

Unwillingness and Imagination in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*

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Abstract: Frederick Douglass testified often to his experiences and the injustice of slavery. Yet how did he explain those who were unmoved, and what did he envision as compelling them to act? I turn to *The Heroic Slave* to investigate Douglass on white unwillingness. A fictional account of the factual mutiny of the enslaved Madison Washington in 1841, Douglass's novella narrates Washington's emancipation through the perspectives of a white northerner and southerner who waver in response to testimony when confronted by the spaces and scripts of white society. Although Douglass suggests that friendship may encourage whites, I find in the story's contents as well as its publication a heroic imagination in which black resistance is inevitable and natural, independent of white alliance, opposition, and judgment itself. This story was for Douglass another means of motivating whites, and for us illustrative of how racial justice demands not only evidence but imagination.

Introduction

A major preoccupation of modern black political thought is the well-meaning white who is unwilling to act for racial justice. James Baldwin wrote that though whites see “an appallingly oppressive and bloody history” before them, “they seem to lack the energy to change this condition they would rather not be reminded of.”¹ For Baldwin and other modern thinkers, whites are increasingly presented with evidence of injustice and the criteria by which to evaluate it and yet devise elaborate illusions to justify their separation from the struggle. “The majority of white Americans consider

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¹James Baldwin, “White Man's Guilt,” in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 320.

themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote shortly before his assassination. "They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class Utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity."² Fictions of American exceptionalism or "the myth of time"—whereby we need only wait for progress—encourage whites to see themselves absolved of the duty to act or, in Baldwin's terms, innocent of their complicity with injustice in the past and present.³

Frederick Douglass sought justice in a more ignorant and illiberal America. Much of his political writing and action thus aimed to inform Americans of slavery's injustice, to bear witness through speech and narrative, his body "the living parchment" and proof of his claims.⁴ Yet like Baldwin and King, he also wrote frequently on what in American society rendered whites unwilling to act on this knowledge. In the South he saw how his mistress Sophia Auld or the slave breaker Edward Covey could trick themselves into believing Douglass to be inferior, even upon witnessing his intellectual capacity and physical self-determination.⁵ He explained how masters read selectively of scripture to justify slavery.⁶ As an abolitionist, Douglass saw whites deny his testimonies on the grounds that a man so well-spoken could never have been enslaved.⁷ He watched fellow abolitionists acting on principle yet held back by their prejudice.⁸ In what is today his best-known critique of white unwillingness, Douglass denounced the "scorching irony" between the facts of slavery and the founding principles otherwise championed by Americans like those in the audience of his "Fourth of July" address.⁹ Among northerners and southerners alike, Douglass saw not only ignorance but the illusions that whites conjured to overlook his humanity.

²Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 2010), 4–5.

³Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), 296. For Baldwin's use of innocence, see for example James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 1–10.

⁴Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 239.

⁵*Ibid.*, 214–17, 283–85.

⁶*Ibid.*, 251–55.

⁷See John W. Blassingame, introduction to *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 1, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass, ed. John R. McKivigan, Peter P. Hinks, and John W. Blassingame, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), xxvi–xxxiii.

⁸Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 393.

⁹Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 2, 1847–1854, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 371.

Since Douglass appealed to whites predominantly through oral and written testimony, political theorists have primarily drawn from his speeches and narratives to reconstruct his political theory and practice.¹⁰ To my knowledge, no political theorist has considered what I will argue is Douglass's most extended analysis of white unwillingness: his only work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave*. Within this 1853 novella, Douglass reimagines the real events of Madison Washington, a slave who in 1841 mutinied aboard the slaver *Creole* on the way to New Orleans and, with others, rerouted the ship to Nassau where slavery was unlawful.¹¹ With its primary witness escaped to the British Bahamas, the mutiny proliferated narratives based on sailors' reports and scant evidence. What distinguishes Douglass's story from other depictions is its unique narrative framing. Douglass wrote *The Heroic Slave* not from Washington's perspective but from that of the whites who were audience to his testimonies: a northerner intrigued but unacquainted with abolitionist politics, and a southerner first mate who was aboard the *Creole*.

I argue that through *The Heroic Slave* Douglass not only explains but offers an antidote to white America's unwillingness to act against slavery. Though Washington's testimony compels the white protagonists to better judgment, both waver when removed from these engagements. Douglass suggests that the North and South alike provide spaces and scripts whereby whites can see themselves as separate from or superior to black suffering and solidarity.¹² Thus whites may know injustice while remaining unwilling either to

¹⁰Nicholas Buccola provides the most comprehensive overview of Douglass on persuasion or education in *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). For other political theory that relies particularly on Douglass's "Fourth of July" address and his narrated fight with Edward Covey, see Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); George M. Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Jason A. Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Linda Zerilli, "Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgment: Farewell to Public Reason," *Political Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012): 6–31.

¹¹Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 127–29.

¹²By "scripts" I refer to cultural norms in behavior or speech, similar to the scholarly use of "narrative" or "stories" to describe how we draw and make meaning in political and legal contexts. My use of the word "script" is inspired by Douglass's formatting a conversation in part 3 as though it were a staged play, which I interrogate below. On narrative and stories, see Robert M. Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," in *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, ed. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 95–172; Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

aid black Americans or—at the very least—to allow their emancipation. Whereas the first part of this essay unpacks Douglass’s explanation for white unwillingness, the second and third parts address what Douglass proposes as one solution to overcome it. To move beyond the spaces and scripts that justify racial injustice, readers of *The Heroic Slave*, like its white protagonists, require a political imagination in which black resistance is envisioned as inevitable and natural. Whether manifested as trust or fear, such an imagination moves whites beyond judgment to an epistemic space between fact and fiction, wherein they may interrogate their unwillingness and what they expect of the future. I trace this heroic imagination in Douglass’s choice to narrate black agency and solidarity in the margins of the protagonists’ and readers’ views, as well as within his writing and publication of the novella itself. By narrating Washington as heroic, Douglass places himself alongside the reader as they imagine together what occurred aboard the *Creole* and what justice they would seek in America.

