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Unsettling Agency: Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*

Christopher Freeburg
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* follows the enslaved Black man Madison Washington in his fight for freedom, fulfilling Douglass's wish to bring a slave hero out of "darkness" and into the political history of the United States.[1] Douglass's cunning and industrious hero is blessed by Providence; consequently, the slave rebellion Madison leads aboard the ship *Creole* is not only admirable but spiritually justified. Madison's nobility contrasts with racist characterizations of slaves, which would otherwise portray him as ignorant, immoral, and cowardly. To aid Madison's courageous escape and successful revolt at sea, Madison's wife supplies him with stolen provisions while he waits for the right conditions to escape. But Madison's wife's efforts appear in stark contrast to Madison's estimations of the "cowardly acquiescence" of other slaves unwilling to resist slavery's coercion. These slaves are so deeply content with slavery that Madison fears they will thwart his efforts to escape.[2] This master text of "black antislavery heroism" captures important categories of slaves: the revolutionary in Madison; the everyday resister in Madison's wife; the content plantation slaves; and the ambiguous but ultimately rebellious collective aboard the *Creole*.[3] In *The Heroic Slave*, slaves either resist or they succumb to the powers of enslavement.

Slavery scholarship parallels Douglass's oppositional description. Across a variety of periods, geographies, and contexts, scholars reveal the cultural niceties of slaves' performances, efforts to gain political leverage, and strategies of self-education as well as other modes of self-fashioning. Yet scholars tend to couch these discoveries in terms of agency, power, damage, resistance, and/or social life and death.[4] For example, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* unveils slaves' individual self-fashioning in Black Atlantic cultures;[5] in a review of Gilroy's book, a suspicious Colin Dayan asks, "What is this agency?"[6] Lawrence Levine, Eric Sundquist, and Sterling Stuckey contend that slave folk tales, singing, and worship contain the nascent origins of Black Nationalism and politics.[7] Saidiya Hartman argues the opposite, that slave expressive

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[1] Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, ed. Robert S. Levine, John Stauffer, and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015).
[2] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 15.
[3] William Andrews, "Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative," in Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 203.
[4] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Stephen Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles In the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside an Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).
[5] Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 40.
[6] Joan Dayan Colin, "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 7–14, 13.
[7] See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: 'The*

cultural performance does not contain oppositional agency; for Hartman, slave culture only reinforces masters' coercive powers.[8] Vincent Brown's and Walter Johnson's essays and books state that, whether implied or directly stated, the oppositional abstractions that shape American slavery studies remain central to current critical discussions. One cannot deny that key terms like *agency* have helped scholars locate and articulate the richness of slaves' resistance and the elastic power of slavery's regimes. In this brief essay, I am interested in two questions: what does looking at slave life through the prism of agency and power keep hidden from view? How can Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* encourage slavery studies beyond these firmly entrenched oppositions?

Douglass's novella is not a historical or sociological examination of slavery, yet the story can help scholars rethink social and epistemological aspects of slave social life—beyond slave rebelliousness or White masters' power to quell it. In this essay, I submit that Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* discloses the social truth that human action is, as David Scott emphasizes, "open to unaccountable contingencies" that exceed the explanatory force of abstractions like agency, resistance, and power.[9] My argument stems from the most significant event in Madison's fictional life: the slave insurrection he leads. The revolt indubitably depicts slave resistance, but what else? I advance the idea that the fact of insurrection also points to an undeniable reality of slavery: despite every effort to know and control slaves, slaves' interiority cannot be fully acquired by either Whites in power or their fellow slaves. Douglass's text, then, affirms that no one can know what a slave is thinking; this also means that, to some degree, masters are always subject to slaves and slaves subject to one another in unforeseen and unaccountable ways. Whether in Madison's revolt, his apprehensive thoughts about cowardly slaves, or his wife's trials and investments, *The Heroic Slave* repeatedly points to an ongoing sense of the intractability of the social environment of the slave. Through the prism of Madison's unanticipated rebellion, this novella encourages scholars in slavery studies to consider putting the unknown, unforeseeable, and contingent at the center of their thinking about slave life.

