrisonian abolitionists' antislavery convictions. Their awareness of the enslaved is informed by the white community and they insist on blacks' complicity with their goals. Douglass counters this tendency and offers an alternate ideal for white abolitionist behavior in the figure of Listwell.

Not only does *The Heroic Slave* model white abolitionist behavior, but it models black revolutionary leadership. This essay examines the example of antislavery agitation present in the novella's protagonist. Madison Washington lives up to the work's title in

multiple ways. His growth as an individual stand him apart from the African Americans depicted in slave narrative literature. His willingness to risk his life for his wife and others is extremely brave. And, his leadership in the *Creole* uprising perfectly captures radical antislavery action. It is important to note that, although *The Heroic Slave* is a work of fiction, the actual Madison Washington did escape from slavery, return to the South for his wife, and participate in the *Creole* incident. He is a tremendously heroic person. Therefore, while the character Madison Washington's actions are extraordinary, they are not entirely unrealistic and baseless. Furthermore, Frederick Douglass endorses and exemplifies Washington's violent struggle when he includes it in his novella. This aspect of *The Heroic Slave* directly challenges the pacifistic position of the American Anti-Slavery Society. According to John Sekora, this organization allays white society's fear that antislavery violence threatens the social and racial order by discouraging such violence. According to Sekora, abolitionists "took seriously the charges that antislavery agitation would unleash social anarchy...Because of such charges, most abolitionists worked tirelessly to disassociate themselves from social and economic radicalism" (505). Such abolitionists reassure white society that abolitionism does not pose a challenge to the racial hierarchy. Frederick Douglass, who is well acquainted with race prejudice, does not agree. For him, emancipation is an end to slavery *and* racial subjugation. Thus, he is comfortable with imagery that threatens to disturb the social order. Furthermore, sensitive to the continued enslavement of millions, he feels the immediate need for emancipation and is willing to endorse the most expedient path freedom, which may mean violent agitation. In addition to his position regarding violence, Frederick Douglass advocates for black leadership and heavy involvement in abolitionism. Hence, the figure

of Madison Washington, an African American resistance leader captures Douglass' vision for the movement. With this character, he both rejects the American Anti-Slavery Society's pacifist tactics and white leadership, and he supplies an example of exemplary antislavery agitation for black activists.

Finally, by way of the aforementioned analyses, this paper points out examples of Frederick Douglass' skill in employing the written word to counter white abolitionist domination of the black activist. The way in which he manipulates the very form and conventions owned by abolitionists in order to serve his own cause evinces his craft as a writer. This act turns the tables on those who once sought to silence him; and, it establishes him as an independent writer and thinker. The following analysis explores how he realizes his own intellectual freedom through the act of writing. Overall, Frederick Douglass adroitly uses *The Heroic Slave* to critique Garrisonian abolitionists' racist practices in the production of slave narrative literature and their treatment of African American colleagues in general. The protagonist's intellectual growth, particularly as it relates to his understanding of liberty, and the examples that Listwell and Washington set for Afro and Anglo Americans are important themes in *The Heroic Slave*. They also constitute part of Douglass' response to the patronizing control of abolitionists. The following essay proceeds by first exploring the concept of heroic male individualism and how it defines Madison Washington's character at the opening of the novella. Second, it identifies the protagonist's developing sense of self-worth and reveals its connection to his individualist perspective. It next discusses Douglass and his own assertion of self-worth. It finds parallels between the protagonist and Douglass in their quests to assert their independence and realize physical and intellectual freedom. Fourth,

this essay examines the physical, psychological, and interdependent concept of liberty that the novella advances. This is the concept of liberty that Washington cultivates as he grows intellectually. Finally, it explores the true relationship of dependence between abolitionist and ex-slave. While the abolitionist would have the ex-slave dependent upon him for assistance, this essay advances that the abolitionist is, in many ways, dependent on the slave. This section also reveals how the novella models revolutionary black heroism and respectful and appropriate white abolitionist collaboration with the ex-slave. In the end, the following essay seeks to highlight some of the remarkable literary achievements in Douglass' only piece of fiction and in one of the nation's earliest works of African American fiction writing.

Individualism

Heroic individualism figures the person as a free agent who assumes responsibility for achieving his potential. It honors those who realize their self-ideal. History is awash with examples of such individuals. It remembers them for their ability to radically alter their circumstances—many reportedly start with few resources—to reach the maximum of their potential. Heroic individualism has been a longstanding part of American mythology. History honors the founding fathers for leading fulfilled lives and illustrious careers that significantly contribute to the founding of this country and its economy. The sons of Virginia Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington are examples. According to *The Heroic Slave*, Madison Washington is also one such figure. His lesser-known contributions to this country are comparable to those of the aforementioned figures. With *The Heroic Slave* as its title and an introduction that likens its protagonist to the aforesaid founding fathers, the novella's opening seems to

situate its hero in a tale of heroic individualism. This corresponds to the tradition established in some male-narrated slave narratives. Valerie Smith, in her *Introduction* to Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, writes that "by representing themselves as isolated heroic subjects, male slave narrators also defined their humanity in the terms of prevailing conceptions of American male identity" (xxix). Male-authored narratives often feature a man who realizes his dream to be free by independently and successfully making the harrowing journey North. When they enlist "prevailing conceptions of American male identity," such slave narratives align themselves with the popular, positive image of American individualist heroism. This makes them more relatable to mainstream Americans and the popular thought that hard work and dedication will lead to success and life fulfillment. By likening its protagonist to some of the founding fathers, *The Heroic Slave's* beginning certainly taps into such heroic male individualism and links him to well-respected historical figures. This idea dominates its first chapter. This is also where the hero defines his particular understanding of liberty, which, at this point, is based on individualism.

Very early on, *The Heroic Slave* focuses on Madison Washington, the individual, with a very self-oriented form. He presents his desires and determination to escape from slavery in a soliloquy. This literary device, composed of the Latin roots "solus" meaning alone and "loqui" meaning speak, is an individual's articulation of her own thoughts to herself. This form's self-referential qualities are paralleled in the concept of heroic individualism, which is one's autonomous pursuit of his self-defined potential. This literary form draws attention to the individualism that defines Washington's character at this point. His individualist orientation invites academic Richard Yarborough's critique.

In his work titled “Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave,’” Yarborough claims that “Douglass’s fascination with self-reliance and heroic male individualism thoroughly shapes his conception of Madison as a leader” (176). The first chapter of the novella certainly seems to support the idea Douglass endorses such ideals. In his soliloquy, Washington appears in command of his language and body. He seems to be an autonomous agent. The speech figures him as independently responsible for attaining his own freedom. The “self-reliance” cited by Yarborough is central to the protagonist’s escape plan since he states that he intends to rely on his own “trusty legs” or “sinewy arms” to “place [him] among the free” (*The Heroic Slave* 221). The idea that he will be “placed” among the free reveals that the hero associates freedom with a physical location or a physical state that he inherits based on location. He will realize freedom by way of his physical relocation to Canada. Washington also conceptualizes freedom as a possession in a way that resembles physical possession of an object. He claims, “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*” (222). The first sentence of the quote above establishes a subject-object relationship between the protagonist and liberty, in which liberty functions as a possession that he plans to acquire. In this way, he conceives of liberty in terms of individual ownership. This particular understanding of freedom aligns him with the principles of American capitalism, which values property possession and independent action. Thus, this chapter unites individualism and market values to put forth a mainstream American image of Washington.

The protagonist further aligns himself with the “American male identity” mentioned by Valerie Smith when he adopts the natural rights language of the Declaration of Independence. He justifies his determination to be free by referring to freedom as “the inalienable birth-right of every man.” This construction, which employs the singular phrase “every man” rather than the plural phrase “all men,” suggests that freedom pertains to the individual rather than the collective. Furthermore, Madison Washington’s natural rights-based understanding of liberty further underscores that he conceives of this important concept primarily in physical terms. He espouses the idea that liberty is an innate condition of all creatures. He compares himself to the forest animals, the bird and the snake, who he considers his “superiors.” The snake is “freer and better off than [he]” since it maintains a right to self-defense. As a slave, Washington is denied this right. He states, “I neither run nor fight, but do meanly stand, answering each heavy blow of a cruel master with doleful wails and piteous cries” (221). By focusing on an animal’s right to self-defense, Washington sees liberty only in physical terms and does not consider one’s internal experience of liberty. The animals he cites are not known for their interior lives or the ability to reason and reflect. Thus, by looking to them, he appeals to their external, bodily expression of freedom. He has yet to learn how emotion, reflection, and a sense of cohesion with others affect his ability to realize freedom.