Interpretations of Douglass’s story among historians and literature scholars have emphasized its appeal to interracial friendship, its model of heroic resistance, and Douglass’s artful repurposing of Washington’s life.¹³ I am indebted to these readings even as I emphasize the limits of Douglass’s white protagonists. This emphasis puts *The Heroic Slave* in dialogue with how later thinkers like Baldwin and King addressed white unwillingness. As George Shulman writes, Baldwin deemed whites culpable not only for sustaining injustice but for claiming their own innocence; Douglass’s story focuses more on the specific encounters and imaginative spaces in which such claims of innocence are enacted or overcome.¹⁴ Whereas King worried that whites claimed justice inevitable only to undermine the possibility of the “present moment,” Robert Gooding-Williams writes, Douglass shows how whites convinced of such inevitability may productively fear what will become of them if they remain an obstacle to a just future.¹⁵ *The Heroic Slave* is also distinct in that Douglass wrote it to contest competing narratives

¹³The first modern work on the story is Robert B. Stepto, “Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass’ ‘The Heroic Slave,’” *Georgia Review* 36, no. 2 (1982): 355–68. Other influential scholarship includes William L. Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative,” *PMLA* 105, no. 1 (1990): 23–34; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); John Stauffer, “Interracial Friendship and the Aesthetics of Freedom,” in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*.

¹⁴Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 143.

¹⁵Robert Gooding-Williams, “The Du Bois–Washington Debate and the Idea of Dignity,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther*

of Washington and their underwritten fictions of white superiority. Whereas Lawrie Balfour has shown how Baldwin used both essays and fiction to trace the personal and social impacts of white claims of innocence, I show how Douglass's story models white unwillingness while enacting the heroic imagination he saw as one solution to such apathy or antipathy.¹⁶

As I briefly address in the conclusion, Douglass's interest in the imaginative spaces that disrupt racism render *The Heroic Slave* a vital text for contemporary politics. Today the persistence of injustice is all the more perplexing as new technologies and political movements proliferate evidence of racial inequality. While we might find in the more modern writings of Baldwin and King more relevant tools for diagnosing white unwillingness, Douglass reminds us that overcoming injustice requires not only witness and advocacy but vision. So where Christopher Lebron looks to Douglass's speeches and narratives for a "democratic reimagining" foundational to #BlackLivesMatter, this novella suggests how imagining black resistance may stoke new solidarities even when performed through literature or music or film.¹⁷ Where for Juliet Hooker, Douglass exemplifies a "fugitive tradition within black political thought," so too does *The Heroic Slave* corroborate her claim that how we narrate black resistance paves the path for what comes next.¹⁸ Though we might be wary of fiction at a time of fact's waning importance, a heroic imagination like Douglass's insists upon the collectives and courage that may emerge around such stories.¹⁹

White Unwillingness in America

The Heroic Slave retells Washington's story through the perspectives of two white Americans. The first three parts follow his escape and recapture through the eyes of a northerner, Mr. Listwell. The fourth part details Washington's mutiny through the voice of a southerner bested aboard the boat, Tom Grant. In this section of the essay I draw from the novella Douglass's analysis of white unwillingness. When confronted by

King, Jr., ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), 34.

¹⁶Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 88.

¹⁷Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13.

¹⁸Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair," *Political Theory* 44, no. 4 (2016): 448–69.

¹⁹By this I refer to the contemporary claim that we are living in a "post-truth" era, given the political impact of social media and the success of politicians like Donald J. Trump, among other indicators.

Washington's testimony—which bears evidence of both his suffering and agency to overcome it—both Listwell and Grant are moved to better judgment, and in some cases moved to action. When removed from such engagements, however, both men waver in their convictions. Through these scenes Douglass suggests that whites become unwilling within a society that either shields them from the reality of slavery or offers scripts whereby they may justify themselves as superior to black Americans.

In part 1 of *The Heroic Slave*, a “Northern traveller” watering his horse in the woods of Virginia overhears Washington's elegy for his lost freedoms on an 1835 Sabbath morning.²⁰ The elegy echoes Douglass's life. Washington contrasts his lot to the freedom of birds and the “accursed and crawling snake” who “escaped [his blow],” lamenting that “I am a *slave*,—born a slave, an abject slave” (*H*, 5). In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the author described how he struck back against “the snake” and slave breaker Edward Covey: this fight would show readers “how a slave was made a man.”²¹ Washington's soliloquy is a brief summary of the sentiments Douglass offered in his own life stories. Washington reminds himself of his humanity and agency, the first proven by his own “thoughts and wishes, powers and faculties,” the latter confirmed by the courage he showed in keeping a bull at bay and saving a drowning man (*H*, 5–6). “My resolution is fixed,” he concludes, “*I shall be free*” (*H*, 6). After “scathing denunciations of the cruelty and injustice of slavery,” Washington decides he will save himself and his wife, still in bondage (*H*, 7). With this testified, he leaves.

Douglass describes Listwell's reaction to this scene to clarify that Washington compels the white listener to better judgment through both the substance of his speech and his bodily presence. Before seeing that the speaker is a slave, the traveler desires “to know what thoughts and feelings, or, it might be, high aspirations, guided those rich and mellow accents” (*H*, 5). Douglass does not tell readers what Washington was saying, and so they like the traveler catch first “the sound of a human voice” and approach the witness unknowingly; only after Douglass articulates Washington's words does Listwell raise his head to face a mix of masculinity and gentility. “Madison was of manly form,” Douglass writes, and his voice “could terrify as well as charm” (*H*, 7). With Washington's experiences and existence evidenced before him, Listwell leaves part 1 verbally committed to abolitionism (*H*, 8). After meditating “in motionless silence” for some time, the northerner stands after Washington is gone: the enslaved is “guilty of no crime but the color of his skin” (*H*, 8–9). “From this hour I am an abolitionist,” Listwell

²⁰Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, ed. Robert S. Levine, John R. McKivigan, and John Stauffer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 5. Future citations will be given parenthetically in-text.

²¹Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, in Autobiographies*, 56, 64.

claims: "I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land" (H, 9).

In the final section of *The Heroic Slave* we find another white protagonist compelled to better judgment after encountering Washington. Part 4 opens in "a Marine Coffee-house in Richmond," some two months after Washington's 1841 mutiny aboard the *Creole* (H, 42). There an "old salt" Jack Williams, among other sailors, implores the observations of the boat's former first mate, Tom Grant. Narrating the event, Grant reluctantly testifies to Washington's character before and during the mutiny: "in the short time he had been on board, he had secured the confidence of every officer" (H, 47). When the enslaved revolt, the first mate is knocked unconscious after drawing a knife, and upon waking sees that the crew has ascended the rigging in fear (H, 48). Failing to summon his men, Grant approaches Washington who "disarmed" him with the "eloquence of his speech": "we have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed," Washington calls out, claiming the legacy of their revolutionary forefathers (H, 48–49). When a mutineer moves on the resilient Grant, Washington intervenes to warn Grant that death awaits if he denies their freedom (H, 49). Grant hopes for reprieve upon reaching Nassau, yet knows that he has lost.

