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## A Revision of a Revision: Reading The Heroic Slave as a Response to Uncle Tom's Cabin

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**A REVISION OF A REVISION:  
READING *THE HEROIC SLAVE* AS A RESPONSE TO *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN***

**by**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of these reflections, and while running his eye up and down the fettered ranks, he met the glance of one whose face he thought he had seen before. To be resolved, he moved towards the spot. It was MADISON WASHINGTON!  
*Here was a scene for the pencil!*

Mr. Listwell (*The Heroic Slave*, 176, emphasis added)

Antebellum America provided many such scenes that compelled abolitionists to compose anti-slavery literature. Ranging from Frederick Douglass' first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), to his only work of fiction *The Heroic Slave* (1852), to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), abolitionist literature was seen as a promising means of affecting social change. For the most part, Douglass and Stowe have been heralded in this genre as complementary contemporaries, working towards the similar goal of transforming the public to their anti-slavery beliefs. However, despite both working towards abolition, their methods of marshalling this goal diverge and, at times, directly contradict. Stowe and Douglass' fundamentally differing understandings of race, politics, and religion result in several critical differences across their texts: chiefly, while Stowe finds a compelling impetus for abolition in Christian morals, Douglass finds it in black agency and, later, violent resistance to oppression. These ideological differences are reflected in the content of their work, but also in their rhetorical approaches to the broad genre of abolitionist literature; the consequence is a genre that is rich but inconsistent. To this point, scholars have resisted reading into these contradictions or inconsistencies because of Douglass' public support of Stowe, both of her project and her as a public figure of abolition. In this essay, I find ways to read the texts of Douglass and Stowe as both complementary and critical, suggesting that Douglass' support of Stowe's overall impact and his desire to inspire a black-centered abolitionist movement are not mutually exclusive. Not only that, that giving weight to these

contradictions and inconsistencies is imperative in retaining Douglass' own agency and eminence as a freed-slave turned abolitionist.

In a letter to Douglass soliciting his advice on her depiction of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe encourages Douglass to reconsider his claim that the church is "pro-slavery." She argues two main points: that a majority of the church is anti-slavery, giving her family as an example, and that the church has similar relationships to slavery as it does with temperance and Sabbath-breaking but would likely not be said to be pro-intemperance or pro-Sabbath-breaking. In this letter, her primary purpose is to claim that "this movement must and will become a purely religious one" in which "christians north and south will give up all connection with & take up their testimony against [slavery] and thus this work will be over" (Letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick Douglass). With this goal in mind, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is more than sentimental fiction, as it has often been treated. As Jane Tompkins argues, it is a "political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (Sentimental Power, 126).

Tompkins' analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* conveys the monumental task Stowe took on to transform society through literature, which at once explains her revision of Douglass and illuminates the significant stakes Douglass had in subsequently revising her revision. Tompkins says, "rhetoric *makes* history by shaping reality to the dictates of its political design; it makes history by convincing the people of the world that its description of the world is the true one" (Sentimental Power, 141). Stowe's purpose, then, is to create a fictional representation of the "institution of the kingdom of heaven on Earth" (141) that readers are compelled to actualize after reading; the abolition of slavery is a necessary step in establishing this Christian society. Tompkins claims that the primary way Stowe stages this transformation is by placing the "center

of power in American life...in the kitchen” (145), thus endowing women with the responsibility of reconstructing the domestic space as a locus of morality that can, among other things, end slavery.

I find that Stowe also stages her Christian revolution by rewriting the conventional terms of the slave narrative to impose her views on Christianity. While Stowe’s overall project to transform society is largely related to the domestic space, she must also address the role of freed-slaves in abolition. As such, I argue that Stowe rewrites Douglass’ *Narrative* – another prominent but atheistic representation of slavery – in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in order to impose a Christian framework on its central scenes and characterization of Douglass and prove the unique ability of Christian morals to drive the abolitionist movement. Stowe’s act of revision itself participates in a tradition that erases black voices from American discourse; however, her Christian framework also erases black agency from the abolitionist narrative because it motivates her central black characters to remove themselves from the movement. This threatens Douglass’ vision for abolition and ultimately precipitates his subsequent revision of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

At the conclusion of the novel, George Harris, Stowe’s fictional depiction of Douglass, emigrates to Liberia as a missionary. In a letter to a friend, he cites his desire to further the Christian development of Africa as his primary motivation to do so (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 405). However, having thus argued for him as the model for black abolition, Stowe’s decision to assign colonizationist<sup>1</sup> ideology to Harris challenges Douglass’ vision of a black-centered abolitionist movement. Colonization suggests that, despite the significant work they have both willingly and been forced into doing to build America, freed slaves have an essential African-ness that is better suited to a return to Africa than remaining in post-emancipation America.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive review of colonization in the Antebellum period, as well as Stowe and Douglass’ relationship with it, see Levine, “A Nation Within A Nation, Debating Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Black Emigration”.

Harris' emigration marks Stowe's displacement of the freed-slave turned abolitionist from the center of the abolitionist movement, which allows for the center to be filled by white abolitionists, such as George Shelby, that remain in America to usher in emancipation after Harris has left. Furthermore, Uncle Tom's immense piety has prompted his martyr's death, which catalyzes Shelby's anti-slavery beliefs but denies Tom his potential as a freed-slave turned abolitionist. Given the immense transformative power that Tompkins attributes to rhetoric, specifically that of Stowe, it follows that Douglass had significant stakes in revising *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his novella *The Heroic Slave* as a means of restoring black agency as the center of abolition.

In 1852, Frederick Douglass published his only work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave*, in a collection organized by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society called *Autographs for Freedom*. *The Heroic Slave* is Douglass' fictionalized account of Madison Washington's escape from slavery, leading up to the rebellion he led on the "Creole" in November 1841. To this point, scholars such as Robert S. Levine have primarily read the novella as a political response to William Lloyd Garrison and Martin Delany. Marianne Noble has ventured to read it as a response to Stowe, insofar as it corrects the sympathetic mode she relies on. However, there remains more to be gained from considering the ways in which Douglass may be critical of Stowe's ideology and rhetoric, while remaining supportive of the general impact of her project. Primarily, I find that reading *The Heroic Slave* as a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* not only reveals Douglass' critique of Stowe's Christian framework, but also illuminates much about Douglass' conception of their relationship to each other as black and white abolitionists and the genre that they commit themselves to.

This argument ostensibly constitutes a break with the common belief that Douglass supported Stowe's work, and that *The Heroic Slave* is mainly a criticism of the political figures that Douglass publicly disagreed with. However, I hope to find a reading of *The Heroic Slave* in which both criticisms are legible, while still allowing for Douglass to be supportive of Stowe's overall impact on American society. Previous analyses of their relationship overstate the importance of Douglass' defense of Stowe, and in doing so, have neglected a rich area of potential analysis in Douglass' work. By reading *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I do not attempt to undermine readings of *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of Douglass himself or a response to Delaney or Garrison, as argued by Levine and Hamilton. Rather, I explore the ways that Douglass sought to influence the popular ideology of abolition by shaping fictional representations of it in abolitionist literature, as Tompkins argues Stowe does. Given Stowe's prominence in the genre, a reading of *The Heroic Slave* is not complete without considering the ways that Douglass attempts to establish himself and his particular theory of abolition as superior to Stowe's Christian one. However, even in establishing his singular authority to construct a fictional representation of the ideal freed-slave turned abolitionist, Douglass establishes in *The Heroic Slave* that progressive readings can be found in inherently, consciously or not, racist narratives, such as the first mate's retelling of the actual revolt of the "Creole". Ultimately, despite his ideological revisions of Stowe, Douglass does remain supportive of Stowe; he only reclaims the fictional representation of abolition as a means of re-centering the movement on black agency and establishing his ideal for white support in the abolition movement.

