

## On Heroism

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What has been missing from so much experimental writing has been the passionate will to dominate reality as well as the laws of art. This will is the true source of the experimental attitude. We who struggle with form and with America should remember Eidothea's advice to Menelaus when in the *Odyssey* he and his friends are seeking their way home. She tells him to seize their father, Proteus, and to hold him fast "however he may struggle and fight. He will turn into all sorts of shapes to try you," she says, "into all the creatures that live and move upon the earth, into water, into blazing fire; but you must hold him fast and press him all the harder. When he is himself, and questions you in the same shape that he was when you saw him in his bed, let the old man go; and then, sir, ask him which god it is who is angry, and how you shall make your way homewards over the fish-giving sea."

—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

For an understanding of the post-slave generations, the history of slave resistance is less important than the legends concerning it, though the two by no means invariably contradict each other.

—Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*

## ***Introduction—Frederick Douglass, The Negro and the Moving Image***

*On 3 December 1861 Douglass delivered an address on the value and enduring quality of photographs as part of the Fraternity Course lectures at Boston's Tremont Temple. Departing from his usual subject matter, Douglass also deviated from his customary speaking procedure by reading a prepared lecture. The Boston correspondent of the Springfield (Mass.) Republican thought it "came near being a total failure; the Speaker only saved himself by switching off suddenly from his subject, and pitching in on the great question of the day"—slavery and the Civil War. The adoption of a new topic prompted the conclusion that the 'closing part of the address, though disjointed and rambling, gave evidence of some of Douglass' old power, and the audience applauded...relieved from what they feared would be...an evening without result.'* (The Douglass Papers, slide 452)

*I am at liberty to touch the element out of which our pictures spring. There are certain groups and combinations of facts and features, some pleasant [,] some sad, which possess in large measure the quality of pictures, and affect is accordingly. They are thought pictures—the outstanding headlands of the measuring shores of life and are points to steer by on the broad sea of thought and experience. They body forth in living forms and colors, the ever varying lights and shadows of the soul.* (Frederick Douglass, The Douglass Papers, 459)

[**Setting**] A Negro is seated before [the] new technology. It is as if he is seated in front of a time machine. He will be cast both into the past and into the future. In some photographs he opens his hands, in others they are closed; in some photographs he looks down into the camera, others past the camera, and still, in others straight through the lens. His clothes are usually pressed, but sometimes the inlay of his suit vest is left [intentionally?] crooked and wrinkled, peaking through austerity with a slight hint of vulnerability. He sits again and again and again for countless photos and countless moments of replication. All the while he knows...*We all get [in the end] what we [have] come for.*

Frederick Douglass was the most photographed man of 19<sup>th</sup> century United States of America.<sup>1</sup> He controlled and captured his image—arrested the frame, and told (and foretold) his legacy. The ‘image’ of the Negro in this century, perhaps more than at any other previous time, was being contested. At the center of the issues of slavery, states’ rights, federalism, and the fate of the nation as a whole was the *idea* of the Negro—as chattel, as ‘man’, as Christian, as brother, as servant, and as citizen. For Douglass, photography was central in the narrative telling of the Negro and the nation; it articulated equally the aesthetic and political dimensions of presentation and representation. But, what is more, photography, for Douglass, tapped into that deeply moral aspect of human life, and as such, had more moral and social influence than even that of laws.<sup>2</sup> For Douglass, it is in the merging of the aesthetic and political with the social and moral that photography ultimately could be revelatory, disclosing and activating the highest ends of humanity: self-improvement through self-conscious recognition of human dignity and human freedom—in short, liberty, freedom and liberation. In the broadest of strokes, then, the *idea* and the *image* of the Negro could transform the nation.

Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith begin their edited collection, *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (2012) with the following insight, “To be sure, photography was a watershed invention. So profound was the influence of photography upon antebellum and postbellum American life and thought that, like today’s digital technology, early photography shifted the very ground upon which the production and circulation of knowledges, scientific and philosophical, had set only a half century earlier.” They argue that this new technology, in particular, the daguerreotype<sup>3</sup> shape our phenomenologically centered modern visual-material culture. They go to clarify what they mean: “The deep impact of war, emancipation, mechanization, expansionism, and late-century immigration on American social life and identity was in no small way secured by the aid of early photography and its rapid advance over the century.” (2). Here, Wallace and Smith echo the insights Douglass offered in his speech, delivered in Boston’s Tremont Temple on the relationship between art, morality, politics, and abolitionism, “Pictures and Progress” (1861) where Douglass notes,

Byron says, a man always looks *dead*, when his biography is written. The same is even more true when his picture is taken. There is ever something statue like about such men. See them when or where you will, and unless they are totally off guard, they are either serenely sitting, or rigidly standing in what they fancy their best attitude for a picture.

The stern serenity of our photographic processes, in tracing the features, and forms of men, might deter some of us from operation, but for that most kind of natural Providence, by which, most men easily see in themselves points of beauty and excellence, which wholly elude the observation of all others. (455)

What Wallace and Smith and Douglass’ above quotes share in common is the insight concerning the phenomenological truth—that is, lived or living truth—of photographs is their capacity to generate an *emotional reality*—this, they argue, is what has the capacity to transform both the individual and the nation. The image generates an emotional reaction, emotional ‘facts’ of reality, and come to constitute not only what is ‘true’ but

also the manner in which and through which this ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ come to be interpreted as such. And, the photograph, like the word, because it can be staged, also can be controlled; and, thus, is ‘truth’ element, can also be controlled. And, like words, pictures work to freeze an image, a moment of temporal existence, for the individual and their circumstance to contradict or confirm [live up to, down to, or within] that moment of language or photographic image. Yet, for African Americans, their image had been constructed from the outside, by white eyes and the white imagination. As John Stauffer reminds us,

Most white Americans in the 1850s believed that blacks were innately inferior, incapable of self-government, and thus unable to participate in civil society, and they used pictures—though usually not photographs—to show it. Scientists as well as artists resorted to pictures. In 1854 the respected ethnologists Josiah Knott and George Glidden published an influential and popular book called *Types of Mankind*. In it they included numerous engravings that evoked a strong affinity between blacks and gorillas. The first printing sold out immediately, and the second edition, published the same year as Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, featured an engraving that compared the heads and skulls of a ‘creole negro,’ a ‘young chimpanzee,’ and a *statue* of the white *Apollo Belvidere* (*The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*, 52-54; emphasis in original)

The significance of the Daguerreotype, then, for Douglass cannot be understated: it allowed African Americans to control their image, tell their own story, shape their own narrative, and counter all that was said of them and their humanity. For Douglass, the Daguerreotype allowed African Americans to participate in the expansion of humanity itself through the confrontation of the image and idea of the Negro that confronted many of the national tropes. It is this capacity to produce and to be moved by photographs that fundamentally defines humanity in general, and this confrontation of images that allows for social and moral betterment. Douglass writes,

I have said that man is a picture making and a picture appreciating animal and have pointed out that fact as an important distinction between us and other animals. The point will bear emphasis.

It lies, directly in the path of what I conceive to be a key to the *great mystery of life and progress*. The process by which man is able to invert his own subjective consciousness, into the highest objective form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of mans [sic] nature. (461; emphasis mine)

The ‘inversion’ of one’s own subjective consciousness into a higher objective form can be understood as this freezing image/pose. For Douglass, this transformation or inversion is what constitutes ‘man’ as distinct from the rest of nature itself. Yet, it must be noted that Douglass is speaking specifically of photography as *the method* through which this human distinction comes to be understood.<sup>4</sup> Photography, then, becomes for Douglass, the manner in which and through which presentation and representation are mapped onto *and* the axis point for understanding and shaping ‘reality’.<sup>5</sup>

But Douglass also warns us that “this picture making faculty is flung out into the world...is subject to a wild scramble between contending interests and forces. It is a mighty power—and the side to which it goes has achieved a wonderous [sic] conquest. For the habit we adopt, the master we obey in making our subjective nature objective, giving it form, colour [sic], space, action and utterance, is the all important thing to ourselves and our surrounding.” (461) As such, rather than the manipulation of the images, the transformation of the public image of the Negro requires that the image of the Negro—in this case, in Daguerreotype, especially that of Douglass—be left to “like songs...be left to make there [sic] own way in the world. All they can reasonably ask of us is that we place them on the wall, in the best light, and for the rest allow them to speak for themselves.” (458)

Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith similarly argue in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American identity* that, for Douglass, photography offered a new way of ‘seeing’ the reality of the war and the reality of slavery in a way that had yet to be available. They note,

[t]he technologies of photographic vision and the cultural meaning of photographs were themselves advanced, if not asymmetrically, by the very questions of freedom, racial and otherwise, that emancipation de-philosophized...[T]he photographs thus did much more than simply reflect in substance and shadow the wider social, political, and material calculus of the Atlantic world. They conditioned a modern way of seeing, physically conveying the new visual code in their material circulation between persons and places as if themselves in search of an ideal philosophy and form. (3)

More broadly [than shifting or compressing the image of the Negro], photography not only shifted how Americans saw themselves, and how they experienced their contemporary moment, but helped to expand the political imagination as to the optics of the nation at war with itself: the meaning and experience of the Civil War, and the presence and the role of African-Americans and the newly arriving European immigrants. In its capacity for shifting identity and expanding social imagination, Douglass’ view of photography—the expression of aesthetic experience in man’s capacity for inversion—helps to link the political *to* the aesthetic (and vice versa). It is this possibility for social and political progress spurred on by photography (and the photographic image), that, for Douglass, renders possible the perfecting of the human being toward the moral.

Political commentator David Brooks offers some insight into how the aesthetics of photography could have political significance, especially for Douglass, in its capacity to “reteach people how to see” when he writes,

We are often under the illusion that seeing is a very simple thing. You see something, which is taking information in, and the you evaluate, which is the hard part. But in fact perception and evaluation are the same thing. We carry around unconscious mental maps, built by nature and experience, that organize how we scan the world and how we instantly interpret and order what we see. With these portraits, Douglass was redrawing people’s unconscious mental maps. He was erasing old associations about blackness and replacing them with new ones...he

was taking an institution like slavery, which had seemed so inevitable, and leading people to perceive it as arbitrary. He was creating a *new ideal* of a just society and a fully alive black citizen, and therefore making current reality look different in the light of that ideal.<sup>6</sup>

But Douglass was not speaking of photographs, specifically, that is, beyond or outside of other aesthetic forms of experience, presentation and/or representation. Rather, photography becomes *one* mode of revealing the expressible human element in human *being*. He writes

But it is not of such pictures that I am here to speak exclusively. I am at liberty to touch *the element out of which our pictures spring*. There are certain groups and combinations of facts and features, some pleasant, some sad, which possess in large measure the quality of pictures, and affect us accordingly. They are *thought pictures*—the outstanding headlands of the meandering shores of life and are points to steer by on the broad sea of thought and experience. They body forth in living forms and colors, the every varying lights and shadows of the soul.