This essay unfolds in two major sections. The first section shows that while there has been a proliferation of slavery scholarship with different oppositional lexicons such as social life/death or agency/power, there remains unbelievable continuity in the way many slavery scholars frame the significances of slave life. The first section concludes with a few examples from recent scholarship that point us toward other rubrics that transcend older slavery dogmas. I use recent scholars' embrace of "unaccountable contingencies" to pivot to my reading of Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, where I find that misrecognitions of slave interiority by both Madison and Whites in charge reveal an ongoing sense of epistemic and social uncertainty in the novella. I conclude by showing that if we take seriously the sense of unknowing that I identify in Douglass's novella, then we can realize the limitations of trying to explain slaves' action through the rubric of agential freedom—particularly as it relates to uncovering the personal, moral, and psychological commitments of Madison's wife that sustained Madison's ability to ponder, plan, and escape.

Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[8] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[9] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

I

When Madison proclaims, "My resolution is fixed. I shall be free," he intends to strategically resist slavery in order to escape.[10] Madison's conviction shows readers that despite how damaged he is from the floggings and psychological terrorism of his masters, he will use whatever is available to garner his freedom. Madison epitomizes slave agency and his major moment of conviction calls attention to slaves' less-celebrated, but equally important, everyday acts of resistance. Scholars' emphasis on what slaves do to seize whatever power they can and/or confront their masters began to take root in the 1970s, after Stanley Elkins argued that slaves had no other desire than to further their masters' interest.[11] While there is no doubt that much has changed in slavery scholarship since the 1970s, the conceptual focus on various faces of slave resistance and White coercion remains largely unchanged. Walter Johnson posits that slavery scholarship still maintains too many "durable abstractions," such as agency, resistance, damage, power, and social death.[12] In this section, I will highlight the overlooked through a line of oppositions between heroic slaves and submissive ones, as well as between freedom seekers and those content with bondage across generations of scholars. I will also point out recent scholars who transcend those oppositions.

The opposite of Douglass's hero Madison is the Sambo figure. Stanley Elkins made the slave Sambo crucial to understanding slave personality. According to Elkins, Sambo—who embodies laziness, dependency, and complicity with masters' interests—typifies slave personality.[13] Elkins's book argues that Sambo was the product of slavery's closed system, a system that damaged people to a degree matched only by the horrific abuses of the Holocaust of World War II. Thus slaves, with a few exceptions, were "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing."[14] "Utter dependence" solely defined the slaves' relationship to the masters.[15] Elkins called his Sambo description of slave personality a thesis defined by damage. When Elkins updated his book through several editions, he included essays that responded to his critics and trends in scholarship that conflicted with his work. In the essay "The Two Arguments on Slavery," Elkins divides slavery scholarship essentially into two camps: scholars that conceptualize slavery through "brutality and damage" on the one hand and those that approach slavery looking for evidence of resistance and Black culture on the other hand.[16] The division Elkins describes remains vital to rethinking slavery discourse in the present.

Elkins, rightly or in error, found novelist and essayist Ralph Waldo Ellison to be an inspiration for slavery scholarship that emphasized Black culture and resistance instead of damage and brutality. Ellison argued that studies of Black experience, which relied upon the explanatory power of sociology and social theory, often missed the "great deal of heroism" in Blacks'

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[10] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 6.
[11] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordon Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972; New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); John Blassingame, *Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 82.
[12] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8–9.
[13] Elkins, *Slavery*, 82.
[14] Elkins, *Slavery*, 82.
[15] Elkins, *Slavery*, 82.
[16] Elkins, *Slavery*, 267–268.

struggles.[17] Ellison insists that slaves played a crucial role in American culture, and slave-being was both a product of "brutalization" and "that culture"; the "culture" Blacks produced falls by the wayside in Elkin's *Slavery*. Thus Ellison, while not advocating for African survivalist or Black revolutionary ethos, pushes the idea that Blacks were co-creators of an expressive culture that allowed them to survive and endure in conditions where Whites in power physically brutalized, politically excluded, and socially demonized them. Ellison establishes an implicit connection between the rhetoric of heroism and Black social production in everyday life. But must heroism be implied or stated explicitly to make slaves' lives worthy of study? How does this expectation shape what types of slave actions, meaning making, and survival tactics are the focus of scholarly attention?