## 1. *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* AS A REVISION OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Douglass' first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* presents his vision of a black-centered, secular abolitionist movement. He provides his own story as a testament to the potential of this movement, but primarily highlights the role education played in his own liberation as a means of advocating for it as the key to all black-led liberation. Above all else, Douglass asserts that abolition will be achieved by an educated body of freed-slaves that can exercise their agency. Inspired by Douglass' *Narrative*, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her incredibly popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the intention of contributing to the growing body of abolitionist literature. However, in her portrayal of slavery, Stowe suggests that, instead of education, a society guided by Christian morals is the key to achieving abolition. One of the ways Stowe demonstrates this by imposing a Christian framework on several central scenes and major themes from Douglass' *Narrative*, but the cornerstone of her project is to revise Douglass' portrayal of himself; Stowe's character George Harris draws on Douglass' natural intelligence and pursuit of education, but embraces Christianity upon his liberation.

However, this essay argues that it is not the biographical aspects of this revision that precipitates Douglass' decision to correct Stowe's revisions of his work in *The Heroic Slave*. Rather, it is the fact that the Christianity Stowe assigns to Uncle Tom and George Harris prompts them to remove themselves from the abolitionist movement. Stowe's displacement of Tom and Harris – and, by extension, Douglass – from the center of the movement and participates in a historical trend that erases black agency and voices from the dominant narrative. Therefore, despite its many strengths, Douglass has significant stakes in correcting Stowe's conception of Southern Christianity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.



In his *Narrative*, Douglass constructs himself as an ideal freed-slave turned abolitionist. Part of this construction is to establish a clear hierarchy in the circumstances that allowed for his escape from slavery: his education, a “spirit of hope” from God that he would not be a slave forever (31), and periodic support from a “divine Providence” that works in his favor (31). Of these three conditions, education is by far the most important, but his relationship with it is also the most distraught. Upon learning to read and consuming texts voraciously, Douglass finds that his knowledge is disruptive to his daily functioning. He says:

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved...It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy (37).

Douglass establishes education as the tool with which he identifies the injustice he experiences, and not only that, is given the language to express this injustice. This is consciousness: the ability to identify the circumstances (in this case, injustice) of one’s situation. On one hand, consciousness is Douglass’ burden because it necessitates but does not provide him the ability to fix his situation or alleviate any of his pain. However, it is also the main force that drives Douglass to pursue freedom. As such, consciousness of slavery, although distressing, is necessary for slaves to escape from and end slavery. Douglass stages his pursuit of education as the ultimate exercise of his agency, drawing a clear causal relationship between his agency and his escape from slavery that culminates in his abolitionist efforts. This is why Douglass credits education as the primary key to freedom. Religion takes a secondary role.

In the face of his pain, Douglass credits a “spirit of hope” from God that “slavery would not always be able to hold [him] within its foul embrace” (31) that compelled him to keep living. For that, he offers “thanksgiving and praise” to God (31). In addition to hope, there are two points at which Douglass also credits a “divine” (31) or “kind” (41) Providence that delivered

him to the better of two situations (because, of course, no situation under slavery can be truly good). Douglass' portrayals of God and Providence's roles in his life are importantly nuanced: while he recognizes their utility in his life, he remains the primary agent in his pathway to freedom. Douglass intentionally omits identifying details of his actual escape from slavery in order to protect the secrecy of the Underground Railroad. However, he does detail the cleverness and business acumen with which he convinced Master Hugh to hire him out, allowing Hugh to be deceived by Douglass' consistent income while Douglass planned his escape (77). This anecdote allows Douglass to solidly locate his agency at the center of his liberation; while God and Providence delivered Douglass to a situation that made it possible for him to escape, it was Douglass' work that actualized the escape. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe challenges this construction to suggest that Christian morals are the true impetus for abolition.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe mounts conceptual and thematic revisions of Douglass' *Narrative* in order to center Christianity instead of education. Often, she achieves this by writing scenes that are almost identical to ones in *Narrative* but with the simple substitution of Christianity for education. This rhetorical strategy to elevate Christianity is epitomized in her revision of Douglass' anecdote about his Sabbath School. In his *Narrative*, Douglass recounts how he came to teach his fellow slaves to read on the Sabbath, which he calls the "sweetest engagement with which [he] was ever blessed" (62). He makes it clear that he and each of his students came to the school at high personal risk, given that the punishment was 39 lashes. However, Douglass taught because "it was the delight of [his] soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of [his] race", and the students came because "their minds had been starved by cruel masters" (63). In this anecdote, Douglass stages the potential of a wave of abolition that is driven by an educated body of freed slaves. He establishes that there are other

slaves who desire knowledge like his, and as a result, could be united in an abolitionist movement to free themselves. As he does his own, he emphasizes the agency the slaves employed to choose education in the face of punishment.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe uses the same anecdote of Sabbath School, but replaces education as the genesis of uniting and liberating slaves with religion. During his time working for Legree – who ultimately kills him – Tom inspires other slaves to Christianity with his unwavering faith. Stowe writes that it “began to awaken long-silent chords in their benumbed hearts” (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 370). When the busy summer season ends, the slaves gather on Sundays, their only off day, to hear Tom talk about Jesus. Stowe's scene almost exactly echoes that of Douglass. Slowly and unintentionally, slaves become aware that the teacher in question has knowledge that they would like to learn. It spreads amongst the rest, and the teacher forms an informal school on the Sabbath. However, in Stowe's world, the knowledge being taught is Christianity and love for Jesus. Stowe retains the slaves' agency by suggesting that the stakes are the same for Tom's school as they are for Douglass', and that they choose to attend in spite of the risk (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 370). The fundamental difference between the two scenes is the type of knowledge that the author believes is a compelling uniting force for slaves. This substitution is only one example of Stowe's project to rewrite Douglass' story within a Christian framework and suggest that Christianity is the key to freedom, not education. More significantly, Stowe must entirely reconstruct characterizations of characters to make space for Christian morals. In order to show her perceived potential of Douglass as an abolitionist figure who is both highly educated and pious, Stowe constructs George Harris, who exhibits Douglassian intelligence but within the bounds of Christian morals.

In her *Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe reveals that she used Douglass as inspiration for Harris. Stowe writes, “with regard to the intelligence of George, and his teaching himself to read and write, there is a most interesting and affecting parallel to it in the “Life of Frederick Douglass” (*Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 16). Stowe goes on to quote extensive passages from Douglass’ *Narrative* that detail his relationship with reading and education as a means of showing that “the case of George Harris is by no means as uncommon as it might be supposed” (19). At the beginning of the novel, Stowe’s depiction of Harris remains true to his inspiration: Harris is portrayed as intelligent, hard-working, and decidedly atheistic. However, in addition to his intelligence, Harris also has an understanding of the dehumanizing effects of slavery that appears to be derivative from that which Douglass expresses in his *Narrative*. Throughout the *Narrative*, Douglass explores the transformative effect of slavery to turn men into beasts; the claim “behold a man transformed into a brute!” (*Narrative...*, 51) epitomizes the striking and distinctive language Douglass uses. Stowe attaches a Douglassonian consciousness to Harris by adopting this concept in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Harris exclaims to Eliza that his master attempts to make a “dray-horse” of him (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 24), pointing at his own transformation into a beast. Stowe continues to emulate Douglass’ rhetorical style of lamenting slavery in Harris’ speech, but with slightly different valences that anticipate his ultimate turn to religion.

Both Douglass and Harris express their agony over slavery through rhetorical questions. However, Stowe stages Harris’ questions such that they can be answered by a turn to religion, whereas Douglass does not allow for the same kind of closure. While Douglass asks “Is there any God? Why am I a slave?” (*Narrative*, 52), Harris says “I can’t trust in God. Why does he let things be so?” (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 25). Douglass’ understanding of the essential relationship between God and slavery allows for an answer in which there is no God. In contrast, Harris’

construction does not negate the existence of God, but declares his inability to believe in it. This is a fundamental difference that reflects Douglass' and Stowe's divergent understandings of religion: while Douglass believes that the central crisis of slavery is that it suggests there is no God, Stowe believes that the crisis is that it makes it impossible for slaves to believe in God. This distinction is reflected in Harris' ultimate turn to religion. Upon being united with his family in the Quaker settlement, north of the Mason-Dixon line and in free territory, Stowe writes that Harris makes an organic and inevitable turn to religion.

