

SPEECHES AT GREAT ANTI-COLONIZATION MASS
MEETING OF THE COLORED CITIZENS OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK, APRIL 23, 1849³⁹

Mr. Frederick Douglass:

Mr. Chairman, there is no end to the devices of our enemies. The failure of one only makes room for another. One is scarcely defeated when another is invented. When driven from one point, they plant themselves at another. They are as prolific of schemes as Egypt was of frogs. In these circumstances we ought to be always on the lookout—armed at all points, and ready to march in any direction, and to meet the enemy whether in this or any other country.

Of all the assaults which we have experienced during the last twenty years, none have been more subtle and plausible than those emanating from the American Colonization Society.

Under the garb of philanthropy and religion its efforts to degrade us have been as various as they have been grievous. Of the history of that Society you have already been well informed, and with its origin you are equally familiar. It is, as you are aware, the joint product of slaveholders of the South and Negro-haters of the North, and fitly

bears the image of both parents. Embodying all the malignity of the slaveholder, and all the Negro-hating spirit of the Northerner, it is our ever vigilant and bitter adversary. It has often changed its position, and assumed by turns all the colors of the rainbow, but has never changed its essential character. It is now, as it ever has been, a most deceitful and cunning scheme against the peace and freedom of the colored people of the land.

Sir, we are here to expose and denounce this Janus-faced enemy. And I am glad to bear a humble share in this work. The special duty of this meeting has already been well and honourably discharged, and I for one have no fear of the result. Our humble words on the strong wings of the winds will be speedily wafted to the shores of England. They will strengthen the hands of our faithful and able representative there, and defeat the schemes of our subtle foe, What I have to say must be only by way of amplification.

Is it not strange, sir, that a system which has been condemned by the noble Wilberforce, exposed by the good and great Clarkson, and shattered by the thunder-bolts of O'Connell⁴⁰—whose honored graves are yet scarcely green with the verdure of two summers—should so soon make its appearance on the shores of old England? The audacity of this Society is only equalled by its malignity. Scourged and driven from the shores of England by Wilberforce, Clarkson and O'Connell, it seems to have waited impatiently for their removal to the land of spirits, to return again to its work of meanness and deception. As usual, it has gone abroad with a smile on its cheek, and a lie in its mouth. In the semblance of angel, and the reality of a demon professing sympathy for the colored people of America—it labors to drive us from our home and country.

Sir, it does not seek to do this by open and fair means. If such were true, we should have less fault to find. It does not propose to compel us to leave this country by force and arms, but seeks to bring about a state of things unfavorable to our remaining in this country. It does not tell us to go—but *tells us we had better go*—that we can never enjoy equal rights or peace in this country—that we are a doomed people, and that no efforts can save us while we remain here; and sometimes goes so far as to intimate that if we do not go now, the time is not far distant when we may be compelled to go.

Such, sir, are the sentiments of that Society; and it is these discouraging, insulting and menacing sentiments which have

strengthened prejudice, and supported Slavery in this country. But for the efforts of this Society, I believe there would, long before this, have been a united and determined effort on the part of the whole North against Slavery. It has kept alive this prejudice. The agents, and presses, and reports of that Society carefully kept out of sight all the evidence of our improvement and only represented us as degraded, ignorant and besotted.

Mr. Chairman, the fundamental, and—as Daniel Webster would say—the everlasting objection to Colonization is this; that it assumes that the colored people, while they remain in this country, can never stand on an equal footing with the white population of the United States. This objection, I say, is a fundamental one; it lies at the very basis of this enterprise, and, as such, I am opposed to it, have ever been opposed to it, and shall, I presume, ever continue to oppose it. It takes the ground that the colored people of this country can never be free, can never improve here; and it is spreading throughout the country this hope-destroying, this misanthropic doctrine, chilling the aspirations of the colored people themselves, and leading them to feel that they cannot, indeed, ever be free in this land. In this respect the influence of the Colonization scheme has been most disastrous to us. It has advocated the most stringent persecution in some instances towards colored men. But let me, sir, read a resolution:

Resolved, That if it be left optional with a slave to go to Africa or not, we advise him not to go, but rather to remain here and add to the number of those who may yet imitate the example of our fathers of '76.

I do not mean to say here my friends, that this result is a desirable one—the result to which I look—but I look to it as an inevitable one, if the nation shall persevere in the enslavement of the colored people. I have not the slightest doubt but that at this moment, in the Southern States, there are skillfully-contrived and deeply-laid schemes in the minds at least of the leading thinkers there, for the accomplishment of this very result. The slaveholders are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes, if they did but know it; and I want every colored man in the South to remain there and cry in the ears of the oppressors, "Liberty for all or chains for all." I want them to stay there with the understanding that the day may come—I do not say it *will* come, I do not say that I would hasten it, I do not say that I would advocate the result or aim to accomplish or bring it about,—but I say it *may* come; and in so saying, I only base myself upon the doctrine of the Scriptures, and upon human

inferior—that there is not fight in us—and that is evidence enough to prove that God intended us to retain the position which we now occupy. I want to prevent them from laying this flattering unction to their souls. There are colored persons who hold other views, who entertain other feelings, with respect to this matter.

As an illustration of the spirit that is in the black man, let me refer to the story of Madison Washington. The treatment of that man by this Government was such as to disgrace it in the eyes of the civilized world. He escaped some years ago from Virginia, and succeeded in reaching Canada, where, nestled in the mane of the British Lion, the American Eagle might scream in vain above him, for from his bloody beak and talons he was free. There he could repose in quiet and peace. But he remembered that he had left in bondage a wife, and in the true spirit of a noble minded and noble hearted man, he said: while my wife is a slave I cannot be free. I will leave the shores of Canada, and God being my helper, I will go to Virginia, and snatch my wife from the bloody hands of the oppressor. He went to Virginia, against the entreaties of friends, against the advice of my friend Gurney, whom to name here ought to secure a round of applause. He went, contrary to the advice of another—I was going to say, a nobler hero, but I can scarcely recognize a nobler one than Gurney: Robert Purvis was the man: he advised him not to go, and for a time he was inclined to listen to his counsel. He told him it would be of no use for him to go, for that as sure as he went he would only be himself enslaved, and could of course do nothing towards freeing his wife. Under the influence of his counsel he consented not to go; but when he left the house of Purvis, the thoughts of his wife in Slavery came back to his mind to trouble his peace and disturb his slumbers. So he resolved again to take no counsel either on the one hand or the other, but to go back to Virginia and rescue his wife if possible. That was a noble resolve and the result was still more noble. On reaching there he was unfortunately arrested and thrown into prison and put under heavy irons. At the appointed time he was brought manacled upon the auctioneer's block, and sold to a New Orleans trader. We see nothing more of Madison Washington, until we see him at the head of a gang of one hundred slaves destined for the Southern market. He, together with the rest of the gang, were driven on board the brig *Crowle*, at Richmond, and placed beneath the hatchway, in irons; the slave-dealer—I sometimes think I see him—walking the deck of that ship freighted with human misery, quietly

smoking his segar, calmly and coolly calculating the value of human flesh beneath the hatchway. The first day passed away—the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh passed, and there was nothing on board to disturb the repose of this iron-hearted monster. He was quietly hoping for a pleasant breeze to waft him to the New Orleans market before it should be glutted with human flesh. On the 8th day it seems that Madison Washington succeeded in getting off one of his irons, for he had been at work all the while. The same day he succeeded in getting the irons off the hands of some seventeen or eighteen others. When the slaveholders came down below they found their human chattels apparently all with their irons on, but they were broken. About twilight on the ninth day, Madison, it seems, reached his head above the hatchway, looked out on the swelling billows of the Atlantic, and feeling the breeze that coursed over its surface, was inspired with the spirit of freedom. He leapt from beneath the hatchway, gave a cry like an eagle to his comrades beneath, saying, *we must go through*. Suiting the action to the word, in an instant his guilty master was prostrate on the deck, and in a very few minutes Madison Washington, a black man, with woolly head, high cheek bones, protruding lip, distended nostril, and retreating forehead, had the mastery of that ship, and under his direction, that brig was brought safely into the port of Nassau, New Providence.

There are more Madison Washingtons in the South, and the time may not be distant when the whole South will present again a scene something similar to the deck of the *Crowle*.

But what was the result. The moment they found themselves in the waters of England, under British rule, the slave-sellers went to the American consul for the purpose of obtaining assistance to keep the slaves on board. But they had applied to the wrong source—they were in the wrong pew. The Government sent them assistance, but in that most questionable shape that they knew not whether their intents were charitable or wicked. The assistance came in the shape of a platoon of black soldiers. Down they came, and it seems that they came not so much after all to protect the passengers, (for it was supposed that they could protect themselves) as to protect the vessel. And they speedily communicated the idea that these colored passengers were at liberty to go where they pleased. They had reached the British soil, of which Curran has so eloquently spoken, and which I will here repeat.