More importantly, Elkins claimed that his disagreement with Ellison encouraged a generation of counter-Sambo (counter-Elkins, rather) texts—books on slavery that featured resistance and Black culture. Blassingame's *Slave Community*, Peter Wood's *Black Majority,* and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*[18] all had a lasting impact on American slavery studies. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, however, stands out as garnering the most attention. Genovese demonstrates with painstaking detail his subtitle: that the chattel South is a "world" that "the slaves made." Genovese depicts slaves as makers and producers of music, culture, architecture, and religious rituals that shaped slaves' understanding of and negotiation with the slaveholders' regime. Like Ellison, Genovese suggests that Black culture-making under slavery was heroic. Yet despite Genovese's tremendous respect for slave culture, he laments that, whatever slaves' heroics, the slaves ultimately acquiesced. Genovese crystallizes the challenge across the board between resistance and damage: did slave culture actually threaten slave masters or did it ultimately make them better adapted to their lives as slaves and "reinforce the regime"?[19] While he offers a great deal more evidence and archives than Elkins, Genovese seems very interested in similar questions to Elkins's. Thus, while Genovese saw his work as refuting Elkins's and expanding and deepening the study of slavery, *Roll Jordon Roll* made the poles of disagreement about the relationship between slave resistance and masters' power concrete.

Orlando Patterson composed a review of Genovese's *tour de force* in the *New Republic*, in which he focuses on the Genovese's failure to answer one pressing question: why weren't slaves more heroic? Patterson wants to know the "reasons for slaves' acquiescence."[20] While "expressive components" of slave culture were impressive in music, Patterson concludes, slaves' resistance efforts were inconsequential, a "total betrayal of . . . the *heroic ideals* of their African ancestors."[21]

The results of Patterson's analysis of Genovese foregrounds his magisterial book, *Slavery and Social Death*.[22] "Social death" means that slaves fully succumb to the absolute power of their masters; the effect of this expressed power means that, in addition to being subject to White masters' physical abuse as well as legal and social exclusion, slaves have no ancestral or family

[17] Ralph Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 736.
[18] Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1975); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
[19] Genovese, *Roll Jordon Roll*, 617.
[20] Orlando Patterson, "The Peculiar Institution Again: Roll, Jordan Roll," *The New Republic*, November 1974.
[21] Patterson, "The Peculiar Institution Again."
[22] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

connections except through their masters. This ongoing dehumanization forms a totalizing ideological matrix that smothers the slaves' social lives, making the slaves socially dead.[23] Patterson's book, despite its vocal detractors, maintains an explicit and implicit presence in Black cultural study. In *Scenes of Subjection,* for example, Saidiya Hartman advances that many of slaves' efforts for freedom further reinforced the designs and mechanisms of slavery's regime. Hartman's reading of slavery's gendered violence and legal and social exclusions, especially with regard to Black women, reveals how discourses of freedom, liberation, and humanism contain the tentacles of further restraint.[24] Hartman repeatedly emphasizes that the absolute power masters had over their slaves yielded no agential life for slaves, but only advanced forms of coercion.