It was the first time that ever George had sat down on equal terms at any white man's table... This, indeed, was a home, *-home-*, a word that George had never yet known a meaning for; and a belief in God, and trust in his providence, began to encircle his heart, as, with a golden cloud of protection and confidence, dark, misanthropic, pining, atheistic doubts, and fierce despair, melted away before the light of a living Gospel, breathed in living faces, preached by a thousand unconscious acts of love and good will, which, like the cup of cold water given in the name of a disciple, shall never lose their reward. (138)

Under Stowe's framework of Christianity and slavery, Harris is able to trust God once he has escaped because his primary barrier to Christianity, the oppressive effects of slavery, has been removed. Although the passage clearly describes the specific terms of Harris' conversion at the "home", Stowe switches to general pronouns when describing the spiritual transformation that occurs in "his heart" to suggest that this transformation can happen to any person with "dark, misanthropic, pining, atheistic doubts and fierce despair", even Douglass. It is important to note that Stowe's revision is predicated on her understanding of Douglass as atheistic, which he claims is not the case. In fact, somewhat counterintuitively, Stowe and Douglass depict religion in practice similarly.

In an appendix to the text, Douglass acknowledges that readers who are unaware of his religious views could suppose him an "opponent of all religion" (*Narrative*, 85) based on the *Narrative*, as Stowe appears to have done. For that reason, he clarifies his distinction between the

“pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” that he engages in and the “corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity [of the South]” (*Narrative*, 85). Despite this philosophical distinction, the type of religion that Douglass and Harris engage in are quite similar. For the most part, the way that Stowe writes Harris’ religion highlights his agency, as Douglass prioritizes in his depiction of religion in his *Narrative*. Before encountering the slave hunters, Harris says to his wife: “am I going to stand by and see them take my wife and sell her, when God has given me a pair of strong arms to defend her?” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 182). Harris’s conception of religion aligns with that of Douglass: he recognizes God’s gifts to him, but in a way that emphasizes his agency and resistance. God puts these characters in a position to assert themselves, but they are the agents of that assertion (whether it be physical or verbal). In the *Narrative*, Douglass recounts a time in which he fights back against his owner Mr. Covey: “at this moment – from whence came the spirit I don’t know – I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose” (*Narrative*, 56). The language Douglass uses in this passage to describe a spirit is similar to the language that Stowe uses, insofar as it is distinctly Christian language even if he refuses to explicitly name it as so. Again, the passages are conceptually similar in the agency that is attributed to God and the slave. This, in addition to previous depictions of Douglass’ relationship with religion mentioned in this essay, show that Douglass is religious and reverent of God. As illuminated by his appendix, he only refuses to identify as Christian because to do so would be to participate in a hypocritical and pro-slavery institution. Stowe echoes Douglass’ concerns – in order to resolve them – through St. Clare, who says: “Religion! Is what you hear at church religion? Is that which can bend and turn, and descend and ascend, to fit every

crooked phase of selfish, worldly society, religion?" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 177). Like Douglass and St. Clare, Stowe shows she believes it is not.

The crux of Stowe's ability to argue that Douglass and her readers should embrace Christianity, in spite of Douglass' claims that it is hypocritical and corrupt, is her ability to establish an embodiment of true Christianity in Little Eva. When Tom sees her for the first time, he half-believes her to be "one of the angels stepped out of the New Testament" because she is "always dressed in white" and has a "golden head and deep blue eyes" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 142). Eva's pure Christianity is at once attributed to her childlike naiveté – which she dies too early to have spoiled – but also a fundamental inability to learn what Marie determines to be "proper" (170). As such, Eva's character functions as Stowe's evidence that true Christianity can exist in select individuals that are intrinsically pure and therefore impermeable to slavery's cruelty. Importantly, this status relies on Eva being perceived as external to the institution of Southern Christianity, such that she may be an alternative to it.

Eva's essential Christian goodness allows her to subvert the hypocritical Christian Church as the authority on Christian morals and spread her own brand of true Christianity. On her deathbed, Eva appeals to her family and servants to embrace God:

If you love me, you must not interrupt me so. Listen to what I say. I want to speak to your souls...Many of you, I am afraid, are very careless. You are thinking only about this world. I want you to remember that there is a beautiful world, where Jesus is. I am going there, and you can go there. It is for you, as much as me. But, if you want to go there, you must not live idle, careless, thoughtless lives. You must be Christians. you must remember that each one of you can become angels, and be angels forever.... (274)

This deathbed sermon results in everyone – family and servants alike – falling to their knees, sobbing and praying (274). This scene follows the format of a conventional sermon, but the role of priest is subverted by the child. Therefore through Eva, Stowe is able to argue for a type of Southern Christianity that is independent of the hypocritical institution of Southern Christianity,

and as a result is not subject to Douglass' criticisms. Eva's position independent to the institution is compounded in parallels drawn between herself and Jesus. In addition to crying, Stowe writes that her family and servants "kissed the hem of her garment" (274), which is language that is commonly used to describe Jesus and his followers. Like Jesus, Eva becomes a vehicle for truly good Christian morals, but her true utility to Stowe's larger argument is in her death.

Stowe shows that Eva's life as a model of good Christian morals is important, but less so than her death as a martyr; the real key to Stowe's religious framework is the way in which Eva's piety and death are catalysts for a wave of abolition that is inherently rooted in Christian morals. Tompkins writes that "when the spiritual power of death is combined with the natural sanctity of childhood, the child becomes an angel endowed with salvic force" (Sentimental Power, 129), and therein lies the primary transformative power of the novel. Ann Douglass also argues that Eva's significance is in her death, or more precisely, "the protective veneration it arouses in the other characters in the book, and presumably in her readers" (Douglas, 4), although she primarily does so to link Victorian culture to modern mass culture. The significance that both these scholars attribute to Eva's martyr's death, albeit to different ends, are reliant on her youth and purity. Therefore, it is interestingly complicated when applied to Tom.

Tom is the other character in the novel that is imbued with Stowe's conception of true Christianity, to a similar but lesser extent than Eva. Tom is in a unique position to demonstrate the ameliorating effects of true Christianity on the hardships of slavery, from cruel beatings to family separation. However, like Eva, he is also chiefly significant in the way that he can subvert institutionalized Christianity with his own brand of true Christianity. In the beginning of the novel, Tom holds services in his cabin on the Shelby plantation, for which the novel is named. He continues to do so when he reaches Legree's plantation, where he holds the aforementioned



Sabbath School. Everywhere he goes, his ministry is well-received because it is genuine and pure, regardless of how reluctant his followers are at first.

Although Tom lacks the “natural sanctity of childhood” that Tompkins argues Eva has, his death does resonate with salvic tones, as well as contribute to Stowe’s larger purpose of actualizing abolition through establishing a Christian society. Stowe writes Tom’s death in distinctly martyr-like terms: in the moments leading up to his death, Tom “felt strong in God to meet death, rather than betray the helpless” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 385). When Legree “smote” (386) Tom down, he fulfilled Tom’s martyr status. Having already reawakened Christianity in their hearts, Tom’s death compels others to engage in more purified Christianity than before, just as Eva’s death does. In the days between Legree smoting Tom and George Shelby’s arrival on the plantation, the slaves that once had condemned Tom steal away in the middle of the night to care for him and “repay to him some of those ministrations of love in which he had always been so abundant” (389). Their actions leading up to Tom’s death converts them into “disciples” (390); Stowe writes that they “had little to give, –only the cup of cold water; but it was given with full hearts” (390). Like Eva, this casts Tom in a distinctly messianic tradition.