It is worthy of remark to begin with that of all the animal world man alone has a passion for pictures. Neither dogs nor Elephants ranging nerest [sic] to man in point of intelligence, show any sensation of pleasure in the presence of the highest form of art... The power to make, and to appreciate pictures belongs to man exclusively.

...Rightly viewed, the whole soul of man is a sort of picture gallery, a grand panaroma [sic], in which all the great facts of universe, in tracing things of time and things of eternity are painted. The love of pictures stands first among our passional [sic] inclinations, and is among the last to forsake us in our pilgrimage here. (459; emphasis mine)

The element out of which photographs spring—that is, the element of their *production* (inverting subjective consciousness to objective form) and *consumption* (recognition of the objective form as expressive of one's subjective ideal)—does not strictly belong to photography, but, broadly speaking, belongs to aesthetic expression. Aesthetic expression, in short, is that through which we transform our multitudinous experiences into meaningful expression to organize our social, political, private and public worlds.

As such, it is not a surprise that Douglass relates photography with other forms of aesthetic expression, in particular literature and music. For Douglass, photography and music were both aesthetic forms of moral and social influence. “As to the moral and social influences of pictures,” Douglass writes, “it would hardly be extravagant to say of it, what Moore has said of that of ballads, give me the making of a nations ballads, and I care not who has the making of its Laws. The pictures and the ballads are alike, if not equally social forces—the one reaching and swaying the heart by the eye, and the other by the ear.” (456) Later in the speech, Douglass deepened this metaphor, reflecting on the relationship between the phenomenology of an aesthetic experience, the process of knowledge formation from within this experience, and the role of the imagination in human transformation. He writes of a child sitting on a bluff looking up, into the sky, transfixed by movement in the firmament and the moving images in the clouds;

movements, which, for Douglass, are akin to a child hearing “the Divine harmonies, of scientific [?] music: and the child experiences one with every new object, by means of which it is brought into a nearer and fuller acquaintance with its own subjective nature. With every step he attains a larger, fuller and freer range of vision.” (460) What is significance, here, in Douglass relating aesthetic experience to the fruition of subjective nature in a child, or that person not yet imprinted by social meaning and understanding. Rather, the child is given over instead to the pure experience of the inner harmony of him/herself with all of reality.<sup>7</sup>

As an element of aesthetic experience, literature—in this chapter, Douglass’ first and only historical fiction, ‘The Heroic Slave’—has a way of both capturing the imagination, but also, through the imagination, helping to shape our thoughts on reality itself. Literature, thus, seems to fall under the realm of the aforementioned ‘thought pictures’ and is akin to music and to picture-making in that in literature—in particular, fiction—one is not limited to the realm of objective truth, but is open to the realm of subjective interpretive conversion of ‘objective truth’ to a higher truth—one that rings true in the spirit. Yet, within a fictionalized prose in particular, man as subject is constructed: the image is constantly moving for it bears within itself no place or time—at least not in the temporal finality of history—but bears within itself a sort of flow called forth by the imagination (if autobiography were to be read in a similar fashion, then, it, too like fiction would reveal more about the imagination and desire of the author than it does about historical ‘fact’.)

For Douglass, history and historical facts were understood not merely as material ‘facts’ about the material world [what Douglass refers to as the machinery of the world], but to a reflection of what is *behind* the machinery—that which animates the material world, as that which animates the inversion of subjective experience into objective reality, “the element out of which our pictures spring”—which, for Douglass, was the aesthetic force of nature (465). Douglass, here, is not merely discussing the role of ‘facts’ within the historical narrative or historical argument; rather, what is of central concern is that which comes to situate history as such for what it is—how do we come to frame ‘history’ as such as a fact or a moment?<sup>8</sup> But, what is more, to understand the contemporary moment, for Douglass, one needs to think beyond the dominant ideologies or tropes that mark the ‘historical moment’. He writes,

In addition to the progressive lessons taught in the physical world, man has one written down in his own constitution, superior to all others.

Other animals only change the conditions of their existence in obedience to great natural causes over which they have no control. But the sublime mission of man is the *discovery of truth*—and all conquering resistance to all adverse circumstances whether moral or physical.

By the cultivation of his intellect, by the development of his natural resources, by understanding the science of his own relations to the world, man has to marvelous power of enlarging the boundaries of his own existence. (472)

In the ‘discovery of truth’ and the effect of emotion in this manner, literature may appear abstract and crafted by the author, but presents reality in a manner that is surreal in that is more real than merely ‘objective reality’—there is something in both photography and

literature that allows dually the presentation and representation of reality “both as it is and as it seems”. As such, what we get within photography and literature is an objectively true core—an emotional reality centering on specific events.<sup>9</sup> Douglass notes,

Dry logic and illaborate [sic] arguments—though perfect in all their appointments and though knitted together as a coat of mail, lays down the Law to Empty benches.

But he who speaks to the feelings, who enters the souls [sic] deepest meditations, holding the mirror up to nature, revealing the profoundist [sic] mysteries of the human heart to the eye and ear by action and by utterance, will never want for an audience...

...The dead fact is nothing without the living impression. Niagara is not fitly described when it is said to be a river of this or that volume falling over a ledge of rocks two hundred feet, nor is thunder when simply called a jarring noise. This is truth, but truth disrobed of its sublimity and glory. A kind of frozen truth, destitute of motion itself—it is incapable of producing emotion in others.

But on the other hand to give us the glory as some do without the glorified object is still a greater transgression and makes those who do it as those who beat the air.

We are all deeply affected by Hogarth’s pictures. The secret is to [be] found only in the fact that he painted life *both as it is and as it seems*. (461-2; emphasis mine)

What is clear, here, is that for Douglass, what is deemed as true is always equally phenomenological, and ultimately aesthetic. This relationship between truth, history, and fact becomes especially important for reading Douglass’ writings and his speeches, both internally (in themselves) and in terms of their chronology (how they relate to one another). As it relates to his photography lectures (“Lectures on Pictures” (1861), “The Age of Pictures” (1862), and “Pictures and Progress” (1864)), and his fictional historical narrative (“The Heroic Slave” (1852)) one must ask, what historical truths are revealed within these various phenomenological accounts and aesthetic presentational and representational forms? And, how, if at all, are these aesthetic works related to his autobiographies (*A Narrative of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881)).<sup>10</sup>

What one cannot miss is that for each of these forms and within the creative process itself, it is the exchange between consciousness and the material world, between the constructed image and inward subjectification, that affords the possibility for/of self-creation; but, the exchange also calls forth the aesthetic transfiguration of space and time—that is, the alteration of ‘reality’ within the spectrum of experience itself giving way to history and historical ‘facts’. It is in view of self-creation and the aesthetic transfiguration that fictional prose (and autobiography understood fictionally) is akin to photography in both process and outcome.

Specifically, in rendering the historical fiction, ‘The Heroic Slave’, Douglass opened up such possibilities for us and for himself to link the ‘truth’ of the photographic image with the ‘truth’ of the imagination, and with the ‘truth’ of his own

autobiographical writings. Julia Faisst notes in her essay, “Degrees of Exposure: Frederick Douglass, Daguerreotypes, and Representations of Freedom” the following

From its inception in 1839, photography was taken as an essential metaphor behind the democratic aesthetic. Douglass’ autobiographies and speeches, and in particular his first and only foray into fiction from 1853, ‘The Heroic Slave,’ were products of this increasingly ocular time... Having undergone a life-altering transformation from slave to free man, Douglass embarked on a literary journey which necessitated a threefold revision of his autobiography. In it, he takes the kind of liberties with re-writings and re-interpretations of a life-story that is generally associated with fiction writing—and produced his piece of genuine literature, ‘The Heroic Slave.’ (77; 79)

More will be said of ‘The Heroic Slave’ later. As for now, what is significant about Douglass’ literature is the general idea of capturing an ‘image’ of the Negro as figure. Which is to say, not merely what ‘reality’ is, but how it ought to be expressed and what specific expression *may* mean; and, how the expressive form is related to what ‘reality’ itself is and how it is experienced. And, we have to remember, here, that Douglass is not merely speaking of the social value of photography, nor that of merely pictorial representation as a political tool. He is concerned with how the photographic image with the political milieu and the functioning of the imagination work to produce what he terms, “the philosophy of art.” Meaning, “with the soul rather than the body, with the silence of music, rather than sound, and with the ideal forms of excellence floating before the eye of the spirit, rather than with those displayed upon dull canvass.” With this Douglass announces that there is no particular form of art with which he finds absolute investment, but the process of the art itself, “whether the voice, pen, or brush.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, as a “philosophy of art”, Douglass concerned himself with the social and political role the aesthetic had, but also the aesthetic aspects of social and political living itself.

Douglass, in highlighting the political value of aesthetic expression and form, also highlighted the *form* of politics itself *as* aesthetic. An aesthetic reading of Douglass’ literature through photography, then, offers new avenues and theories for how to approach Douglass’ text as ‘history’, ‘historical fiction,’ aesthetic theory, social and political thought, moral, epistemological, anthropological works of subjectivation—or the creation of the ‘subject’. The precision of his photographic imagination we see replicated in his literary imagination in that his literature as a form of objectification of the self into the realm of the imagination, allows us to understand both aurally and visually.

The battle of presentation, representation, and the authority of the moving and stilled ‘image’—not just the dry logic or dead facts of the Negro, but the very *idea* of the Negro, its aesthetic expressive forms and phenomenological reality—haunted Douglass himself and the nation as a whole and resonated at all levels of cultural production, and as a subversive undercurrent in Douglass political aesthetics localizes the aesthetic attribution of ‘self’ from the realm of merely objective truth and into the realm of the ‘glorified object’ that “makes those who do it as those who beat the air” to reveal “life *both as it is and as it seems*”.