"I speak in the spirit of British law, which makes liberty com-

mensurate with, and inseparable from British soil,⁴³ which proclaims liberty even to the stranger and sojourner. The moment he sets his foot on British earth, the ground on which he treads is holy. No matter in what language his doom may have been pronounced; no matter in what disastrous battle his liberty may have been cloven down; no matter what obligation incompatible with freedom may have borne upon him; no matter with what solemnity he has been devoted on the altar of Slavery; the moment he stands on British earth the altar and the god tumble to the dust; his spirit walks forth in its majesty, his body swells beyond the measure of his chains that burst from round him, and he stands redeemed, regenerated, disenthralled by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation."

That eloquent outburst of Curran was perfectly true as applied to the case of these slaves. They went ashore and walked about their business. Of course the transaction created some sensation in this *free*, *democratic* republic. The news came across the Atlantic with electrical effect, and fell into the midst of our Congress like a bombshell. The greatest amount of consternation and alarm abounded there. Henry Clay rose in his place with tears in his eyes, and said it was time that the American people in all sections of the country should lay aside all sectional difficulties, and present an unbroken front to the English. Mr. Calhoun said that American ships were American territories: they constituted a part of the national domain, and that wherever the American star spangled banner waved, of course the right of slaveholders to hold their property was to be sacredly guarded. England had violated her treaties and stipulations. England had violated the comity of nations. Mr. Rives thought that this event presented a crisis in the history of our diplomacy with England. Mr. Preston thought that immediate energetic measures should be adopted for the reclamation of these slaves to bring them back to the United States. Daniel Webster, the God-like, the man of "October Sun" memory, was then Secretary of State, under the long nose of—I had almost forgotten the name—John Tyler; or rather Captain Tyler, that's the name. And what did Webster do? Why the first thing he did was to write a letter to Edward Everett,⁴⁴ who was then our Minister at the Court of St. James, directing him at once to commence negotiations for the return of these men who had gained their freedom; at any rate for the return of Madison Washington and the brave eighteen who had so nobly achieved their freedom on the deck of the *Creole*, and demanding

payment for the remainder. It resulted just as you might have expected. The British Government treated it with the utmost deference—for they are a very deferential people. They talked about honorable and right honorable, lords, dukes, and going through all their Parliamentary titles, and sent Lord Ashburton over to this country to tell us of course, that that very deferential people could not send back the "n-----s." So Uncle Sam could not get them and he has not got them yet.

Sir, I thank God that there is some part of his footstool upon which the blood statutes of Slavery cannot be written. They cannot be written on the proud, towering billows of the Atlantic. The restless waves will not permit those bloody statutes to be recorded there; those foaming billows forbid it; old ocean gnawing with its hungry surges upon our rockbound coast preaches a lesson to American soil: "You may bind chains upon the limbs of your people if you will; you may place the yoke upon them if you will; you may brand them with irons; you may write our your statutes and preserve them in the archives of your nation if you will; but the moment they mount the surface of our unsteady waves, those statutes are obliterated, and the slave stands redeemed, disenthralled." This part of God's domain then is free, and I hope that ere long our own soil will also be free.

FROM FUGITIVE SLAVE TO FUGITIVE ABOLITIONIST

The oratory of Frederick Douglass and the emerging heroic slave tradition

Celeste-Marie Bernier

This article focuses upon Frederick Douglass's speeches on the Creole slave ship mutiny, which he gave in North America and Britain in the 1840s and 1850s to examine the complexities of his transatlantic abolitionist discourse. Douglass's commitment, not only to freedom from slavery but also freedom from mainstream abolition, remained undiminished throughout his life as he argued against the "spirit" as much as the "fact" of slavery. Douglass's speeches, autobiographies, diaries, and letters reveal a complex literary figure as well as a forceful and impassioned agitator. There can be little doubt that Douglass engaged throughout his works in literary subterfuge, polemical play, and subversive experimentation to express the full extent of his radicalism and challenge the boundaries of permissible antislavery discourse. His speeches on Madison Washington, the heroic liberator aboard the Creole slave ship revolt, afforded Douglass the highly prized opportunity to extend his subject matter beyond personal autobiography and challenge abolitionist demands for an authentic recital of the facts of his own life. He was able to exalt a black heroic tradition of violence and self-sacrifice as he articulated his own creative independence in retelling the story to suit his transatlantic audiences.

KEYWORDS: Frederick Douglass; performance; heroism; experimentation; masculinity; audience; resistance

... allow me to say that there has been a little misunderstanding between myself and the Reporter of one of your papers ... the Reporter took occasion to speak of me as a fine young Negro. Well, that is the mode of advertising in our country a slave for sale. I took occasion to allude to the apparent sweeping manner in which I was spoken of; but I find from information which I have received that the gentleman ... had no intention to sneer or speak slightly of me or the Negro race at all. I am glad to know it.¹

So spoke Frederick Douglass before a wildly enthusiastic Irish audience in a speech titled, "American Prejudice Against Color," which he delivered during his first European tour in 1845. This lecture represents just one of a number in which Douglass dramatized the *Creole* slave ship revolt and the feats of its hero, Madison Washington, to exalt black exemplary militancy, denounce white barbarity and assert his own status as quintessential

¹ Douglass, "American Prejudice against Color" (hereafter abbreviated as APC), 66.

black liberator. The facts of the mutiny are easily told: on the night of 7 November 1841, the cook, Madison Washington, led 19 slaves in a successful revolt during the ship's journey from Hampton Roads, Virginia, to a slave auction in New Orleans. Guilty of killing only one crew member and seriously injuring the captain, they redirected the ship to Nassau, New Providence in the Bahamas, where, upon arrival, British authorities freed all 135 slaves.² This act ignited a furious exchange between Daniel Webster, Secretary of State for the United States, and the British government and caused a rift in Anglo-American diplomacy.³ At the root of the international conflict was the United States' sense of enslavement to British tyrannical rule. However, any illusions of British superiority were soon undermined. According to Howard Jones, by 1855 the Anglo-American Claims Commission had decided to award compensation in the amount of \$110 330 to "the owners of the liberated slaves, thereby vindicating the Southern position [...] in the controversy."⁴ Such a disappointing conclusion to an otherwise uplifting story of British anti-slavery resistance did not suit Douglass's agenda on his first European tour. Thus, while his retellings of the *Creole* revolt saw many reinventions and alterations, his silence on British capitulation to United States' legislation remained unbroken. In his understanding of the mutiny as a moral drama in which the British were the heroic slave's emancipator and the United States his enemy, fidelity to historical fact was too costly as he sought to play off one nation against the other as he worked for radical abolition within a transatlantic context.

Douglass's speeches inspired by the *Creole* revolt and eulogising black heroism in the face of white persecution were deeply entrenched in the abolitionist fervour characteristic of both sides of the Atlantic during the 1840s and 1850s.⁵ He relished the opportunity to present the *Creole* mutiny as an international incident for which the British could be praised and the United States condemned. However, as the quotation which begins this article indicates, his decision to preface his heroic description of the slave freedom-fighter, Madison Washington, with an account of his own treatment illustrates the ease with which misunderstandings could become racist slanders and complicates key aspects of his abolitionist tactics. These speeches prove three key factors. First, his self-conscious rupturing of seemingly straightforward juxtapositions intended to establish British moral superiority and United States depravity; second, his realization of the slipperiness of language, particularly given that signification within racist discourse operated differently according to national and transatlantic contexts; third, his determination to situate his own resistance within a context of wider and subversive black movements towards liberation. His rhetoric quoted at the start of this article was designed to shock British audiences into acknowledging the reality of United States slavery by advertising his own status within his native country as a "slave for sale," at the same time as exhibiting his superlative rhetorical prowess in a clear command of abolitionist arguments. His objection to the phrase, "a fine young Negro," on the grounds that it would constitute, not only a slur on his person but also succeed

² The murdered crewmember was John R. Hewell, a guard for the majority of the slaves on board. For further information, see Hendrick, *The Creole Mutiny*.

³ See Jones, "The Peculiar Institution and National Honor" for an overview of the ensuing diplomatic negotiations as well as a meticulous reconstruction of events.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ See Bernier, "'A Fine Young Negro'".

in securing his status as chattel slave in the United States, flattered his European audiences into recognition of their superiority by provoking outraged response. Yet, by drawing attention to the British reporter's mistake, Douglass interrogated transatlantic ignorance. He compelled his listeners to critique their own assumptions and accept responsibility for their perpetuation, unwitting or otherwise, of racist language and ideology.

Given scant attention by critics, Douglass's speeches on the *Creole* revolt debate a number of questions integral to representations of black masculinity throughout the period and beyond. They posit various relationships between black heroic representation, dramatic spectacle, audience identity, and reader response, which reflect upon Douglass's awareness of the fundamental importance of reconceptualizing the definitions of permissible subject matter and style established by mainstream white abolitionists. Douglass began to signal his resistance to the conviction held by William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and others that slave literature should operate as evidential proof in the same manner as the violated slave's body. Thus, following the publication of *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, he started to experiment with his choice of subject matter, form, and use of language to resist conventional attempts to authenticate his story in particular and the African American experience in general. Douglass's lectures on the *Creole* revolt in Britain and the United States testify to his exemplary prowess as both superlative orator and self-conscious, expert performer. As Fionnghuala Sweeney argues, "Douglass's engagement with oral forms of identity formation in his public speaking sees him calibrating the verbal masks of that art form to coincide with an ongoing quest for a system of signs that can fully acknowledge his representative status."⁶ Douglass was a virtuoso of the antislavery circuit, endlessly pushing the boundaries of acceptable discourse by providing experimental and original performances in which he not only narrated the horrors of slavery but also recreated, re-enacted and revisualized the depths of its enormity to elicit a profound emotional engagement from his audiences. Douglass drew attention not only to the ways in which language can mislead, misinform, and distort but also how human communication in general can fail as individuals struggle to understand one another across differences of experience, nation, race, class, and gender. Douglass's oratory, which combined a number of inventive strategies, relied upon both his accomplished learning and his skills in mimicry and performance. As a result, both his literary prowess and his body became interrelated texts upon which he was able not only to dramatize but also to provide a panoramic view of the African American slave experience in the United States at mid-century.