In his soliloquy, the protagonist downplays his connection to others when making his decision to escape. It is clear that the thought of parting from his wife Susan weighs heavily on this character’s mind. The narrator reports, “The strong man staggered under a heavy load” (222-3). Nonetheless, he recovers from this episode by rationalizing his

escape plan in a way that privileges his need to acquire freedom first and independently. He argues, “All is uncertain here. To-morrow's sun may not rise before I am sold, and separated from her I love, What, then, could I do for her? I should be in more hopeless slavery, and she no nearer to liberty,—whereas if I were free,—my arms my own,—I might devise the means to rescue her” (223). This sentence reasons that he should secure his own freedom before he can attempt to secure that of his wife. By, again, conceptualizing freedom as a physical state in which he possesses his own body parts—e.g. “my arms my own”—he views his freedom as independent of Susan’s. Furthermore, the consideration “I might devise the means to rescue her” frames Susan’s freedom as a possibility or an option. He “*might*”—but not necessarily—pursue her freedom after securing his own. At this point, the protagonist is largely unaware of the degree to which he is tied to others. He thinks of himself as independent when he claims, “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” (222). This argument is framed in terms of what *he* will lose, demonstrating a lack of consideration for what others—especially his wife and two children—might lose were he killed or captured. The text shows how he organizes his life and freedom around the self rather than in relation to others. Upon arriving in Canada, he learns that his freedom is inextricably tied to that of others via an internal experience of bondage. In this way, the grip that slavery has on his mind transforms the *possibility* of securing Susan’s freedom into an *obligation*.

Self-Worth

The first chapter’s soliloquy is significant not only because it lays out the protagonist’s notion of liberty, but because it allows him to do so himself. It gives this

slave, albeit a fictional character, a voice. And, it offers the audience access to his thoughts and feelings. This narrative device sets Douglass' novella apart from the slave narrative, which is scarcely concerned with providing the actual ex-slave a platform for self-expression. In the slave narrative tradition, the ex-slave narrator's life is a tool used by the abolitionist to make a case against slavery. It is not, as Olney notes, valued for its "own intrinsic, unique interest" (51); it exists for a cause. The abolitionist editor strives to prove the slave's existence, not his personhood. Academic John Sekora maintains that "Silence, the suppression of selfhood, is a necessary condition for being in the slave narrative" (510). Douglass' work clearly distances itself from this approach especially at its outset where the slave protagonist speaks much and articulates his inner thoughts and sense of self. Since Douglass' work of fiction is made to serve the African American community rather than white abolitionist's demands, it dedicates much space to the soliloquy or the slave's personal expression. It is in the interest of this work to highlight the personhood and humanity of the slave. Furthermore, because this takes place in the Virginian woods where he believes he is alone, it is clear that he speaks only for his own benefit or his "own intrinsic, unique interest." Sekora's claim puts forth a connection between silence and suppression of selfhood. The novella's soliloquy demonstrates that the inverse is also true; speech and selfhood go hand-in-hand. It is in a spoken form, in which the protagonist speaks aloud to and about himself, that he asserts his selfhood. Thus, as silence is a hallmark of the slave narrative, a tradition that demands repression of the narrator's personhood and compliance with abolitionist demands, speech pervades Douglass' work, a novella that champions the slave. Finally, it is logical that, at a moment in which he uncovers his self-worth, Washington endorses individualism, a

philosophy that highly values the independent, individual, self. His newfound self-appreciation accords with a philosophy that esteems the sacredness of the individual.

Madison Washington's discovery of self-worth serves as both an inspiration for others and a rejection of the slave narrative's tradition of silencing its narrators. According to Maggie Sale, the hero's realization marks the start of his quest for liberation. She writes, "This progression, from conceiving of oneself as inferior to reconceptualizing oneself as worthy to be free, describes a psychic journey to liberation, and is a model for African-American, especially formerly enslaved, readers" ("To Make the Past" 41). In addition to serving as a general model for the ex-slave who is searching for his inner worth, this aspect of the novella might also be a manifesto for the ex-slave narrators and public speakers who exist as tools of their abolitionist sponsors. It sends a message of self-worth to all who have been ill-treated either by a slave master or an abolitionist. The soliloquy's length and prominent location at the opening of the novella mark this expression of self and exploration of the slave's inner life as important. Thus, Douglass directly bucks the trend of "white sponsors" who "seem to have believed that all important aspects of a slave life could be told by recounting what was done to him or her" (Sekora 504). While Madison Washington asserts his self-worth, Douglass exercises his own independence and breaks with the literary tradition that only recounts "what was done" to the slave. *The Heroic Slave* deviates from the slave narrative form by portraying the slave's sentiments and will to be free and by serving as a model for others affected by a master-slave relationship. Therefore, just as the protagonist refuses to serve his master, the text likewise refuses to serve the mission of the Garrisonian abolitionist community.

Douglass and Self-Worth

In some ways, the epiphany that Washington experiences regarding his sense of self-worth resembles the self-realization that Douglass achieves through his writing career and break with Garrisonian abolitionists. Douglass' career as an antislavery crusader begins approximately three years after his escape from slavery at the strong urging of Garrisonian abolitionist John A. Collins. Such a career poses a considerable danger to the escaped slave because it risks exposing his whereabouts and activities to his former master who could attempt to retake him. And, according to his work *My Bondage and My Freedom*, publicly admitting his origin as a slave is a particularly degrading experience since it is a "confession of a very *low* origin" (*My Bondage* 272). For the aforementioned reasons, Douglass' African American friends find his antislavery activities imprudent. Despite this, he agrees to participate and expose himself to the dangers of speaking out about his slavery experiences. Above the risks and shame inherent in this activity, his sponsors heighten his sense of degradation in the way that they treat him. For instance, at public lectures, they present him to the audience as a spectacle or curiosity. Douglass recalls being "generally introduced as a '*chattel*'—a '*thing*'—a piece of southern '*property*'—the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak. Fugitive slaves, at that time, were not so plentiful as now; and as a fugitive slave lecturer, I had the advantage of being a '*brand new fact*'—the first one out" (*My Bondage* 271-2). At best, the abolitionists employ such language to expose the inhumanity of slavery, a system that treats human beings as objects or property. Nonetheless, this practice risks reinforcing the stereotypes held by the audience members that attend out of "curiosity to hear what a Negro could say in his own cause" (*My Bondage* 271). As a

lecturer/spectacle, Douglass is a device to draw attention and attendees to abolitionist lecture events. His case is not unique. According to Sekora, “white abolitionists most often applauded black lecturers as *useful* agents of the antislavery cause” (198). Thus, ex-slave activists are not equal partners in this cause. They are devices like oral lectures and newspaper articles that are valued for their utility.

James Olney’s and John Sekora’s articles suggest that, in their relationship with ex-slave activists, abolitionists replicate the master-slave dynamic on an intellectual level. According to Hegel, in his well-known theorization of the master-slave dialectic, one’s personhood is reflected in another. This reflection is necessary in order for one to distinguish his/her personal identity in the world. A situation in which two individuals reflect one another’s personhood equally is untenable; hence, they must fight to the brink of death in order for one to establish dominance. The winner becomes the master and the loser, the slave. In this arrangement, the master confirms his identity through the slave, but the slave cannot do the same through the master. This is because the master views the slave as an object, tool, or “consciousness in the form of *thinghood*” (Hegel 115) that exists to serve the master. He does not recognize the slave as a fully-fledged independent consciousness. According to Hegel, these two entities “exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman” (115). The master enjoys being-for-self, since he “achieves his recognition through another consciousness” (Hegel 116). The slave, who is dependent, does not experience being-for-self. In the case of the ex-slave activist and abolitionist, the former functions as a tool for the abolitionist and his

cause. The abolitionist does not see the ex-slave's independent consciousness or personhood so much as his usefulness to abolitionism. In this relationship, the ex-slave is a cog in the abolitionist's mission; he occupies the condition of "thinghood." This relationship can be seen in the slave narrative's production. The abolitionist does not encourage the ex-slave to develop or explore her independent personality or selfhood in the work. He selects the parts of the ex-slave's life that advance abolitionism. In Douglass' case, he serves as a useful object to abolitionism through his speeches and writings. Following his break from the Garrisonians, he establishes his independence and independent personhood through his writing career. According to Hegel's formulation, work is one way for the slave to realize "being-for-self." This is because the slave sees his own lasting existence in the finished product, which is an independent and permanent object. Hegel writes, "in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to *him*, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right. The shape does not become something other than himself through being made external to him...Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own..." (118-9). In Douglass' case, such work is his writing career. This medium allows him to realize and recognize his independence from Garrisonian abolitionists. Through writing, he grows his own ideas and asserts himself as an abolitionist activist in his own right. As a self-conscious and independent thinker, Douglass resists those who once presented him as a "thing" on the speaking circuit. For example, Robert Stepto suggests that he establishes his paper the *North Star* amid abolitionist opposition. This act is important because it signals a break from or resistance

to their design's for him. Stepto writes that Douglass begins his paper "while harassed by suggestions that his *place* was to speak, not write" ("Storytelling" 357-8). They oppose his literary career because "Douglass himself was, in their estimation, more useful as a lecturer" than as a writer ("Storytelling" 356). Thus, what defines his relationship with abolitionists is his usefulness to them. This demonstrates that in the relationship between Garrisonian abolitionists and Frederick Douglass, Douglass exists to serve them; his purpose is to reflect their cause. Through his writing career, Douglass comes into his own and realizes his intellectual independence.