Though Washington's testimony aboard the *Creole* persuades more through physical than rhetorical force, Grant like Listwell is moved to better judgment in the wake of his encounter. Before the story, Grant resolves never to set foot on a slave ship again: "I dare say *here* what many men *feel*, but *dare not speak*, that this whole slave-trading business is a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia" (H, 45). In sum, through parts 1 and 4 we find whites persuaded to better judgment by the strategies Douglass himself deployed. Washington's soliloquy within the forest refrains much of Douglass's own evidence against slavery provided through speeches and narratives. Washington's resistance aboard the *Creole* parallels Douglass's liberating fight with the slave breaker.

Yet both Listwell and Grant struggle to develop their newfound judgments when no longer confronted by Washington. The former character makes greater progress throughout *The Heroic Slave* that is nonetheless peppered with setbacks. Within part 1 we already see that while he is curious ("he had long desired to sound the mysterious depths of the thoughts and feelings of a slave" [H, 7]), Listwell never emerges from hiding to aid Washington. In the first three parts, Listwell is motivated only when encountering Washington: though he ends each part a better ally, the parts' serialization puts in relief what little Listwell does when away in white society. This implies that evidence and chance engagements are not enough to bring whites to sustained political action against slavery.

As part 2 opens on Listwell's Ohio home five years later, it is clear that little has changed. Douglass describes the quiet scene of his and his wife's hearth, "smouldering embers" in contrast with the heavy wind outside (*H*, 9–10). "A whole wilderness of thought might pass through one's mind during such an evening," Douglass writes. But where is any sign of Listwell's abolitionism, that his convictions continued once away from Washington's testimony? Douglass lingers on this scene, to suggest that white northerners like Listwell comfort themselves at home while moral storms rage and the "slumbering volcano" of slavery rumbles in the South.²² Several times the dog barks at noise outside, and upon finding nothing the couple reseat themselves "as if reluctant to leave the slowly expiring embers" (*H*, 10).

Though a brief passage, here we see how the spaces of white society—in this case, domestic life in the North—shield whites from the reality of injustice bearing down on the nation like a natural disaster, enervating those once energized to act. When the fugitive Washington appears at their door for refuge, Douglass shows how, even as witnesses perforate those shielded spaces, Listwell's society encourages behavior unreceptive to what Washington needs (*H*, 11). The northerner's home is so removed from American injustice that in a naive act of hospitality Listwell exclaims that he remembers the man. Washington is "disconcerted and disquieted": to identify an escaped slave was to mark him for recapture.

This is momentary as Listwell realizes his mistake and once again is moved to better judgment through receiving the fugitive's testimony. Listwell assumes "a more quiet and inquiring aspect," and Washington introduces himself anew (*H*, 11–12). With his wife fallen silent, Listwell tells Washington of his eavesdropping years prior: "your face seemed to be daguerretyped on my memory," the northerner tells him (*H*, 14).²³ Washington now resumes his testimony upon Listwell's request. Though I will not unpack Washington's story till the next section, notice here how Listwell is a more willing participant than he was in part 1. He is no longer a mere spectator nor is he barking declarations in the forest or his home's threshold. Listwell listens and asks well, letting his partner elaborate new evidence of injustice. Their discussion resembles what Vincent Jungkunz calls "silent yielding." Whereas constant talk risks speaking over the oppressed or refusing racial self-consciousness, silent yielding "acts as a refusal and disengagement from whiteness as privilege and power."²⁴ Listwell's silence

²²Frederick Douglass, "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 2:148–58.

²³Douglass embraced the daguerreotype for "like slave narratives ... photographic portraits bore witness to African Americans' essential humanity" (John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass* [New York: Liveright, 2015], x–xii).

²⁴Vincent Jungkunz, "Dismantling Whiteness: Silent Yielding and the Potentiality of Political Suicide," *Contemporary Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (February 2011): 12.

before Washington allows room for storytelling that may “fundamentally transform” him, just as it has changed that northern space that buffered Listwell from injustice. Listwell leaves part 2 having assisted Washington in his trip north the following day (*H*, 24).

It need scarcely be said that Mr. Listwell was deeply moved by the gratitude and friendship he had excited in a nature so noble as that of the fugitive. He went to his home that day with a joy and gratification which knew no bounds. He had done something “to deliver the spoiled out of the hands of the spoiler,” he had given bread to the hungry, and clothes to the naked, for he had befriended a man to whom the laws of his country forbade all friendship. (*H*, 26)

As Jungkunz and Julie White write elsewhere, testimony can transform only those who are receptive.²⁵ Listwell not only listens well but enlists himself in Washington’s cause, no longer inactive.

But part 3 again reveals Listwell unwilling to commit himself. With hardly a year passed, the white abolitionist finds himself in Virginia again at a historic tavern (*H*, 29). Listwell spends the first pages in conversation with local whites over news of a nearby slave auction. Here Douglass is even more explicit that it is not simply how white society shields its members from injustice that saps the will of would-be allies. By voicing these characters through script rather than as the omniscient narrator that otherwise frames *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass depicts white society as a performance that discourages advocacy through the roles offered its players. That evening, Listwell eavesdrops from his room as his bar mates guess his identity (*H*, 32). When they conclude that Listwell must be a slave buyer, he chooses to play along: “to reveal himself, and to impart a knowledge of his real character and sentiments would, to say the least, be imparting intelligence with the certainty of seeing it and himself both abused” (*H*, 33). Douglass characterizes this dissimulation as cowardly. Listwell knows that he would rather “cry out against” slavery, but “bodily fear, not conscientious scruples, prevailed” (*H*, 33–34). The unique literary style with which Douglass describes this tavern scene implies that the South must inscribe more elaborate fictions to maintain white superiority than what is found in the North. Yet both Listwell’s home and the tavern provide whites narrative spaces in which they may ignore evidence of injustice or justify it.

This script has such a hold on Listwell that another encounter with Washington only briefly renews his judgment. The next morning he sees a slave market for the first time (*H*, 34). Here are men, women, and children, “guilty of no crime,” “humanity converted into merchandise,” scenes of woe never witnessed by Listwell. He is startled to see Washington’s face among the slaves and greets him (*H*, 35). Speechless but for a moment,

²⁵Vincent Jungkunz and Julie White, “Ignorance, Innocence, and Democratic Responsibility: Seeing Race, Hearing Racism,” *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 446.