More recently, Vincent Brown has taken up the oppositions discussed in this essay to unsettle the growing scholarly commitment to Patterson's social death. After the publication of his book on the funeral rituals of Jamaican slaves, *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown embraced the challenge of evaluating the work of scholars who deployed social death as a prism through which to evaluate slavery.[25] In "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," Brown juxtaposes his own approach to slavery in Jamaica with works like Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery*, Ian Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic*, and Hartman's *Scenes* and *Lose Your Mother*.[26] Brown's major accomplishment in the essay, however, is his assertion that studying slavery sheds light on how "conflicts over the most elemental aspects of social life informed" major events of political history. The question I ask of Brown is, why the end game of "political history"? While Brown points us to the import of common acts that other scholars overlook, he still reinforces the relevance of slave choices and actions to influence politics and political history. The subtext of Brown's emphasis is that slaves' choices, practices, and culture, even ones that have eluded scholars, can be significant to the larger events scholars already deem monumental. Brown suggests that, while slave actions may not be heroic, their importance is of heroic proportion and of consequence to politics and political thinking. Can slave culture, thought, and practices capture values and significance outside of agential politics, or is there only a political history of slave social life? Brown demonstrates in *The Reaper's Garden* that one can deemphasize the language of agency and resistance and emphasize "social being," but is this really still just a subtle way of demonstrating slaves' impact on their masters and their world-making culture without explicitly drawing on the contested phrases of past slavery debates? Brown still seems trapped in the very oppositions he wants to escape. He advances his profound thesis on "political life" against other slavery arguments that rely too heavily on social death, damage, and idioms of power.

What if we take political issues like slavery and emancipation that call scholars' attention and use them to mine slavery for other significances and rubrics? Christopher Hager's book *Word by Word* does just this. Hager takes the topic of slave education and focuses less on illegality of White society, deprivation of literacy, and transgressions of White authority. Instead Hager zeroes in more on the literal, physical, and psychological difficulty of acquiring literacy, as well as the

[23] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
[24] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 48.
[25] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
[26] Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Politics Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009); Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

victories and failures of slaves trying to communicate effectively across networks. White authority obviously shapes slaves' conditions, but that is not Hager's focus, and readers get a sense of the depth and variety of slaves' points of view about writing as a form of everyday life.[27] Hager's emphasis does not transcend the political juggernaut of antislavery activism and print culture, but the event of slaves' literacy struggle recasts historical consciousness, interiority, and the written word in "many and unpredictable directions" that need not be legitimated as confrontations with White authorities.[28]

What is more, I take this sense of unpredictability to apply not only to what slaves do but also to how scholars interpret and frame slaves' actions and thoughts. To this point, in addition to Hager's important work, Johnson's analysis of the *Creole* ship revolt upon which Douglass had based *The Heroic Slave* also liberates itself from past slavery dogma. Johnson claims the "black revolt is represented as political organization practiced along a razor's edge of mistrust, betrayal, and mortal vulnerability"; for Johnson, these themes exceed the frames of what most scholars rely on to approach slavery.[29] When Johnson examines the revolt aboard the *Creole*, he reveals the differences in social and political interest among the slaves on board. Johnson steadies his eye on the "mistrust, betrayal, and mortal vulnerability" that define the social forces aboard the ship. He believes slaves' interpersonal dynamics and choices are crucial factors. Johnson's reading of the *Creole* invites questions about how and why the revolt was planned, how each individual slave's interests were quelled in favor of collective interests, and how enslaved Africans told their own individual stories, including what they were thinking as well as how and why they were thinking it.

Just as Johnson uses Douglass's novella to go around the archive, I think we can use it to reimagine what we find of interest in the archive of slavery. We know that clear political interests dominate *The Heroic Slave*, but can we use our keen eye for political interests, agency, and power as a way to access social, psychological, and spiritual enigmas of Black subjects in social conflict? Turning back to Ellison can be useful here. He insists that scholars and writers consider the chaotic, vibrant, and "imperious mind" within all subjects, which he considers to be a "mysterious configuration of forces."[30] Incorporating the psychological and social fact of unwieldiness is a crucial part of history and of thinking historically about the minds and worlds of slaves; doing so unmoors frames and opens up space to imagine, create, and debate.

II

Scholars may be interested in the damaging effects of power or how slaves seize agency, but often the answers do not give insight into the mystery of what slaves do, what they value, or how they think individually and collectively. Early in *The Heroic Slave*, Madison asks, what "is life to me?" This question has no certain answers beyond his compelling desire to seek freedom, but is the desire for freedom all there is in Madison's predicament? Madison has a wife and children. While he loves his wife, he feels driven toward freedom and ultimately leaves her. What are the values and social attachments that make him want to go back for her but that do not directly correspond to how Whites impact their daily lives? The novella narrates a predictable story of

[27] Hager, *Word by Word*, 136–37.
[28] Hager, *Word by Word*, 218.
[29] Walter Johnson, "White Lies: Human Property and Domestic Slavery aboard the Ship *Creole*," in *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* 5:2, 237–263.
[30] Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *The Collected Writings*, 509.

heroic triumph, but what I think is equally important is how the story discloses a subtext of slaves' unpredictability and enigmatic thinking that exceeds Madison's thirst for freedom.