In the late 1840s, Douglass' written productions begin to challenge Garrisonian thought. Robert Stepto reads the works of this period as evidence of his break from Garrison. He writes that the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, the *North Star*, and *The Heroic Slave*, "as opposed to speaking duties, are of a piece, each one bolder than the one preceding it, each a measure of Douglass' remove from acts of literacy involving merely spoken renditions of what Garrison and company alternately called Douglass' 'facts' or 'story' or 'simple narrative'" ("Storytelling" 358). It is fascinating that Stepto contrasts his written works from his "speaking duties." The written artifact, a physical testament to the fruit of his labor, allows him to experience independence from his mentors in a more concrete manner. Furthermore, his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* allows Douglass to assert his person by write himself into text. Although this work follows many of the conventions of a typical slave narrative, in it, he expresses a greater degree of authorial control over the writing. In his article titled "I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four

Slave Narratives,” Robert Stepto writes that Douglass’ narrative “seems all the more a remarkable literary achievement” given that the typical ex-slave often experiences a “lack of control over his own narrative” (237). Frederick Douglass further declares his independence from William Lloyd Garrison’s strictly pacifistic abolitionism by condoning the violence employed in the *Creole* slave revolt. *The Heroic Slave* celebrates the use of violence by declaring Madison Washington, one of the leaders of the revolt, a hero. In the novella, he also appropriates the natural rights language of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and he justifies the use of violence based on America’s revolutionary principles. This move distances him from Garrison who criticizes the Constitution, and it aligns Douglass with the antislavery philosophy of Gerrit Smith, a wealthy philanthropist and opponent of Garrison’s brand of abolitionism. With Smith’s help, Douglass transforms the *North Star* into the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. By affixing his name to this influential abolitionist paper and by adopting a radically different abolitionist philosophy, Douglass both resists the patronizing Garrisonians and advances his person as a generator of abolitionist thought. Douglass’ literary creation, *The Heroic Slave* is another artifact that permits him to exercise independence as a self-asserting writer and abolitionist. As a work of fiction, this form allows Douglass to reimagine the African American-white abolitionist relationship. This creative venture differs from his speaking career in which white sponsors like George Foster “wished to pin [him] down to [his] simple narrative” (*My Bondage* 272). As a work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave* decidedly shifts away from a mere repetition of abolitionist-approved facts and shirks the control of abolitionists like Foster. This form allows Douglass to manipulate text while borrowing from slave narrative conventions in

order to craft a work that serves the interests of the African American community. As an independent product of Douglass' intellect, *The Heroic Slave* can be likened to Madison Washington's soliloquy in that both are powerful expressions of self-worth and declarations of freedom. In the act of writing about Washington's journey to freedom, Douglass exercises his own intellectual freedom from abolitionist control.

Physical, Psychological, and Interdependent Liberty

While Frederick Douglass' journey to independence from Garrisonian abolitionists is uniquely personal, his journey to freedom from slavery in general is interpersonal. In other words, as his written works help him assert himself and oppose the abolitionist organization that once restrained his thought, his ability to enjoy freedom more broadly depends on the status of others. This is because race-based slavery and prejudice compromise the freedom of all black men and women. Frederick Douglass' writings and speeches consistently maintain that freedom is a joint enterprise for all African Americans. They also highlight the role of adversity and a common threat to security in inspiring solidarity. In his speech titled "The Present Condition and Future Prospects of Negro People," he states:

The distinction between the slave and the free is not great, and their destiny seems one and the same. The black man is linked to his brother by indissoluble ties. The one cannot be truly free while the other is a slave. The free colored man is reminded by the ten thousand petty annoyances with which he meets of his identity with an enslaved people, and that with them he is destined to fall or flourish. (253)

The race-based nature of slavery and prejudice makes it so that all individuals of color are susceptible to falling victim to these social ills. That is, when society sanctions the abuse of citizens of a certain race, any person of that race can be targeted. This

compromises the security of the entire black community. Therefore, it behooves all affected to fight for freedom and an end to discrimination. Those afflicted by slavery and discrimination are united by these threats and must struggle in solidarity against them. Because the simple nature of being black automatically primes people for discrimination or enslavement, unsuspecting, free individuals can rapidly fall victim to slavery on account of their easily enslave-able appearance. This is what happens to Solomon Northup, the ex-slave narrator of *Twelve Years a Slave*. His testimony shows how someone who fits the bill for slavery can easily be abducted and enslaved. While on a visit to Washington D.C., this New York citizen is stripped of his free papers and sold into slavery. His narrative explains how his disbelief at discovering himself kidnapped evolves into understanding. After initially finding the situation “incredible” he relates, “There must have been some misapprehension—some unfortunate mistake. It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly. The more I contemplated my situation, however, the more I became confirmed in my suspicions” (Northup 19). What becomes apparent to Northup is how such a tragedy can happen. He realizes that, because of his appearance and race, he has always already been susceptible to falling victim to slavery. In a country that supports race-based slavery, the black individual is already partially enslaved even in a free state. Context is the only thing that changed around Northup causing him to go from free citizen to slave. In other words, because he looks like a slave, he is easily enslaved once South of the Mason-Dixon Line. Racial slavery is a vulnerability to all African Americans. As such, their freedom is codependent.

Madison Washington's interactions with his wife deepen his learning about black unity and the interpersonal nature of liberty. After he realizes his inherent value as a human being and decides to strike for freedom, Madison Washington begins his journey and concomitant discovery of what freedom truly entails. His first week on the run is accompanied by hardships that cause him to revisit his decision to seek freedom independently. He reunites with his wife Susan, and they "mutually" determine that he "should remain in the vicinity" (*The Heroic Slave* 227). Washington recalls, "we came to an understanding that I should make the woods my home, for if I gave myself up, I should be whipped and sold away; and if I started for the North, I should leave a wife doubly dear to me" (ibid.). This event is significant for it shows the protagonist's newfound willingness to compromise and curb his actions out of regard for another person. This scene contrasts with his earlier attitude of independence in which he considers his wife but decides to pursue freedom independently anyway. It marks a shift away from the individualist and self-reliant nature he initially demonstrates. In the woods, he is "sustained by the promise that [his] good Susan" would meet him weekly. The protagonist's existence is now defined in relation to his wife. In fact, he depends on her physical presence.

After a fire forces him to flee the forest and make his way to Canada, Madison Washington further expands his understanding of liberty and his connection to his wife. His physical presence in Canada, calls into question his previously held conception of liberty, which figured liberty as a possession or a quality dependent on location. While in the north, the protagonist's thoughts turn to his wife, underlining his deep psychological connection to her. He realizes that his freedom is predicated upon hers. Washington reports

that while living in Canada, “I could not be free with the galling thought that my poor wife was still a slave. With her in slavery, my body, not my spirit, was free” (*The Heroic Slave* 239). By distinguishing between the body and the spirit, he calls attention to the dual nature of freedom. It is both physical and psychological. Physical relocation helps relieve the physical trauma of slavery while psychological deliverance depends on the status of others. Moreover, the psychological and interdependent aspects of liberty are closely related. The idea that others are enslaved weighs on the individual’s conscience thereby qualifying their inner experience of freedom. It is the psychological experience—fortified by shared physical experiences—that bonds one slave to the other. In the case of *The Heroic Slave*, Washington cannot enjoy liberty as long as Susan remains in bondage. According to Maggie Sale, the lesson Washington learns is that “individual liberty is compromised when loved ones remain enslaved” (“To Make the Past” 43). Interestingly, this character’s mental anguish takes a toll on his physical health. Washington reports, “I was wretched. I lost my appetite. I could neither work, eat, nor sleep, till resolved to hazard my own liberty, to gain that of my wife!” (*The Heroic Slave* 139). This revelation indicates that his worry about his wife so permeates his being that it manifests physically. In this way, the protagonist’s experience of slavery comes full circle. While he is physically enslaved, he is able to imagine himself free and thereby briefly experience freedom. The narrator reports that the moment he declares, “*I shall be free,*” in his soliloquy “he was free, at least in spirit” (222). Now, while he is located in a free land, his spirit is enslaved. In turn, this psychic experience affects his physical state and he consequently feels the effects of slavery physically. In this way, the interpersonal nature of liberty can affect people both mentally and physically. The

effects of his renewed sense of enslavement drive the hero to seek his wife's freedom. In reporting his mental state, Madison reveals that his determination to secure Susan's freedom has risen from the optional sense he employs when justifying his escape—"I *might* devise the means to rescue her" (emphasis added)—to an imperative. He must free her as his own ability to function depends on it.