Washington encourages Listwell to come back after breakfast and thereafter tells of what led to his recapture: the fugitive returned from Canada to free his family, and in rescuing his wife was enslaved while she was killed (*H*, 37–38). And yet, falling back on cowardice, Listwell tells him, “it was madness to have returned”; donning a disguise as a trader once more, Listwell asks to buy Washington’s freedom (*H*, 38). The offer rejected, Listwell slips him ten dollars, and returns to the tavern. Giving one white there a dollar, “Mr. Listwell now stood as well with the company as any other occupant of the bar-room” (*H*, 39). Douglass’s meaning is clear: with the same currency Listwell can ease his conscience with Washington and maintain his standing as a white, propertied man.

This is not the end of Listwell’s story, but alongside it we must see how Grant too becomes unwilling despite his improved judgment. Though Douglass does not frame part 4 through script as he does the conversation in part 3, he describes Grant’s interlocutor as playing a part: explaining his theory of black inferiority, “Williams went on in this strain, occasionally casting an imploring glance at the company for applause” (*H*, 44). Removed from Washington’s testimony to a tavern like the one that housed Listwell, Grant clarifies the limits of his newfound sentiments. Though critical of the slave trade, he is angered when Williams accuses him of being “as good an abolitionist as Garrison” (*H*, 45). He also contends that Washington was right to seek freedom, though aboard the *Creole* his conscience had not moved him. Grant closes *The Heroic Slave* conscious of a widening disconnect between his judgment of slavery and his unwillingness to act against it:

“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.” (*H*, 51)

Though in the next section I will unpack Grant’s earlier dissection of Williams’s racist claims, see here how he (like Listwell) is increasingly certain of slavery’s injustice while nonetheless struggling to move beyond a social script of white superiority.

It is worth comparing Listwell’s and Grant’s unwillingness to the conclusion of Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, a story that has much in common with *The Heroic Slave*: both based on an actual slaver mutiny, both narrated through white protagonists incapable of seeing through dissimulation. Compare Grant’s closing remarks to the final exchange between the traumatized Cereno and his savior. “You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?” Amasa Delano asks, to which Cereno famously replies, “The Negro.”²⁶ As Lawrie Balfour explains, Melville’s story ends with a captain stunned into silence by his inability to comprehend black insurrection.²⁷

Though Babo died for his freedom, through the fiction he wove aboard the *San Dominick* he tore the veil of white supremacy from at least one man's eyes. Cereno is not converted but he is changed. All Grant can do in part 4 is talk: confidently when upholding his white superiority, and softly, tentatively as he probes new ideas that justify Washington's emancipation. Since we as readers remain ashore with Grant, we leave *The Heroic Slave* knowing what spaces and scripts will still make whites unwilling even as we are unsure what will come of Grant himself.

Douglass leaves Listwell in a far better position, while leaving unclear—at least for now—what it takes to move whites from their unwillingness. The day after their conversation in part 3, Listwell follows the train carrying Washington and others up to Richmond (*H*, 40). Suddenly, Listwell buys three files from a hardware store that he then passes to Washington as the latter boards the boat. As readers learn in the final part, with these files Washington removes his shackles and begins the mutiny. And yet Douglass does not explain where Listwell found the will to risk himself for Washington. Baldwin wrote that whiteness is a “moral choice”; Joel Olson adds that by posing it as a choice we may envision “political alternatives.”²⁸ But Douglass describes Listwell's decision as having been inspired by something beyond: “the thought struck him.” Without a closer reading of *The Heroic Slave* we cannot know what might have led to such a pivotal moment in Listwell's final act.

Though Douglass bore witness often to the injustice of slavery, throughout *The Heroic Slave* he suggests that testimony alone cannot persuade whites away from the spaces and scripts by which racial injustice appears a separate or insignificant problem. Revealed throughout these depictions is a fundamental epistemic problem that grounds white unwillingness. Notice that Washington's obstacle is not that Listwell and Grant do not believe him. If anything, Listwell believes Washington too readily in part 1, and in parts 2 and 3 we see that he suffers more from a desire to speak *for* or *over* Washington. Grant, on the other hand, finds himself in that southern tavern the object of what Miranda Fricker calls “hermeneutical injustice”: he has epistemic standing among his peers, yet they lack the “collective interpretive resources” to make sense of what he witnessed aboard the *Creole*.²⁹ As

²⁶Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1990), 103.

²⁷Lawrie Balfour, “What Babo Saw: Benito Cereno and ‘the World We Live In,’” in *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Jason Frank (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 260.

²⁸James Baldwin, “On Being White ... and Other Lies,” *Essence*, April 1984; see Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 145; Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxix.

²⁹Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

Fricker writes, even if we develop what she calls “testimonial sensibility” through engaging with difference, we are forever vulnerable to the social prejudice that makes disbelief or inaction easy.³⁰

What justice required then was that Douglass and other witnesses work outward to build not only evidence against slavery but a richer solidarity grounded in a vision of what is possible and probable. As Juliet Hooker writes, the challenge of racial justice is not simply “how to generate white empathy but rather how to engender white solidarity” with blacks seeking justice, to produce among whites “willingness to take action.”³¹ Essential to such solidarity are not only practices specific to whites such as “silent yielding,” but building friendship across communities that sustain advocacy even when separated. As Listwell watches the *Creole* sail away, Douglass concludes that not only Washington but author and reader have found the northerner to be “our friend” (*H*, 41). That this declaration follows Listwell’s unexplained aid to Washington suggests that friendship is dependent upon that action, not the other way around—even if, as John Stauffer has written, Douglass saw friendship as essential to racial justice.³²

As I show in the next two sections, conversation and camaraderie were not enough for Douglass. We must return to Douglass’s story to find a crucial element of what Danielle Allen calls “political friendship”: that it “cultivates habits of imagination that generate politically transformative experiences out of ordinary interactions among strangers.”³³ Such an imagination does not override but supports testimony, bringing racial justice from questions of empirical verification to those of political futures.

Black Resistance in the Margins

The waning white convictions of *The Heroic Slave* exemplify Douglass’s claim in his “Fourth of July” address: that though Americans bore the intellectual resources to judge slavery unjust, they lacked the courage to act against it. As Nicholas Buccola writes, the early 1850s found Douglass increasingly skeptical that America would act on good judgment. Looking at Douglass’s

³⁰Ibid., 5.