The Heroic Slave casts slavery as dark, destructive, and irreparable. Slavery's horrors encourage Madison's escape. For instance, Madison's masters flog him for staying at the mill too long. This disciplining stands as a punishment and warning, a way to police and dominate Madison's behavior and that of other slaves, yet the flogging is actually a motivating factor in Madison's escape. After he escapes, he risks being recaptured because he wants to free his wife and children. He cannot get his wife and kids out of his mind.[31] While one could reduce this to an attachment to slavery itself or an ideology of love, such a reduction diminishes and oversimplifies human thought and the interpersonal connection that Douglass conveys. What actually inspires Madison's moves is unclear, but that shouldn't stop readers from asking what the probable factors are for his actions. There is epistemic and psychological certainty about what masters and slaves will do in a given situation, but how can anyone from a critical distance be so certain about such uncertain situations as escape attempts and revolts? I submit that no one can actually know and that *personal unpredictability* is embedded in the textual moments where it appears Whites claim the most control. There is no way to obscure, blot out, or eradicate a slave's unpredictability—the brutal fact is that however much one whips, sexually assaults, overworks, or rewards, one can never know what is going on in someone else's head.

There can be no greater example of this than in the retelling of the circumstances of the insurrection led by Madison. After Madison escapes from slavery initially, he is recaptured and ends up aboard the *Creole* where he leads an insurrection. Madison's revolt has already happened in the novella when Douglass introduces the reader to some sailors at a coffee house in Richmond who are discussing it. One sailor, Jack Williams, argues the insurrection could have been prevented or safely contained. Williams is confident that every Negro slave is a coward on the inside simply because the slave is Black. With six resolute White men, Williams says, he could have the Blacks in chains in ten minutes.[32] The boastful and confident Williams turns to the practice that was supposed to subdue Madison when he stayed at the mill too long—"flogging"—but flogging may not be enough, and Williams goes on to explain that he would use other means of violence to "quell a nigger insurrection." But this is where Williams tries to have it both ways. He claims that slaves are cowards and that cowardice is their nature, but if slaves are fundamentally cowards, where does the experiential knowledge come from on how to "quell insurrections"? If all one needed was to crack a whip, there would be no such thing as "rebellious darkies," and the thought of rebellion would not even occur to a Sambo coward solely interested in furthering his master's interests. Williams's misrecognition of what motivates slaves begs the question.

Douglass does want to claim that slaves, if given the opportunity, can be heroic, but my point is to show that what a slave is thinking about cannot be certain, and that even though the character may be thinking about rebelling, he could be unwilling to actualize the rebellion for reasons other than cowardice or the master's absolute dominion. The culture of domination has built into itself that slaves are capable of insurrections for a variety of unknown reasons. The conditions of possibility have instability baked into the cake, even while the sailor Williams insists that White supremacy always maintains the upper hand through knowledge and violence, chalking the revolt up to White incompetence. Johnson's study of the *Creole*, however, unveils that slaves

[31] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 37.
[32] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 42.

aboard the ship with different personal and political interests (which the novella withholds) temporarily aligned with one another and decided to rebel.[33]

Douglass emphasizes the ongoing sense of instability and contingency with which I identify. The most eloquent moment in the book occurs when Douglass attributes Madison and his fellow slaves' courage to the sea. Douglass writes about the sea's spiritual encouragement: "lonely billows of the Atlantic . . . every breeze speaks of courage and liberty." The sailor Williams is skeptical, claiming that, whether at sea or on land, the slave is a coward. What the sea communicates is the notion that something—a change of conditions perhaps, together with inspiration (via Madison)—can change the lot of slaves. Douglass's text revolves around the emphasis on the possibilities of radical and unexpected change. The sea exemplifies this effect and reality. Agents, actors, and new information mean that a compressed state that defines Negro character is unreliable and that self-risk, and what slaves take risks for, might be prompted by the desire for freedom or for something else they find valuable.