After Washington realizes that he cannot experience freedom without securing that of his wife, he hazards his life by returning to the South in an attempt to rescue her. It is at this point that Washington's heroic nature especially comes to light. The protagonist's growing awareness of his connection to others and his willingness to fight for their freedom are what define the heroism of the "heroic slave." Critic Robert Stepto speculates that Douglass' interest in Washington stems from the similarities between their stories and the valor of Washington's actions, which perhaps make him a "personal hero" ("Storytelling" 360) to Douglass. Stepto writes, "Douglass might very possibly have been attracted to Washington's story because it in some measure revises his *own* story...while Douglass caulked ships in Baltimore...Washington was, in both a literal and figurative sense, a truer and more heroic sailor" ("Storytelling" 359). Stepto presents an interesting difference between both men's escape narratives. Douglass' narrative demonstrates more "heroic male individualism" or "solitary male heroism" since it depicts one man's personal escape from slavery. Conversely, Washington's story begins with his own escape but goes on to portray his mental growth, his attempted rescue of his wife, and his participation in the liberation of around 130 slaves on board the *Creole* slave transporter. Thus, Washington's heroism begins with himself but grows to encompass the fates of others. This particular aspect of *The Heroic Slave* constitutes a

decided break from the conventional slave narrative. According to Valerie Smith in her Introduction to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "The conventions of the male-authored narratives...conflate the experience of slavery and freedom with prevailing definitions of masculinity. They rarely feature protagonists who suffer over the separation from their families or who bring relatives North with them" (XXX). Smith's observations suggest that the narrator's consideration of others and an articulation of the interdependent experience of liberty do not make their way into the typical male-authored narrative. In contrast to this, *The Heroic Slave* exposes the protagonist's inner life in a way unknown to the standard slave narrative when it presents Washington's mental anguish and corresponding concerns about his wife's continued enslavement. This is where Douglass' novella breaks significantly from the male-authored slave narrative. The psychological aspect of the main character's development is a large contributor to his heroic nature. He not only embarks upon a harrowing journey across the continent, but he grows as a person. Upon learning new lessons about freedom, he returns for his wife and subsequently helps free some 130 others.

The individualism, self-reliance, and interest in physical freedom that the protagonist demonstrates in Part I of *The Heroic Slave* only provide a baseline for the intellectual development that he later undergoes. His search for freedom starts as an independent quest, but he revises this approach once he realizes his connectedness to those still enslaved. For this reason, either Richard Yarborough targets his criticism of "heroic male individualism" at the sentiment expressed early in the work or it is incorrect. Either way, the expression of such individualism sets the stage for the important lessons that the protagonist later learns about dependence and collaboration. In

other words, individualist sentiment is presented only to be revised throughout the course of the novella. Yarborough objects to the show of male heroism because it affirms the values inherent in oppressive American society. He maintains, “Douglass was unable or unwilling to call into question the white bourgeois paradigm of manhood itself. Consequently, his celebration of black heroism was subverted from the outset by the racist, sexist, and elitist assumptions upon which the Angle-American [sic] male ideal was constructed and that so thoroughly permeated the patriarchal structure of slavery” (182). If by “Angle-American [sic] male ideal” Yarborough means “heroic male individualism” or “solitary male heroism” (176), then, it may be objected that by the end of the novella, Washington has grown away from this ideal. The protagonist’s psychic journey only begins with “heroic male individualism.” The rest of the novella spotlights Washington’s growth in developing an interpersonal concept of liberty. Douglass does not celebrate “black heroism” by “highlighting the individual nature of [the] protagonist’s triumph” (Yarborough 176) as Richard Yarborough claims. Instead, he celebrates “black heroism” by championing the protagonist’s personal development and the heroic acts he performs in the service of “liberty for all.” Madison Washington is heroic in the way he progresses away from individualist thought. The novella seems dedicated to depicting this. For example, it showcases the protagonist’s fully-developed sense of solidarity when it features him as part of a slave gang proclaiming, “We are chained here together, -ours is a common lot” (238). In this moment, the protagonist practically serves as a mouthpiece for the author, who writes in an address dated four years prior to *The Heroic Slave*, “It is more than a mere figure of speech to say, that we are as a people, chained together. We are one people—one in general complexion, one in a common degradation,

one in popular estimation. As one rises, all must rise, and as one falls all must fall” (“An Address” 119). Furthermore, the actions the protagonist takes to free his wife and those on board the *Creole* reveal the work’s unique interest in questions of human connection. Communal over individual action is its focus.

The idea that freedom is both physical and psychological surely factors into the slave’s experience of life upon reaching the North. If one’s mental state affects her ability to experience freedom, then it might be imagined how an escaped-slave’s experience of racism in a free state might keep her from completely realizing freedom. In fact, Frederick Douglass’ writings, like his novella, explain how African Americans can suffer from a sense of enslavement even in free lands. He writes, “In the Northern states, we are not slaves to individuals, not personal slaves, yet in many respects we are the slaves of the community” (“An Address” 119). Thus, black people remain slaves amid the daily injustices that permeate racist society. They experience prejudice and ill-treatment from all corners of northern society including from whites who fight for emancipation. Despite their antislavery work, Garrisonian abolitionists are not free of color prejudice. According to Sekora, they were “careful to distinguish between emancipation and social equality” (505). This means that the abolitionists’ mission strictly revolves around the moral injustice of slavery and not that of inequality. Their adherence to the norms of racial hierarchy might account for why the narratives they sponsor fail to promote the abovementioned binary notion of slavery. Such works scarcely explore one’s psychological experience of slavery or prejudice. Instead, many abolitionist-sponsored works celebrate the slave’s attainment of freedom by arriving in the North. Thus, they subscribe to a geographical or physical conception of freedom.

This understanding is too unidimensional to capture the ex-slave's true psychological experiences on the Northern side of the Mason-Dixon Line. The abolitionist-sponsored slave narratives do not leave room to consider how discrimination compromises freedom in the North. The way they ignore the ex-slave's internal life before and after slavery is a convenient omission for those who might participate in hindering the ex-slave's experience of liberty in free states. Moreover, even as white abolitionists challenge the legal institution of slavery, they discreetly maintain an unbalanced relationship with their ex-slave collaborators. This means they are perpetuators of intellectual slavery. According to James Olney, "The master-slave relationship might go underground or it might be turned inside out but it was not easily done away with" (62). The ex-slave may feel enslaved by the very people who claim to help her. Those in a place of power can mistreat or take advantage of vulnerable beneficiaries in this instance. On the other hand, in a reversal of the slave narrative tradition that ignores the slave's intellectual growth, *The Heroic Slave* explores Madison Washington's feelings while in Canada and thereby illustrates how one's interior life can affect their experience of freedom. The novella suggests that the work of emancipation does not end once the slave reaches a place of physical security. In this manner, Douglass' work points out how an ex-slave may feel a sense of enslavement and subjugation in Northern society. It indirectly indicates how the abolitionists' belittling treatment of their African American colleagues may contribute to this feeling of enslavement and subjugation. Overall, *The Heroic Slave* significantly complicates the notion of freedom that the slave narrative genre traditionally promotes. It exposes the myth that freedom is attainable via location or possession. This exposure is

facilitated by unveiling some aspects of the heroic slave's mental life, a radical practice made possible in Frederick Douglass' fiction.

Dependence and Modeling

Shared suffering under slavery and racial prejudice provide the basis for understanding, empathy, and solidarity among individuals of color. *The Heroic Slave* unveils how the life experiences of the slave facilitate unity. Madison Washington's encounters with an elderly slave illustrate this point. Believing that he is alone in the woods, the man prays for help and release from slavery. Washington too pleads for help in his soliloquy. The narrator describes Washington's and the old man's pleas similarly, thus illustrating how the two are united in sentiment. The text reads that the old man's "soul...broke out in humble supplication for deliverance from bondage" (230). The narrator describes the protagonist's soliloquy as "heart-touching narrations of his own personal suffering, intermingled with prayers to the God of the oppressed for help and deliverance" (222). The brutality of slavery brings these two together in their appeal to God. It results in their similar appeals independent of one another. Washington even surpasses the barrier of religion as he connects with the other slave. He reports, "I had given but little attention to religion, and had but little faith in it; yet, as the old man prayed, I felt almost like coming down and kneeling by his side, and mingling my broken complaint with his" (230). Shared feelings occasioned by shared experiences unite these two slaves in a strong bond of empathy. This scene culminates when the elderly slave is caught attempting to purchase food for Madison Washington. A group of fourteen armed men beat him with sticks. While this occurs, the protagonist must repress the urge to aid the man for fear that his involvement would exacerbate the punishment. Nonetheless,

although he cannot act, the protagonist seems to physically manifest the ordeal he secretly watches. He reports that his “own flesh crept at every blow” (231). Certainly, his own experience of being whipped makes it possible for him to know and relive the pain of the old man’s whipping. Madison Washington’s interaction with this elderly slave constitutes one way that *The Heroic Slave* demonstrates how mutual hardship leads to solidarity. It also plays a key role in this character’s psychic development by teaching him about his connection to others. As the unfortunate victims of slavery, slaves and ex-slaves, have exclusive and intimate knowledge of this institution. Their experiences unite them and singularly but unfortunately position them as the gatekeepers of information about slave life.