Perhaps most importantly, Tom’s death does what Eva’s cannot: he transforms George Shelby to anti-slavery beliefs. While Ann Douglas calls Eva’s death “decorative” (Douglas, 4) because her death is unable to compel her father to free their slaves before his own untimely death, Tom’s death has an immediate anti-slavery effect on George Shelby. Shelby proclaims, “Witness, eternal God!...oh, witness, that, from this hour, I will do *what one man can to drive out this curse of slavery from my land!*” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 393). Under Stowe’s framework, the power to transform others is the ultimate honor, and Tom has achieved her goal.

However, despite the way that he is ostensibly elevated by Stowe, Dean and Kopacz illuminate how Tom's fate may contribute to Douglass' need to revise *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Dean and Kopacz characterize Tom's role as that of a local minister, not evangelist. They predicate this argument on his illiteracy, claiming that "after he has learned to write and gained his freedom, Tom could attend seminary and become the evangelist, Methodist bishop, or African missionary he seems marked to be", which is a deeply Douglassonian claim, "but circumstances converge to ripen Tom for martyrdom before he becomes fully literate" (Dean and Kopacz, 13). I would argue that Dean and Kopacz's distinction between Tom as local minister and evangelist is overstated such that it erases the substantial impact Stowe attributes to Tom's death. However, the value in their argument is that it highlights the way that dying before he can learn to read and liberate himself and others erases Tom's potential as the kind of freed-slave turned abolitionist that Douglass holds up as the key to black-led liberation. Through this lens, Tom's death is one of unrealized potential. It reveals that the pernicious aspect of Stowe's Christian framework is not that it assigns Christianity to slaves, it is that it assigns Christianity to slaves such that the slaves are motivated, for various reasons, to remove themselves from the abolitionist narrative. The implications of Stowe's Christian framework are the same for Harris. To Dean and Kopacz's point, Harris is literate, goes through the steps of religious and intellectual education, and, as a result, can be read as an ideal freed-slave turned abolitionist.

With Stowe's addition of Christianity, Harris achieves the perfect balance of self-advocacy in the face of slavery as a result of his education, but within the bounds of Christian morals and values. Stowe elevates this engagement between Christianity and education as the ideal for abolitionists, but, in doing so, undermines Douglass' assertion that the central traits of the ideal black abolitionist is their ability to assert their agency and liberate themselves because

of their education. In a standoff with the slave hunters, Harris demonstrates his exemplary blend of Christianity and education, in response to a slave hunter claiming that they have the “law on [their] side” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 189):

I know very well that you’ve got the law on your side, and the power,” said George [Harris], bitterly. “you mean to take my wife to sell in New Orleans, and put my boy like a calf in a trader’s pen.... and your laws *will* bear you out in it...But you haven’t got us...we stand here as free under God’s sky as you are; and, by the great God that made us, we’ll fight for our liberty till we die. (189-190)

The narrator calls this his “declaration of independence”, claiming he says it as if “appealing from man to the justice of God” with his hand raised to heaven (190). Stowe blends religious and political terms to show Harris’ background in both. Harris’ knowledge of the Fugitive Slave Act and conventions of slavery allow him to appear informed to the readers and the slave hunters. It also allows him a pragmatic understanding of his reality should he submit to the slave catchers, which compels him to fight. However, Stowe suggests that the true logic of Harris’ ability to demand his freedom is that he can use Christianity as a framework of statehood to replace America’s racist one, which the slave holders seek to reinforce. He rightfully asserts that he is standing in God’s world, not the white man’s. It is this knowledge that God’s word is the ultimate authority, and not the white man’s law, that allows Harris to make these claims. Thus, it is his blend of religious and political justifications that lends him authority. Stowe also demonstrates the importance of Harris’ godliness, insofar as it prevents him from resorting to perverseness. When a slave hunter is shot and abandoned to die by his peers, Harris and the Quakers save him. Their mercy is rewarded when the slave hunter helps them escape, just to spite his betraying partner (359).

Despite Harris’ exemplary ability to assert himself, the Christian revision that Stowe mounts is dangerous to Douglass’ conception of abolition because it leads Harris to colonization,

which removes him from the abolitionist movement. At the close of Douglass' *Narrative*, he has just begun to find his voice and appeal to white abolitionists at anti-slavery conferences. He concludes the autobiography with the following sign off:

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds--faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts--and solemnly pledging my self anew to the sacred cause,--I subscribe myself,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS (*Narrative*, 90).

Douglass' *Narrative* solidly places himself at the center of abolition. Although he calls them "humble efforts", Douglass' own actions – this autobiography and the speeches he made at conventions – are the impetus for abolition, and the actions his abolitionist peers take after that are seen as products of Douglass' work. Therefore, he sets the stage for a secular wave of abolition in which freed-slave turned abolitionists, such as himself, are at the center of the movement. However, the Christian framework that Stowe imposes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* undercuts the agency that Douglass finds for himself and advocates for others. At the close of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, George Harris decides to move his family to Africa. He writes a letter to his friend and declares his belief that the development of Africa will be a Christian one:

When I wander, [my wife's] gentler spirit ever restores me, and keeps before my eyes the Christian calling and mission of our race. As a Christian patriot, as a teacher of Christianity, I go to *my country*, – my chosen, glorious Africa! – and to her, in my heart, I sometimes apply those splendid words of prophecy: 'Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee; I will make thee an external excellence, a joy of many generations!' (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 405).

Harris quotes from *Isaiah* 60.15 as his justification to return to Africa. That this turn to colonization has a Christian genesis is important because it constitutes the most egregious revision of Douglass' life. Stowe repeatedly codifies the continent of Africa, as well as the African race, in religious terms that demonstrate their interconnectedness under her framework.

During her description of Tom's Sabbath School, long before she assigns colonizationist ideology to any character, she writes:

It is the statement of missionaries, that, of all races of the earth, none have received the Gospel with such eager docility as the African. The principle of reliance and unquestioning faith, which is its foundation, is more a native element in this race than any other (370).<sup>2</sup>

In another, she writes that God “hath chosen poor Africa in the furnace of affliction, to make her the highest and noblest in that kingdom which he will setup”, drawing on concepts from Matthew 20.16 (174). Clearly, the terms with which Stowe stages the development of Africa, through colonization, are distinctly Christian. In applying these values to Harris, Stowe assigns to Harris the same language that she uses to describe the Christian revolution in America in her aforementioned letter to Douglass. As such, she sees herself and Harris embarking on similar journeys to help their respective countries find morality, which are both equally tied up in Christianity. However, this wrongfully assumes that Harris and Stowe are of different countries.

Colonization is, and was in its contemporary moment, largely criticized because it denies freed slaves the right to continue their lives in America, the place they had built their homes in and had labored to build and support. Stowe's advocacy of colonizationism was publicly criticized by many, including Douglass (Analysis of Reception...). Critics such as Douglass believe that Harris' support of colonizationism completely undermines his value as an abolitionist leader, because the theory's inherently racist underpinnings erase the history of slavery in America and reject the slaves' American identity. Douglass writes in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Frederick Douglass' Papers* on the subject:

The truth is, dear Madam, we are *here*, and here we are likely to remain. Individuals emigrate—nations never. We have grown up with this Republic; and I see nothing in our

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have read Stowe's racist justifications of her authorial decisions, in this case but also in the case of Harris' intelligence, in ways that undermine her overall project. For more on this, see “Mrs. Stowe's Negro: George Harris' Negritude in Uncle Tom's Cabin”, by Randall M. Miller.

character, or even in the character of the American people, as yet, which compels the belief that we must leave the United States (Letter to Mrs. Stowe).

Thus, in returning to Africa, Douglass claims that Harris is ceding the significant work he and his black peers have done to shape their Republic and perpetuating the essentialist notion that blacks are, and will always be, only African. However, another pernicious implication of Stowe's endorsement of colonization is to suggest that the abolitionist work that is left to be done in America is not the job of the freed-slave turned abolitionist, as Douglass imagines, but that of the white abolitionists; this undermines Douglass' entire project in life as he sets it forward in his *Narrative*.

