

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S FORAY INTO FICTION: CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT OF RECENT WORK ON *THE HEROIC SLAVE*

John R. McKivigan and Jane E. Schultz

In February 2015, the Frederick Douglass Papers, a documentary editing project at work since 1973 to collect, edit, and disseminate the various works of Frederick Douglass, the most influential African American of the 19th century, published the first-ever scholarly edition of Douglass's sole work of fiction, his 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave*. Edited by Robert S. Levine of the University of Maryland, John Stauffer of Harvard University, and John McKivigan, the longtime editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers, based since 1998 at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI), and published by the Yale University Press, *The Critical and Cultural Edition of The Heroic Slave* provides, for the first time, an authoritative text, along with assorted contemporary and scholarly documents to help readers engage the novella in its historical, biographical, and literary contexts. Those documents assist readers to better understand what Douglass chose to emphasize and leave out in his telling of the story of the 1841 slave revolt aboard the brig *Creole*. *The Heroic Slave* has emerged as a major text in Douglass's canon, a novella that continues to fascinate readers with its compelling vision of reform, black revolution, and the quest for human freedom. This new modern edition is a major scholarly achievement worthy of intensive examination by anyone who desires to learn more about the contexts of slave resistance and Douglass's role in working to abolish slavery and the racism on which it fed.<sup>1</sup>

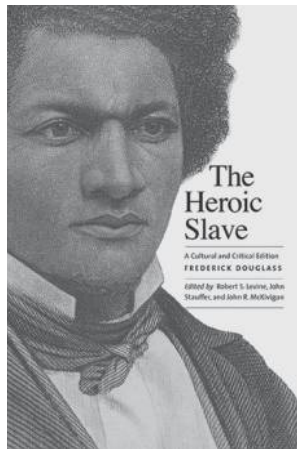
In October 2014, in anticipation of the new volume's publication, a scholarly symposium, "Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* and the American Revolutionary Tradition," was held on the IUPUI campus to observe this event and to reassess the historical and literary significance of *The Heroic Slave*. The two-day symposium was organized by John McKivigan of the Douglass Papers, and Bessie House-Soremekun, Chair of the IUPUI Africana Studies Program. Ten internationally recognized scholars in the disciplines of history, literature, and Africana Studies attended this two-day event and presented original research on Douglass, utilizing the new Yale University Press edition of *The Heroic Slave*.

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Five of these papers, in addition to a critical response and appraisal by Robert Levine, have been edited by McKivigan and Jane E. Schultz of the IUPUI English Department for this Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History*. These essays will become a valuable new addition to the expanding cultural scholarship on Frederick Douglass's central role in the 19th-century African American experience.

Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* presents a fictional account of one of the most dramatic acts of slave resistance in American history. In November 1841, enslaved African Americans being transported on the brig *Creole* from Richmond, Virginia, to New Orleans, Louisiana, rose up and seized control of the ship from its white crew. The mutineers steered the ship to Nassau in the Bahamas, where British authorities soon freed all of the more than one hundred captives. The rebellion was comparatively peaceful, with two African Americans and one crewman killed. In terms of the numbers liberated versus those killed, it was one of the most successful slave revolts to occur in North America.



Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*

*The Heroic Slave* is one of the earliest examples of African American fiction; this fact alone makes it an important intervention in the study of antebellum literature. The novella must certainly be recognized as part of an American canon that has been profoundly shaped by the historical fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Jacobs, and many others. Not only was the *Creole* rebellion important in United States history and politics, it also had an impact on Douglass's career, moving him toward a more radical position on the uses of violence to achieve black freedom. In his 1853 novella, Douglass addressed such issues as the abolitionist movement, the trans-Atlantic history of slavery, interra-

cial friendship, African American leadership, and the relationship between media, fiction, and history. With his skillful use of dialogue, setting, and point of view, Douglass also offered a rousing good read, making one lament that this is his only work of fiction. It is not surprising that over the past thirty years, *The Heroic Slave* has emerged as an essential text in the 19th-century American literary canon. Its ascendancy to canonical status is visible in its recent inclusion in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*.<sup>2</sup>

Although he conceived *The Heroic Slave* as a work of fiction, Douglass carefully researched the story of the *Creole* uprising, interviewing persons who had known its leader, Madison Washington. Having been born in slavery in the Chesapeake Bay region, Douglass brought special insights to his account of the behavior of both enslaved African Americans and whites in the novella's Virginia setting. As a leading abolitionist propagandist, Douglass designed *The Heroic Slave* to educate his readers about the inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade and particularly to put white readers in the difficult-to-imagine mind of "the enslaved." Examining the *Creole* uprising through the lens of Douglass's novella and the personal consciousness it reveals thus illuminates numerous dimensions of the assault on U.S. slavery.