³¹Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics,” 21. Elsewhere Hooker writes that “political solidarity refers to the reciprocal relations of trust and obligation established between members of a political community that are necessary in order for long-term egalitarian political projects to flourish.” The challenge is that solidarity is “supposed to transcend race, yet solidarity continues to be powerfully delimited by race” (Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 4–5).

³²See John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³³Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 171.

writings thereafter, Buccola traces the abolitionist's defense of "earned, or merit-based, sympathy" in the form of black courage.³⁴ That Madison Washington needs no encouragement throughout the novella thus articulates for readers not an *imperative* that blacks must resist but an *imagination* that blacks will resist no matter what whites do. "Imagination" captures this perspective's progressive outlook *and* its recognition of black resistance that often occurs beyond white judgment. Douglass does not use this term, yet throughout *The Heroic Slave* he places examples of black agency and solidarity beyond the view of both his white characters and his readers. With attention to these scenes, I go one step beyond what Stauffer identifies as Douglass's use of the sublime.³⁵ Whereas for Stauffer, moments like Listwell's overlapping fear and familiarity below Washington's masculine form in part 1 preface interracial friendship, imagination turns our attention to spaces of black resistance of no sensory proximity to whites. This imagination replaces the spaces and scripts that enervate whites, and whether expressed as trust or fear requires whites to reconsider what is possible in a just future and their participation therein. To see this work in *The Heroic Slave* requires that we retrace our steps through its narrative before considering the context in which Douglass himself imagined Washington.

In part 2, Douglass not only challenges Listwell to hear Washington's testimony, but in narrating the latter's story charges Listwell with imagining what solidarity persists among black Americans beyond his home. Within their conversation, Washington tells of his return south to save his wife and children, and his narrow escape from recapture after a forest fire separates them (*H*, 14–17). In the woods again, the fugitive climbs a tree to sleep before waking to the voices of black men come to fell the forest (*H*, 19). The work finished, one sits on a stump and, after a while, rises to move beneath Washington. He kneels to pray "such a prayer, the most fervent, earnest, and solemn, to which I think I ever listened" (*H*, 20). Washington has assumed Listwell's position of judgment in part 1. The fugitive had given "little attention to religion," and yet "as the old man prayed, I felt almost like coming down and [kneeling] by his side" (*H*, 21). Where Listwell hesitated to entreat his observed subject, Washington descends to join the pious slave. The resting worker is alarmed upon Washington's greeting, but after the latter reveals his story "the good man embraced me in his arms, and assured me of his sympathy."

At the deepest layer of this narrative, Washington offers Listwell and readers a model of resistance to contrast Listwell's weak stance at the end of part 1. Washington heard his testimony and joined him, committed now to aid him if need be. By bearing witness, Washington is not simply attesting to his own humanity but asking that Listwell trust his story and what it

³⁴Buccola, *Frederick Douglass*, 91–94.

³⁵Stauffer, "Interracial Friendship and the Aesthetics of Freedom."

exemplifies of the solidarity forged among black Americans. Drawing back, we as readers now understand what might have encouraged Listwell to help his visitor the next morning—and more importantly, we must imagine with Douglass this conjured forest scene and its implications for political action. Just as Douglass spoke of his “band of brothers” upon the plantation, here both Listwell and reader must recognize the persistence of struggle by those who seek freedom.³⁶

Part 3 again presents black solidarity just out of Listwell’s view, as he briefly breaks from the tavern to see Washington awaiting the auction. Douglass writes that the hundred-plus other slaves stand by “as mute spectators” while the two men entreat one another (*H*, 35). Only as Listwell is leaving does one man speak up to ask Washington of Listwell’s identity: Washington tells his comrades that this stranger “is not less *your* friend than *mine*” and that they are to remain quiet of this chance meeting (*H*, 35–36). Although Listwell overhears this exchange, it begins only once he is departing. Washington’s words not only affirm the solidarity formed among those in bondage, contrasted with the white performance of the nearby tavern, but they place his friendship with Listwell as secondary albeit supportive of this solidarity. We and Listwell are left to imagine the many other scenes like this beyond our verification. Though Listwell’s courage falters upon returning to the tavern, he likely buys those files the next day inspired by what he had only glimpsed of Washington’s camaraderie with others.

Scenes of black agency and solidarity occur in the margins of parts 1–3 to suggest that the oppressed can and will resist injustice with or without Listwell’s better judgment and action. Perhaps counterintuitively, by this Listwell does not dismiss himself as unneeded but acts on newfound trust of what he imagines Washington can and will do. No doubt this imagination depends upon their growing friendship and the evidence he does witness; yet what most invigorates Listwell are those scenes where resistance persists without and beyond him, the potential future breaking through the scripts and spaces holding him back.

Two potential critiques bear mention. First, imagining the persistence of black resistance is not meant to generalize among individual black Americans the same drive. Douglass’s own escape plot while enslaved had been foiled by one among his band of brothers, he surmised, so he knew the diverse incentives and obstacles facing black Americans—though even in that moment he would not indict the man he thought responsible.³⁷ Douglass’s focus is on what whites must imagine to will them to action. Second and related, there remains the risk that those oppressors who imagine resistance from below might unify against it. In one major historical

³⁶Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 320.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 321.

example, the fear that other slaves would reprise Nat Turner's rebellion of 1831 led many whites thereafter to pass repressive laws.³⁸

Yet Douglass recognized that rebellions like these also inspired white abolitionists, and through *The Heroic Slave* he suggests that even when manifested as fear, imagining black resistance may bring the oppressor to new views on what is possible and probable. In part 4 the *Creole* mutiny occurs outside the narrative frame: the sailors depend upon Grant's testimony in imagining what occurred there, such thoughts producing not trust but fear of what black solidarity may mean for those clinging to white superiority. As he expressed in his autobiography, Douglass believed that mere word of resistance could move others. Whites who learned of the fight with Covey came to fear and thus avoid Douglass, and later, upon defending his choice to exclude an account of his escape from his narratives, Douglass writes that the slaveholder "should be left to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormenters."³⁹ In part 4, Douglass similarly shifts focus to how resistance might stoke the American imagination. Whereas at the end of his struggle with Covey, Douglass quoted Lord Byron's "Hereditary bondmen, Know ye not / Who would be free, *themselves* must strike the blow," here he elides "hereditary bondmen" to suggest that *all* must imagine black solidarity (*H*, 41).⁴⁰

Through Grant's testimony Douglass proposes that not only resistance itself but its imagining disrupts scripts of white superiority by treating black solidarity as not only ongoing but natural. "Mr. Mate," Washington tells Grant as the former captains the newly freed ship to Nassau, "you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows" (*H*, 50). Douglass drew these lines from his own speech in 1849, where he elaborated that upon the waters "the slave stands redeemed, disenthralled," a model for the land and domestic law as well.⁴¹ According to Douglass, black agency upon undomesticated waters exemplifies that liberty rests in natural law uncorrupted by the artifice of man-made policy or the pantomimes played out in the white spaces of *The Heroic Slave*.