***Frederick Douglass and the Paraconsistent Logic of 'The Heroic Slave': Or, the Figure of Heroism***

*The state of Virginia is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen and heroes. She has been dignified by some the mother of statesmen. History has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds... Yet not all the great ones of the Old Dominion have, by the fact of their birth-place, escaped undeserved obscurity. By some strange neglect, one of the truest, manliest, and bravest of her children—one who, in after years, will, I think, command the pen of genius to set his merits forth, holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox. Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State.*

—Frederick Douglass, 'The Heroic Slave'

*[i]rony and absurdity are not only thorns in the briarpatch in which they themselves were bred and born but also precisely what literary statement is forever trying to provide adequate terms for!*

—Albert Murray, "The Hero and the Blues"

**[The narrative]:** Imagine a man, standing alone in the woods; imagine another man, watching this man, in these same woods. The first man imagines he is alone; the second man knows that he is not. The first man—enslaved, a Negro—is confessing to God, in the form of a conversation, in the structure of a soliloquy, his wretched condition as a slave; the second man, a white man, listens, spellbound, to the confession. The second man had never considered the personal weight of enslavement before this moment; but, after this moment, now forever changed, swearing when returning home, to do something about the institution. The first man, upon confessing, is also changed; in the woods, after the confession, swearing to never again be enslaved; swearing, too, to never allow his wife to also be enslaved. Both men are witness to a sea-changing event.

**[The setting]:** A surrounding wood. On the interior [of the wood], a slave plantation. On its exterior, freedom—liberation. The interior relates to the exterior [and vice versa] in the mode of a threat: the enslavers hunt the enslaved; the enslaved hide themselves in the woods to evade capture—their evasion threatening the constitution of the enslavers.

**[The narrative and the setting]:** A Mr. Madison Washington and a Mr. Listwell, one in overhearing the other changes the nature of the other's expression: a sort of aesthetic observer effect [something like observer bias, the cognitive reality of Listwell alters the confessional state of Mr. Washington [and vice versa].

Frederick Douglass begins his fictional historical narrative, the “Heroic Slave” with a description of the ‘slave’ as chattel. He writes,

The state of Virginia is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen *and heroes*...Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State. (10-11; emphasis mine)

‘Heroism’, it seems, in part, is the constitution of liberty—if we remember, the first Governor of the state of Virginia, of notable fame for, in 1775 at the Virginia Convention, in opposition to British taxation, exclaimed, “give me liberty or give me death,” a remark held in the annals of lore as a swaying remark of the Revolutionary War. Such liberty, as Mr. Patrick Henry exhibited, was only a fraction of that of chattel given no more status than that ‘of a horse or an ox’. Ironically, as Mr. Henry’s ‘heroism’ seems to be, in part, also tied to his relationship to the greatness of his birth state, the greatness of the burgeoning American freedom (emergent out of liberty—as in, the liberty of the Revolutionary War gives rise/birth to the very *idea* of freedom—i.e., American exceptionalism through the emancipatory act of Independence), and idea of the sacrifice inherent in the necessities of human action, a man, given over to the status of chattel, who bears these same elements (of birth state, of the greatness of freedom—and the burgeoning act of emancipatory Independence—and the idea of ultimate sacrifice) is also denied the status of heroism. It seems that the concomitance of these ‘American’ features taken within the very Americanness of the chattel condition blended into the narrative telling of fictional literature revealing the ‘true’ nature and meaning of heroism and the ‘heroic’ condition. Douglass’ penning of the slave as heroic—and, in Mr. Henry’s context, *more* heroic—is marked with this opening scene, and links a Mr. Henry of notable lore with another man of notable lore, a Mr. Madison Washington, through the metaphorical similitude of their liberatory acts—Mr. Henry’s the act of Independence through words, and Mr. Washington through marronage.<sup>12</sup>

What is more, Douglass’ choice of Mr. Washington to draw out this relationship while maintaining the distinction offers something instructive about Douglass’ own political aesthetics, but also something more fundamental about African American literature. Cynthia S. Hamilton notes in her essay, “Models of Agency: Frederick Douglass and ‘The Heroic Slave,’ (2005) that

Douglass’ use of a historical figure about whom so little is known appears a somewhat quirky choice. On closer examination, however, the choice of hero becomes explicable, and the subtleties of Douglass’ narrative strategy begin to emerge. (90)

What Hamilton is alluding to here is the idea that there is something more to Douglass’ choice of Madison Washington. We must recall that Douglass had alternatives for his narrative arch (of liberty, freedom, and struggle) in Toussaint L’Ouverture, Denmark

Vesey, Nathaniel Turner, and Joseph Cinque, but *chose* Washington: this choice of Washington should shape how we read the narrative arch (and speak to us back through our earlier discussion of presentation and representation).<sup>13</sup>

Madison Washington is a figure of whom less is known, and of whom less is made.<sup>14</sup> Settled within Douglass' narrative, Washington captures an image less that of an historical figure and more of a literary technique. Not only does Douglass use Mr. Washington to tell the narrative of enslavement, liberation, and freedom, he also uses him to tell a meta-narrative about subjectivity, aesthetic approximation of 'fact', phenomenological reality, and the meaning and value of history and historical 'truth'.

Most notably, there is the ambiguity of the name itself: Madison Washington. A Mr. Madison Washington—conceptually, a blending of two names: president James Madison (1751-1836: 4<sup>th</sup> president, who, though conflicted over the morality of the institution of slavery itself, owned slaves, one of who, a Mr. Paul Jennings, after purchasing his freedom from a Mr. Daniel Webster, penned his own White House memoir in 1865, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*) and president George Washington (1732-1799: 1<sup>st</sup> president of the United States, who, himself, owned slaves; and a man, who, though his views on the institution were to change over the course of his life, still, could not, in the duration of his existence, bring himself to see their liberation).<sup>15</sup> What is more, in addition to the irony of his namesake, we also have the additional irony of narrator—Douglass uses white narrators throughout the story to guide his audience and to inform them as to Mr. Washington's character, and to his heroism and heroic action. The initial white narrator, a Mr. Listwell, sneaks upon Mr. Washington in the woods bearing his soul to God.

Following the direction of the sound, he [Mr. Listwell] descried, among the tall pines, the man [Mr. Washington] whose voice had arrested his attention. "To whom can he be speaking?" thought the traveller. "He seems to be alone." The circumstances interested him much, and he became intensely curious to know what thoughts and feelings, or, it might be, high aspirations, guided those rich and mellow accents. Tying his horse at a short distance from the brook, he stealthily drew near the solitary speaker; and, concealing himself by the side of a huge fallen tree, he distinctly heard the following soliloquy:—

... "what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a slave—born a slave, an abject slave—even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs. How mean a thing am I... But here am I, a man—yes, a man!—with thoughts and wishes, with powers and faculties as far as angel's flight..

... No—no—I wrong myself—I am no coward. *Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it...* This cringing submission to insolence and curses! This living under the constant dread and apprehension of being and transferred, like a mere brute, is too much for me. I will stand it no longer... My resolution is fixed. *I shall be free.*" (12-13; emphasis mine)

If we were inclined to follow the traditional European existential philosophical modes of analysis [which many tend to do when reading Douglass—more will be said of this later in the chapter] we would surely see, here, a perfect existential moment. In short, all of the

elements of a Sartrean existentialism are present with one key distinction: only Mr. Listwell *seems* to be aware of the double yet overlapping conversation—Mr. Washington’s within himself and with God, and Mr. Listwell’s within himself and with that of Mr. Washington’s conversation/inner monologue. Rather than Mr. Washington being aware of Mr. Listwell’s presence, even in theory, as in Sartre’s famous keyhole scene<sup>16</sup>, Mr. Listwell is able to be an unnoticed observer onto the scene of Mr. Washington’s confessional state. As such, Mr. Listwell is able to, seemingly, observe Mr. Washington at a distance and without disruption. Mr. Listwell occupies the space of absolute freedom that all men wish: freedom without responsibility in the presence of another; the notion of Mr. Washington was in-total constructed within Mr. Listwell’s phenomenological experience of Mr. Washington, unimpeded with the possibility of the reversal of looking. Seemingly, this is the case. But there are indications of what Douglass himself intends.

At these words the traveller raised his head cautiously and noiselessly, and caught, from his hiding-place, a full view of the unsuspecting speaker. Madison (for that was the name of our hero) was standing erect, a smile of satisfaction rippled upon his expressive countenance, like that which plays upon the face of one who has but just solved a difficult problem, or vanquished a malignant foe; for at that moment he was free, at least in spirit. The future gleam brightly before him, and his fetters lay broken at his feet. His air was triumphant. (13)

Something seems off within the scene and with Douglass’ account: our hero, unlike Sartre’s existential man, did not have in his countenance the chiasmic dualism or recognition of himself as seen through the gaze of the other. Rather, his ‘liberation’ was in the absence of the Other in the presence of the Absolute [God] with the *removal* of the Other’s gaze. As the “fetters lay broken at his feet” he was, in a sense, a new man—if ‘man’ at all: “Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong...His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron...His whole appearance beckoned Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect...A giant’s strength, but not a giant’s heart was in him.” (13-4) It seems as if Mr. Washington, our hero has transcended humanity itself to become something beyond ‘man’ in his freedom. Additionally, we see with Mr. Listwell a transformation, which, too was done without the chiasmic presence of the other, and only within the presence of his absolute [in this case, his own moral principles]: “Long after Madison had left the ground, Mr. Listwell (our traveler) remained in motionless silence, meditating on the extraordinary revelations to which he had listened. He seemed fastened to the spot, and stood half stooping, half fearing the return of the sable preacher to his solitary temple. The speech of Madison rung through the chambers of his soul, and vibrated through his entire frame...“Here is a man,” thought he, “of rare endowments—a child of God—guilty of no crime but the color of his skin...From this hour I am an abolitionist.” (15-16) A Mr. Listwell, through his own determinations of the presence and condition of Mr. Washington has generated a moral ethos in which he can understand and generate present and future actions—“*from this hour I am an abolitionist.*” His moral ethos, like that of Mr. Washington’s declaration for freedom through liberty, places him only in relation to the Absolute, and in contradistinction to humanity and society.