Those on the outside of slavery less easily access the understanding and unity that slaves share due to common experiences. While the white abolitionist may be able to sympathize with slaves on a basic level, her unfamiliarity with the everyday particulars of the slave’s personal life make it difficult for her to completely comprehend the slave’s thoughts, feelings, and needs. This is the case with *The Heroic Slave*’s white farmer Listwell. His distance from slavery proves a barrier to understanding the enslaved. This is expressed by his apparent sense of mystique around the slave’s inner thoughts. His curiosity about the slave’s inner life draws him to Washington’s passionate speech in the woods. The text explains that he cannot help but listen to the protagonist’s soliloquy. It reads:

As our traveller [sic] gazed upon him, he almost trembled at the thought of his dangerous intrusion. Still he could not quit the place. He had long desired to sound the mysterious depths of the thoughts and feelings of a slave. He was not, therefore, disposed to allow so providential an opportunity to pass unimproved. He resolved to hear more; so he listened

again for those mellow and mournful accents which, he says, made such an impression upon him as can never be erased. (222)

The gazing that Listwell performs in this scene suggests that, to him, the slave is a spectacle or someone different and distant from that which he knows. He gazes to collect information about the unknown. His curiosity around the “thoughts and feelings of a slave” reveals that Listwell has something to learn about Washington’s internal life. He does not have access to the experiences that feed the interior life of the slave. This curiosity signals his distance from the slave’s life situation. Carrie Hyde in her article titled “The Climates of Liberty: Natural Rights in the *Creole* Case and ‘The Heroic Slave,’” rightfully maintains that Listwell’s keen interest in exploring the “mysterious depths” of the slave’s interiority strikes as perverse. She argues, “Here, what might otherwise have been an assumed good—an opportunity to communicate the feelings and humanity of a slave to white abolitionist readers—is given a notably sinister connotation in the depiction of Listwell’s overeager and almost eroticized surveillance of the ‘unsuspecting speaker’” (487). There is no question that the abolitionist’s overly enthusiastic observation exoticizes—rather than eroticizes—Madison Washington. The spectatorship displayed in this moment reads as distasteful to the modern reader. Listwell’s resolve to “hear more” and not let “so providential an opportunity to pass unimproved” suggest that access to the inner life of a slave is rare. This is how Listwell justifies his disrespectful surveillance of Washington. At the same time that Listwell’s behavior sets Washington apart as the “other,” it communicates that a breach divides the abolitionist from slave life. As a Midwestern farmer, the abolitionist has little contact with slaves. This is indicated by the “providential” nature of his chance encounter with

Washington. Clearly, he lacks the unity in understanding that connects Washington and the older slave. Instead, the farmer depends on Washington and the information conveyed in his soliloquy to learn about the slave's thoughts about and trials under slavery.

Parts II and III correct Listwell's unauthorized surveillance of the hero and feature the farmer politely engaging him in conversations about his journey. The farmer's meaningful exchange with Washington signals progress away from secretive surveillance and toward constructive engagement. For Robert Stepto, the storyteller/storylistener relationship between Washington and Listwell is a major theme of the work. He characterizes it as "the resolution or consummation of purposeful human brotherhood between slave and abolitionist, as it may be most particularly achieved through the communal aesthetic of storytelling" (365). Washington weaves Listwell into the fabric of the slave's plight with his story. It opens up a window to deeper understanding of slave life than allowed by remote observation or a momentary intrusion on Washington's thoughts. Furthermore, this "communal" event is a shared activity for both ex-slave and abolitionist. As such, it is something that unites the two men. The "consummation of purposeful human brotherhood" is occasioned by an evening of storytelling that both men jointly experience. Instead of supplying the meaning to his guest's story or refashioning it to suit his own needs, Listwell quiets in order to truly learn from his guest. This allows him to better understand and aid the slave. This interaction models a healthy relationship between slave and abolitionist. Particularly, it demonstrates to other would be abolitionists how to be a truly good friend to the slave. Stepto maintains that the farmer Listwell "*listens well*" ("Storytelling" 365) as Washington speaks. According to him,

Douglass' "point" in portraying Listwell as the expert listener is that "one cannot be a good abolitionist without being a good listener" ("Storytelling" 365). This feature of the abolitionist is foreign to the slave narrative tradition. The white abolitionists involved in the slave narrative's production do not customarily grant the narrator space to speak freely. John Sekora maintains that in the slave narrative genre, "The *voice* of the narrative is a white voice. For Methodists or abolitionists to express their dominance, the slave must remain silent" (510). It is in Listwell's model and deferential behavior that Frederick Douglass' novella responds directly to this sad convention. His story features a black protagonist who articulates his own escape story while conversing with a politely silent white abolitionist. Critic Maggie Sale recognizes the novelty of this situation. She comments that Douglass' protagonist "does not need anyone to speak for him, except in his absence, and he takes on the role of speaking for his people. Washington provides the analyses and interpretations of his actions himself, and the white abolitionist is obliged and contented to follow him" ("To Make the Past" 50). Not only does Madison Washington narrate the facts of his escape, but he also reflects on his mental state and personal growth drawing conclusions about his experiences. For instance, he articulates his discovery that his wife's enslavement affects his own feeling of liberty when he states, "With her in slavery, my body, not my spirit, was free" (*The Heroic Slave* 239). This example shows how the novella's protagonist articulates his own comprehension of a particular situation. Such reasoning on the part of the slave is unheard of and unheard in the antislavery community where white leaders supply the voice of abolitionism. In his autobiographical work *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass famously documents the way that his abolitionist sponsors position themselves as the gatekeepers of meaning.

He reports being told by John A. Collins of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to “Give us the facts...we will take care of the philosophy” (*My Bondage* 272). In contrast to this situation, Douglass’ version of the ex-slave-abolitionist relationship respects the slave’s humanity and informed position as an intimate witness to the horrors of slavery. Furthermore, it more accurately reflects the real flow of information about the institution of slavery since it is the slave who conveys knowledge about slavery to the abolitionist. It behooves the abolitionist to respect the slave upon whom he is dependent for knowledge about slavery. Thus, it is surprising that the abolitionist who depends on the slave for insight appoints himself the philosophizer as is the case with Garrisonians. Finally, the fact that Douglass employs the “communal aesthetic of storytelling” instead of a more solitary form like the soliloquy to relate the hero’s escape story underscores the role of interpersonal bonding in Washington’s story. While the form of the second and third chapters displays the hero relating with another, the content deals with his growing awareness of his connection to others and the lessons learned regarding the interpersonal nature of liberty. Thus, interestingly, by way of storytelling, Washington relates his personal growth, particularly his newly learned sense of interpersonal connection. The novella appears especially interested in matching form and content in this way. Just as the soliloquy appropriately reflects the part of the novella in which Washington expresses the ideal of masculine individualism, the conversations between slave and abolitionist suitably match Washington’s learning regarding the interconnectedness of people.