Douglass's development of numerous literary motifs throughout his addresses on the *Creole* revolt sheds light on the dramatic elements contained within his written material on the same subject, particularly *The Heroic Slave*, published nearly 10 years later in 1853.⁷ There can be little doubt that his oratory presented an initial forum within which he could experiment with various aspects of the mutiny before fixing upon the preferred interpretations of his written versions.⁸ His presentation of black male slave heroism

⁶ Sweeney, "Mask in Motion," 29.

⁷ Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* was first published in Griffiths (1853) and since reprinted in Andrews, *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. For further information regarding the different versions Douglass published of this work, see Bernier "A Comparative Exploration."

⁸ See Bernier "Arms Like Polished Iron."

according to white revolutionary values countered the exclusivity of white rhetorical claims to an "American" national identity. Douglass's competing dramatisations of Madison Washington overshadowed those of his wife Susan Washington to challenge the available formal conventions within which to portray black male slave heroism. Black female slave heroism was at best only a secondary consideration and, if included at all, always embedded in constructions of black masculinity.⁹ Thus, while by the 1850s and his publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in which he included female slave liberators such as Nelly, who refused to be subdued, in his speeches and written versions of the *Creole* revolt, Susan serves as a text upon which black male liberation is penned. Douglass's narration of Madison Washington's heroism opposed attempts by whites to stereotype the black male abolitionist as ex-bondsman by dramatizing subject matter beyond, and consequently not confined by, the immediate particulars of his own life. His use of rhetoric and language was indebted to various abolitionist forebears on both sides of the colour line: David Walker, innocent clothier by day and bloody insurrectionist by night; Henry Highland Garnet, staunch advocate of the black man's rights; and Gerrit Smith, wealthy landowner and philanthropist.¹⁰ Douglass's minimal descriptions of black violence were intended to convert his listeners to black equality and to refute discourses suggestive of black "barbarity." They documented his ambivalence towards representing black physical resistance in retellings given before antebellum Anglo American and European audiences. His quest to convert white audiences prompted his development of Washington as an individual black heroic exemplar who, like his famous namesake the Founding Father, George Washington, was popularly celebrated as using violence solely in the interests of the family, community, and nation. However, the versions of the *Creole* revolt he delivered before abolitionist organisations whose membership consisted mainly of black men memorialized a different story. Douglass's oratory manipulated the "electrical effects" (SSV 156) of a transatlantic context by juxtaposing British and North American national differences to effect the abolitionist conversion of his audiences.

Douglass gave "at least six speeches" on the *Creole* mutiny in North America and Britain prior to his first formal written adaptation in 1853.¹¹ These were: "American Prejudice Against Color" (Ireland, October 1845), "America's Compromise with Slavery and the Abolitionists' Work" (Scotland, April 1846), "American and Scottish Prejudice Against the Slave" (Scotland, May 1846), "Farewell to the British People" (London, March 1847), "The Slaves' Right to Revolt" (Boston, May 1848), and "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano" (New York, April 1849).¹² "America's Compromise with Slavery" and "Farewell to the British People" provide only very brief treatments of the revolt. Sale's suggestion that Douglass "act[ed] [. . .] the [. . .] historian" by "retelling the rebel leader's story and interpreting its

⁹ Stephens, "A Black Empire," argues that African Caribbean women were also either dismissed or became the imaginary locus for a newly empowered rebellious masculinity.

¹⁰ See Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America"; Smith, "Address to the Slaves of the United States"; and Walker, *Walker's Appeal*.

¹¹ Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*, 241.

¹² See the following texts by Douglass: "American Prejudice against Color," hereafter abbreviated as APC; "America's Compromise with Slavery," hereafter abbreviated as ACS; "American and Scottish Prejudice against the Slave," hereafter abbreviated as ASP; "Farewell to the British People"; "The Slaves' Right to Revolt," hereafter abbreviated as SRR; and "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," hereafter abbreviated as SSV.

significance for his audience" provides a good starting point from which to consider his use of oratory in these works.¹³ Yet at the same time that she identifies Douglass's complex status as a "historian" engaged in recovering important events, Sale neglects to consider that these lectures proved Douglass's self-awareness concerning his status as both ex-slave and anti-slavery advocate on the abolitionist podium. These addresses gave Douglass the much prized opportunity to introduce new subject matter and adopt an innovate narrative style in techniques designed to fictionalize and dramatize this material in the service of an emerging radical political agenda which sought not only to "narrate wrongs" but also to "denounce" them.¹⁴ Thomas Cooley argues that Douglass "could be more bold in his fiction than in his speeches to white audiences, where he sometimes seemed to concede 'the inferiority of our race.'"¹⁵ How far it is accurate to argue that Douglass's oratory yielded less than his written work because he was conciliatory towards his listeners is a moot point—even untenable in light of close analysis, particularly given his awareness of his own importance as a performer coupled with his deliberate reinvention of his position, depending upon whether he was speaking before white or African American audiences. These speeches express Douglass's cultivation of fresh material in British and North American anti-slavery circles to a far greater extent than his written work, as he strove to reclaim an individual subjectivity beyond his status as fugitive abolitionist. His narration of Madison Washington's heroism was intended to elicit a political response from his audiences divorced from any wonder that "it," the black man and ex-slave, "could speak."¹⁶ Rather, Douglass's use of black history in his addresses was designed to not only provoke moral outrage against suffering but also respect for the black struggle and the philosophical foundations of heroic resistance. For white auditors, the *Creole* revolt reinforced slave humanity and black reliance on white aid to secure emancipation while, for the black community, the mutiny stressed defiance against persecution and injustice in the affirmation of an aggressive black militancy and the active pursuit of withheld rights. On the one hand, Douglass sought white converts to abolitionism by presenting black heroism according to preconceived white revolutionary

¹³ Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*, 197. Sundquist compares Douglass's speeches with *The Heroic Slave* in terms of their competing agendas: "Whereas Douglass's speeches place some emphasis on Madison Washington's African features, his blackness, and on his relationship to other black rebels such as Turner and Cinque, 'The Heroic Slave' is carefully modulated to appeal to a white antislavery audience and dwells more on the principles of revolution than on the actual revolt aboard the *Creole*." See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 117–18. Sundquist's view is limited, first, because he neglects to consider Douglass's complex targeting of both black and white audiences in his speeches and second, because he fails to see that Douglass's speeches and his novella are both hesitant to dramatize the moment of insurrection other than in abbreviated form for fear of alienating his audience support.

¹⁴ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 362.

¹⁵ Cooley, *The Ivory Leg in the Ebony Cabinet*, 142. He discusses Douglass's speech, APC in terms of racial equivocation and suspected inferiority, while he only mentions a couple of the others that remain unspecified only in passing.

¹⁶ Douglass cries out in *My Bondage and My Freedom* against abolitionist prejudice: "I was generally introduced as a 'chattel'—a 'thing'—a piece of southern 'property'—the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak," 360.

values while, on the other, his use of the mutiny was didactic to establish Madison Washington as a role model capable of inspiring black audiences to acts of emulation.

The majority of Douglass's speeches inspired by the *Creole* mutiny were written swiftly after the event, published in the periodical press, and performed on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1840s. Thus, while his oratory was by no means performed in the immediate aftermath of the event, these addresses were sufficiently contemporaneous to exploit the existence of this revolt in a wider cultural memory, given its familiarity to British and North American audiences.¹⁷ This would also have been the case for readers of his novella, *The Heroic Slave*, published in 1853, although almost certainly less so by 1863, currently the latest proposed date for a version of the same work that I recently discovered.¹⁸ Douglass dramatised this mutiny for several reasons aside from its significance as an event that he could rely upon as assumed knowledge among his audiences. Given that this incident presaged potentially international consequences, he must have hoped that its retelling would act as a political touchstone for both North American and British anti-slavery activism. More importantly, however, it is clear that he saw in Madison Washington's heroism the chance to extend the range of his abolitionist oratory, which had previously been circumscribed by the events of his own life. The *Creole* revolt suited his abolitionist agenda because it enabled him to garner British support by denouncing North American brutality while at the same time liberated his pretensions to the status of independent orator endowed with the right to choose his own subject matter. This bid for autonomy showed that the early years of the 1840s, when Garrison, Maria Weston Chapman, Wendell Phillips, and others would highly influence his abolitionist performances at will, were long gone. It is no accident that his addresses on this mutiny were given between his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and his novella, *The Heroic Slave*, and second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. There can be little doubt that Douglass's first autobiography was written upon command to prove his fugitive slave status and dispel the doubts of white sceptics. His novella, *The Heroic Slave*, celebrates the difficulties of black heroic representation to demonstrate the limitations of written documentation in North America ever to capture fully the experience, identity, or defining features of black slave heroism. Pushing the boundaries even further, his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, explicitly critiqued the dictates of abolition to celebrate the necessity of juxtaposing his life as a slave with his subsequent status as a freeman, author, and activist, in order to begin fully to engage with the full gamut of his potential reinventions. Douglass's addresses celebrated in the absence of Madison Washington from official records to suggest that a realm of black experience would remain forever unfathomable to white audiences. Close examination of Douglass's speeches on the *Creole* revolt confirm the dangers of reading his work too straightforwardly as he invites his reader to search the *Narrative* for dramatic and staged features, which immediately complicate any tendencies towards oversimplifying his literary style.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise stated, for the purposes of this article, the transcripts for Douglass's speeches are those collated by John Blassingame. This is for the simple reason that they are readily accessible, exhibit consistencies of style, a unified editorial practice, and reliable production standards.