For both Grant's audience and Douglass's, the *Creole* mutiny is meant to serve as more an object of imagination than a model to follow. What freedom Washington found in open waters he affirmed in seeking the safe haven of the British Bahamas; similarly, Douglass's two-year trip to England clarified the irony of a racist, independent America.⁴² Yet neither

³⁸Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 210–11.

³⁹Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 287–88, 340.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 287.

⁴¹Douglass, "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," 158.

⁴²Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 374. On the relevance of Britain for Douglass's story, see Ivy G. Wilson, "On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and 'The Heroic Slave,'" *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (2006): 453–68.

suggests for Douglass that racial justice requires blacks to mutiny or move abroad. His 1849 speech on Washington concluded by criticizing the efforts of the American Colonization Society that labored “to drive us from our home and country.”⁴³ As Neil Roberts writes, for Douglass freedom was something not achieved but ongoing.⁴⁴ For Grant’s and Douglass’s audiences to recognize the naturalness of resistance on open waters would guide their imagination back to the United States. Early in their discussion, Williams voices common racist prejudices: “the whole disaster” of the *Creole* “was the result of ignorance of the real character of *darkies* in general” (*H*, 42). “All that is needed in dealing with a set of rebellious *darkies*, is to show that yer not afraid of ‘em,” he tells the first mate (*H*, 43). Grant’s response reveals how scenes like that of the *Creole*—even if they erupt beyond the United States and must be imagined by his interlocutors—threaten the fictions by which whites consider themselves supreme. The first mate claims that it is not nature but law that protects slaveowners on land:

“It is quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on land, where you have the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command; and where, if a negro shall lift his hand against a white man, the whole community, with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down... . But, sir, I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward, or that your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of *salt water*.” (*H*, 43)

The sea and the *Creole* and Washington had shown the first mate something different: that without such protections and customs there is little to distinguish black from white and little to protect the latter from the former’s emancipation. Testifying to this encourages Grant’s audience to imagine what he witnessed and to interrogate their own adherence to these illusions.

Most important then is that such an imagination did not mean for Douglass that freedom could exist only within this fictional or far-off space. Indeed to imagine black resistance as inevitable and natural was to see it as already in progress throughout the states. Where part 2 found Listwell at home amid fierce winds outdoors, Washington captains the *Creole* through a storm, telling us that nature condemns slavery abroad as well as within the United States (*H*, 50). Indeed the Listwells and Grants alike could only shelter themselves from such states of nature for so long. In his 1849 speech, Douglass described the South like those open waters, in “a *state of war*.”⁴⁵ These similarities should frighten slaveowners: “I want to alarm the

⁴³Douglass, “Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano,” 150.

⁴⁴Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 56–57.

⁴⁵Douglass, “Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano,” 153. See also Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” 364: “From the round top of your ship of state, dark and threatening clouds may be seen.”

slave holders...I want them to know that there are some Madison Washingtons in this country." Black agency and solidarity are not simply elsewhere or in the future, but in some sense already here.

Teasing out these imaginative spaces of resistance throughout *The Heroic Slave* does not redeem Listwell or Grant as better allies. These margins serve instead as a two-part message to readers: First, that such activity is inevitable and will proceed beyond the alliance or opposition of whites. Second, that such activity often occurs beyond the very judgment of whites. Neither contradicts Douglass's claims elsewhere that blacks *should* testify against slavery in word and deed, *should* bind together in solidarity and friendship with whites. Such witnessing may indeed inspire others. But it is the work of imagination to move beyond evidence, beyond judgment as whites anticipate the inevitability of black resistance and a just future. To lean too heavily on testimony may assume of the oppressed what standpoint theorists call "automatic epistemic privilege."⁴⁶ Douglass knew well how an emphasis on evidence could relegate black voices to an inferior political position, as his early abolitionist colleagues generalized whites as advocates and blacks as witnesses.⁴⁷ Imagination does not seek to get the facts right, it interrogates the right for which facts are marshaled. Only with this imagination can whites turn away from the spaces and scripts that render them unwilling to end injustice.

The Heroic Imagination

If we take the narratives of Listwell, Grant, and Washington alone as models of unwillingness and imagination, we risk too neatly dividing responsibility for justice along racial lines.⁴⁸ Douglass of course recognized among northerners, southerners, and the enslaved distinct positions in the fight against

⁴⁶See Kristina Rolin, "Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 218–26.

⁴⁷See Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 26; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 33–35; Nolan Bennett, "To Narrate and Denounce: Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Personal Narrative," *Political Theory* 44, no. 2 (2016): 240–264.

⁴⁸There is also a problematic association of power with masculinity throughout the story, given the relegation of Listwell's and Washington's wives. On gender in *The Heroic Slave*, see Richard Yarborough, "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 166–88; Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*; Celeste-Marie Bernier, "'Arms Like Polished Iron': The Black Slave Body in Narratives of a Slave Ship Revolt," *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 2 (2002): 89–106.

slavery—and he employed those distinctions in rhetoric. The Fourth of July “is yours, not mine,” he told his audience.⁴⁹ But if we consider Douglass’s position in publishing *The Heroic Slave* as a fictionalized account of a factual story, we see better how imagination promotes solidarity across racial lines. What facts Douglass knew of Washington he wove into a narrative of agency and solidarity, a narrative to contend with the many others of the *Creole* mutiny that wove its story into the scripts of white supremacy. Through fiction Douglass not only placed Washington in the annals of great Americans before him, but drew his readers’ and our attention to the work of envisioning racial justice with Washington gone: to elevate Washington as “heroic” was to make him an object of imagination shared between Douglass and readers alike. What results is a novella that treats black resistance as given and white unwillingness as challenging, but that shares the work of imagination among all Americans.