The storyteller/storylistener relationship between slave and abolitionist highlights the dynamic of dependence at play in this exchange. That is, Listwell depends on Washington to satisfy his curiosity about slavery. But, dependence is a fraught issue in

the slave narrative tradition. The white sponsor and audience depend on the slave, particularly her memory and reporting, for the narrative's content. They must trust the slave's reporting. In order to appease skeptics of the black narrator, those involved in the narrative's production cast the slave's memory as perfectly accurate and unwavering. Olney argues that narratives aim to put forth an ostensibly transparent picture of slavery as it really is. In order to do this they must deny the true workings of memory. He writes that ex-slave narrators do not mention the workings of memory in their narratives "because of the premises according to which they write, one of those premises being that there is nothing doubtful or mysterious about memory: on the contrary, it is assumed to be a clear, unflinching record of events sharp and distinct that need only be transformed into descriptive language to become the sequential narrative of a life in slavery" (49). The ex-slaves must frame her work as a reliable report of facts that leaves nothing up to the imagination. Slave narratives are geared towards a skeptical and prejudiced audience that mistrusts the reporting of an African American. This mistrust results in the narrative convention that denies the narrator a human expression of memory. It motivates editors to erect elaborate staging around memory that upholds the pretense that memory works robotically. In order to further appease the skeptical audience, the ex-slave is frequently placed in the degrading position of having her narration authenticated by a white editor. William Lloyd Garrison authenticates the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* by asserting, "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS" (*Narrative* 6). This authentication

obscures the fact that memory is at play in Douglass' narrative. Instead, it presents the work as a straightforward recital of facts. Furthermore, Garrison's attestation that "I am confident..." means that he takes responsibility for the veracity of the work. This transfers the readers trust from the black narrator to the white editor, who is more reliable in the reader's eyes. Thus, the white man's authentication, rather than the narrator's intimate and direct experience with slavery, increases the work's credibility. The way the narratives handle memory and the phenomenon of authentication place white intervention in the work above the narrator's insight. Authentication reinforces white dominance and control over the ex-slave's word; and, the neutral, transparent presentation of memory denies the slave a human relationship with the mind's workings. Both of these conventions mask the true nature of dependence present in the narrative. In reality, the reader and the abolitionist depend on the slave for insight into the institution of slavery.

Madison Washington's conversations with Listwell are important because they depict the true relationship of dependence between abolitionist and ex-slave, which is that the abolitionist depends on the ex-slave for information about life under slavery. In the storytelling scene, which takes place around the fireplace in the farmer's Ohio home, Listwell is quite dependent on Washington to satisfy his curiosity about the latter's escape from slavery. For his part, the protagonist does not attempt a robotic recounting of facts. Instead, his narration flows naturally. He begins by stating, "I will try to tell you" (226). Washington's admission that he will "try" to tell the story indicates a more human relationship with memory and feelings. This term leaves room for interpretation and even fallibility. The indefinite nature of the word "try" contrasts sharply with the authentication of Solomon Northup's narrative in which the editor claims that Northup

“has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular” (*Twelve Years* 1). In a number of other instances, Douglass’ hero simply refuses to narrate particularly emotional or graphic scenes leaving it to the listener and reader to fill in the details. For instance, he declines to narrate his reunion with his wife by stating, “Our meeting can be more easily imagined than described” (*The Heroic Slave* 227). This sentence shows the protagonist’s sensitivity to the emotional scene of the reunion. Emotion, not a robotic repetition of facts, is at play in Listwell’s narration. This sentence, which refuses to relate certain details, highlights the fact that Washington is the owner of his story and, as such, he has the liberty to narrate as he pleases. Since Listwell depends on Washington’s narration, he must grapple with such omissions. In like fashion, the text’s narrator makes omissions with which the reader must grapple. For instance, the text refuses to satisfy some gawkers’ interest in scenes of human brutality by excluding details of the slave gang’s tortured march to the Richmond auction. It reads, “We pass over the hurry and bustle, the brutal vociferations of the slave-drivers in getting their unhappy gang in motion for Richmond; and we need not narrate every application of the lash to those who faltered in the journey” (*The Heroic Slave* 240). Such narration forces the audience to trust that the march to Richmond is horrific without providing specific details. In this way, Douglass’ work pointedly rejects the narrative techniques employed by the slave narrative editors guilty of “horror-hunting and sensation-seeking” (Sekora 501). Some slave narratives display brutal scenes of violence against the slave as a way to increase readership and win converts to abolitionism. Such works employ base tactics that sacrifice the dignity of the slave in order to achieve a particular goal. Such scenes reinforce negative images of African Americans by

recreating images of them being treated as less than human. They do this to arouse sympathy for the slave based on corporeal injustice similar to the way one would feel sympathy for a tortured animal. Such scenes do nothing to promote the humanity of the slave and picture her as a thinking and reasoning human being as is done in *The Heroic Slave*. Furthermore, images of brutality against slaves showcase white action and power over blacks lives. On the contrary, Douglass overtly refuses to employ this cheap device in his novella. His work is not interested in winning converts to his cause by depicting black people at the height of their humiliation. He aims to preserve the dignity of the slave with positive imagery such as his hero's successful revolt. Furthermore, the narrator's refusal to describe the slave gang's march to auction reminds the reader of her state of dependence. That is, the reader depends on the narrator for information. In reality, Douglass, the black author, decides what the reader can access in the text. As the gatekeeper of textual omissions, Douglass exercises control over his novella. This author similarly withholds information from the audience in his personal narrative as well. He directly announces that he will not provide the details of his personal escape from slavery. He writes, "I now come to that part of my life during which I planned, and finally succeeded in making, my escape from slavery. But before narrating any of the peculiar circumstances, I deem it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction (*Narrative* 70). The command and authority that Douglass exercises in his writing is unquestionably unique for the slave narrative genre. Olney indicates that Douglass is singular, particularly regarding his narrative abilities, when he writes, "There is, however, only one Frederick Douglass among the ex-slaves who told their stories" (Olney 56). The textual omissions of Douglass' works force the

reader to reckon with the amount and type of information provided. They remind the reader of his dependence on the ex-slave narrator. *The Heroic Slave*'s protagonist who wields power over white men and who narrates his story as he sees fit are testaments to the great control and independence that Douglass expresses over his story.

In the antebellum North, it is common for the ex-slave to depend on the white benefactor for help establishing herself in the North and for help in the fight for emancipation. But, for Douglass, such a state of dependence is undesirable. He considers it a state of degradation and disrespect. In "An Address to the Colored People of the United States," Douglass asserts, "independence is an essential condition of respectability. To be dependent, is to be degraded...We do not mean that we can become entirely independent of all men; that would be absurd and impossible, in the social state. But we mean that we must become equally independent with other members of the community" (120). Based on his writings, the type of "independence" that Douglass envisions is distinct from the individualism or "solitary male heroism" mentioned by Yarborough. Instead, he imagines the African American community, not just a solitary actor, as moving away from its dependence on the abolitionists' and white sympathizers' charity and benevolence, which is frequently expressed in the form of guardianship and patronization. Douglass is clear that total independence is impossible and unrealistic. His phrase "equally independent" suggests something more along the lines of an interdependent relationship with others. *The Heroic Slave* supports this understanding because it features constant interactions between black and white characters in which both parties participate in an exchange of knowledge and assistance. Yet, the novella reverses the typical scenario in which the white abolitionist exerts control over and

manipulates her ex-slave counterpart. Instead, it is the black hero who is featured expressing power over white men. His powerful use of language is one medium by which he affects others. For example, his impassioned soliloquy is responsible for Listwell's conversion to abolitionism. After secretly listening to Washington in the Virginian woods, the farmer proclaims, "From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough..." (223). In this scene, the protagonist and his words transform Listwell. In this way, Washington exerts a form of influence and power over the farmer. Additionally, *The Heroic Slave* figures a model for African American independence in Madison Washington the strong and influential leader. It partially constructs this image of Washington through his skilled and powerful use of language. While telling the story of the *Creole* slave revolt, the white Virginian sailor Grant admits to being moved by the protagonist's words. He states that Washington's speech "disarmed" him and move him to silence (245). Grant reports that Washington moved other white sailors to follow his orders by employing a "tone from which there was no appeal" (246). Grant's account testifies to the power of the protagonist's language and its centrality in the rebellion. According to Ivy Wilson's article "On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and 'The Heroic Slave,'" the white *Creole* crewmembers "are held captive by Washington physically and orally—equally" (265). Wilson's choice of words that the white sailors are "held captive" by Washington accurately describes the reversal of affairs that occurs in the revolt. The protagonist and the other eighteen slaves, who were once themselves held captive to white power, later reverse this scenario when they capture their oppressors. This is a prime example of how the novel features African American power. Even though the hero's physical strength

partially subdues the white crewmembers, the work more prominently displays his rhetorical ability. In this way, it figures him as strong and intelligent.