Taken together, these two independently existing revelations and transcendences of the ‘self’ (without the chiasmic other) reveal a fundamental disjuncture within the narrative storyline from the very beginning; a disjuncture between what is known and what is spoken or written—or, as Douglass noted earlier, between “life *both as it is and as it seems.*”

In other words, it must be asked, why would Douglass construct this scene, and these two dialogues in such a way that they appear to be unbelievable to many readers? Are we to believe that Mr. Washington was, in fact, unaware of Mr. Listwell’s presence? Why would Mr. Washington, an escaped man in hiding, who Douglass has observed, ‘loved liberty’ as much as Mr. Henry, the man of heroic action, confess of his condition, as having absconded into the woods, to relieve himself of his chattel status, but unable to leave his wife behind, confess to hiding, right out in the open, in the clearing of said woods? Why would an enslaved man, notably careful at remaining undetected—as Douglass notes in the story—risk, in this moment, his capture for the sake of the straightforwardness of ‘honesty’ and existential ‘authenticity’? If we take a closer account of the story we may hear something else.

That is, if we recall Mr. Washington’s speech and recall the parallel drawn between Mr. Washington and Mr. Henry, we see that ‘liberty’ is what is at stake, and that liberty for a slave means something much more profound than for an Anglo-American. This, in conversation of the parallel between Mr. Washington’s resolution and Mr. Listwell’s resolution—to *not be enslaved* as opposed to the act against the institution of slavery—we see that Douglass is, in fact, constructing for us a portrait of the Negro and demonstrating the complexity and multifaceted perspectives of such an image, both as it is and as it seems: that is, what he is to himself and how he is perceived by the other.

But, and what is more, we see in the portrait of Mr. Washington another, deeper disjuncture in the image of the Negro—namely, this portrait is one that is constructed *by* the Negro himself. In another seminal scene Douglass paints Mr. Washington, having had his forest hiding burned by accidental fire, approach Mr. Listwell’s home in search of solace for the night.

Slightly hesitating, the traveller [Mr. Washington] walked in... “No, sir,” said he, “I have come to ask you a great favor.”

Instantly, Mr. Listwell exclaimed, (as the recollection of the Virginia forest scene flashed upon him,) “Oh, sir, I know not your name, but I have seen your face, and heard your voice before. I am glad to see you. I know all. You are flying for your liberty—be seated—be seated—banish all fear. You are safe under my roof.”

... Thus assured, the stranger said, “Sir, you have rightly guessed, I am, indeed, a fugitive from slavery... I am on my way to Canada It was my purpose to have continued my journey till morning; but the piercing cold, and the frowning darkness compelled me to seek shelter; and, *seeing a light through the lattice of your window, I was encouraged to come here and beg the privilege named.* You will do me a great favor by affording me shelter for the night.”

“A resting-place, indeed, sir, you shall have; not, however, in my barn, but in the best room of my house. Consider yourself, if you please, under the roof of a

friend; for such I am to you, and to all your deeply injured race.” (19-20; emphasis mine)

One wonders, within the construction of the narrative whether Mr. Washington *knew* he was being watched by Mr. Listwell, and, having the pretense of leaving, had doubled back and listened to Mr. Listwell’s own confession; and that *this* was precisely the reason that he chose to visit Mr. Listwell’s home, rather than the idea of “seeing a light through the lattice of your window, I was encouraged to come here and beg the privilege named.” The doubling, here, then adds to complexity of Mr. Washington’s construction of himself and being constructed the idea of constructing *how* one is seen.<sup>17</sup> Again, we can see Douglass sitting for a photograph, hands closed, one in the other, on his knee, looking directly into the camera—as one would have imagined a president when seated for a portrait—constructing an image of himself.

\* \* \* \*

Perhaps, though, we learn something more about Douglass’ authorial intent in his presentation and representation of Mr. Washington as a heroic figure. On this reading Douglass’ multifaceted depiction of Mr. Washington in the narrative tells us something more about Douglass’ own views on black heroism, specifically as it attends to presentation and representations of liberty and freedom. But, what is more, reading Douglass for clues on how to ‘read’ [interpret] Douglass offers new ways of theorizing a black text existentially.

The idea of heroism itself—from Mr. Henry to Mr. Washington—reveals the phenomenological reality that history and historical documentation, as noted earlier, has less to do with ‘dry logic and dead facts’ than with the living reality of emotional truths. Reflecting back on the opening epigraph by Lawrence Levine, we can say something more generally about history as lore itself—that it is more important to those who follow, than for those who have lived it in that it comes to inform and shape how we live our reality. This, too, is especially illuminating in Douglass’ choice of Madison Washington, for who is going to debate the historical ‘truth’ of a figure to which no one has much information? What Douglass has created, then, in Madison Washington as heroic is the idea of the phenomenological truth of heroism itself. This creation is akin to Douglass himself, again, seated for countless portraits, shaping and constructing the *idea* of the Negro.

Much of how Mr. Washington has been interpreted by Douglass and by scholars depends on the last scene of the story, which is, of course, is the one with the least amount of information—the last seminal scene: mutiny aboard slaving vessel, *The Creole*. How Mr. Washington is viewed depends on how one reads the scene: he can be read as a strong liberator willing to kill for liberty, a level-headed leader willing to defend the life and liberty of all, or a devout non-violent figure unwilling to kill on the principle of life—the principle of life being different than the principle of liberty.

But, to fully get a range of the dimensions of Mr. Washington as our hero, we should get a full range of *how* he has been depicted in the story. Let us tell the rest of it. Mr. Washington was helped by Mr. Listwell to escape to Canada. Upon arrival, Mr. Washington not being able to bear the idea of his wife still enslaved, decides to give up

his freedom and return to give her liberty. Upon return, he is caught and she, murdered.<sup>18</sup> He is transported to a slaving vessel, *The Creole*, which is promised to take him South, to never return North and the possibility of freedom. He is aided by Mr. Listwell in his boarding of *The Creole* with a file. On the ship Mr. Washington leads a revolt, takes the ship and steers it to Nassau, a British protectorate. Upon arrival, he and the enslaved crew are given their freedom.

As Douglass portrays him:

...The company which had listened in silence during most of this discussion, now became much excited. One said, I agree with Williams; and several said the thing looks black enough. After the temporary tumultuous exclamations had subsided—

“I see,” said Grant, “how you regard this case, and how difficult it will be for me to render our ship’s company blameless in your eyes. *Nevertheless, I will state the fact precisely as they came under my observation.* The leader of the mutiny in question was just as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand. The name of this man, *strange to say*, (ominous of greatness) was MADISON WASHINGTON. In the short time he had been on board; he had secured the confidence of every officer. The negroes fairly worshipped him. His manner and bearing were such[,] that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose.

...“The attack began just about twilight in the evening... I put my hand quickly in my pocket to draw out my jack-knife; but *before I could draw it*, I was *knocked senseless* to the deck. When I came to myself... there was not a white man on deck. The sailors were all aloft in the rigging, and dared not come down. Captain Clarke and Mr. Jameson lay stretched on the quarter-deck—both dying—while Madison himself stood at the helm unhurt...

...“I told them that by the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States, the slaves on board were as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold. At this the stupid blockheads showed their ivory, rolled up their eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity. When these instructions were understood among the negroes, it was impossible for us to keep them on board. They deliberately gathered up their baggage before our eyes, and, against our remonstrance, poured through the gangway—formed themselves into a procession on the wharf—bid farewell to all on board, and, uttering the wildest shouts of exaltation, they marched, amidst the deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathizing spectators, under the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, MADISON WASHINGTON.”

What is precisely and discursively tricky in Douglass’ portrayal of Madison Washington is the way in which Douglass chooses to narrate the details of the mutiny and Washington’s role in it. That is, Douglass uses an unreliable source to be the main voice of Washington’s heroic narrative. Douglass distances himself from the veracity of Washington’s heroism by leaving Washington’s story in the mouth of a man who could be considered less than honest in multiple ways. On the one hand, the narrator, Tom

Grant, usually referred to as merely “shipmate” or “mate”, was knocked unconscious at the beginning of the mutiny only to awaken with Madison Washington at the helm, leaving him to suggest or assume *how* Mr. Washington was set in place. On the other hand, Mr. Grant was narrating these events to a skeptical white audience who was more than accusing him of dereliction, if not complicit action.<sup>19</sup> Either way, Douglass is narrating Washington’s heroism in an indirect manner central to black literary production, in which critical elements could not be documented as ever having occurred.

Similarly, Cynthia S. Hamilton notes,

In the first section of ‘The Heroic Slave,’ Douglass emphasizes the paucity of information about Washington’s previous life. In the fourth part, he directs the reader’s attention to the absence of evidence concerning Washington’s role in the battle for the ship, knocking the narrator senseless at the very start of the action and leaving him unconscious until the fighting is over. As a result, not only is Washington’s role unknowable, but the active resistance of the mutiny lies hidden in a narrative lacuna. (133)

Douglass leaves a lacuna of information within the narrative structure itself. Where he could have embellished or simply inferred or intuited an end, he simply leaves it ambiguous. And, while the title of the story suggests something about heroism and heroic actions, the narrative itself occludes these, rendering the title ironic—if heroism is of such importance, why cloak the moment in which said heroism could be clearly displayed? What this shows, though, more than anything else are the stakes of black heroism, and the multiple ways in which black heroism is depicted, and interpreted.

Reading Douglass’ narrative both with and against itself reveals the narrative as concealing and revealing the truth of an experience, an encounter. We, then, realize that ‘authenticity’ as it is usually held within the traditional narrative and existential contexts—as the self-disclosure of the *bildungsroman* structure<sup>20</sup>—does not apply in the African American context, whether fictionalized or not.<sup>21</sup> Rather than the individual’s capacity to signify upon himself through the narrative scope and arch, thus, clarifying his circumstance and his own character to himself and to his viewing audience, for Washington his self-disclosure *is* his self-concealment, a telling lie in the mode of paraconsistent logic.<sup>22</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Cynthia S. Hamilton notes that Madison Washington could be interpreted as Douglass’ chosen figure precisely because he could be depicted as non-violent, allowing those anti-slavery abolitionists who preferred the non-violent moral position to further their own position. Madison, then, could be read as a figure whose physical prowess was not diminished or curtailed by his moral virtue, but was in fact bolstered by it<sup>23</sup>; blending the two together—moral virtue and physical prowess—made Washington *the* abolitionist heroic figure. (96) Though one could read Madison Washington as the selected choice of Negro heroism, he could also be read as a more complicated figure.