¹⁸ See Bernier, "A Comparative Exploration," 69–86.

In "Farewell to the British People," an address on the *Creole* revolt delivered in London in 1847, Douglass urged, "the subject of slavery in America" was "a matter of the utmost importance" which "should be kept before the British public."¹⁹ Therefore, he used this mutiny to expose the injustices of an "American" system of slavery on the international stage in a eulogy of British reform efforts: "the slave [. . .] is welcomed [. . .] by the British authorities [. . .] not as a bondman, but as a freeman; not as a captive but as a brother."²⁰ He pressed his point further: "the Americans do not know that I am a man [. . .]. But here, how different! Why, sir, the very dogs of old England know that I am a man!"²¹ However equivocal he was elsewhere concerning British philanthropy, these speeches applauded their restitution of the rights of independent black masculinity to the slave. His allusion to the recognition of his masculinity by the "very dogs of old England" contrasts with his escape from the jaws of the slave hunting bloodhounds of the United States. Douglass mediated between competing discourses of British and American nationalism to develop a rhetorical model within which to reclaim his own position as black heroic exemplar while celebrating his rights to black masculinity. Douglass's statement, "the Americans do not know that I am a man," was as opposed to racist prejudice as it was anti-slavery. He was as dissatisfied with Northern abolitionists as with Southern slaveholders because both denied the autonomy, if not the full humanity, of the slave.

African American Heroism and the "Cult of True Manhood"

Douglass's first recorded address on the *Creole* revolt, "American Prejudice against Color," given in Ireland in 1845, demonstrates the extent to which he called on this incident to refute racist arguments in favour of "the inferiority of the slave." (APC, 59). He established a code of heroic and rebellious masculinity, as did David Walker a number of decades earlier, to argue that slavery "belongs to the whole nation of America; and to the Irishman, not because they are Irish, *but because they are MEN*" (APC, 60, emphasis in the original). His appeal was designed to cut through notions of national and racial difference and convert his audiences to the humanity of the slave by offering proofs of their equal masculinity. Deeply opposed to being petted and fawned over as an exotic curiosity, Douglass was desirous that his European audiences would be less sensitive to his status as a black man and more appreciative of his rights as a man, irrespective of race and class. For this purpose, he stated, "I plead here for man" (APC, 60), emphasising his commitment to fighting for the rights, not just for exceptional individuals or even for fugitive slaves, but for all mankind, irrespective of gender, race and class. Richard Yarborough's assessment of *The Heroic Slave* as promulgating "a mythology of masculinity analogous to the Cult of True Womanhood [. . .] partially grounded [. . .] in the [. . .] sentimental tradition," can be applied to his speeches in which he also embedded sentimental concerns to redefine black manhood.²² I would argue that Douglass's pioneering "Cult of True Manhood" broadened definitions of African American heroism to show each individual's participation in a universal code of masculinity which could transgress prescriptive notions of difference.

¹⁹ Douglass, "Farewell to the British People," 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² Yarborough, "Race, Violence, and Manhood," 168.

He argued, "I am here but to urge the right of every man to his own body, to his own hand and to his own heart" (APC, 61). His definition of black manhood drew upon representations of the black heroic male slave in moral suasionist arguments to subvert white abolitionist hesitations concerning the legitimacy of the black man's right to violent self-defence. For Douglass, slavery was above all a "matter of moral interest; since the morals it produces affect all men alike" (APC, 60), believing that black men were morally obliged to exert themselves to physical rebellion both to effect and to deserve their own emancipation.

The impetus behind "American Prejudice against Color" can be traced to Douglass's description in the middle of this lecture of attempts by "slave owning" passengers to deny him freedom of speech aboard ship, prior to his arrival in Europe. He confided sadly to his Irish audience, "Some said I should not speak, others that I should—I wanted to inform the English, Scotch and Irish on board on Slavery—I told them blacks were not considered human beings in America" (APC, 64). His exposure of American racist reactions to earlier versions of the same speech enabled Douglass to guide the moral responses he expected, even demanded, of his Irish hearers. At sea, he was poised between two competing British and American contexts and, therefore, able to exhibit his autonomy beyond the confines of national lines: "I sat with my arms folded, feeling in no way anxious for my fate. I never saw a more barefaced attempt to put down the freedom of speech" (APC, 64). His discussion of a slave ship mutiny while aboard ship and, therefore, beyond the wrangles associated with property rights and the demarcation of national boundaries, granted Douglass a liberated space within which to articulate racial protest. The sea and ships presented an empowered liminal space allowing for greater freedom in the performance and articulation of identities beyond the artificialities of perceived political, social and national differences. Michel Foucault describes the ship as "the heterotopia *par excellence*."²³ His analysis of various "heterotopian" models describes "the boat . . . [as] a floating piece, a space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea . . . [and is] simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination."²⁴ This interpretation assists in understanding Douglass's celebration of the ship as a transgressive and radical space in which rigid social distinctions and otherwise accepted ideological meanings are contested.²⁵ Paul Gilroy argues that the sea and the ship are indispensable to a theoretical framework determined to extend the scope of national paradigms for interpreting black history. Ships represent "micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity" and "need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade."²⁶ Gilroy's interpretation of the sea as an alternative symbolic space and belief in the ship as operating at an intersection of cultural boundaries integral to theories of transatlantic exchange reflects Douglass's artistic and political practice. In his speeches on the *Creole* revolt, Douglass saw a way to liberate himself from repeated accounts of his own heroism and from the immediate pressures of nationally coded abolitionist patronage.

²³ Foucault, "Of Other Places," 27.

²⁴ Foucault's working definition of heterotopia is "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live." *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵ Sale argues, "Ships by their very nature are liminal spaces that move between state and national boundaries," *The Slumbering Volcano*, 28.

²⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 12, 17.

Statements such as, "America has not sufficient moral stamina in herself to emancipate the slave unassisted by the world" (APC, 66), showed that his oratory on the *Creole* revolt was motivated by a desire to juxtapose abolitionist sensibilities from both sides of the Atlantic only to find North America wanting. Thus, his emphasis upon the aggressive racism of Americans was calculated to inspire his Irish audience to greater heroism, in a commitment to abolitionism which would shame their American contemporaries. In this lecture, Douglass communicated how he quieted the abuse of American racists protesting against his rights to speak aboard ship by quoting not from himself but from their own home grown institutions: "since what I have said has been pronounced lies, I will read not what I have written but what the southern legislators themselves have written—[. . .] the law [. . .] this raised a general clamour, for they did not wish the laws exposed. They hated facts, they knew that the people of these countries [. . .] would draw their own references from them" (APC, 64, emphasis in original). In this speech within a speech, Douglass exploited the fact that he had a captive transatlantic audience before which he could "expose" American cruelty and inhumanity. Similarly, his later address, "Farewell to the British People," interpreted that in the "American code of laws" each "page is red with the blood of the American slave."²⁷ His use of legal evidence as "fact" and ultimate proof was not only popular among the African and European American abolitionists William Wells Brown and Lydia Maria Child, but also among British writers such as Charles Dickens, who denounced American injustice in his travel writings.²⁸ Douglass called upon legal testimony to prove that black subjectivity had been denied and erased in the official records of North America according to which the slave body in law had become simply a text upon which could be written his otherwise hidden selfhood and citizenship. Douglass's abilities as an expert performer meant that, like a magician who never reveals his tricks, he was able to convince his audiences of the forcefulness of his position by concealing the mechanics of his arguments. By commandeering the language of white lawyers, he was able to efface his own presence and to play down his role as interlocutor of his subject matter for specific political effects.

In "American Prejudice against Color," Douglass resorted to measures other than his literacy and knowledge of homegrown laws to convey to his Irish audiences the immorality of Americans who had tried to censor his speech. Thus, he exhibited material proofs: "The Captain threatened the disturbers with putting them in irons if they did not become quiet—these men disliked the irons—were quieted by the threat; yet this infamous class have put the irons on the black. (Mr Douglass showed the slave-irons to the meeting)" (APC, 65–66). Douglass's display of the emblems of slave torture proved two incontrovertible facts: first, the absolute veracity of his testimony and second, far more importantly, the ideological, political, and aesthetic difference between the testimonies revealed by objects, "slave-irons" and the testimony communicated by men. Throughout the nineteenth century, North American abolitionist lectures were characterized by the use of artefactual evidence to authenticate an individual's story. This tradition had been established previously by abolitionists in Britain in the eighteenth century and such

²⁷ Douglass, "Farewell to the British People," 27.