Following *The Heroic Slave*'s 1853 printing, the novella fell out of public attention for many decades, except for brief references in early biographies of Douglass.<sup>3</sup> The indefatigable chronicler of African American history and culture, Philip S. Foner, in 1975 included *The Heroic Slave* in the 1975 *Supplement* to his five-volume *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (1950–75), its first significant reprinting since the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Foner's rediscovery of *The Heroic Slave* led to its first serious examination by historians and literary scholars. Robert Stepto began the discussion with a 1982 essay placing the novella in a rich tradition of African American "storytelling." Subsequently other literary scholars have debated issues of gender, racial identity, agency, resistance, and numerous additional points of aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Historians such as Stanley Harrold and Roy E. Finkenbine similarly helped show the important role that Douglass's novella played in abolitionist efforts to change public perception of slave revolts.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of the 2014 symposium and the papers that emerged from it was to transform the academic discussion and understanding of the place of *The Heroic Slave* in the context of prior studies about Douglass. Their goal was to generate a reconceived understanding of the importance of *The Heroic Slave* to Douglass's career, to the United States in the 1850s, and to American and African American literary history. It is our hope that the articles included here will not only inspire new scholarship and critical ways of understanding the text, but will also lead historians, literary scholars, and other researchers immersed in considering the

impacts of slavery on American cultural life to bring *The Heroic Slave* to new generations of students.

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The first article in this issue, “The Nonfiction Madison Washington Compared to the Character in Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* and Similar Civil War-Era Fiction” is contributed by historian Stanley Harrold of South Carolina State University. Harrold has written many books about the American antislavery movement during the decades prior to the Civil War. In bringing together the disparate archival sources that tell of the historical Madison Washington’s life and his experience as an insurrectionist, Harrold emphasizes Douglass’s romantic departures from what little data we have on Washington’s life and motives, and he compares Douglass’s 1853 version to those penned later by William Wells Brown and Lydia Maria Child. He finds that none of the fictionalized versions of Washington’s story link him directly to the antislavery movement, despite compelling evidence of this connection in personal accounts and media records. Interestingly, most abolitionist writers saw Washington’s actions as part of the larger fabric of slave revolts in the 1830s and 1840s, and they do not intentionally downplay the violence that occurred on the *Creole*, as Douglass’s fictionalized account does. Without venturing an explanation for Douglass’s romanticized reticence, Harrold’s assembling of the extant accounts of the *Creole* revolt and its leader prepare the ground for new scholarship that will inevitably consider what political and literary motives prompted Douglass’s version of *The Heroic Slave*.

The next article is “Insurrection as Righteous Rebellion in *The Heroic Slave* and Beyond” by L. Diane Barnes of Youngstown State University. Barnes is a longtime Frederick Douglass scholar, having worked with the Frederick Douglass Papers, and is author of the 2013 biography, *Frederick Douglass: Reformer and Statesman*. Barnes argues that slave insurrectionists were well aware of natural rights philosophy and used it to justify their revolutionary activities—a marker of increasingly violent tactics espoused by Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and other black abolitionists. Discussing the distinction between natural “law,” which justified slaveholding and consigned African-descended people to the bottom of the social order, and natural “rights,” which brought together thinkers committed to insuring personal freedoms to every individual, Barnes suggests that “rights” rhetoric was receiving deep attention as early as Douglass’s trip to Ireland in 1845, the year that his first *Narrative* was published. In retrieving and celebrating the histories of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and finally Madison Washington, Douglass established a genealogy of freedom-seekers who saw not only the potential rewards of personal liberation, but also represented the goals of enslaved people of color in the Americas. Douglass and a prominent list of sup-

porters and statesmen connected the struggle to end slavery with the struggle that had resulted in founding the United States, insisting that the natural rights of human beings in both cases transcended man-made laws that could not, in their repressive regimes, continue to stand.

We move closer to the text itself in this volume's third contribution, "Autographs for Freedom and Reaching a New Abolitionist Audience," which examines the place of *The Heroic Slave* in the larger project of garnering a broad-based, transnational coalition of readers who would actively work to end slavery. Co-authored by John R. McKivigan and Rebecca A. Pattillo of the Douglass Papers Project, the essay situates *The Heroic Slave* in the context of the antislavery gift book *Autographs for Freedom*, which was published in 1853 and edited by Douglass and British evangelical abolitionist Julia Griffiths. A longtime political and financial supporter of Douglass's journalistic endeavors, Griffiths not only helped expand Douglass's readership overseas, but she also encouraged Douglass to break ranks with the Garrisonians and to recast his *North Star* as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*—moves that signaled his growing militancy among abolitionists. Enlisting the aid of abolitionist compatriot Gerrit Smith and the celebrated novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had brought northern whites closer to understanding the millennial imperative to end slavery, Douglass and Griffiths sought to vastly expand the readership of *The Heroic Slave* and the other works collected in *Autographs*—truly a transnational effort to raise antislavery consciousness. With contributors such as Stowe, Smith, Charles Grandison Finney, and British abolitionist Joseph Sturge, explicators of Protestantism's abhorrence of the peculiar institution, *Autographs* found an even broader base of support, which led to the publication of a second edition just a year later and presented work by political luminaries not featured in the first edition. Griffiths's plan to end the volume with work by the most radical of the assembled writers, including Douglass's fiction based on the *Creole* insurrection, was calculated to bring more politically conservative readers along to more militant ways of thinking.