By removing themselves from the narrative, both Harris and Tom leave the center of the abolitionist movement open for George Shelby to fill. Although, as Dean and Kopacz point out, Tom does not seek out martyrdom, he willingly enacts it "as the fastest way to his heavenly home" (Dean and Kopacz, 14); in doing so, he forfeits his potential to liberate himself and others. Instead, he leaves that to George Shelby, who Stowe calls as the "Liberator", as he is hailed in the title of the final chapter of the novel. Likewise, Harris does not spitefully abandon American, but seeks out Africa as a "field of work" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 405). After witnessing Tom's death and proclaiming his anti-slavery beliefs, Shelby returns home to free his slaves:

It was on [Tom's] grave, my friends, that I resolved, before God, that I would never own another slave, while it was possible to free him; that nobody, through me, should ever run the risk of being parted from home and friends, and dying on a lonely plantation, as he died. So, when you rejoice in your freedom, think that you owe it to that good old soul, and pay it back in kindness to his wife and children. Think of your freedom, every time you see UNCLE TOM'S CABIN; and let it be a memorial to put you all in mind to follow in his steps, and be as honest and faithful and Christian as he was (410).

This ending shows that the ultimate, and most damaging, result of Stowe's insistence on a Christian framework is that it results in the center of the abolitionist movement being filled with actions taken by white abolitionists, in direct contradiction to Douglass' *Narrative*. As such, I

argue that Douglass seeks to right Stowe's depiction of the freed-slave turned abolitionist in his novella *The Heroic Slave*.

## 2. *THE HEROIC SLAVE AS A REVISION OF UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Although other scholars have overlooked reading *The Heroic Slave* as a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I propose that doing so exposes Douglass' critique of Stowe's insistence on the potential for Christianity to bring about abolition, primarily because of the way that it erases black agency. As such, I argue that *The Heroic Slave* stands as a revision of the Christian framework that Stowe imposes on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, insofar as it corrects her idealized conception of religion under slavery, as it pertains to both blacks and whites, and recovers the freed-slave turned abolitionist that she undermines.

Scholars such as Robert S. Levine have historically neglected to read Douglass as critical of Stowe because of their publically amicable relationship. Levine is a prolific scholar of Douglass, and a supporter of a biographical reading of *The Heroic Slave*. He usefully tracks the multitude of texts that Douglass would have seen that shaped his final iteration of Madison Washington's story, such as articles published by William Lloyd Garrison in "The Liberator". He also analyzes the development of Douglass' speeches on Washington, allowing him to highlight the salient changes Douglass makes in order to give it specific meaning that responds to the contemporary moment. Most importantly, Levine sets the groundwork for a biographical reading of Douglass in Washington, establishing that Douglass chose this narrative because of the many ways in which he saw himself in Washington (Heroic Slaves...). However, Levine's comprehensive and well-researched analysis falls short in his final claims that *The Heroic Slave* is Douglass' means of establishing his diverging theory of abolition from that of Garrison

(*Heroic Slaves...*), or a direct response to his critic Martin Delany, who publicly condemned Douglass for his support of Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Analysis of Reception...*), but not Harriet Beecher Stowe herself. Levine predicates this argument on Douglass' well-circulated disagreements with Garrison and Delany, claiming that Douglass's ostensibly amicable relationship with Stowe casts her as ineligible of his criticism. In doing so, Levine fails to realize that Douglass could afford to be critical of Stowe's writing, both in her revision of his life and sensationalized portrayal of slavery, but still support her as an useful abolitionist figure.

Marianne Noble walks this line more delicately and acknowledges the way in which *The Heroic Slave* may be critical of Stowe's rhetorical strategies in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while still support the overall work. In doing so, she proposes an opening with which the scholarly discussion surrounding Douglass can be significantly expanded. Noble directly responds to Levine and agrees that elements in *The Heroic Slave* can be read as a direct revision of Douglass' own narrative, purging it from Garrison's influence to distill his own voice. However, she also shows that Douglass criticizes the conventional understanding that depictions of violence or other visual signs of suffering can elicit sympathy from readers and inspire them to abolition. She claims that Douglass uses characters such as Grant from *The Heroic Slave* to demonstrate that sympathy induced by depictions of physical violence will never fully transcend white essentialism, the notion that blacks are constitutionally inferior to whites, thereby invalidating the primary approach that much of abolitionist fiction took at the time. In the face of this, Noble argues that Douglass suggests a framework of sympathy that is achieved through speaking and listening, which he believes is the only way to facilitate the meaningful interracial relationships necessary to bring about abolition. She isolates this new framework by reading scenes in *The Heroic Slave* as direct revisions of scenes in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's*



*Cabin*, arguing that Douglass replaces Stowe's use of visual sympathy with his own discussion-based one. Noble's argument is convincing such that it necessitates asking what else could be uncovered from *The Heroic Slave*, if it were to be read as a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. My argument expands on hers by considering the implications of reading *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of the Christian framework in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, beginning with my central argument that Stowe's Christian framework contributes to the erasure of black abolitionist agency.

*The Heroic Slave* begins with taking up the question of systematic erasure of black stories directly. The narrator claims to be telling the story of “one of the truest, manliest, and bravest of [the State of Virginia's] children” who “holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox” (*The Heroic Slave*, 149). Douglass explicitly compares this unnamed hero, who the reader will soon learn is Madison Washington, with Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson to emphasize the injustice of his only living in the “chattel records” (150). Douglass positions the coming narrative as the journey that the narrator and reader take together – indicated by the collective pronoun “we” – to “peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of the northern skies to reveal [our hero]” (150), suggesting that uncovering erased voices from history is a collective project. At once, this introduction allows Douglass to take up the implications of the erasure that Stowe stages and the long history that it participates in. Douglass contends that Madison Washington is a real figure whose story has been neglected over time in favor of white revolutionary figures, who are equally as laudable as Madison Washington. Douglass shows how Stowe is participating in the same tradition by erasing the work of freed-slave turned abolitionists – such as Douglass and Harris – in favor of white Christians in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As such, *The Heroic Slave* becomes Douglass' response to Stowe to announce that he will not relinquish the narrative she constructs

and resign to being erased. Instead, he creates, once and for all, a fictional representation of the ideal abolitionist in Madison Washington, who is above all else a freed-slave turned abolitionist.

As scholars such as Levine and Noble have argued, Madison Washington's character can be read as a revision of Douglass portrayal of himself in his *Narrative*, as he seeks to distinguish his increasingly radicalized abolitionist approaches from Garrison. In his later years, Douglass turns to a more assertive, violent form of abolition – which he finds a compelling model for in Washington. Much like Stowe, Douglass takes Washington's model and attempts to construct his own ideal by attaching his oratorical skill, his most lauded quality, to Washington, but with a slight variation that establishes his distinct potential for abolitionism. In Washington's first appearance in *The Heroic Slave*, Mr. Listwell overhears him delivering what Listwell identifies as a "soliloquy" (*The Heroic Slave*, 150). Listwell's classification of the speech puts Washington in a distinctly Shakespearean tradition that suggests his words not only represent his true interiority, but also demonstrates his natural and exceptional rhetorical skill. In particular, Washington's musings over the "hope of freedom" (153) closely resemble Hamlet's famous "To Be Or Not To Be" soliloquy, emphasizing the depth of his interiority. Therefore, in one motion, this passage allows Douglass to demonstrate his own authorial skill in his ability to emulate a classic writer, specifically his ability to write compelling speeches, while also establishing the same rhetorical skill for Washington's character, drawing parallels between their lives.