²⁸ See for example, Brown *Narrative of William Wells Brown*, 96–109, and Child, *An Appeal*. Dickens included runaway slave advertisements and reports from southern newspapers to ensure that "we [. . .] have no partial evidence from abolitionists in this inquiry" in *American Notes for General Circulation*, 255–65.

demonstrations were described by the Gloucestershire born Granville Sharpe as “iron arguments.” However, in Europe there was one crucial difference. With a few exceptions, such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and Ignatius Sancho, nearly all abolitionists lecturing on the podium and telling stories of slavery were white men such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, who needed the material evidence of slavery (shackles, chains, paddles for example) to prove the reliability of their testimony.

In the United States, however, with the advent of Frederick Douglass and others as prominent abolitionist orators, for the first time ex-slaves became themselves the commodity capable of displaying the “iron arguments” of slavery in the exhibition of their own bodies, which made any further evidence unnecessary. Therefore, Douglass’s decision to show “slave-irons” was an explicit “proof” not of his fugitive slave status but of his autonomy: he used additional physical proofs to both reclaim his subjectivity and disassociate his own body from the status of slave object. His use of these objects also brought together the content of his two speeches (the speech within a speech) to make yet more tangible the responsibilities of his current audience to respond with greater philanthropy to his subject matter than his earlier racist listeners. Douglass’s interest in slave objects reflected his preoccupation with narrative experimentation as they were employed less to establish his truth claims than to evoke theatrical conventions. He adopted the dramatic use of properties to punctuate thematic aspects of his recital in order to reflect upon barbaric American practices. Washington’s rehearsal of the “fugitive slave story” in *The Heroic Slave* followed the same pattern: “I, with this strap, (pulling one out of his old coat-pocket,) lashed myself to a bough.”²⁹ Therefore, Douglass relied upon visual proofs to punctuate his oratory and written dramatizations, not only to produce incontestable evidence according to existing conventions, but also to convert his audiences by portraying himself less as a commodity, a product of the trade, and more as an orator and witness. His lectures testify to Douglass’s skills as a performer, adept at convincing his audiences of the authority of his arguments, not only by his literary prowess, but also by his visual display, which relied upon the spectacle of his body. As Sweeney argues, “accounts of Douglass’s eloquence testify not only to his rhetorical achievements but to the importance of the role of performance and spectacle in his work: as modes of communication, as core elements in the politics of representation and in manipulating popular engagements with official discourse and ideology in the public sphere.”³⁰

Douglass’s abolitionist arguments are brought to a dramatic end in “American Prejudice against Color” as he summarises the *Creole* revolt to counter racist charges of “intellectual inferiority” and a “want of affection” (APC, 67) among black men. His portrayal of Madison Washington defines black heroism according to both traits of aggressive masculinity and submissive domesticity, suggesting, “a short time ago we had a glorious illustration of affection in the heart of a black man—Maddison [sic] Washington” (APC, 67). He justified Washington’s revolutionary activity as motivated by his determination to defend the black slave family and domestic unity: “his wife was perpetually before him, he said within himself—I can’t be free while my wife’s a slave” (APC, 67). By contrast, he documented the significance of black womanhood to constructions of black masculinity by maintaining Madison’s lament for his wife in this speech in his later written versions:

²⁹ Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 195.

³⁰ Sweeney, “Mask in Motion,” 30.

"I could almost hear her [his wife's] voice, saying, "O Madison! Madison! will you then leave me here?" (HS, 219) In his speeches, Douglass left Washington's wife unnamed, yet in his written work he identified her as Susan Washington and made her role more prominent. By contrast, Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* presented black male heroism as literally only possible on the back of black female suffering; Madisons narrated that, "I . . . stood my ground, and awaited their attack over her dead body" (HS, 220). Douglass's speech, however, supplanted concern for Washington's wife with a lament for his children, "he left his . . . little ones in slavery" (APC, 67). Both Douglass's oratory and written accounts that define black masculinity according to its capacity to protect the black family contradict recent scholarship suggesting that he deliberately avoided such issues to portray an isolated black male individualism. Within the context of his speeches, Douglass's interpretation of Washington's heroism as originating in his desire to protect the black family resonates with his own self-representation in his autobiographies and elsewhere as the founding father of black resistance in the service of liberating the wider slave community.

Douglass's description of the mutiny in "American Prejudice against Color" is far more understated than in later speeches such as "America's Compromise with Slavery," given in Scotland in April 1846. While the first account conveyed the bare bones—"Washington succeeded in getting off his irons [. . .] he seemed inspired with the love of freedom [. . .]. As he came to the resolution he [. . .] seized a handspike, felled the Captain—and found himself with his companions masters of the ship" (APC, 68)—the second favoured grandiose language: "Madison Washington, who braved the dangers of the deep [. . .] with one mighty effort, burst asunder the chains of 135 fellow-men, and after much fatigue and severe struggles, steered them into a British port."³¹ Such differences in his choice of language illustrate Douglass's deliberate refashioning of this mutiny according to his audience: in the first speech, he minimized the number of opinionated statements in the interests of producing a factual narration, whereas, in the second, he engaged the individual sympathies of his audience by creating a heroic narrative of black struggle and survival. Thus, while the first speech narrated without comment the fact that Madison "saved a sufficient number of the lives of those who governed the ship to reach the British Islands; there they were emancipated" (APC, 68), the second address used repetition to laud British philanthropy: "Washington . . . [is] basking under the free sun amid the free hills and valleys of a free monarchical country."³² "America's Compromise with Slavery" was the only speech on the *Creole* revolt in which Douglass's main aim was to defend abolitionist agitation from its detractors: he sought to answer the question, "What have the abolitionists done?"³³ The mutiny, therefore, highlighted the injustices of an American republicanism, which supported the "bloody stain of slavery" and exposed the need for abolitionists "to make the whole world see the villainy of such a system."³⁴ Douglass's agenda in this lecture was to defend abolitionism as a reform movement and abolitionists as spokespersons for the slave's struggle, for which purpose he temporarily aligned himself with the aims of Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison for the good of the cause. In the interests of defending abolitionist

³¹ Douglass, "America's Compromise with Slavery," 211.

³² *Ibid.*, 211–12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 212, 213.

activism, his impassioned rhetoric minimised, if not omitted entirely, possible dissensions within the movement that were to become increasingly prominent.

In "American Prejudice against Color," Douglass illustrated the paradoxes of American racism by situating Washington within a paradigm of American revolutionary heroism: "our Congress was thrown into an uproar that *Maddison* [sic] *Washington* had in imitation of *George Washington* gained liberty" (APC, 68). Generally, in his oratory, Douglass consistently exploited the American revolutionary associations contained within Washington's name in order to translate black heroism according to white normative standards for his audiences. This was not, however, a sign of Douglass's endorsement of racist rhetoric or assimilation to normative American values but an indication of the restrictions placed upon him by the antebellum period. By 1861, the year in which he gave a later speech titled "A Black Hero," the change in political context had facilitated a shift in aesthetics and literary experimentation. At the onset of Civil War, Douglass abandoned assimilationist politics to prove black humanity equal on its own terms. Thus, he was able to situate the "black hero" of his address, the "obscure Negro" William Tillman, within an exemplary black heroic tradition equating his "Love of liberty" with that of "Denmark Vesey, Nathaniel Turner, Madison Washington, Toussaint L'Ouverture."³⁵

"Body-guards to slavery:" Radical Aesthetics and Transatlantic Slave Heroism

Douglass's preoccupation with Madison Washington and the *Creole* revolt reveals his continued fascination with slave heroism and provides engaging material with which to map the dominant concerns and trends within his transatlantic rhetoric. The event was awarded centre stage in two speeches given on both sides of the Atlantic: "American and Scottish Prejudice against the Slave," performed before a British audience in 1846 and, "The Slaves' Right to Revolt" delivered in Boston two years later and the first staged before an American audience. The form in which these texts were published poses difficulties: "American and Scottish Prejudice" was reported entirely in the third person, including abbreviations such as "(Mr D.)" (ASP, 247) while third-person reportage frames the otherwise first-person narration of "The Slaves' Right to Revolt." By their brevity and variant prose style these addresses illustrate that their publication was subject to the will of various editors who selected and abridged their content not only according to available space but also individual interests, political agendas, and conventions of accepted subject matter. The first of these speeches, "American and Scottish Prejudice" (1846) expanded on the concern within "American Prejudice against Color" (1845) to counter arguments in favour of the "inferiority of the slave." This address was less interested in proving black humanity and more concerned with analysing and condemning those "inveterate prejudices which existed against the coloured population [. . .] [as they] were looked on in every place as beasts rather than men" (ASP, 244). For the first time, Douglass implicated his British audiences by admitting that the "feeling of prejudice [. . .] against the slave was not altogether confined to the United States" (ASP, 247), hence the title of this speech which exposed "American and Scottish Prejudice against the Slave" with equal force. Douglass thereby complicated his previously polarized value assessments of British and American abolitionism to shame his Scottish audiences into sending back the money

³⁵ Douglass, "A Black Hero." 132–33, 134.

given to their churches by Southern slaveholders. His confession to his audience that he “would rather suffer to exhibit on his hands the burning brand of ‘S.S.’ (slave stealer) [. . .] than bear on his head the sin [. . .] [of] trafficker [. . .] in human blood” (ASP, 246–247) was employed to convince Scottish church members of the immorality of supporting slavery. The enormity of this statement would not have been lost on his audiences: an ex-slave himself, Douglass still believed that personal physical violation was preferable to evading his “moral responsibility” (ASP, 246).