If one was to recount Douglass’ own third-person portrayal of Washington, one would see the ambiguity in his portrayal of Washington:

“I will state the fact precisely as they came under my own observation...I was completely weakened by the loss of blood, and had not recovered from the stunning blow which felled me to the deck; but it was a little too much for me, even in my prostrate condition, to see our good brig commanded by a *black murderer*... You murderous villain, said I, to the imp at the helm, and rushed him to deal him a blow, when he pushed me back with his strong, black arm, as though I had been a boy of twelve...I started towards Madison again...The rascal now told me to stand back. ‘Sir,’ said he, ‘*your life is in my hands. I could have killed you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now.*’ You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night’s work...

“I felt little disposition to reply to this impudent speech. By heaven, it disarmed me. The fellow loomed up before me. I forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech. It seemed as if the souls of both the great dead (whose names he bore) had entered him...

...I confess gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one, who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior.” (60; emphasis mine)

Douglass’ depiction here not only offers Washington as both a ‘murderer’ and a man of considerable constraint, but also troubles the clarity of action removed from intent. That is, what is indicated is the idea that how we think of Washington’s action depends on the motive for an action: the same action of violence can either be liberatory or murderous. Yet, as in Tom Grant’s portrayal of him, it was not the motive of action, but his color which defined his action villainous and murderous, rather than the principle of liberty—how Mr. Washington saw himself was different from how he was seen by the other. Here it is relatively clear Douglass’ own views on abolitionism, slave insurrection and the possibility of liberty and freedom under slavery and in relation to the Declaration of Independence—that is, what is clear in this scene is that liberty should be the motive for action, which, it seems is a separate issue from the manner of the action itself. As such, while the particular actions of Mr. Washington remain ambiguous, what is unambiguous is Mr. Washington’s love of liberty.<sup>24</sup> The lacuna of information that Douglass provides alludes to this—we don’t really know if Washington is in fact violent, we only know that the white shipmate infers that he is violent because he is black *and* free at the helm of the ship.<sup>25</sup>

Though Douglass seems to be ambiguous in terms of his views of violence, there is a suggestion that violence does offer the possibility of redemption *through* insurrection.<sup>26</sup> The fullness of Washington’s retort to Mr. Grant (as cited above) is as follows:

*I could* have killed you a dozen times...You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive... 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.' (60)

While it is significant that Douglass aligns slave insurrection with the Revolutionary War—a point not missed in comparing Madison Washington to Patrick Henry—what is more significant is the analogy of liberty, freedom, insurrection (whether violent or not) and redemption. As with the Revolutionary War, fought for the sake of liberty, the very soul of man was redeemed, from enslaved to that of freedom—the highest calling of humanity itself—the slave rebellion on *The Creole* not only liberated the enslaved, but liberated the enslavers from the practice of enslavement: “We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed.” One could read *this* as the reason for Washington having let Mr. Grant and the others live.<sup>27</sup>

The figure of Washington, in a sense, operates like a trope or an archetype to stand in for larger issues, transforming into different things for different people of differing political agendas. Douglass, the man, was much like Washington, the character in that he, too, became an archetypal figure set to the specificities of the social, political, and aesthetic climates.<sup>28</sup> What is significant, here, alongside *what* Washington represented and *why* he represented it, is the fact that Negro heroism as individual moral and physical character was tied to the moral reckoning of the institution of slavery. (99) Douglass' doubling and intentional ambiguity of *The Creole* rebellion and Washington's role allows the reader to infer that how we understand 'heroism' in Washington's case is less the concern of the moral ethos of individual action, and more with the political leanings of those observing particular actions—we all get [in the end] what we came for—which begs certain question: “Can those [supposed] actions of Mr. Washington ever be seen in the same light as those of Mr. Henry, or the actions of *The Creole* alongside those of the Revolutionary War?” Given the racialized moral sentiments of the reader an action can be interpreted as either villainous or heroic. This means, then, that liberty, freedom, or heroism is never quite the issue, but the moralization of the of Negro himself as a sort of aesthetic judgment. That is, the image or presentation/representation of the Negro becomes more important than the moral ethos of a particular decided action.

Douglass' narrative, then, offers some keen insights into 1) the ideal Negro hero 'type'; and, 2) Negro heroism as it pertains to justice, rights, and moral and physical character. But, as much as this is a conversation about the heroic Negro 'type'—violent, non-violent, morally elevated, base—it is also a conversation about Negro heroism itself—Can and *should* black history itself be understood from within Negro heroism *of any type*; and, what are the consequences of heroism for our understanding not only black history, but also for how we canonize and catalogue black intellectual and aesthetic expression?

## ***Of Mr. Murray and Negro Heroism***

*I invite you to imagine a rather comically American scenario. The intellectual, a promising young man of color, has made his way to one of the great capitals of Europe...*

*He had planned to write during his year abroad (indeed the first he has ever had) a study of Black American intellectuals who came of age after the great wars. He had thought to pay homage to that generation of male artists and critics to whom he felt most indebted, those who had grappled most assiduously with matters of race, gender, and sexuality, those who had been celebrated in his childhood as fine examples of genius, Black American, genius. He finds himself stifled, however, distracted as he has said, because the work of celebration, of historical recovery, has become suddenly, if not inexplicably, a rather more complicated matter. The gift, the challenge that was given from that earlier generation to his own, was not, he believes simply an impressive body of literature nor even the heroic and largely successful struggles to advance the civil and human rights of not only Black Americans but indeed much of the human community. It was not even that American people with crinkly hair and brown skin more or less similar to his own crinkly hair and brown skin have come, in some quarters, to be associated with the advance of liberal society. The even more profound gift, the warmly glowing coal that burns with a throbbing, impersonal heat when examined too closely is the knowledge that the Black American has not only had a great hand in the creation of America and thus the world but also and importantly that the Black American, quiet as it's kept, has had a substantial role in the creation of himself...*

*Thus it is an article of faith with our young intellectual that the time has arrived for our advances in theoretical and historical analysis to come into sync with our rhetoric, our common sense. The Black American is not produced at the location at which the African was dehumanized, at the point at which he became a nigger. Niggers cannot clear forests, raise crops, build roads, fight wars, much less found universities or establish traditions of literature, art, and music... (Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black*)*

Picture the Negro. It is a striking image. *He* is a striking image. He strikes an image. Frozen in time, frozen in a moment, the image persists in the way of lore. He is a legend in the still of a frame. The Negro is aware that he is seen. The Negro is aware of *how* he is seen. The Negro sits down, sets himself, and prepares to be seen. [The Negro has always been a moving image to be captured, and set free]

**[Setting]** *The Negro takes center stage. He raises his hand in a grand, subtle gesture. He stands, appearing to get himself ready for a monologue. Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and countless other black orators present themselves. He begins to elocute [“It’s Paul Poitier-Kittredge. It’s a hyphenated name.”] He is the Existential Negro. He is our Hero. An eruption of applause.*

A Mr. Albert Murray, staunch critic of social science fiction fiction, and progressor of the Negro image in the idea of aesthetics and the blues tradition, author of *Omni-Americans*, wrote, at the beginning of his seminal text, *The Hero and the Blues*—“originally presented at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in the form of three public lectures on October 7, 8, and 9, 1972” (5)—the following:

Storybook images are as indispensable to the basic human process of world comprehension and self-definition (and hence personal motivation as well as purposeful group behavior) as are the formulas of physical science or the nomenclature of the social sciences. Such basic insights as may be derived from the make-believe examples of literature are, moreover, as immediately applicable to the most urgent problems of everyday life as are ‘scientific’ solutions.

With this premise, it might not be too much to say that the most delicately wrought short stories and the most elaborately textured novels, along with the most homespun anecdotes, parables, fables, tales, legends, and sagas, are as strongly motivated by immediate educational (which is to say moral and social) objectives as are the most elementary. (9)

In traditional stories the hero is elected from his circumstance—what he is called upon, at least in the moment, to *become* in order to *be* himself in the most fundamental sense. In this way, heroism, the hero, and heroic action are as much concerned with the solvency of circumstance as the individual’s response to it; both are elemental to the existential double unfolding [of self and context]. As such, when framing the ‘hero’ as central to storytelling, it must also be noted that heroism is relational. Murray writes,

It is the writer as artist, not the social or political engineer or even the philosopher, who first comes to realize when the time is out of joint. It is he who determines the extent and gravity of the current human predicament, who in effect discovers and describes the hidden elements of destruction, sounds the alarm, and even (in the process of defining ‘the villain’) designates the targets. It is the storyteller working on his own terms as mythmaker (and by implication, as value maker), who defines the conflict, identifies the hero (which is to say the good man—perhaps better, *the adequate man*), and decides the outcome; and in doing so he not only evokes the image of possibility, but also prefigures the contingencies of a happily balanced humanity and of the Great Good Place.

Thus no matter how sincere his intention, the writer does not automatically increase the social significance and usefulness of his fiction by subordinating his own legitimate aesthetic preoccupations to those of the social and political technicians. If so, he only downgrades the responsibility which he alone has inherited. He discontinues or reduces the indispensable social and political service which art alone can provide, only to do something which many competent journalist (given a functional point of view or doctrine—or a line of jive) can do as well and most good promoters can do better. (11-12; emphasis added)

This, though, is not to assert that heroism or the constructed narrative is ethical in any way, but to highlight that the narrative that the storyteller constructs prefigures certain

distances through which the good and the bad, or the adequate-to-the-moment (good) or inadequate-to-the-moment (bad) are decided. The writer as artist decides, that is, takes measure and depicts the outcome of his moment, and in doing so, aesthetically centers the balance itself. The black writer, then, prefigures the image of the Negro but also sets forth the subtextual qualities and values of his literary form, and ultimately that of the literary tradition. Douglass' fictive narrative set in the midst of his autobiographies prefigures the genre of black writing and the subtextual qualities inherent in the burgeoning tradition, namely the role and significance of doubling and paraconsistent logic. As Cynthia S. Hamilton remarks, 'The Heroic Slave' marked a "new Douglass" who would refuse to "again exhibit himself in public, as he had once done early in his speaking career, as a lacerated victim of slavery." The Douglass of the fictive narrative was "prepared to direct his own future, was no longer willing to accept the role assigned to him by Garrison and his associates." (112) As such, we can look at Douglass' fictive narrative as the aesthetic and political signpost for the rest of his oeuvre, and can help to read his oeuvre within the tradition of Murray's 'mythmaker': the marked decision of the 'good' and the 'bad'.