In addition to echoing Hamlet, the language that Douglass attaches to Washington in this moment of deep vulnerability also echoes his own musings on his consciousness of his enslavement in his *Narrative*, but to a more radicalized end that foreshadows Washington's willingness to use violent resistance to oppression in the "Creole" revolt. Douglass carries over terms such as "consciousness" and "brute" (*The Heroic Slave*, 151) directly into *The Heroic*

*Slave*, but with more violent valences that set Washington up as a radicalized iteration of himself. For Washington, the intolerability of “consciousness” is shifted from Douglass’ conception of consciousness as enduring hardships of slavery to Washington’s conception of consciousness as inaction in the face of such hardships; he chastises himself for his “cowardice and indecision”, saying: “Can it be that I dare not run away?” (*The Heroic Slave*, 151). In addition to depictions of Washington’s measured violence in the conclusion of the novella, these slight changes encapsulate Washington’s advanced, assertive theory of abolition that Douglass looks to embrace as he moves away from Garrison. Because Stowe reveals in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that Harris is a derivative of Douglass’ portrayal of himself in his *Narrative*, Douglass’ project to revise that portrayal also revises Harris’ character at its most fundamental level.

To this point, scholars such as Levine have read *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* only to the extent that Douglass revises Stowe’s racialism by depicting a dark-skinned hero (*Heroic Slaves...*, 145). In fact, Levine rejects a fully revisionist reading by claiming that “the novella, which focuses on a white man responding sympathetically to the plight of a black man, is very much of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* moment” (145). However, given Noble’s assertion that the sympathy Douglass employs is patently different from that of Stowe, Levine’s rejection of a revisionist reading is left unstable. As such, I propose a reading of Washington’s character that revises both Douglass’ portrayal of himself and Stowe’s portrayal of him. Later in the soliloquy, Washington directly references *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, saying: “Tom escaped; so can I” (*The Heroic Slave*, 151). This reference clearly shows that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was on Douglass’ mind when he was constructing Washington’s character, meaning that an analysis of the text cannot be complete without considering the impact Stowe’s had in shaping

Douglass' subsequent work; importantly, this does not undermine *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of Douglass own *Narrative*, but serves to add another layer of potential analysis to a complex text.

Through a revisionist lens, *The Heroic Slave* becomes an original text that aligns with Douglass' general abolitionist project but has its own distinct objective, which could not be achieved otherwise. Douglass' decision to use fiction when his preferred, or at least most employed, mode seems to be autobiography suggests that his displacement as the central character is crucial to his project. Had Douglass intended solely to revise his portrayal of himself in his *Narrative*, his subsequent autobiography *My Bondage My Freedom* presumably would have been sufficient. While other scholars have explained the somewhat anomalous *The Heroic Slave* as a "bridge" in Douglass' political ideology to *My Bondage My Freedom*, Levine attempts to give it more significance by reading it as its own unique point on Douglass' timeline (*Heroic Slaves...*, 125). In doing so, Levine argues for *The Heroic Slave* as an isolated political comment, still only looking at Washington as a radicalized version of Douglass from the *Narrative*. I add to this by suggesting that a revisionist reading of the novella can solidify its stance as a unique project by explaining his use of fiction as an intentional move to redefine Stowe's prominent portrayal of black abolitionists. While Washington's power as a literary character comes in large part from his resemblance to Douglass, his significance as a model for abolitionist literature relies on him standing independently as his own literary ideal. As such, Douglass' project to construct his ideal fictional representation of the freed-slave turned abolitionist cannot be complete unless it revises both Harris and Douglass.

Douglass stages his revision of Stowe by replicating scenes or concepts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with his own framework of abolition, much like Stowe revises Douglass. One of

the first ways that Douglass links Washington to Harris is by appropriating a line that Stowe writes to connect Harris with Patrick Henry. When he tells Eliza that he wants to escape slavery, Harris exclaims, “I’ll be free, or I’ll die!” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 27). Stowe’s line is an invocation of Patrick Henry’s famous quote: “Give me liberty or give me death!”. It exactly imitates Henry’s chiasmatic structure with basic synonyms – “free” for “liberty” – and exchanges the verb – “die” – for the noun – “death”. Douglass does the same thing but to a more exaggerated extent. In his soliloquy, Washington exclaims, “*Liberty* I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it” (*The Heroic Slave*, 151). In an impassioned and rhetorically advanced speech about the dehumanizing effect of slavery, this passively constructed exclamation stands out. Douglass retains the chiasmatic structure and continues in Stowe’s practice of simple substitutions, but to a more contorted end. This, in addition to the emphasis Douglass places on “liberty” by italicizing it, points at a subversive reading that criticizes Stowe’s simplistic method of giving Harris political significance.

Douglass continues to criticize Stowe’s portrayal of Harris, and her elevation of the domestic space, by replicating Harris’ moment of conversion in Washington’s meal with the Listwells, only to reject the conversion. As quoted previously, Stowe credits the dinner that Harris has with the Quakers as the catalyst for his religious epiphany, because he had never “sat down on equal terms at any white man’s table” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 138). In that moment, Harris realizes what it means to have a home, and comes to religion. In *The Heroic Slave*, Washington has a similar meal with the Listwells but does not experience a religious epiphany.

A bountiful repast was quickly prepared, and the hungry and toil-worn bondman was cordially invited to partake thereof. Gratefully he acknowledged the favor of his benevolent benefactress; but appeared scarcely to understand what such hospitality could mean. It was the first time in his life that he had met so humane and friendly a greeting at the hands of persons whose color was un-like his own; yet it was impossible for him to doubt the charitableness of his new friends, or the genuineness of the welcome so freely

given; and therefore, with many thanks, took his seat at the table with Mr. and Mrs. Listwell, who, desirous to make him feel at home, took a cup of ea themselves, while urging upon Madison the best that the house could afford (*The Heroic Slave*, 157).

Douglass replicates the exact scene that Stowe originally wrote: the benevolent, white family feeds the vulnerable slave. However, Douglass rejects the emotional and religious value that Stowe attributes to black and white people eating a meal at the same table, on equal grounds. In doing so, he undermines the scene as having the potential to catalyze a religious epiphany. Most importantly, he shows that Stowe's logic in which the oppressive nature of living under slavery is the primary barrier to Christianity, which enables Harris' almost immediate conversion upon his liberation, is false. Douglass exaggerates the scene from Stowe's original to underscore the fallacy of this thinking. While the Quakers provide the Harris family with griddle cakes and coffee (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 138), Washington gets a "bountiful repast" (*The Heroic Slave*, 157), but even this relatively extravagant meal is not enough to catalyze a religious epiphany. Later, Douglass writes that "for the *first* time during *five* years, Madison enjoyed the luxury of resting his limbs on a comfortable bed, and inside a human habitation" (167). He declares that even the floor is "*far* more comfortable and inviting than any bed to which he had been used" (167). However, even the offer of a real bed is not enough to propel Washington in Christianity, because Douglass shows that the comforts of the domestic space do not erase the hardships of slavery that make slaves question religion. This recalls Stowe and Douglass' fundamentally different understandings of Christianity. For Douglass, who believes that the continued existence of the institution of slavery and the horror that it perpetuates indicates that God may not exist at all, it would take more than personal liberation to convert. That this scene is a satire of Stowe is even further compounded with the knowledge that, although based on a true story, these intermediary episodes are entirely Douglass' own construction. This is to say that Douglass went out of his way to construct a scene that would respond to the Stowe's suggestion that one meal in

a stable domestic space can restore or generate faith in God. In other cases, Douglass revises such that he replicates Stowe's scenes or concepts not to play with scale but to correct the scene to reflect his lived reality as a slave.

Douglass' construction of Washington distinctly retains the relationship with religion that Douglass puts forth in his *Narrative*, rejecting Stowe's framework of Christianity. The narrator summarizes the second half of Washington's first soliloquy as follows:

Scathing denunciations of the cruelty and injustice of slavery; heart-touching narrations of his own personal suffering, intermingled with prayers to the God of the oppressed for help and deliverance, were followed by presentations of the dangers and difficulties of escape, and formed the burden of his eloquent utterances; but his high resolution clung to him, – for he ended each speech by an emphatic declaration of his purpose to be free (*The Heroic Slave*, 153).