Douglass began “American and Scottish Prejudice” by narrating “the case of Maddison [sic] Washington, an American slave, who with some others escaped from bondage, but was retaken, and put on board the brig *Creole*” (ASP, 244–245). He used Madison Washington’s heroism to illustrate the paradoxes of American revolutionary thought: “It was considered no crime for America, as a nation, to rise up and assert her freedom in the fields of fight; but when the poor African made a stroke for his liberty it was declared to be a crime [. . .] what was an outrage on the part of the black man was an honour and a glory to the white” (ASP, 245). For Douglass, this mutiny conveyed to his British audiences the racism of American republicanism which could “weep tears of red hot iron [. . .] for the oppressed monarchical nations of Europe” (ASP, 245) while remaining unmoved by its own barbarism.

Douglass’s reiteration of Washington’s national birthright as an “American slave” throughout “American and Scottish Prejudice” echoed earlier speeches, which drew parallels between black slaves and white revolutionaries. His reiterated emphasis upon Washington as an “American slave” underlined the common ground Douglass saw between his hero and himself. The fact that his slave autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was subtitled, *An American Slave* documents his simultaneous fascination with his own self-representation and his individual portrayal of African American heroism. For the first time in his speeches, Douglass revealed the extent to which Madison Washington operated as a fictive displacement for his own heroism. He substantiated this connection by combining his discussion of the *Creole* revolt with a personal anecdote. According to the reporter, Douglass narrated his own journey in an American stagecoach:

It was dark [. . .] and they [the passengers] had no opportunity of examining into his [Douglass’s] features; and during the night a spirited conversation was kept up—so much so that he absolutely for once began to think he was considered a man [. . .]. But morning came, [. . .] which enabled his companions to ascertain the color of his skin, and there was an end to all their conversation. (ASP, 246.)

Despite the clear mediation of his language and style by the unnamed reporter who transcribed this speech for publication, this excerpt demonstrates Douglass’s determination to situate his account of Madison Washington’s bravery within the context of his own superlative prowess and the cultivation of his own status as the heroic freedom fighter, Frederick Douglass. The motivation behind his decision to frame his own experiences within a narration of Madison Washington’s is threefold. First, to establish his own archetypal and representative status within a continuum of radical and heroic black rebellion; second, to distance his audience from his material; and third, to lay claim to his rights as author to have full control over his subject matter. He wanted his listeners to see his experiences less as a part of himself, embedded in his own success story, and more as part of a black heroic continuum representative of a number of black experiences. The

story of Madison Washington not only elevated Douglass's own heroism, by suggesting that it rivalled that of a celebrated insurrectionist in its significance, but also underscored its typicality. For his pronouncement in a later speech, "if there has been one Madison Washington, there may yet be another," read, "if there has been one Frederick Douglass, there may yet be another."

One of the lectures that Douglass gave shortly upon his return from Europe, "The Slaves' Right to Revolt," records a shift in style and change of audience: "I am glad [. . .] to address those whom I regard as among the enslavers of myself and my brethren."³⁶ The reader senses relief as Douglass relishes the opportunity finally to direct his invective towards slaveholders and Northern sympathisers alike upon whose action, the past and future state of the institution depends. He confronts his white audience not as their equal but as their superior: "I say to you [. . .] get out of this position of body-guard to slavery!" (SIR, 131) At this point in his career, Douglass's tone was one of biting satire to express his disapproval of all those Northerners, abolitionists among them, who supported the Constitution that he and others condemned as the manifesto of slaveholders. He traced the charges levelled by his audience of black "*cowardice* for being slaves" (SRR, 130) to their support of this document by suggesting that it represented the single obstacle between black men and the reclamation of their rights by outward rebellion. He stated, "We call upon you to [. . .] stand away from the slaveholders' side [. . .]. Would you but do this, oh, men of the North, I know there is a spirit among the slaves which would not much longer brook their degradation and their bondage. There are many Madison Washingtons and Nathaniel Turners in the South, who would assert their right to liberty, if you would take your feet from their necks, and your sympathy and aid from their oppressors" (SRR, 130–31). In this advice, Douglass appealed for recognition and respect from his Northern audience for the "spirit of slaves" acknowledging their rights as men.

This lecture argues staunchly in favour of not only the legitimacy but also the necessity of black violence, suggesting the beginnings of Douglass's endorsement of the principles of radical black abolition. His rhetoric reveals that he still supported Garrisonian politics, which argued that the Constitution was an "instrument" of black oppression. However, he also believed in direct opposition to his mentor that the ultimate solution to black enslavement lay in the capacity of each slave to rise up by violent resistance: hence the title of his speech, "The Slaves' Right to Revolt." There is little doubt that Douglass's first speech on the mutiny given on American soil, fresh on his return from Europe, testified to his increasing independence from white abolitionist support and heightened belief in the black man's rights to aggressive self-defence. In this speech, Douglass was liberated from the self-censorship of his earlier lecture given to a British audience, "American and Scottish Prejudice," in which, out of delicacy to the sensitivity of his listeners, he confined the mutiny simply to one sentence exalting in the reversal of fortunes as the slave becomes master: "in ten minutes" Madison "was master of the ship" (ASP, 245). The changing trends within Douglass's rhetoric as he moved from one national context to another, suggest that his focus upon the event's diplomatic and political implications in earlier speeches had less to do with his own hesitancy concerning black male rebellion and more to do with the censorship issues of his audiences which, if ignored, would stand in the way of widespread conversion to antislavery politics. I would argue that Douglass's first priority in Britain was to present the inequities of slavery and of

³⁶ See Douglass, "The Slaves' Right to Revolt," 130.

American national race politics in general to galvanise the diplomatic support of his audiences to work for abolition. On his return to America, however, he exhibited a more personal plea as he sought to threaten slaveholders directly by encouraging their latent fears of slave rebellion and heroism. On both sides of the Atlantic, his antislavery rhetoric shifted considerably: in Britain, he sought to gain support for the removal of the legal and national system of slavery while, in North America, he cultivated white insecurities regarding the practical consequences of widespread suffering and violation.

For the first time, in "The Slaves' Right to Revolt," Douglass did not shy away from lending his support to black resistance and heroism. No longer censoring himself from situating accounts of slave heroism within an American paradigm of resistance, he described Nat Turner as "a noble, brave and generous soul—patient, disinterested, and fearless of suffering," motivated by the desire to "gain his own liberty, and that of his enslaved brethren, by the self-same means which the Revolutionary fathers employed" (SRR, 131). Douglass echoed David Walker's belief that black heroism proved the African American's rights to equal manhood and citizenship: "I know how you will reply to this; you will say that I, and such as I, are not *men*; you look upon us as beneath you [. . .]. But, nevertheless, we are MEN! . . . You may pile up statutes against us and our manhood as high as heaven, and still we are not changed thereby. WE ARE MEN [. . .]. Yes! We are *your* brothers!" (SRR, 131, emphasis in original). Douglass appealed to a universal code of masculinity for the purpose, not only of effecting the conversion of his audience to antislavery sentiment, but also of inviting their identification with his black protagonists across racial boundaries. His use of language satirised the ignorance of his white audiences while also appealing to the African American readers of the *Liberator* and *North Star*, in which these speeches were reprinted, to inspire a sense of pride in his hope that knowledge of such a black heroic tradition would encourage others to follow. His emphasis upon not only manhood but also brotherhood suggests his preoccupation with leading a distinct group of black heroic abolitionists.

Douglass referred to the history of white slavery in Europe elsewhere in this speech both to undermine the logic of a system of slavery based on racial difference and to expose the fallacy of natural white superiority. He elaborates, "The degradation of the Anglo-Saxon race in England, under their Norman conquerors; yet, of that very race which boasts itself of superiority to all others, and assumes to plunder or enslave all others" (SRR, 131). This comparison had been made two years earlier in a short story by Lydia Maria Child titled "Black Saxons" in which she narrated how a condition of enslavement affected all races alike: "The brave and free-souled Harolds, [. . .] the fair-haired Ediths [. . .] all sank to the condition of slaves [. . .] [and] tamely submitted to their lot."³⁷ Child's premise that slavery is no respecter of racial distinctions can be mapped onto Douglass's equal conviction, of not only the injustice but also the inaccuracy of white America's claims to superiority over both African American slaves and European governments. By contrast, in this speech, Douglass satirised North American claims of "superiority over France" to state that, "'infidel' France, when she obtains a popular government, emancipates her slaves" (SRR, 131). He also eulogised the kind treatment received by "a delegation of colored people in Paris" (SSR, 131) by stating that "*Infidel* France has not yet learned the lesson from Christian [!] America" (SSR, 132, emphasis in original). Part genuine sentiment and part political trick, throughout his oratory on the *Creole* revolt, Douglass celebrated the

³⁷ Child, "Black Saxons," 190.

adherence to antislavery principles in Europe to denounce American hypocrisy and expediency in the defence of its “peculiar institution.”