There are, for Murray three kinds of heroes of distinction: one, the tragic hero "whose problem is his own contamination (his own flaws, mistakes, choices, or whatever)"; two, the comic hero "whose problem is his naiveté, or lack of perception"; and, lastly, the melodramatic hero "of some sagas, of some medieval romances, and the scientific success story purifies society." (28)

In many readings of black literary figures we see a sort of narrative and character construction which follows a mixture of these three kinds of heroism, but from within a larger structure or arch of a traditional *bildungsroman* tale. Within this assumptive prefiguration, the hero, through his own flaws, which are his unfailing belief in a social order which is set to his death, is able to show to himself and to the society itself its internal flaws, and thus, in sacrificing his consciousness to the purification order (of himself and the society at large) becomes a new man and ushers in a new social order.

This hero whose very prescience purifies society—"the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil (caul), and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (); one can only imagine this is draw of the Du Boisian hero of double-consciousness whose naiveté is his contamination, but whose 'dogged strength' allows him to overcome his condition by way of a unique sense of clarity, whose mystical and supernatural origins offer him, and only him, the gift by which the nation can be saved, bridging the Negro and European through his individual talent; this Fanonian character who overcomes his racial malady by means of examining it "I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and the black races has created a massive psycho-existential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it." (12)—this Negro writer of the *bildungsroman* variety is a specialist, as analyzer of society, and as such is a curer of ills. Within this framework, Douglass the man and Douglass the writer are transformed into an impulse for reconciliation through his inner heroic strength, his own narrative *becoming* a transitory moment in which his very being enacts for us

the story pattern known as tragedy...which is in effect the retracing of the steps leading to destruction and which, as the name suggests, may well be the extension

of the goat sacrifice song and dance or the Dance of the Scapegoat—he is performing a purification ritual in imitation of the life process itself. (25-6)

Which is to say, much of the scholarship on Douglass tends to focus solely on his fight with and victory over the slave breaker Edward Covey as the transformational moment to discuss black humanity, dignity, liberation, and freedom.<sup>29</sup> Within this interpretation, there are fundamentally three readings of Douglass, and of Negro heroism—transcendence, reconciliation, and recognition.

This life process, of ‘dialectic’ of existence [destruction and liberation], finds its footing in that the chaos of existence can, at least momentarily, find its succor in the span of a single human life—one man’s life can offer us clarity in the chaos of all of human history and the chaos surrounding that human life. Negro heroism set to the pace of an individual’s life, then, offers us only a glimpse of the existential perspicuity of the black literary tradition, but perhaps misses the structure and meaning of Douglass’ own scaffolded fictive narrative.<sup>30</sup> That is, in choosing the figure of Madison Washington as the central figure of liberation and freedom, Douglass was prefiguring the idea of the anonymity of heroic action itself—though portrayed in part as an exceptional individual, Washington’s ambiguous historical image meant that Douglass’ interpretation of him allowed him to be more than himself and range into his significance for us.

That is to say, the focus on the singular human life of Douglass—Du Bois, Fanon or any other Negro of exemplar status—allows us to avoid the utter chaos of all the other lives who may have failed to thwart the exogenous system of oppression. This is, in essence, the existential purpose of a Douglass, a Du Bois, a Fanon, [or any other existential hero] and how we’ve chosen to read them—they allow us to focus, through their singularity, on the fact that we may have no control over our lives. In Douglass we have purified our contemporary moment in a specific given meaning, structure and value—Douglass allows for the possibility of the linear model of historiography and historical progress in the narrative arch and character development—even if the narrative itself has little to do with Douglass, black intellectual traditions or with ourselves.

Yet, given Douglass’ own doubling in his fictional text, what we have is not straightforwardly anything that is traditionally heroic, comical, tragic or melodramatic, but farcical. That is, Douglass in his doubling is turning the logic of social order on itself: what we think we receive as a heroic narrative, the sort of existential and phenomenological clarity and cleansing, is overturned for a sort of logic which refuses traditional order as clarity and cleansing, but finds its own order and ‘clarity’ in a sort of disorder, confusion and a refusal of cleansing. When one looks in a certain manner at Douglass work, the truth is present, but within a co-extensive or parallel dimension. Murray defines a farce in the following manner

Essentially, a farce, which always involves subversive intrusion, is a capricious or goat-like song and dance symbolizing disorder. As such it is a ritual reenactment not of goat sacrifice or of sacred totemic copulation but rather of the absurd and outrageous and inexorable resurgence of nature itself... farce breaks the spell of ritual... It protects human existence from the excesses of the imagination and operates as a safeguard against the overextension of ideas, formulations, and formalities. (29)

For Murray, the farce, much more than the comic, tragic, or melodramatic captures the deeper aspects of myth-making for human society, for it is in the farce that the myth comes to its true force—the world turned upside down is resignified, not in another false order, but within the chaos that it itself always already was. One can think of the various scenes in ‘The Heroic Slave’ from Listwell’s overhearing of Madison’s wooded confession; Madison’s choice of Listwell’s home; the ambiguity of the mutiny aboard *The Creole*; the ambiguous narrator of the mutiny itself to see that Douglass’ narrative offers a farcical account of history itself and historical documentation. In each of these scenes the ideas of reconciliation, through which the reader may feel triumphant [the Negroes are free at the end of the narrative!] or resolution [the white does, in the end, do the right thing!], are disrupted with the unknown and with a narrative structure that has little emotional truth.

As a way of reordering reality [one that has little to do with continuity], Murray’s definition of the ‘farce’ is connected to what he refers to as a “counterstatement”— which counters the ritualistic practices of ideology (or that which is asserted to be true) with another narrative arch, but not one that deals with disorder through resolution or sublation, but one that allows the chaos to be itself without subsuming the individual or their life within it. Imagining the Negro as conquering their condition, though, is neither farcical nor a counterstatement; it is a signifier for and to the linear cosmological force of a specific myth-making. It is, in short, the Negroid version of the hegemonic fusion of Marxian-Freudian complex, only slightly tilting the axis of reality from the topside to what is *underneath*.<sup>31</sup>

That is to say, beneath the narrative of Negro heroism (understood through the *bildungsroman* narrative) is a sort of anthropological and psychological assumption about the individual and their relationship to their environment. Such an assessment normalizes the subject in very specific ways through myth making about the nature of subjects and subjectivation at all. For example, the narrative mythical ark of Douglass’ “The Heroic Slave” read through European existentialism would center ‘recognition’ as the basis of the relationship between Washington and Listwell, as it is thought to be for Douglass and Covey in Douglass’ own autobiographical work. Listwell’s recognition of Washington’s humanity is what set forth and foregrounded the possibility of Washington’s liberty and freedom<sup>32</sup>; and it was Douglass’ own forcing of Covey’s recognition that made Douglass a MAN, a FREEMAN. Yet, if one were to take a farcical view of the text, and read it against this dominant view, then, one would not center the narrative construction on ‘recognition’, but on ‘false narration’ as ‘counterstatement’ to the straightforwardly given narration of linear character development of either going through or overcoming certain odds. For Murray, these traditionally straightforward formulations are not the work of literature or the imagination, but the articulation of specific modes of a modern social science narrative (modern social science) wherein the heroic individual is less a character and more of an explainer to the audience of the all of the social ills of reality.<sup>33</sup> Murray writes,

Many Marx-Freud melodramas are specifically designated to demonstrate that the ‘system,’ the environment in a social structure, will destroy all mankind if it is not transformed. In any event, it is always the so-called system (political and

economic habitat) which generates the complications in the social science plot structure. Thus since the successful social science fiction hero achieves his ends (or at least saves his skin) because he is able to outwit or beat the system, the one who fails does so only because he is deficient in scientific technique (and moral purpose, to be sure). As defined not only by Marxians and Freudians, but also by social reformers in general, all of the essential problems of humanity can either be solved or reduced to insignificance by a hero or man of good will who can apply adequate scientific insight to Public Administration and medicine.

(The assumptions underlying the behavior of the popular contemporary detective story hero are perhaps more consistent with the experience [and resulting perceptions of actuality] from which truly contemporary sensibilities are derived... Sometimes he may take the action necessary to dispatch evil, but his essential job is to dig up evidence and provide information about the source or sources of specific evils. Once he accumulates enough evidence for an 'indictment,' the detective has, to all intents and purposes, completed the job he was hired to do and may collect his fee and move on to the next client. He provides existential information, not millennial salvation. (17-18)<sup>34</sup>

What Murray is offering by way of analysis, and what Douglass offers by way of narrative is an alternate counter-statement, not so much prognosis, but paraconsistent frame of reference. As such, the function of the hero is not only that of critique (of the prevailing system), but also a counterstatement through which the world can be remade. Thus, if we take Murray seriously, and we take his claim seriously, we have to read Douglass not so much as an extension of the European existential and literary traditions, but as establishing a new tradition of farcical black literary expression. That is, the doubling moments of paraconsistent logic reveals by concealing what is true by presenting it as a lie. Murray writes,

What must be remembered is that people live in terms of images which represent the fundamental conceptions embodied in their rituals and myths. In the absence of adequate images they live in terms of such compelling images (hence rituals and myths) as are abroad at the time. Where there is no adequate vision the people perish, one might say, precisely because where there are no 'good' writers there are always 'bad' writers, where there are no adequate images there are always inadequate images. Yet the quality of 'serious' art of the times whether adequate or not is likely to be reflected in the popular art of the times.