"Gimme Shelter: The Ironies of Refuge in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*" by literary scholar Jane E. Schultz of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis is the fourth offering in the Special Issue. Schultz is an authority on antebellum and Civil War-era American literature as well as the racial dynamics of 19th-century American life, especially through the lenses of the history of nursing and the interracial climate of U.S. military hospitals. "Gimme Shelter" takes its name from the Rolling Stones song, but its subject matter centers on the numerous references in the text to shelter and the search for refuge among those who seek liberation. While the most obvious seeker of shelter is Madison Washington, we see other characters, white and black, reflecting on Washington's convictions to find their own forms of refuge. With discerning speech and reluctance to give

himself over too readily to those who offer him aid in escape, Washington discovers shelter that appears to promise permanent refuge but often delivers much less—an irony that bespeaks the precarious position of those in bondage in the 1850s.

This assessment of *The Heroic Slave* concludes with a “Commentary” by Robert S. Levine of the University of Maryland-College Park. Levine has been an influential force in American and African American literature for thirty years. His numerous scholarly editions of Melville, Hawthorne, Martin Delany, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Beecher Stowe have helped restore lesser-known works to wider audiences. Levine presented the keynote address at the 2014 symposium in Indianapolis, and is the co-editor of Yale University Press’s new edition of *The Heroic Slave*. Levine observes that re-situating Douglass’s only work of fiction in the context of print culture—the object of his including *The Heroic Slave* in the 2007 edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* for the first time—inevitably gave it new life. Instead of being read in the narrower frame of anti-slavery polemics, it could now be considered in juxtaposition to transcendently inspired and racially constituted fictions of the antebellum period, enlarging its interpretive scope. Significantly, without alienating the white readership of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, presumably an audience that was receptive to *Autographs for Freedom* in which Stowe figured as a celebrated contributor, Douglass succeeded in placing before that readership a model of full-blooded African American heroic insurgency in Madison Washington. This is in stark contrast to the model of evangelical meekness represented in Stowe’s characterization of Uncle Tom. In reflecting on the contributions of historians Harrold and Barnes to this volume, Levine vexes the rigid formulae of what are considered “historical” accounts of the *Creole* insurrection and asks whether the archive of materials that Douglass and others drew upon in constructing their versions of Madison Washington’s exploits is any more historically reliable than subsequent iterations.

Citing the critical genealogy of natural rights language that suffuses the text, Barnes’s work also opens up a Pandora’s box of questions about any reader’s ability to attribute exclusively political motivations to slave insurrectionists’ actions—a perspective we expect to be mined further as cultural historians build new insights into the contingent nature of black interiority. The multiple levels of slave consciousness and thus the impracticability of slaveholders’ claims of absolute possession come to light in Jane E. Schultz’s literary analysis of the impermanence of shelter in *The Heroic Slave*—a reading that resists conventional interpretations, according to Levine. Not only are the putative triumphs of liberation temporary and evanescent for Washington, but his white co-conspirator Listwell proffered friendship—a gesture that many readers have interpreted as benevolent and instrumental to Washington’s eventual deliverance—is tinged, in Schultz’s mind,



with more doubtful and self-serving intentions. In reflecting on essays that place *The Heroic Slave* in a variety of new contexts that strain at the sometimes limiting margins of disciplinary thinking, Levine finds much to praise in these new epistemological approaches to interpreting the text, believing that they open the way for a reconsideration of a signal document in Douglass's oeuvre and in American literature more generally.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave: A Cultural and Critical Edition*, ed. Robert S. Levine, John Stauffer, and John R. McKivigan (1853; reprinted New Haven, CT, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Robert S. Levine and Arnold Krupat, eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume B, 1820–1865* (New York, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Frederick May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (1891; reprinted New York, 1895).

<sup>4</sup>Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. 5 (New York, 1975), 473–505.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Robert B. Stepto, "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass' 'The Heroic Slave,'" *Georgia Review* 36, no. 2 (1982): 355–68; 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, MA, 1990), 166–88; Ivy G. Wilson, "On Native Ground: Transnationalism, Frederick Douglass, and 'The Heroic Slave,'" *PMLA* 21, no. 2 (2006): 453–68; Fionnghuala Sweeney, "Visual Culture and Fictive Technique in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*," *Slavery and Abolition* 33, no. 2 (2012): 305–20; Lance Newman, "Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" *American Literature* 81, no.1 (2009): 127–52; Krista Walter, "Trappings of Nationalism in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*," *African American Review* 34.2 (2000): 233–47; and Carrie Hyde, "The Climates of Liberty: Natural Rights in the *Creole* Case and 'The Heroic Slave,'" *American Literature* 85, no. 3 (2013): 475–504.

<sup>6</sup>Stanley Harrold, "Romanticizing Slave Revolt: Madison Washington, the *Creole* Mutiny, and Abolitionist Celebration of Violent Means," in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville, TN, 1999), 89–107; Roy E. Finkenbine, "The Symbolism of Slave Mutiny: Black Abolitionist Response to the *Amistad* and *Creole* Incidents," in *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jane Hathaway (Westport, CT, 2001), 233–52.