Re-imagining the Slave Body: Black Masculinity, Rhetoric, Violence and the *Creole* Revolt

For the first and last time, when Douglass narrated the *Creole* mutiny in his speech titled, “Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano,” in New York in 1849 he was speaking to an audience consisting entirely of black men.³⁸ This address was given at a meeting organised by black abolitionists to protest against the “assaults”³⁹ of the American Colonization Society and, as such, echoed the final section of David Walker’s *Appeal*. This lecture registers Douglass’s by now systematised opposition to American injustice and firm belief in the need for violent action and separatist politics. Douglass’s rhetoric exalted in the freedom offered by an all black audience as he indulged in overtly polemical phrases such as “there is no end to the devises [sic] of our enemies” (SSV, 149), proving beyond any doubt the extent to which his retellings of the event shifted according to differing political, national, and racial contexts. Knowing that he was preaching to the converted, for the first time men like himself, he was able to draw directly upon Walker’s extreme rhetoric and condemn outright the “most deceitful and cunning scheme” (SSV, 150) of the colonizationists for legitimizing white racist assessments of black character by keeping “out of sight all the evidences of our improvement and only represent[ing . . .] us as degraded, ignorant and besotted” (SSV, 151). Douglass’s first-person plural invited his audiences to believe that he was like them and erased any sense of difference in favour of rallying his black audience on mutual grounds for polemical ends. This address narrated the *Creole* revolt less as a means to deplore American barbarity and more to celebrate race solidarity by suggesting to the black men in his audiences that heroes such as Madison Washington had not only lived but were currently among them. Consequently, the capacity for reform and change existed from within their ranks rather than from without. Madison Washington thus became an advertisement for the self-made man. As a backdrop to his belief in black self-help, Douglass introduced a transatlantic context to bolster African American bravery and suggest their struggle was not a national but a transnational concern: “Our humble words on the strong wings of the winds, will be speedily wafted to the shores of England. They will . . . defeat the schemes of our subtle foe” (SSV, 150). By this period, the support of British abolitionists had become useful to Douglass only insofar as it underlined the already existing campaigns of black activists.

In “Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano,” Douglass was convinced that parallels between black militant protest in the present and white revolutionary heroism in the past would assist in gaining antislavery recruits. He resolved, “That if it be left optional with a slave to go to Africa or not, we advise him not to go, but rather to remain here and add to the number of those who may yet imitate the example of our fathers of ‘76” (SSV, 151). Douglass was convinced that, like himself, Madison Washington and the others were “Americans” and as such, were not only entitled to remain on United States soil but that, in actual fact, their presence was necessary to mete out to every slaveholder his just

³⁸ Sale identifies this speech as “the longest version of Washington’s story,” *The Slumbering Volcano*, 179–80.

³⁹ See Douglass, “Slavery the Slumbering Volcano,” 149.

reward: "The slaveholders are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes, if they did but know it; and I want every coloured man in the South to remain there and cry in the ears of the oppressors, 'Liberty for all or chains for all'" (SSV, 151). Douglass's references to "every coloured man" and the need for universal black male rebellion was inspired by his belief that slavery inspired a "state of war" (SSV, 153, emphasis in original) in the South which entitled black men to violent retribution. For the first time he openly used graphic language rather than displaced metaphors to communicate the "bloody" reality of black violence. He also played upon the performative potential of the alliteration in his statement, the "slaveholders are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes," in order to cultivate in his audiences, by the harsh repeated sounds, a strong sense of fear in the face of inevitable black resistance. There is no mistaking the threat contained in his statement that "those who have given us blood to drink for wages, may expect that their turn will come one day" (SSV, 152). In earlier speeches such as, "Farewell to the British People," his description of black retaliation was much more symbolic and abstract: "The slaveholder [...] is conscious that there is intellect burning [...] within the bosoms of the men he oppresses, who [...] will [...] mete out justice to the wretch who had doomed them to slavery."⁴⁰ His reference to "intellect burning [...] within the bosoms" of African American men inverts customary associations of the intellect with the head and passion with the heart. By locating the intellect in the hearts of men, Douglass suggested that emotion as expressed in slave rebellion and violence was not the result of ill-conceived passions but instead possessed a strong rational foundation. Overall, Douglass's endorsement of black rebellion in "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," represented less a change of emphasis and more a complete *volte-face* from his earlier speeches. For the first time, he reversed his priorities. He replaced previous sentimentalized definitions of black masculinity intended to placate and convert white British and American audiences with radical rhetoric aimed at both inspiring his black audiences to emulation and revealing to white Americans the inevitability of their downfall.

There can be little doubt that "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," signals Douglass's awareness of both his immediate black audience and his subsequent white readership who had access to the published record: "I know that I am speaking now, not to this audience alone, for I see reporters here, and I learn that what is spoken here is to be published, and will be read by Colonizationists and perhaps by slaveholders" (SSV, 153). Therefore, he drew upon the solidarity of his present audience to communicate the support for black rights to a white readership:

I want them to know that at least one coloured man in the Union . . . would greet with joy the glad news [...] that an insurrection had broken out [...] I want them to know that a *black man* cherishes that sentiment . . . and that it is not impossible that some other black men (a voice—we are all so here) may [...] put this theory into practice. Sir, I want to alarm the slaveholders, and not to alarm them by mere declamation or by mere bold assertions, but to show that there is really danger [...] I want them to know that there are some Madison Washingtons in this country. (SSV, 153.)

Douglass's campaigns for reform from this point onwards were characterized less by conciliation and passivity in attempts to appease his white readers, and more by an open declaration of black male rights. Douglass drew parallels between himself and Madison

⁴⁰ Douglass, "Farewell to the British People," 31.

Washington to suggest his active support of black rebellion. For his immediate black listeners, this speech was designed as a wake-up call to black militancy in the pursuit of independent rights whereas, for his white readership, it was intended to encourage widespread "alarm." His aim was to horrify his white readers not just by language, nor by "mere declamation" or "mere bold assertions," but by the promise of physical resistance in the prophecy of black violence. He argues that "there are some Madison Washingtons in this country" and that black concerted efforts, "a voice—we are all so here" would be able to resist continued abuse under slavery. By mid-century, language for Douglass had become, as it would for James Baldwin and Richard Wright over 100 years later, only useful in so far as it prompted actual black protest: "words as weapons" was as much his mantra as it became theirs. In a later speech, "Men of Color, To Arms!" delivered to recruit black soldiers to the Civil War in 1863, he made this view clear: "The office of speech now is only to point out when, where, and how, to strike to the best advantage."⁴¹

In "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," Douglass welcomed black "insurrection" as "glad news" and as proof of black heroic prowess that would work against white stereotyping and prejudice. He saw physical resistance and not moral suasion as the only way to challenge popular opinion concerning black inferiority. As late as 1861, in "A Black Hero," he questioned, "When will this nation cease to disparage the Negro race? When will they become sensible of the force of this irresistible Tillman argument?"⁴² By a clever sleight of hand, Douglass continued to unite rhetoric and resistance. He presented the heroism of the slave, William Tillman, in rhetorical rather than bloody terms: he was presented as an "argument" rather than a "fact" of black resistance. In many of his addresses, Douglass complicated his descriptions of black violence by describing heroic figures such as Madison Washington and William Tillman, as rhetorical figures and textual arguments as well as historical founding fathers of African American fights for freedom.

The narration of the *Creole* mutiny in "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano" is by far the most detailed and highly dramatised of all those provided by Douglass's oratory. He used this event to undermine racist arguments that "there is no fight in us" (SSV, 154) and resist white assumptions of black inferiority. He began by stating, "As an illustration of the spirit that is in the black man, let me refer to the story of Madison Washington" (SSV, 154). The *Creole* revolt provided Douglass with a template for black slave heroism which transcended stereotyped boundaries by adhering to a universal code of masculinity. However radical his retelling in this speech, he nonetheless maintained his critique of American laws and belief in the power of British philanthropy. He contrasted the "treatment" of Washington "by this Government [which] was such as to disgrace it in the eyes of the civilized world" (SSV, 154) with that of his experience in Canada where, "nestled in the mane of the British Lion, the American Eagle might scream in vain above him, for from his bloody beak and talons he was free" (SSV, 154). Regardless of the difficulties he experienced in Britain, this nation still held a powerful place in Douglass's antislavery ideology as the country which had provided him with shelter, not only from the pursuit of slave-catchers but also from abolitionists intent upon scripting his philosophy. In Britain, Douglass gained both physical and intellectual freedom: he was not only purchased, and thereby emancipated, but he also gained independence from his antislavery supporters in America by the donations of British abolitionists, which made

⁴¹ Douglass, "Men of Color," 224.