Nothing else fulfills the inherently consummate intellectual or ideational fiction of the image-making processes so well as does literature. Not even the most exact and comprehensive scientific information about individual or group impulses, drives, motives, frustrations, repressions, releases, compensations, and sublimations is equivalent to either the personal or the general significance of the writer's singular and indispensable insight into the poetic, dramatic or mythological dimensions and possibilities of the human situation. (13-14)

And, given that language, "the concept and the image" shapes our understanding and experiences with reality, one can situate Douglass' fictional text within his photography

lectures and Murray's notion of the 'counterstatement'. Douglass, in his fictional and non-fictional works, provides perspective, but also "specific instruction and general education" as to "what happens in given circumstances and why it happens, but, perhaps most fascinating of all, how it happens." (23) To regard Douglass as a writer in this sense is to regard Douglass as both subject and object, as both writer and narrative character construction; it is to regard Douglass in his own autobiography similarly to how we regard Madison Washington—both as fictional-histories. But more than anything, Douglass' fictional narrative, along with his photographic writings inform us that Douglass, himself, is an illusion—one of his own self-creation; an illusion meant to convey something about reality, but an illusion no less; a mirage set deep onto the horizon of possibility.<sup>35</sup> Douglass' fictive narrative shows the hero and heroism is an illusion—one that reveals the paraconsistent and doubled elements significant for/to black literature and in said figuration, the narrative and image construction of the idea of the Negro [himself].

[End Scene]

*[Stage Direction] The stage glows dimly. The photographic equipment is quickly removed, leaving just the Negro seated on the stool—with the same austere pose. The curtail closes. There is a hushed murmur in the crowd.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There are over 160 remaining photographs of Frederick Douglass. This outpaces any other man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by at least 20 photographs. With renewed interest and the publication and republication of many his archival photographs and speeches on photography, we now know that this fact was neither accidental nor coincidental. For more on Douglass' photographs see "How Artist Changed the World" and, John Stauffer's *Picturing Douglass*.

<sup>2</sup> Douglass argues in his essay, "Pictures and Progress" the following

As to the moral and social influence of pictures, it would be hardly extravagant of me to say of it, what Moore has said of that of ballads, give me the making of nations [sic] ballads, and I care not who has the making of its Laws.

<sup>3</sup> An early type of photographic process invented by Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre in 1839. What made the invention significant was its inexpensive costs, which made it widely available to the public. This photographic technology "democratized" the replication of the personal image, which until this point has been only the singular usage of the very wealthy because of the high commission costs of painterly or photographic portraits. Douglass himself argues that with the Daguerreotype

[M]en of all conditions may see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all. The humbled servant girl whose income is but a few shillings per week may now possess a more perfect likeness than noble ladies and court royalty, with all its precious treasures could purchase fifty years ago. ("Pictures and Progress," 454)

For more on Daguerreotypes see *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); for more on the Daguerreotypes and democratizing the image, see *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Duke University Press, 2012), especially Introduction, "Pictures and Progress" and Chapter one, "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation"

<sup>4</sup> While I am not claiming that photography is the *only* method of constituting the human, I will also be claiming the same of literature as well, but noting the significance of the usage of photography as a way of theorizing the human as such.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this see John Stauffer's essay, "Douglass' Aesthetics of Freedom", in particular, pages 116-119.

<sup>6</sup> David Brooks, "How Artists Changed the World"

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/opinion/how-artists-change-the-world.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/opinion/how-artists-change-the-world.html?_r=1)

<sup>7</sup> In more detail, Douglass writes,

On the hillside in the valley under the grateful shades of solitary oaks and Elms the boy of ten all forgetful[,] of time or place[,] calls to books, or to boyish sports, looks up with silence and awe to the blue overhanging firmament [sic] and views with dreamy wonder, its ever drifting drapery, tracing in the Clouds, and in their ever changing forms and colors, the outlines of towns and cities, great ships and hostile armies of men [and] of horses, solemn Temples, and the Great Spirit of all: Break in if you please upon the prayers of monks or nun, but I pray you, do not disturb the divine meditations of that little Child. He is *unfolding to himself* the Divinest of all human faculties, for such is the picture making faculty of man. (460)

<sup>8</sup> Here we can situate the slave narrative from within the framework of the 'happy slave' narrative. One can see in Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (especially chapters 1 and 2) an account contradicting this historical 'fact' and see the narrative as an aesthetic-political counterstatement.

<sup>9</sup> On this point Ginger Hill notes,

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Douglass' lectures on pictures reference photography because it is proof of a process of thinking through potentialities, a method of comparing empirical fact with internal images...Photographs objectify the ever-moving context of phenomena...Douglass argues that this process of taking in exteriority, forging and transforming interiority and sending the interior to the exterior, and the moments of a blurred division between the two, are all required for the attainment of truth. (69)

And,

These lectures set up (at least) a tripartite system of knowledge acquisition. This structure suggests an interrelation and interdependence between passion, reason, and ideals, rather than simply an absolute split between mind and body, and a recognition of others' realities, rather than an absolute truth possessed by an autonomous human mind.

Douglass introduces a fourth, mediating term, whose equivocal status allows it to circulate among all three paths toward knowledge: imagination. (60)

Thus, situated around 'imagination', Douglass' theoretical work on photography, the human will, and knowledge can be linked to his fictional prose, and to his autobiographical works.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Larry J. Reynolds has argued in his text *Righteous Violence*, for both an internalist *and* externalist reading of Douglass' fictive narrative "The Heroic Slave". He writes, "Douglass' 'The Heroic Slave' has gained critical attention, as scholars have examined Douglass' methods of using the American Revolution (and founding fathers) to defend the idea of slave insurrection. Because of its unusual treatment of insurrection and race relations, the novella is one of the most internally conflicted yet thematically rich antislavery texts written during the antebellum period." (87) That is, the question of how the novella fits and functions within Douglass' oeuvre remains of critical importance. Yet, it still remains to be seen how the photography lectures *and* the fictive narrative fit together with his antislavery works. An internalist/externalist reading of Douglass both situates Douglass as forerunner of black literature and slave literature, but also teaches us something about how 'read' each. More will be said of this later, especially as it relates to black existential philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Expanded version of "Pictures and Progress" reprinted in *Picturing Douglass*, 166-172.

<sup>12</sup> What is interesting about Douglass' fictional story is his non-commitment to classifying Madison Washington's status with reference to his escape. What Douglass does say is that Washington, set on not be enslaved, yet unable to leave his wife, had a sort of status between 'petit' and 'grand' marronage—what I refer to as an ambiguous status. This, it seems, is no clearer than in Douglass' portrayal of Washington's wooded confession. More could, and should be written of Douglass' relationship with marronage and his historical fiction. For more on marronage see Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*.

Yet, John Stauffer offers a different interpretation of Douglass' depiction of Washington's freedom status. He reinterprets the wooded scene as not necessarily being concerned with marronage, but as an example of Douglass' own ambivalence concerning aestheticizing freedom. Stauffer argues that Douglass was, in a very real sense, writing himself into existence and that in this new form of writing there were no examples to follow. "[I]n the genre of slave narratives," Stauffer notes, "there was no precedent for representing oneself as a freeman while also envisioning immediate emancipation. Narrators focused on their life in bondage and described the horrors of slavery in the hope of converting readers to abolitionism. The teleology of slave narratives centered around the moment of freedom. But narratives of freedom had not been developed." (*The Aesthetics of Freedom*, 127); Also see John Stauffer, "*The Black Hearts of Men*, 49-56.

To add more depth, in bringing together marronage with Douglass' 'aesthetics of freedom' we get an interesting juxtaposition that can be solved, in part, with making a distinction within Douglass' own fictive narrative between liberty and freedom, wherein liberty would be the hope—what Stauffer refers to as 'freedom' within the slave narrative tradition—and freedom, then, would be the fruition of that hope within the material world—what Stauffer refers to as

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emancipation. In this sense, the question is less of the concern over whether or not Douglass *could* represent freedom (in the aesthetic sense of presentation and representation discussed earlier), and more of an existential question concerning how an enslaved man presents and represents freedom itself as an aesthetic value, but also a political goal—and how the aesthetic value and the political action overlap and coalesce.

<sup>13</sup> There is ample evidence that Douglass was both aware of and held in great esteem each of these figures. For example, Douglass wrote an essay on Toussaint L'Ouverture for Victor Schoelcher's American edition of *Vie de Toussaint-Louverture* in 1889 (for more on this, see *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, 527-539); published articles on Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner in his newsletter, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (for more on this see, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 252); and, while recruiting black men for the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment, he gave speeches on Joseph Cinque and other freedom fighters (for more on this see, *Frederick Douglass: For the Great Family Man*, 155)

<sup>14</sup> It is argued herein that Douglass' choice of Washington was less a decided choice of political action with regards to violence and non-violent in resistance and liberation, and more of literary decision in that since little is known of him and since he poses less of a figure of controversy, more could be imprinted on him, and that Douglass could paint a more fluid narrative without problems of historiography and historicity.

<sup>15</sup> More will be said of Mr. George Washington in chapter four

<sup>16</sup> Reflect upon the famous keyhole scene in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (347-50)

<sup>17</sup> Henry Louis Gates, when discussing Douglass' slave narrative argues that Douglass utilized the rhetorical trope of chiasmus in which he used "two clauses in reversed order to create an inverse parallel. For example, Douglass wrote, 'You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.'" (Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 186) In the case of Washington and Listwell's confessions, we can see another 'inverse parallel', again reflected in Washington's 'beg' of a favor, and Listwell's beg of doing him such a favor. And, though the doubling that is of discussion here is not quite the chiasmus to which Gates refers, what is of interest is the idea of imbedding messages within a narrative (even within a sentence) as an aesthetic trope of political significance.

<sup>18</sup> For more on their relationship, see Ellen Weinauer's "Writing Revolt in the Wake of Nat Turner: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of Black Domesticity in 'The Heroic Slave'."

<sup>19</sup> What we have to remember is that a Mr. Grant was on the hook for the escaped slaves, and could have been interpreted as motivated by his own accordance to validate Mr. Washington's heroics to the upmost extent.

Just two months after the sailing of the Virginia slave brig, which the reader has seen move off to sea so proudly with her human cargo for the New Orleans market, there chanced to meet, in the Marine Coffee house at Richmond, a company of ocean birds, when the following conversation, 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.

... "Well, betwixt you and me," said [Jack] Williams, "that whole affair on board of the Creole was miserably and disgracefully managed. Those black rascals got the upper hand of ye altogether; and, in my opinion, the whole disaster was the result of ignorance of the real character of darkies in general. With half a dozen resolute white men (I say it not boastingly I could have had the rascals in irons in ten minutes...)

This speech made quite a sensation among the company, and a part of them indicated solicitude for answers which might be made to it. Our first mate replied, "Mr. Williams, all that you've said sounds very well here on shore, where, perhaps, you studied negro character. I do not profess to understand the subject as well as yourself; but it strikes me, you apply the same rule in dissimilar cases. It is quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on land, where you have the sympathy of the community, and the

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whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command... It is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic...