Does this change how we see Madison's wife or the other slaves who, unlike Madison, are not interested in revolting or escaping? While Douglass implies that the sea is crucial in conveying the ethos of freedom, the unpredictability in human subjects—that the sea makes manifest—points us back to when Madison tries to avoid slaves from his plantation. He believes if they discover him, they will betray him. While the "negroes [on the *Creole*] fairly worshipped him,"[34] his fellow plantation slaves were less poised and flat-out uninterested in freedom. They certainly didn't worship him. What did the slaves think about Madison? What did they think about their fellow slaves or the idea of escape? Douglass does not go to great lengths to explain the difference between the ship slaves and the slaves on the plantation; he only says the ship slaves worshipped Madison and that the others would betray him. But why aren't these slaves on the ship the same as the ones Madison encounters on his own plantation?

Douglass writes: "peeping through the rents of the quarters, I saw my fellow slaves seated by a warm fire, merrily passing away the time, as though their hearts knew no sorrow. Although I envied their seeming contentment, all the wretched as I was, I despised the cowardly acquiescence in their own degradation which it implied . . . I dared not enter the quarter—, for where there is seeming contentment with slavery, there is certain treachery to freedom."[35] Masters and/or slaves have deceived themselves into "contentment with slavery." But why don't the slaves aboard the *Creole* turn Madison in? Is it the sea or some new conditions that shape slaves' proclivity to act? Madison may be wrong about the degree to which slaves have acquiesced; he may also be wrong about his own predisposition to change their minds. Madison and the sailor Williams misdiagnose slaves' interiority, or at least fail to admit that they do not know why or how long slaves will cowardly acquiesce. If Madison believed his fellow slaves were all cowards, then he would have never attempted a revolt, and if the White sailors did believe slaves were all capable of rebellion, then they would not have been blindsided.

III

Unpredictability circulates throughout the text of Douglass's *Heroic Slave.* The novella shows that even slavery's fiercest scenes of domination contain the wildest contingencies, which need to be further explored as part of slavery's archive. One of the most overlooked mysteries in

[33] Johnson, "White Lies."
[34] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 47.
[35] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 17.

The Heroic Slave is why Madison chose to leave his wife and children in the first place.[36] When Madison tries to rescue his wife, she is shot dead. Her horrific death is significant, but there are important moments in the novella before her death. When Madison says, "I shall be free," he commits himself to the likelihood that he will never see his wife again. Are we to believe him when he says their "parting was like flesh from bones"? He chooses for five years to leave his wife and live in a cave near his master's plantation, but it isn't a heroic burst of courage that drives him into arms of freedom; it is a great fire.[37] Otherwise, Madison stays in hiding. He says, "I had partly become content with my mode of life." Madison's love for his wife is paradoxical. It sustains him from "utter despair," yet this sustenance encourages his ambition to be free; it is because of this forceful attachment that he does not want to leave her.

During the five years of bringing him provisions, how did Madison's wife procure his food and keep his whereabouts secret from malicious parties? Along with caring for their children, I wonder what values and practices sustained her connection to Madison. The context of the relationship is the potential for escape and the refusal of it; the five years is a stalemate in historical progress, yet rife with possibilities in historical thinking. Madison and his wife's survival during this interim period is not heroic, yet the circumstances of it make for an interesting vehicle into the social life that is estranged from the monuments of political history. This social life is full of moral probing, ethical choices, and agonizing feelings of despair and hope that might be legitimate on their own historical grounds. *The Heroic Slave* cues us to turn our attention away from our own political impulses—to look for agency, resistance, or the elasticity of power. Douglass provides us with an opportunity to explore new rubrics and reaffirm that slavery contains both the discernable and ungraspable aspects of everyday life.

[36] See Andrews, "Novelization," and Edlie Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
[37] Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 17.