⁴² Douglass, "A Black Hero," 134.

it possible for him to set up his own newspaper. While there were clearly problems with this sort of assistance both in terms of his sale, which Garrison saw as a capitulation to Southern slaveholding principles, and the funds for his newspaper which raised important issues concerning patronage and freedom of speech, these acts offered Douglass the practical beginnings from which to emancipate himself from mainstream white abolitionists and to search out compatriots of a radical antislavery politics rooted in and inspired by an African American heroic tradition.

In this address, Douglass's account of the mutiny sought to rouse his black audience to acts of heroism by appealing to their imagination: "he [Madison] was brought manacled upon the auctioneer's block [. . .]. We see nothing more of Madison Washington, until we see him at the head of a gang of 100 slaves destined for the Southern market" (SSV, 155). He compelled their attention and empathy by dramatising the extent to which his own imagination was haunted by the slaveholder's cruelty towards Madison Washington: "I sometimes think I see him—walking the deck of that ship freighted with human misery" (SSV, 155). By adopting such direct and emotive language, he removed barriers of narration to heighten the sense of horror and brutality in his black audience and invite their greater intimacy. His statement, "I sometimes think I see him," draws attention to the tradition within abolition discourse of relying upon the visual to convey the authenticity and legitimacy of any given experience. In a consistent emphasis upon that which could be "seen," many abolitionist writers secured the black body's status as commodified spectacle for white audiences. However, Douglass reveals that this is only part of the story as Washington himself reveals the limitations of such an approach: "On the eighth day it seems that Madison Washington succeeded in getting off one of his irons [. . .]. The same day he succeeded in getting the irons off the hands of some 17 or 18 others. When the slaveholders came down below they found their human chattels apparently all with their irons on, but they were broken" (SSV, 155). Douglass placed a great deal of weight upon the capacity of black performance to thwart straightforward relationships between the signifier and the signified in order to argue for traditions of black resistance which complicated white attempts to read a scene too literally. Douglass's narration probably inspired Lydia Maria Child's description in "Madison Washington" that "[the slaves] continued to wear their chains, and no one suspected that they could slip their hands and feet out at their pleasure."⁴³

The major radical thrust of "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," however, does not consist in his narration of the revolt but in his physical description of Madison Washington. While he described the mutiny with characteristic brevity, as per his earlier speeches, "in an instant his guilty master was prostrate on the deck," (SSV, 155), he portrayed Washington very differently as "a black man, with woolly head, high cheekbones, protruding lip, distended nostril, and retreating forehead" (SSV, 155).⁴⁴ Sale argues that Douglass portrayed Washington as "stereotypically African" in order to "contest [. . .] the racist assumption [. . .] that the spirit of liberty inheres in white rather than black blood."⁴⁵ Thus, he put white racist caricatures to radical political use as he presented a stereotypically black hero to disassociate Madison Washington's heroism from any white ancestry or influence.

⁴³ See Child, *The Freedmen's Book*, 152.

⁴⁴ Douglass's construction of Madison Washington can be interestingly considered alongside Martin Delany's dramatization of black slave heroism in *Blake*.

⁴⁵ Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*, 179.

His stylized representations of blackness resonated with debates surrounding theatricality, minstrelsy, and performance and confirmed his interest in using popular images and language to dramatize this revolt as widely as possible. Douglass's conclusion concerning this mutiny with the moral that there "are more Madison Washingtons in the South, and the time may not be distant when the whole South will present again a scene something similar to the deck of the *Creole*" (SSV, 156) was intended not only to inspire his black audiences but also to warn his white readership concerning the inevitability of the enactment of black apocalyptic vengeance. His use of the word "scene" further confirmed Douglass's theatrical focus in his recognition of the dramatic and visual potential of this material. Throughout his oratory, Douglass's narrative practice was, of necessity, alternately characterised by techniques of defamiliarization and identification in order to offset and interrogate the roles played by his white and black audiences in the semantic process.

In addition to this list of speeches compiled by Maggie M. Sale, I can add two lectures delivered by Douglass on the same subject later. The first of these, "West India Emancipation," was performed in New York in May 1857 at the height of North American abolitionist pamphleteering. This address critiqued North American injustice by eulogising British philanthropy's emancipation of all slaves in the West Indies. Douglass collapsed the perceived differences between white revolution and black insurrection to argue, "Madison Washington who struck down his oppressor on the deck of the *Creole*, is more worthy to be remembered than the colored man who shot Pitcairn at Bunker Hill."⁴⁶ The second, "A Black Hero," which Douglass gave much later in August 1861 amid the escalating turmoil of Civil War, used Madison Washington's story to recruit black soldiers to the Union side in the Northern fight against slavery. He observed "daring and heroic deeds" of the black soldier, William Tillman were inarguable proofs that a "Love of Liberty alone inspired him [. . .] as it had inspired Denmark Vesey, Nathaniel Turner, Madison Washington, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Shields Green, Copeland, and other negroes before him."⁴⁷ Both these works established the leader of the *Creole* revolt as only one "Negro hero" among many to prove both the existence of a black militant tradition and endorse Douglass's later separatist politics overturning racist charges that black resistance was arbitrary and self-seeking.

Douglass's oratory on the *Creole* slave ship revolt proves his aesthetic and political independence even at the start of his abolitionist career. A close examination of these speeches reveals that he incorporated, rather than submitted to, white demands only in so far as they served his quest to win converts to abolitionism on both sides of the Atlantic. Douglass was adept in the arts of disguise, masking, and ventriloquism as he played as much upon his physical stature and the spectacle he inspired as the premier fugitive slave turned abolitionist as he did upon his rhetorical and literary skills. His decision to dramatize a slave ship mutiny extended the customary definitions of suitable subject matter for an ex-slave and, as a result, shifted the direction of later black abolitionist oratory while succeeding in establishing his own status as heroic liberator. He strayed further a field than the facts of his own life to draw upon events that were beyond his own personal experience and, as such, both tested and honed his skills at literary invention. Douglass subverted what was perceived to be an appropriate narrative style for black writers by providing imaginative experimentations with literary form, political purpose, and historical context, which left far behind the simple plea by whites that slaves write only

⁴⁶ Douglass, "West India Emancipation," 438.

⁴⁷ Douglass, "A Black Hero," 134.

autobiography. These speeches laid the foundations for his subsequent representations of black heroism in the post-emancipation period towards the close of his life. During the 1880s, for example, he borrowed from the language and ideas explored here to dramatise the life of the seventeenth century black slave revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture. These biographical works were equally inspired by the desire to dispel the prejudices or "cloud noir" surrounding the representations of black men in the historical record. They uncovered a number of similar themes including his evocation of natural imagery to justify black rights to physical resistance, his ambivalence towards white abolitionist philanthropy, his satirical resistance to the confines of available historical discourse, as well as his interpretation of L'Ouverture's obscurity in the white historical record as justifying fictive recreations of black heroism. These works engaged with the existing templates within which black male resistance was represented only to find them lacking as they interrogated the available discourses within which the black male body had been dramatized. They also complicated attempts made by white abolitionists to appropriate black masculinity as a spectacle for voyeuristic consumption.⁴⁸

Douglass's speeches on the *Creole* revolt betray his experimental aesthetics, which guided his complex depictions of black male slave heroism and of white racist discourse. He revised and restructured his material according to changing political contexts, diverse generic forms, and varying platforms for publication. The unjust neglect suffered by these innovative works necessitates their recovery to extend Douglass's presently fixed canon. These speeches pursued audience conversion by juxtaposing American and European abolitionist contexts while they reflected his fearless autonomy and determination to distance him from differing strands of American abolitionism. Douglass articulated his opposition to white control in his address, "West India Emancipation" delivered in the mid-1850s: "Your humble speaker has been branded as an ingrate, because he has ventured to stand upon his own right, and to plead our common cause as a colored man, rather than as a Garrisonian."⁴⁹ There can be no doubt that Douglass used the story of Madison Washington to refute his status as a "Garrisonian" and present himself instead as a "colored man." These speeches were intended to take a stand against what he described later as Garrison's interest in his own oratory in "taking me as his text."⁵⁰ A study of Douglass's oratory establishes his development of theatrical techniques which dismantled white attempts to appropriate and authenticate black male intellectual activism and physical heroism. Douglass's dramatisations of Madison Washington, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and many others sought to prove, along with black abolitionists such as Walker, Garnet, Delany, and Pennington, as well as subsequent black writers of the twentieth century, including Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison) that "the negro is in all respects simply a man."⁵¹ As Douglass writes towards the end of the nineteenth century, he is "No better, no worse. The angel in him is as lovely as in any other description

⁴⁸ Douglass's four untitled versions on "Toussaint L'Ouverture" are included on Reel 19 of the Library of Congress's microfilm series, *Frederick Douglass's Papers*. These texts constitute Douglass's drafts for an introduction that he intended to write to an American edition of the French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher's biography of *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. Whether this edition ever appeared is unknown. For further information, see Bernier, "Emblems of Barbarism". 2004.

⁴⁹ Douglass, "West India Emancipation," 437.

⁵⁰ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 358.

⁵¹ Douglass, "Toussaint L'Ouverture," n.p.

of man—and the brute is not less visible and brutal in him, than in any other. We differ as the waves but are as one as the sea.”⁵²

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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⁵² Ibid.

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