"In that, too," said Grant, "you were mistaken. I did all that any man with equal strength and presence of mind could have done. The fact is, Mr. Williams, you underrate the courage as well as the skill of these negroes, and further, you do not seem to have been correctly informed about the case in hand at all."

"All I know about it is," said Williams, "that on the ninth day after you left Richmond, a dozen or two of the niggers ye had on board, came on deck and took the ship from you; had her steered into a British port, where, by the by, every wholly head of them went ashore and was set free. Now I take this to be a discreditable piece of business, and one *demanding explanation*." (55)

<sup>20</sup> A genre of literature dealing with the formative years in the development of a central character in a narrative. In this sort of narrative, the central character begins in a state of unknowing or naiveté, and through his/her developments experiences moral and/or psychological growth incumbent upon of a specific plot line or narrative arch. Phenomenologically, a bildungsroman assumes the possibility of epistemic clarity and self-revealing; and, with this direction, the progress and process of knowledge is *within* the linear ideation of the subject.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Louis Gates, too, sets Douglass' narrative within the same bildungsroman tradition when he writes, "He [Douglass] mastered the form of chiasmus (or rhetorical reversal), describing with the great beauty and power the transformation from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, from lost to being found, from slavery to freedom, barbarism to civility, corruption to decency. His writings describe selves and societies that continually evolve, in states of constant flux, encouraging new generation of readers to discover through his stories their *own* stories, to find through his words their own sources of strength and inspiration, and to seek through his imagery their own swift-winged angels that move merrily before the gentle gale." (*The Portable Frederick Douglass*, xxxiv) Yet, Gates read against himself—that is, his claims of the moral and psychic arc of development herein with his doubling from the *Signifying Monkey*—we see a theory of doubling that doesn't outstrip the bildungsroman narrative structure that could be further developed in our engagement with Douglass scholarship. On this reading, though, the doubling of Douglass' narrative outstrips the bildungsroman structure of narrative writing. More will be said of the bildungsroman style of narrative telling in the next section, and in the next chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Paraconsistent logic refers to the idea that inconsistencies within the structure(s) of thought do not dismantle the thought itself nor invalidate the structure itself. Rather, a system is constructed that can take into account such inconsistencies and contradictions, and offers within them an alternate mode of accounting. This could be done within historicity—or an historical accounting in which feelings guide narrative truth rather dry facts; but, it could also be done phenomenologically in which case the experience itself both serves as guide and that which is navigates the guided terrain. For Douglass' narrative and his thinking through heroism in the context of enslavement, and the inconsistencies in the structure of thinking of Washington's heroic action parallels Washington's own historically ironic namesakes (Madison and Washington).

<sup>23</sup> Remember how Washington was depicted: "His whole appearance beckoned Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulders." (12)

<sup>24</sup> Cynthia S. Hamilton has gone as far as to argue that 'The Heroic Slave' with its positive portrayal of violent resistance, was a pointed criticism of [William Lloyd] Garrison's position [of abolitionist moral non-violence] of 'non-resistance'. In the novella, with the killing of the captain as well as the owner of many of the slaves, Douglass pointedly made the revolt more violent than it actually was." (112) Yet, if we read the novella as Douglass' split from Garrison—the man and

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the politics of white abolitionism—and the development of his own abolitionist voice, as Hamilton also does (111-118), it is not altogether clear whether Douglass is in support of violent resistance, or if he is using violent revolt to both distance himself from Garrison and to establish his own independent voice.

<sup>25</sup> Contrary to Ellen Weinauer's assertion that Washington was used as a foil to Nat Turner's "grip on historical consciousness", I argue that Washington represents the ambiguity at the heart of the relationship between liberty and freedom when specifically dealing with black people. This, it turns out, is no more prevalent than in the cases of Nat Turner and Toussaint L'Ouverture, and could explain Douglass' use of Washington as opposed to Turner or L'Ouverture to prove this very point. Taken together with his writings/speeches on photography, one could read 'The Heroic Slave' as a portrait of the Negro for the national imagination, one that, like many other black aesthetic productions, had both implicit and explicit messages.

<sup>26</sup> Depending on how one chooses to read the historicism in Douglass' writing—that is, the historical continuity or discontinuity in his writings over the breadth of Douglass' career and within the backdrop of historical and material changes—one could make sense of what seem to be larger shifts in his oeuvre. For example, John Stauffer argues that the historical shift from slavery to emancipation effectively altered the content and style of Douglass' work. "With legal freedom," writes Stauffer, "Douglass abandoned his sublime aesthetic. His story is now linear, rational, and dispassionate; it is progressive and secular rather than millennial. He no longer has a problem representing freedom...In *My Bondage* he embraces a sublime black self; in *Life and Times*, that self has become much whiter." ("Frederick Douglass and the Sublime Aesthetic," 132) While Larry J. Reynolds argues in *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Resistance* that, "*The Heroic Slave*, with its defense of violent revolution, stands as perhaps the best example of how Douglass tried before the Civil War to resolve his chosen role as representative of his fellow blacks suffering at the hands of whites with his comparable identification with white friends in the anti-slavery movement..." (110) Although in the exchange, it seems that for Stauffer Douglass has always been removed from support of violence—Stauffer continually cites Douglass' claim from *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, "Government is better than anarchy, and patient reform is better than violent revolution"—, but argues that though this non-violent theme is present throughout the corpus, it mellowed over the years; while Larry J. Reynold seems to suggest Douglass' own racial ambiguity—"As a mulatto, Douglass saw himself as half-white and half-black, even though in the eyes of everyone he was simply a Negro"—is the cause of his ambivalence towards violent resistance given some of the offenders were his relatives. It is my contention, though, that given Douglass' own essays on Toussaint and the ambiguous status of violence in "The Heroic Slave" that Douglass himself, though he had moral concerns over the use of violence (as well noted in Frank Kirkland's essay), he was not absolute in his resolve against its necessity, as witnessed in his 1845 speech: "I am a peace man yet would greet with joy glad news of slave insurrection."

<sup>27</sup> For more on slave insurrections, please see Leonard Harris' essay "Insurrectionist Ethics: Advocacy, Moral Psychology, and Pragmatism" or Lee McBride's "Universal Human Liberation and Insurrectionist Ethics or an Excursus Honoring the Guile and Enmity of Leonard Harris" to get the full force on the idea of an insurrectionist ethics.

<sup>28</sup> We can think of any black figure and see the ways in their presence becomes archetypal for a particular context and within a particular climate. The most recent of this has been the usage of Martin Luther King, Jr's speech, "I Have a Dream," in support of anti-affirmative action legislation: <http://www.phillymag.com/news/2013/08/28/no-martin-luther-king-conservative-republican/>

<sup>29</sup> Most notably from *My Bondage, My Freedom* chapter 15, "Covey, the Negro Breaker"

I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life.

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... Whilst I was obeying his order... Covey sneaked into the stable, in his peculiar snake-like way, and seizing me suddenly by the leg, brought me to the stable floor... The fighting madness had come upon me, and I found my strong fingers firmly attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor... The very color of the man was forgotten.

... Well, my dear reader, this battle with Mr. Covey—undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is—was the turning point in my ‘life as a slave.’ It rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty... I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be A FREEMAN.

One can search through the numerous philosophical essays on Frederick Douglass to discover this scene as central to the scholarship, with no mention of his photography lectures or his historical fiction. See, for example, George Yancy’s “The Existential Dimensions of Frederick Douglass’ Autobiographical Narrative”; Lewis R. Gordon’s *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (especially chapter 3, “Frederick Douglass as an Existentialist”; Bernard Boxill’s essay, “The Fight with Covey” in *Existence in Black*; Frank M. Kirkland’s essay, “Is an Existentialist Reading of the Fight with Covey Sufficient to Explain Frederick Douglass’ Critique of Slavery?”

<sup>30</sup> The notion of character trope heroism is central to contemporary hero worship, but also central to European existentialism’s focus on what Walter Kaufmann terms, “perfidious individualism”, but has little to nothing to do with the black intellectual or literary traditions.

<sup>31</sup> This is especially true of the idea that white supremacy can be defeated through a one-on-one physical conflict, as with Douglass’ physical defeat over Covey.

<sup>32</sup> If we remember, it was Listwell’s proclamation of Washington’s individual merit that deemed slavery wrong; and, it was this proclamation that motivated Listwell to not only help Washington escape to Canada, but upon Washington’s return and capture, to offer to Washington a file, which would eventually be the leading cause of the freedom Washington and the other enslaved men and women on *The Creole*

<sup>33</sup> For more on Murray’s notion of the modern social science narrative—what Murray terms, ‘social science fiction fiction’, see *Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture*, especially, “A Clutch of Social Science Fiction Fiction” where he writes, “Fiction about Negroes offers an obvious example. Instead of the imaginative writer’s response to the infinitely fascinating mysteries, contradictions, and possibilities of human existence, what fiction about U.S. Negroes almost always expresses is some highly specialized and extremely narrow psycho-political theory about American *Negro* existence.” (122) Which, in our take, explains why philosophy always begins, when thinking about blackness with the Du Boisian retort in the form of a question, “how does it feel to be a problem?” The black individual, unbeknownst to the philosophical writer, becomes the Negro *type*. Douglass, though, is not giving a fiction of the Negro type, but a meta critical aesthetic statement about the structural analysis of character and plot development and its relation with and to political organizing and political action. As such, his fictional narrative is tied aesthetically and politically to his photography lectures.

<sup>34</sup> Here, Murray centers the Marx-Freud dynamic as central to social science fiction fiction in that the dynamic of the social and psychic structures are played out on the subject to create explanators of his subjectivation. In Douglass’ case, the ‘system’ was not just enslavement, but the embodiment of it in the figuration of Covey, whose defeat was not only physical but moral as well, creating Douglass as a new subject-FREEMAN, and prompting Douglass’ oft quoted “West India Speech”: “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want

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rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will”

<sup>35</sup> John Stauffer has gone so far to argue in *The Hearts of Black Men* that “the greater the disparity there was between an ‘artistic’ public self and a private self that remained largely circumscribed by those aesthetic boundaries. In Douglass’ case, he was (and is) extremely difficult to penetrate and know as a private individual.” (48-9)