Frederick Douglass argues that it is crucial for African Americans to independently lead the antislavery cause. This idea reoccurs in Douglass' writings. To him, those principally affected by the institution of slavery ought most to fight for its repeal. He outlines this idea in his work titled "What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?" He writes, "Our white friends can and are rapidly removing the barriers to our improvement, which themselves have set up; but the main work must be commenced, carried on, and concluded by our-selves...all the helps or hindrances with which we may meet on earth, can never release us from this high and heaven-imposed responsibility" ("What Are" 1-2). The term "main work" above signifies the responsibility of African Americans in emancipation while leaving open the possibility of help from outside. As discussed above, instead of advocating for a completely isolated African American independence, Douglass seems to allow for interdependence provided that black individuals head the struggle. *The Heroic Slave* models the injunction above in an interaction between Madison Washington and Listwell. The farmer supplies Washington with three files, which he carries on board the *Creole* and uses to break his chains. Free of their fetters, he and other slaves successfully carry out the insurrection. In this way, Washington performs the "main work" of liberation, and Listwell, the good abolitionist, provides supportive help. Maggie Sale recognizes the important secondary role that the farmer Listwell plays in Washington's liberation act. She maintains that Listwell "does not lead the struggle, nor determine its shape or outcome; he simply provides what aid his more privileged position enables him to lend. Listwell provides a means but not a motive

or a method” (“To Make the Past” 48-49). Sale’s observation points out how white privilege can be used to aid the slave rather than dominate him. Ultimately, the “motive” or “method” must come from the slave himself since his own liberty is at stake. This scene models a way in which white abolitionist sympathizers can assist with emancipation while upholding respect for the African American community’s volition, vision, and leadership. It also models for African Americans the work that “must be commenced, carried on, and concluded” by them. The cooperation between slave and abolitionist in this scene directly challenges the approach to abolitionism advanced by William Lloyd Garrison. John Sekora outlines Garrison’s approach writing, “What Garrison prefers is an unequivocal announcement of white hegemony: a statement drafted by men like himself to direct freedmen to their political duty...Garrison would have important decisions made by white people talking to white people” (509). This paternalistic and domineering attitude lacks respect for the black population’s needs and desires. It leaves no room for the black community to formulate and voice its own interests. By taking over antislavery messaging and campaigning, the white community denies blacks’ needs and right to self-determination. Furthermore, Sekora posits that, Garrisonian abolitionism is a self-serving enterprise. It is about satisfying their own consciences above meeting the needs of African Americans. He writes that “neither Garrison nor Phillips was normally concerned with black goals. Garrison said his ultimate intention was not to end slavery but to compel men to do their duty, and Phillips announced proudly, ‘If we never free a slave, we have at least freed ourselves in the effort to emancipate our brother man’...even before they translated the goal of abolition to mean repentance by white America for the sin of slavery, they were in essence

ignoring black demands—literary, economic, or political...they could, with impunity, be antislavery without being advocates of black values” (504). Douglass, who works closely with the Garrisonian abolitionists in the 1840s, recognizes their deafness to “black values.” He documents how they direct the antislavery cause by attempting to control his speech in his second narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Given the behavior of abolitionists, it is logical that Douglass calls for African Americans to reclaim the lead role in this matter. After all, slavery is a looming threat that affects all African Americans. And, since slaves more to gain in this fight, their commitment to this cause is likely stronger.

Frederick Douglass’ argument that African Americans should perform the “main work” in emancipation is supported by the fact that slavery threatens this community particularly and the theory that this community’s commitment to freedom is likely stronger. Just as the risks and rewards for each party involved in abolitionism will vary, so will their dedication to the cause. Frederick Douglass’ writings reveal that for current and former slavers there is much to be gained in freedom. In some instances, slavery is a fate worse than death, which means that slaves in this position have less to lose in the fight for liberty. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he recounts how a man who “found fault with his master” was “chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death” (23). The phrase “more unrelenting than death” signals the omnipotence of slave masters. Their control extends to every aspect of the slave’s life. On the other hand, death is finite; it places a limit on the master’s power. For some slaves that suffer from constant torture from violent masters, death may appear

as a relief. Or, when faced with punishment like being sold to the deep South where slavery conditions are generally worse, risking death in an escape or a rebellion presents as a viable alternative. Similar to the case of the slave mentioned in the textual moment above, Madison Washington's master attempts to sell him to the deep South to punish him for trying to rescue his wife. Washington informs Listwell that he "was sold on condition of [his] being taken South. Their motive is revenge" (*The Heroic Slave* 239). Were it not for the *Creole* rebellion, Madison Washington would have suffered this fate. Considering his predicament, the protagonist's calculation to risk his life for freedom appears logical. Even before his initial escape from slavery, Washington weighs the risks and rewards of fleeing the South in his soliloquy. From his calculation, he concludes that the possibility of obtaining freedom outweighs the risks involved in being recaptured or killed. He claims, "I have nothing to lose. 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" (221-2). His claim that "I have nothing to lose" pointedly outlines the slave's predicament. There remains so much to be gained on the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line for many slaves. For someone plagued by a life that is "a burden and a curse," the decision to seek freedom may be quite clear. In his meditation, Madison Washington discovers that he has a stronger motivation to risk his life in the pursuit of freedom than to not act. The protagonist's situation demonstrates how some slaves' desire for liberty may outweigh the real possibility of death.

The choice between acting on of behalf of the slave's liberty and not acting is not as clear in the white farmer Listwell's case. His stay in Virginia tests his commitment to

the antislavery cause. The text reveals that this character has much to lose personally and less to gain from the struggle for emancipation. In turn, this affects his actions. According to Maggie Sale, in aiding Washington, Listwell risks “his farm, and perhaps his liberty and even life in Virginia” (“To Make the Past” 49). Sale’s analysis points out that Listwell has the benefits of property and a free life, which are strong forces that pull him away from acting in the name of abolitionism. Because Listwell’s risk of personal injury is high, his moral code breaks down when faced with the options of helping Washington and decrying slavery. According to the novella, to disclose his “real character and sentiments would, to say the least, be imparting intelligence with the certainty of seeing it and himself both abused” (237). For this reason, Listwell chooses to conceal both thereby reluctantly betraying his conviction that it is the “immediate duty of every man to cry out against” slavery (ibid.). He reasons that it is “wiser to trust the mercy of God for his soul, than the humanity of slave-traders for his body” (ibid.). His broken resolves—there are more than one—demonstrate that the threat of bodily and property harm is a large deterrent to speaking on behalf of another, not to mention acting on behalf of another. The white abolitionist is not directly affected and threatened by slavery as is the case with African Americans; therefore, his level of commitment to emancipation reflects this. Listwell again disappoints when he initially refuses to assist Washington who is chained to the slave gang headed to the Richmond slave market. He tells Washington, “I fear I can do nothing for you. Put your trust in God, and bear your sad lot with the manly fortitude which becomes a man. I shall see you at Richmond, but don’t recognize me” (240). The farmer’s hollow claim that “I fear I can do nothing for you” does not accurately reflect his predicament. He technically “can” do many things

for Washington; however, he chooses not to act at this time. His decision not to act reveals that abolitionism is an elected activity for some, especially more privileged individuals such as free whites. Since Listwell is not personally threatened by the race-based slavery supported by the United States, he does not experience the same pressure to eliminate this threat and to struggle on behalf of other slaves. In other words, abolitionism does not compel the white northerner to act in the same way that a shared sense of bondage forces Madison Washington to hazard his life for others. While in Canada, the hero is acted upon by his ever-present knowledge of his wife's enslavement, that is, the interdependent and psychological aspect of liberty. This experience is alien to Listwell who cannot comprehend Washington's decision to return South in pursuit of his wife's liberty. When Washington explains why he returns South, Listwell responds, "it was madness to have returned" (239). The tie to the enslaved, particularly his enslaved wife, is felt stronger for Washington who is intimately familiar with the horrors of slavery. *The Heroic Slave* presents two different levels of risk and consequent levels of commitment to freeing the enslaved in the characters of Washington and Listwell. To the farmer, who is free, who is not personally threatened by slavery, and who owns property, fighting slavery is an option. The punishment for abolitionist activism ranges from a loss of property to a loss of life. To Madison Washington, who is enslaved both psychologically and physically, who is personally threatened by slavery, and who owns nothing, arguably not even his own body, fighting slavery is an obligation. He has little to lose and everything to gain. With the two previously mentioned characters, *The Heroic Slave* presents the way in which race and social position affect one's dedication to abolitionism. The idea put forth in the comparison of said characters, which is that

African Americans are intrinsically and more steadfastly tied to the cause of emancipation, supports Douglass' call for the black population to lead and perform the "main work" of the antislavery mission. Moreover, not only does this scene present Listwell's dedication to helping the enslaved as optional, it demonstrates just how quickly the help of the abolitionist can falter. It reveals this with the apparent ease and speed with which Listwell abandons his friend. When he pleads that Washington not recognize him in Richmond, he effectively cuts off all ties with Washington. One takeaway from this situation is that location challenges and complicates the abolitionist's actions. Like his broken pledge to "cry out against" slavery, his willingness to ignore Washington in Richmond suggests that the abolitionist's fervor may dissipate when the stakes are higher. This is not the case for the protagonist. His actions in the South are bold. This is where Washington is most effective in liberating fellow slaves. Although this chapter demonstrates a sure weakness in the novella's abolitionist character, by its close, this character changes his mind about helping Washington and, in Richmond, he slips his friend files to break his fetters.