This summary of Washington's speech indicates that he organizes his hierarchy of personal agency, education, and religion in the same way that Douglass does. As Douglass defines in his *Narrative*, the "scathing denunciations of the cruelty and injustice" that Washington issues are a result of consciousness provided by education. These predominate this truncated speech – and, the reader can assume by extension, Washington's mind – and are only "intermingled" with prayers. This places religion in the secondary role that Douglass casts his own religion in. It is also significant that Washington's prayers are directed to specifically the God of the oppressed, because it rejects the conventional tradition to pray to the Almighty God. This suggests that Washington, like Douglass, participates in a religion of his own construction that is external to the institution of Christianity. Listwell confirms this in his observation:

He shuns the church, the altar, and the great congregation of christian worshippers, and wanders away to the gloomy forest, to utter in the vacant air complaints and griefs, which the religion of his times and his country can neither console nor relieve (154).

Most importantly, each speech ends on a declaration of Washington's intent to be free. Like Douglass, Washington portrays a relationship between himself and religion in which God might

offer help, but the burden is on Washington to act and free himself. Douglass conveys the necessity of retaining this hierarchy in Washington's story of his escape from slavery.

As Washington recounts his escape, Douglass presents a model of ideal, true Christianity that complicates Stowe's use of Eva as the embodiment of true Christianity. While hiding in a tree, Washington overhears an old, black man praying. Washington's description of the "deep pathos" of the speech – which he actually claims to be unable to convey to the Listwells – gives the sense that this is Douglass' example of true Christianity, or as close to it as Douglass believes there can be. Although the comforts of the domestic space are not enough to convert Washington, Douglass shows that this demonstration of true Christianity comes closest:

I had given but little attention to religion, and had but little faith in it; yet, as the old man prayed, I felt almost like coming down and kneel by his side, and mingle my broken complaint with his.

He had already gained my confidence; as how could it be otherwise? I knew enough of religion to know that the man who prays in secret is far more likely to be sincere than he who loves to pray standing in the street, or in the great congregation (164).

Importantly, the existence of this old man as the embodiment of true Christianity does not contradict Douglass' claims on the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, because he notes that his status as true Christianity is contingent on his being external to the institution. In line with Noble's assertions on the sympathetic mode, Washington's near-conversion takes place because he listens to a profound prayer, not because he sees or experiences something material. This illuminates Douglass' belief that true Christianity gains its power and is signaled by language, above all else. Later in recounting the story, Washington is able to describe the old man being beaten in detail, but discloses that he decided to not descend from his hiding spot and help because of the danger it posed to both of them. On a rhetorical level, Washington's ability to describe the physical suffering but not the prayer further supports Noble's argument that Douglass rejects the primacy of the sympathetic mode that is generated by depictions of



violence: the reader's attention is called to the profundity of the absence of language, rather than its presence. However, the fact that Washington is compelled to descend from his hiding spot by the prayer and not the physical beating adds another layer to Noble's observation, insofar as Washington's character performs the new theory that Douglass proposes: Washington's sympathy, which in turn evolves into his own kind of Christianity, is compelled by language and not physicality or violence.

Having come to trust the old man, Washington solicits his help to go into town and purchase him more supplies with his last dollar. However, when the old man returns, he brings with him fourteen men with guns. Mrs. Listwell is horrified because she assumes that the man betrayed Washington. However, Washington denies this, claiming that he believes the old man was caught because it was suspicious for slaves to have money, and forced to reveal the truth. He says, "I can easily believe that the truthfulness of the old man's character compelled him to disclose the facts; and thus were these blood-thirsty men on my track" (165). In this interaction, Douglass concedes that true Christianity under slavery might exist in individuals, but it is inevitably subverted by the institution of slavery. The old man's attempt to do a good deed is immediately undercut by institutional limitations on slaves that make it suspicious to have money, and then again when he is physically punished for it. Douglass cultivates a construction of true Christianity that is benevolent, but still intensely vulnerable to the cruelty of slavery; in fact, he suggests that true Christianity is more vulnerable to cruelty because it guides people to take dangerous risks to help others. Thus, the brutality the old man faces as a result of his good deed establishes that true Christianity under slavery is not as simple as Stowe makes it out to be. Nor, as he shows in his depiction of the old man's beating, is it as sensationalized as Stowe figures it to be.

The old man also complicates Stowe's depiction of Tom as true Christianity. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tom is valorized for dying, which Tompkins claims – admittedly, in reference to Eva – is the “supreme form of heroism” in Stowe's framework because it “brings an access of power” (Sentimental Power, 127). In contrast, Douglass' description of the old man's beating is relatively mundane. Although Douglass describes a different circumstance, his decision to isolate an ordinary instance of a beating, and refusal to sensationalize it, rejects the enormous power that Stowe attributes to Tom's martyrdom. Instead, Douglass draws the reader's attention to the quotidian horrors of slavery to establish that true Christianity is not achieved by grand acts – such as death – but by every day instances of Christian morality. Douglass' emphasis on the old man does not undermine Tom as a figure of Christian piety, but merely illuminates the extent to which Stowe's depiction of him is sensationalized, in order to cast light on the type of true Christianity that is practiced every day under slavery.

Establishing that true Christianity exists and can be the source of abolition is the cornerstone of Stowe's argument in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is the rationale for Harris' turn to colonization and the elevation of white abolitionists. Having complicated the notion of true Christianity, Douglass can return to an ending that shows how God and white abolitionist efforts may support the freed-slave turned abolitionist, but ultimately retains his primacy of a largely secular and black-centered abolitionist movement.

Douglass' central move is to re-establish the ideal characteristics of the freed-slave turned abolitionist, keeping his revision of Harris and himself in mind, through the first mate's retrospective narration of the “Creole” revolt. One of the first ways he achieves this is by re-establishing the black abolitionist as hero and recasting the white abolitionist in a supporting role. Logistically, Washington is able to free himself and his peers because Mr. Listwell slips

him three strong files that he uses to break their irons. However, the first mate is the one to establish that the revolt's success was made possible by Washington's rhetorical skill. The first mate claims that "[Washington] had secured the confidence of every officer" and "his manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose" because "his words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of a schoolmaster" (*The Heroic Slave*, 186). This description of Washington recalls Douglass' escape: in the same way that Douglass was put in a position that made it possible for him to escape but had to actualize his freedom himself, Washington was given files that made it possible for him to break his chains but has to lead the mutiny himself. In her reading of Douglass' sympathetic mode, Noble rightly characterizes Listwell's role as that of a good listener to Washington, calling attention to his name being an abbreviation of "listen well" (Noble, 60). However, clearly Listwell serves an important operational role in the revolt that requires agency and material support, in addition to simply listening to what Washington has to say. As such, Douglass constructs his ideal white abolitionist as one who uses their resources to support black-centered abolition, while leaving the actual act of emancipation – in this case, represented by the revolt – in the hands of freed-slaves.

Douglass intentionally resists placing the impetus of Washington's freedom and his status as an abolitionist leader in God's hands. Early in the text, Washington is said to pray to the "God of the oppressed" for deliverance (*The Heroic Slave*, 150). In his retelling, the first mate calls Washington the group of slaves' "deliverer" (190). Unknowingly, the first mate subverts a *deus ex machina* trope by placing Washington in the role of God that saves the group in the end. In doing so, Washington does not become God, but subverts God, further suggesting that Washington alone carries the burden of actualizing emancipation. Not only that, Douglass also offers the group of black soldiers that come aboard the ship in Nassau and free the slaves as the

subverted God in the trope. By suggesting two alternates to fill the role of God in the conclusion of the text, both black, Douglass emphasizes that God is not the force that delivers slaves to freedom; the slaves are.

Despite the fact that Washington drives the revolt, he does not resort to baseness. Under Stowe's framework, Harris' Christian morals enable his assertion of his freedom, but also ensure that he remains moral. This is why he saves the slave capturer, who ultimately helps him. However, under Douglass' framework, explicitly Christian morals are not necessary to instruct Washington to morality: instead, basic goodness and logic can. When the first mate accuses Washington of being a "murderous villain" (187), Washington measuredly responds:

Sir...your life is in my hands. I could have killed you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now. You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work...We do not thirst for your blood, we demand only our rightful freedom (188).