Douglass wrote *The Heroic Slave* amid numerous representations of Washington, whose mutiny of November 1841 occurred not long after Douglass first spoke to William Lloyd Garrison’s Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Douglass likely saw echoes of his own struggle. The nation saw another case against slavery. Two years before this mutiny, the enslaved Cinqué similarly led comrades aboard the Spanish sloop *Amistad* to seize the vessel. Although the American Navy captured the boat off Long Island, the Supreme Court eventually confirmed a district court ruling that freed the Africans on the basis of their unlawful enslavement under Spanish law, effectively nullifying a treaty that required the return of human contraband.⁵⁰ The *Creole* worried slavery’s defenders not only as another rebellion like Turner’s and Denmark Vesey’s; it worried them that antislavery voices like John Quincy Adams could compellingly depict such uprisings as legitimate according to the natural law that defined international waters and might soon wash over America. Abolitionist venues like the *Liberator* were quick to identify Washington’s deed with natural law and the War for Independence.⁵¹

With “slavery on trial,” as Douglass wrote elsewhere, Washington aboard the *Creole* had borne witness against it.⁵² Yet the irony of Washington’s mutiny was that by his success he could not testify in America “at the bar of public opinion.” In the first part of *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass wishes that Washington will “command the pen of genius to set his merits forth” some day (*H*, 4). With the mutineer gone, the lone witnesses to reach an

⁴⁹Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” 368.

⁵⁰See Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 109–16.

⁵¹See Robert S. Levine, John R. McKivigan, and John Stauffer, introduction to *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, by Frederick Douglass (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), xvii–xviii.

⁵²Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 106.

American jury were the *Creole's* surviving crew.⁵³ In one article drawn from their "Protest," the author warned "old Virginia to be careful how she ships her slaves to the South."⁵⁴ With a nod to the mutiny and legal ruling on the *Amistad*, the article warned that "these Virginia slaves are hard cases." Published in issues that also narrated Douglass's emancipation, the stories of Washington to emerge by 1842 in the *Liberator* drew from oral histories of his life before the rebellion, Robert Levine writes.⁵⁵ By 1843, abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet would include the mutineer in rank with Turner and Toussaint L'Ouverture, one such set of remarks heard by Douglass as they were delivered at the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo.⁵⁶

By writing *The Heroic Slave*, first published in Julia Griffiths's *Autographs for Freedom* in 1853, Douglass could go beyond his and others' efforts to testify to Washington's deed in his absence. What Douglass knew of Washington he would rewrite not as a legal brief but a work of imagination. "There are charges brought against coloured men not alone of intellectual inferiority," he told an Irish audience in 1845, "but of want of affection for each other."⁵⁷ No wonder that within *The Heroic Slave* Douglass imagined Washington joined in solidarity and friendship with others, grounded both in what he knew of the mutineer and what might move white minds. In 1849 he told a New York audience that "there are more Madison Washingtons in the South, and the time may not be distant when the whole South will present again a scene something similar to the deck of the *Creole*."⁵⁸ No wonder that Douglass wrote this story through the perspectives of white spectators struggling to recognize such scenes beyond their scripts, distinguishing the novella from accounts by others like William Wells Brown or Lydia Marie Child.⁵⁹

Most important was that in writing *The Heroic Slave* Douglass not only bore witness to Washington's resistance and white unwillingness, but he joined readers who too must imagine Washington aboard the *Creole* and beyond. "The distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I

⁵³Even today our records include only those and government documents. See George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *The Creole Mutiny: A Tale of Revolt aboard a Slave Ship* (Chicago: Dee, 2003), 4.

⁵⁴"Another Amistad Case—What Will Grow out of It?," in *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, 61.

⁵⁵Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 130.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 132–33.

⁵⁷Frederick Douglass, "American Prejudice against Color: An Address Delivered in Cork, Ireland, 23 October 1845," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 1, 1841–1846, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 67–68.

⁵⁸Douglass, "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," 156.

⁵⁹Yarborough, "Race, Violence, and Manhood," 179.

escaped, is considerable," Douglass told his audience in 1852.⁶⁰ But the distance between his book and the *Creole* was greater. And whereas Douglass was that living witness against slavery standing before his audience, Washington confronted him and his readers alike as a shadow. If by prophecy Douglass could align those Americans with their founding ideals, if their crossing that distance brought them to the "reconstitution of community" as George Shulman writes, then it is by imagination that Douglass positions himself *alongside* those Americans who must too look to Washington's legacy.⁶¹ Through shared imagination they could bring Washington back by envisioning him within an American past and its just future.

It was thus crucial for Douglass to imagine Washington not only within an American narrative but as heroic. As Douglass reveals in the opening pages of his novella, Washington's testimony was lost long before he left the United States. Though he was a man who "loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry,—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson," his legacy "lives now only in the chattel records of his native State" (*H*, 4). *The Heroic Slave* proposes less to document Washington's deeds than to remove his story from the receipts of southern slavery to the revolutionary tradition of Virginia and the nation. Imagining the mutineer alongside Henry and others not only reflects Douglass's ongoing jeremiad but positions Washington as an ideal point, a hero to which he and his readers may look. As Hooker argues, advocates for racial justice are right to suspect the language of heroism.⁶² Douglass wrote accordingly that his autobiography was not to "illustrate any heroic achievements of a man": the editor invited readers not "to a work of Art, but to a work of FACTS,—Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be—yet FACTS, nevertheless."⁶³ Though James McCune Smith called Douglass "a Representative American man," Douglass remained conscious of how heroism could elevate his experiences and deeds from the reality of other Americans, even as transatlantic contemporaries debated the potential of heroic men in democratic times.⁶⁴

The Heroic Slave testifies not to the hero himself as exemplary but the heroic imagination that surrounds him, the friendship and solidarity built through imagining those dedicated to racial justice. The novella offers license not to manufacture facts but to act according to new visions of what justice will

⁶⁰Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?," 360.

⁶¹Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 17.

⁶²Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics," 18.

⁶³Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 105.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 132; see Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Electric Book Company, 2001); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*, in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 610–761. Yarborough criticizes *The Heroic Slave* on this point, arguing that it never establishes a case for what is shared among Washington and other black Americans ("Race, Violence, and Manhood," 180).

and should be. "Glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented," Douglass writes in its opening pages, and "anxiously we peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of northern skies to reveal him. But alas! he is still enveloped in darkness" (*H*, 4). Washington's heroism reflects not his exemplary acts or existence but those who witness him throughout the story, and those who bore oral history of the factual man as Douglass and others recovered him from the archives in the 1840s. It is this focus on storytelling that situates Douglass's imagination between fact and fiction, to overcome white unwillingness by contending scripts of white superiority we saw within *The Heroic Slave*. We with Douglass can only guess where Washington went, and through that heroic imagination consider our own place in a just future. Remember that Douglass ends *The Heroic Slave* sitting as the reader does: unable to join the mutineer. Imagination may yield what Allen calls "political friendship," but it may also resemble Lloyd Pratt's "stranger humanism," which envisions democracy as "an encounter without end in which the parties to the encounter never reach a concluding moment of full intelligibility."⁶⁵ As Washington leaves us and our narrative, we remain to act on his behalf.