Conclusion

The fourth and final part of the narrative deals with the uprising on board the *Creole* slave transporter. It features the protagonist as both the leader and a member of the group of nineteen slaves who win their freedom and that of over one hundred others. Madison Washington's adroit use of language during the rebellion, at which point he alternates between singular and plural first-person pronouns, demonstrates his integration into the slave body as well as his leadership role. For example, he responds to one of the *Creole* crewmember's accusations that he is a "murderous villain" by declaring:

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. (*The Heroic Slave* 245)

The protagonist initially refers to himself in the singular in order to respond to the “murderous villain” accusation that is specifically directed at him. This “I” statement exposes him above all others to the white sailor’s criticism. Yet, when he refers to the act of liberation, the hero includes himself with the others by employing the term “we.” This term refers to the group of nineteen without explicitly naming specific actors. In this way, the novella represents the fight for liberty as a collective action while figuring Washington as its leader. The hero’s dual role as both leader and member of the collective is also evident when he later declares, “My men have won their liberty...We are nineteen in number” (245). Even though the novella portrays Madison Washington as a model leader, a reading that focuses primarily on this role misses the lesson of collective action that the work conveys. Such a reading may view him as an independent revolutionary agent who outshines his peers. Critic Richard Yarborough seems to see Washington along these lines. He interprets the novella’s failure to name any of the other mutineers in this scene as evidence of the work’s interest in masculine individualism. He claims that “although there were reportedly several key instigators of the *Creole* revolt, Douglass omits mention of all but Washington, thereby highlighting the individual nature of his protagonist’s triumph as well as the man’s superiority in comparison to his fellow blacks” (176). It is true that Douglass’ novella is decidedly dedicated to the story of one man, the heroic slave. But, it is dedicated to depicting this man’s growth, particularly his

realization that he is part of the slave collective. That is, the novella focuses on one man who learns that his fate is inextricably tied to that of others. Madison Washington's triumph is his moral and intellectual growth, which is a realization not of his individuality or superiority but his connectivity to other slaves. The rebellion scene is the culmination of this critical life lesson.

The final chapter spotlights three facets of Madison Washington's character that make him a good model for antislavery leadership. He is physically able, intelligent, and beneficent. His characterization as strong, capable, and willing is present throughout the novella. However, the revolt scene ideally captures this. The white sailor Grant reports that, upon charging after Washington, "he pushed me back with his strong, black arm, as though I had been a boy of twelve" (245). With this, Madison Washington embodies Douglass' call that African Americans participate centrally in the struggle for emancipation. For the author, this cause must be led and fulfilled by the black community. Douglass writes, "For our part, we despise a freedom and equality obtained for us by others, and for which we have been unwilling to labor" ("What Are" 5). *The Heroic Slave* presents an adept hero whose valiant actions respond to these words. The protagonist is also intelligent, which is a quality that contradicts stereotypes about slaves. The work implicitly makes the point that language functions as a sign of intelligence and that Douglass' adroit use of language indicates his intelligence. While reporting on the *Creole* affair, Grant states, "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" (*The Heroic Slave* 244). With this characterization, the author directly replies to his former abolitionist sponsors who perpetuate negative stereotypes

about African Americans' intelligence and articulateness. In fact, they discourage Douglass from speaking articulately in order to increase his "authenticity" as an orator. They advise Douglass, "Better have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned" (*My Bondage* 272). In this way, his colleagues degrade him by asking him to disguise his intelligence and thereby come down to the stereotypical intellectual level of the slave. This constitutes an instance in which abolitionists attempt to curb the ex-slave's voice in an effort to increase his believability and advance their own cause. In doing so, they perpetuate negative images about the people they supposedly help. Considering the abolitionists' humiliating treatment of their counterparts, it comes as no surprise that Douglass demands that African Americans reclaim the work of emancipation. His novella further supports this call by exhibiting how black and white abolitionists' level of commitment varies based on life circumstances. Because the slave has much more to gain from abolition her dedication to this cause may be stronger and more steadfast. For the white abolitionist, he envisions a supportive secondary role that respects African American self-determination. In addition to showing the hero as strong and intelligent, the final chapter casts Madison Washington as beneficent and merciful. It conveys this through the character's words and actions. For instance, Washington restrains a mutineer from attacking the sailor Grant. According to Maggie Sale in her work "Critiques from Within: Antebellum Projects of Resistance," his honorable behavior distinguishes the hero from the dominant expression of manly struggle, which condones excessive and racist violence. She writes,

Washington's bravery, physical prowess, and ability to fight for his freedom are tempered by a moral restraint that recognizes that natural rights of his opponents, regardless of their race. Thus Douglass's heroic model insists that moral and ethical considerations must transcend racial

distinctions. Implicitly then, this manly model critiques those hegemonic representations of Anglo-Saxon manhood that supported and exalted an unrestrained aggressiveness toward peoples of color. (Sale 703)

As a model heroic black liberator, Madison Washington surpasses the Euroamerican revolutionary ideal, and he contradicts the stereotypes that deem slaves unintelligent and violent savages. With the image of this hero, Frederick Douglass puts forth a new revolutionary ideal. It is one that values collective liberty, racial equality, and black leadership. Therefore, although the text likens Washington's struggle for liberty to that of the founding fathers, the similarities between their principles are in many regards illusory. Even their conception of liberty differs. The masculine individualism that Yarborough incorrectly attributes to Douglass' writing is part of the forefather's version of freedom. The founding fathers, many of whom are slaveholders, fight for an exclusionary freedom that only applies to certain individuals. On the other hand, Douglass believes in equality and freedom for all. His work shows how slavery compromises freedom. And, the idea that liberty is psychological and interdependent, which his novella advances, demonstrates the interconnectivity among the oppressed and those who desire freedom. Subsequently, lessons about connection, unity, and self-sacrificing action abound in Douglass' work. The final chapter of *The Heroic Slave* best illustrates such lessons.

This chapter offers a suitable culmination to a story designed to exhibit Madison Washington's personal development and to respond to controlling and condescending practices in the world of slave narrative literature. As in earlier chapters, this one displays a close relationship between form and content. The narrative voice conveys Washington's evolving sense of collective liberty. It signals that he is part of a collective

with a common fate and interest in securing each other's freedom. The description of this event unfolds via a conversation between the white Virginian sailors Tom Grant and Jack Williams. The text describes this conversation as one which "throws some light on the subsequent history, not only of Madison Washington, but of the hundred and thirty human beings with whom we last saw him chained" (241). This moment locates the protagonist amid the slave gang. It presents him not as a standalone hero but as a member of a group. This illustrates the story's new interest in Washington as he relates to others. Moreover, because this chapter plays out in a conversation between two sailors, the protagonist's speech is conveyed indirectly through Grant. This sailor approximates the hero's voice and words, which comprise only a small part of this scene. Thus, instead of being the subject of his own narration, he is the object of Grant's. This technique mutes the protagonist's personal narrative and places him in the context of a larger story; it weaves Washington into the fabric of a group action. At the same time, *The Heroic Slave* never totally forgets its hero; he is simply at the center of a story that now takes in a wider view. Overall, the work progressively zooms out in order to encompass larger events and to capture the hero's growing concern for and collaboration with others. The soliloquy at the beginning of the novella presents Madison Washington prominently as a solitary actor. He is mainly concerned with securing his own freedom by physically relocating to Canada. The self-focused declaration, "*I shall be free*" (222), captures his attitude in the beginning. The middle two chapters, which picture the hero in conversation with Listwell, portray him interacting with others. His concern for his wife begins to influence his actions and eventually forces him to return in pursuit of her liberty. Washington and Listwell cultivate a friendship through storytelling. And, the

protagonist's sympathy for an elderly slave demonstrates the role that shared experiences under slavery plays in uniting people. The final chapter withdraws the protagonist from the fore and places him inside Tom Grant's narration of a larger event. By this time in the novella, he has become part of a collective body, willing to fight alongside others for his freedom and that of over one hundred and thirty others. In this chapter, he fully realizes his heroism as himself and others. This progression accompanies the protagonist's intellectual and personal growth, described above as his "psychic journey." In his journey, the protagonist's understanding of liberty particularly as it concerns his connection to others evolves. This is a dominant feature of Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*; and, as such, it constitutes one of the ways in which the author intentionally responds to the slave narrative traditions that ignore the ex-slave narrator's personal development and that portray the narrator as a solitary actor. Overall, the author exercises his skill and authority as a writer by effectively responding to the conventions of slave narrative literature that strip the narrator of his voice, control, and unique character. With *The Heroic Slave*, a product of his imagination and intellect, Frederick Douglass asserts his own intrinsic worth, freedom, and independence from the Garrisonian community.

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