Washington's ability to morally assert his freedom on account of his desire for liberty and not because of Christianity undermines Stowe's assertion that Christian morals are necessary to instruct abolitionists to moral assertions of their anti-slavery beliefs. While Stowe locates morality in Christianity, Douglass finds it in the essential human nature. Douglass' decision to highlight Washington's natural morality has additional significance when considering popular assertions that slaves were less human than whites and lacked these basic traits. As such, by highlighting Washington's intrinsic morals, Douglass further reinforces the capacity and natural benevolence of the freed-slave's agency, justifying his insistence that they be at the center of the abolitionist movement.

Given that one of the central ways Stowe contributed to the erasure of black agency was by writing Harris' turn to colonization, the ending of *The Heroic Slave* offers an alternative conclusion that involves freed slaves staying in America, as aligns with Douglass political

ideology. Levine's analysis of Douglass's speeches on Washington that preceded *The Heroic Slave* reveals that Douglass put more emphasis on the black soldiers in *The Heroic Slave* than in earlier iterations of his retelling of the story (Heroic Slaves...). This could be explained by Douglass' desire to fully place the responsibility for abolition in the hands of free slaves; however, it also puts more emphasis on the laws that underpin the freed slaves' authority, suggesting that Douglass wants to call attention to the English legislature that allows for the slaves' freedom, offering a model of a nation that has successfully abolished slavery. The first mate recounts his conversation with the black soldiers, whose support he had enlisted to regain control of the ship:

...by order of the authorities, a company of *black* soldiers came on board, for the purpose, as they said, of protecting the property. These impudent rascals, when I called on them to assist me in keeping the slaves on board, sheltered themselves adroitly under their instructions only to protect property, –and said they did not recognize *persons* as *property*. I told them that by the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States, the slaves on board were as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold. At this the stupid block-heads showed their *ivory*, rolling up their white eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity (190).

Douglass' emphasis on the laws that allowed the black soldiers to support the slave's freedom, through the first mate's horror that he was not supported by English law, suggests what he believes could be achieved in America with abolitionist legislature. He presents England as a model of abolition, in which laws are fair and black men could be trusted to enforce them. More importantly, Douglass suggests that public attitudes towards slavery could be transformed by this abolitionist legislature, in the same way that abolitionist literature can transform society. In contrast to his own dismay, the first mate claims that the then freed slaves were met by "the deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathetic spectators" on the wharf (190). In doing so, Douglass provides a window into the British socio-political context that suggests that, with the

official abolition of slavery, the entire population's attitude of slavery was corrected. Under this model, freed slaves could coexist in the same space as their former enslavers in America, and be met by the same kind of cheers that Madison Washington experienced. That Washington's personal liberation inspires Douglass and serves as an important tool with which Douglass furthers a black-led abolitionist movement only further emphasizes Washington's influence.

Although a triumphant, black-centered abolitionist conclusion can be read in the ending to *The Heroic Slave*, it must be noted that this is done despite a clearly racist narrator. In the last section that details the actual events of the revolt, Douglass adopts the perspective of the first mate, Grant. Grant concludes his description of Washington's treatment of him with the following statement:

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 (189).

Scholars are divided on how to read Grant's character. Noble reads this passage as evidence that Washington's words have transformed Grant into an anti-slavery thinker because Grant begins the important process of listening (Noble, 60). Levine argues that Grant remains pro-slavery, and that the purpose of adopting this perspective is to emphasize the problem, which Douglass foregrounded in the beginning of the novella, of white people's fundamental inability to acknowledge black heroism (*Heroic Slaves*, 153)<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Cynthia Hamilton argues that adopting Grant's perspective allows Douglass to "capture the skeptical reception any account of Washington's heroisms would have received" (Hamilton, 126). Both readings have been argued

<sup>3</sup> Levine argues, contrary to many other scholars, that Grant agrees to direct the boat to Nassau not because he has been transformed by Washington's words, but because he believes that the American Consul there will support him. This explains his subsequent anger when the black policemen free the "Creole" slaves (*Heroic Slaves...*, 155).

extensively and to relatively successful ends. However, by reading *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, another reading emerges.

As a story within a larger story, Grant's retelling can be read as a metatextual comment on how, despite its inherent racism, a progressive reading can be found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By drawing parallels between Grant and Stowe, this reading necessitates the assumption that Grant is anti-slavery, such as Stowe. However, it primarily demonstrates Douglass' belief that one can be both anti-slavery and racist; not only that, that one such person can meaningfully contribute to the abolitionist discourse, with some qualifications. Noble has already observed that Grant's conversion is "realistic and enduring" because it is "hard-won", "incremental", and at times inconsistent – such is the nature of developing thought, she argues (Noble, 59). In this analysis, Noble gestures at the inherent paradoxes of Grant's claim that he cannot recognize Washington as his equal but will take a moral stance to not work on ships that participate in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (*The Heroic Slave*, 185). Grant walks a line of anti-slavery belief and racism that remains pervasive today. I argue that Stowe takes a similar stance in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: she nobly writes an anti-slavery novel – which even criticizes some other types of racism – but is oblivious to her own internalized racism that permeates it. As such, Douglass corrects Stowe, but, even in his critique of her, also strategically protects *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By allowing for a triumphant reading of Grant's racist retelling, Douglass suggests a way to read Stowe's novel profitably, despite its racism. Even though Grant is blatantly racist, Washington's voice and individual agency shine through; the same is true for Stowe's novel. Through this metatextual comment, Douglass shows that texts can retain relevance in the face of internalized racism. He also uses the story as a metatextual comment on his relationship with Stowe, justifying his support of her as an abolitionist figure.

Douglass quickly gestures at his relationship with Stowe in a line spoken by Grant to Williams. Williams declares that the “Creole” revolt was mismanaged by the shipmates, and that he could have prevented the revolt with “half a dozen *resolute* white men” because he knows how to “manage” slaves by showing he is not afraid of them (*The Heroic Slave*, 183). Grant responds with a line that I believe reflects Douglass’ perspective on his relationship with Stowe: “For the negro to act cowardly on shore, may be to act wisely” (183). This is not to say that Douglass acts cowardly in supporting Stowe. Rather, I argue that, in this line, Douglass hints at the strategic nature of his relationship with Stowe. Grant explains that it is easy to exert dominance over slaves on shore because whites have the “sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government” (*The Heroic Slave*, 183). In light of this, Grant argues that common ways of “managing slaves” (i.e. emotional and physical brutality) would not “stand the test of salt water” (183). Accordingly, in his newspaper, Douglass’ metaphorical shore, Douglass acts in a way that will not provoke the white community which, “with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down” (183). In contrast, in this novella, Douglass’ metaphorical sea where the lines of truth and fiction are blurred, he has more latitude to criticize and rewrite Stowe. Therefore, while Douglass finds the space to criticize Stowe in fiction, he recognizes that she still serves an important purpose in the abolitionist movement and supports her publically.

The interaction between Douglass and Stowe that I have explored in this essay is primarily concerned with their attempts to present fictional representations of their ideal freed-slave turned abolitionist. I have tracked the ways in which their particular ideologies inform their fictional representations, sometimes to complementary ends but often to contradictory ends. In this analysis, I find that it is imperative that both the complements and contradictions be given weight in scholarly considerations of Stowe and Douglass. The result of considering them



together is not to undermine the significant and mutually beneficial relationship that they had, but to expose a layer of complexity in abolitionist literature that has historically been overlooked. Namely, it exposes the significant consequence of rejecting a revisionist reading of *The Heroic Slave*. By allowing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to stand as an uncontested revision of Douglass' *Narrative*, scholars are perpetuating the erasure of Douglass' voice from the abolitionist narrative. However, by reading *The Heroic Slave* as a revision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the revisionist reader restores Douglass' agency as an eminent abolitionist and author.

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