Conclusion

With *The Heroic Slave* Douglass accomplished through literature what few political authors do. From cover to cover the book not only reveals through its characters what Douglass saw as the unwillingness of American whites to act outside the fictions that justify slavery, but the book charges us as readers to interrogate our own unwillingness. The novella is both a work *on* and *of* the heroic imagination. This was of course not Douglass's only writing on white unwillingness, nor was the heroic imagination I have sketched here his sole means of persuading whites to action. Douglass also made use of moral suasion, deployed irony, sought sympathy and empathy through narratives of personal experience, spoke with a jeremiad vision of America, and appealed to the founding principles and natural law and Christian morality—much of which is represented within the novella. Yet *The Heroic Slave* rewards our attention not simply for its sustained scrutiny of how northerners and southerners responded to the evidence he and others presented elsewhere, but how Douglass used this literary space between fact and fiction to promote in readers a political vision that would encourage them make justice real.

The Heroic Slave is not only a valuable work among Douglass's political writings but confirms his place in a lineage of political theory and philosophy on the psychology and epistemology that sustain inequality. Historical shifts

⁶⁵Lloyd Pratt, *The Strangers Book: The Human of African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 10.

in the social conditions of the antebellum and postwar eras account for much of the nuance between Douglass's and later analyses. For Baldwin, the uneven century since emancipation implied "willful ignorance" among whites who believed themselves innocent of the past; Douglass stressed the weak will of those who ignored the humanity of black Americans or the founding principles that deemed slavery unjust.⁶⁶ For King, most whites believed racial justice already achieved and were moved infrequently by any "inner conflict" concerning the reality of their delusions; Douglass recognized instead how the North and South presented distinct scripts and spaces and thus called for varied solutions to white unwillingness.⁶⁷ The persistence of injustice today despite a more liberal white majority has no doubt led to the great flourishing of work among critical race and feminist thinkers. For scholars ranging from Miranda Fricker to José Medina and Charles Mills, injustices like those associated with gender and race rely upon epistemologies to justify superiority or separateness.⁶⁸ Yet Douglass's recognition that bystanders to injustice may lack not simply courage but an egalitarian imagination makes clear his relevance for contemporary politics. Indeed Medina writes that justice requires both "diverse experiences *and* diverse imaginations" exchanged in common.⁶⁹ No matter the strides toward justice taken from Douglass to the twenty-first century, those unwilling to do more still perpetuate scripts like the story that Barack Obama's election had ushered in a "postracial" society, that Michael Brown was murdered but "no angel," that Trayvon Martin should not have had his hood up.⁷⁰

And so what I take to be the greater relevance of *The Heroic Slave* is not Douglass's analysis of white unwillingness but his call to a heroic imagination. In Douglass's terms, to overcome unwillingness we need the imagination of storytellers and readers alike, art and ideas and visions that combine empirical proof with open eyes for what is possible in the future. Much of this work is being done.⁷¹ Where Douglass asks that we interrogate the narratives that emerge around testimony and resistance, Juliet Hooker has

⁶⁶Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said*, 27.

⁶⁷King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 5.

⁶⁸Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁶⁹Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 6.

⁷⁰On the dependence of this "postracial" story on American ideas of individualism, see Turner, *Awakening to Race*. Exemplary claims about Brown and Martin include John Eligon, "Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problems and Promise," *New York Times*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lives-mysteries.html>; Katherine Fung, "Geraldo Rivera: Trayvon Martin's 'Hoodie Is as Much Responsible for [His] Death as George Zimmerman,'" *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/23/geraldo-rivera-trayvon-martin-hoodie_n_1375080.html, accessed October 4, 2016.

recently critiqued the language of “democratic sacrifice” that frames so many responses to the Black Lives Matter movement and protests in Ferguson, Missouri.⁷² Where *The Heroic Slave* encourages that we look for contemporary works of political imagination between fact and fiction, Christopher Lebron has recently argued that we listen to the radical Afrofuturism of Janelle Monáe’s discography.⁷³

Turning to these imaginative spaces does not require that we turn away from truth telling and testimony, for we must meanwhile push for accountability and legitimacy and the justice dependent on facts told fearlessly—especially when today’s technology proliferates narratives through social media, bodycam footage, and live cell-phone testimony.⁷⁴ But Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* reminds us that it is neither the truth content nor strategic purchase of testimony as evidence that alone compels a society to justice, but a political imagination that inspires new solidarity, a vision that inspires the Listwells and Grants of America to action.

⁷¹In addition to the examples I provide, consider the diverse writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who like Douglass has evaluated white unwillingness and imagined alternatives. Coates has critiqued white illusions like what he calls the “Dream” in *Between the World and Me*, yet also contributed to the science fiction vision of an advanced black Wakanda in the comic *Black Panther: A Nation under Our Feet*. On the work of political imagination animating the latter, Coates writes: “beneath that political conversation about ‘race,’ swirling around it, sometimes directly related, and sometimes tangentially related, are the incredible myths and world-views of black people and the black diaspora at large. To the extent that this society has not been able to engage with those myths, with that world-view, it has not only lied to itself, but it has also robbed itself of some beautiful art. Racism isn’t just morally wrong, it makes for poor story-telling” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* [New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015], 11; Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Wakanda and the Black Imagination,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2015/12/visions-of-a-wakandan-future/420768/>, accessed July 14, 2018).

⁷²Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics,” 2–3, 7. According to Hooker, these narratives of martyrdom treat black loss as exemplary while shifting attention away from whites’ own difficulty accepting loss. Hooker proposes that we narrate such political action instead “as a form of democratic redress for black citizens, even if in and of themselves they cannot transform the prevailing racial order,” as a means of expressing “black anger and pain” (17–18).

⁷³Christopher Lebron, “Janelle Monáe for President,” *Boston Review*, May 21, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/race-literature-culture/chris-lebron-janelle-monae-president>. Lebron finds in this music “the cost of our failure to imagine a compassionate world that embraces rather than punishes racial, sexual, and gender difference.”

⁷⁴For recent work tracing the effects of technology throughout the thought and treatment of black American politics, see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).