Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* – Risk, Fiction, and Insurance in Antebellum America

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**ABSTRACT**

Published in 1853 as part of Julia Griffiths’ abolitionist gift-book and fundraiser *Autographs for Freedom*, the novella *The Heroic Slave* became canonized as Frederick Douglass’s sole and somewhat negligible attempt at sentimental fiction. The novella offers a speculative account of moments in the life of Madison Washington, one of the ring-leaders of the 1841 slave revolt aboard the brig Creole. The following essay proposes a rereading of *The Heroic Slave* in light of the historic events of the Creole incident and the subsequent tort lawsuit Thomas McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company. I outline how Douglass’s novella taps into the probabilistic logic of the legal case and thus traces the lineage that historically connects slavery, risk, and marine insurance. My essay proposes a reconsideration of Douglass’s novella as an aesthetic experiment; it shows how *The Heroic Slave* employs elements of genre convention, narrative form, and symbolically charged spaces to present the reader with a case for self-empowered, African American agency, which hinges on a newly emergent probabilistic paradigm rather than providential convictions. A radical and deeply ambiguous text, the novella confronts the reader with the racial bias of historiography; it struggles to find a form that reflect slaves’ experiences of exposure to the seemingly aleatory uncertainties of the slave-keeping system, in which bodies became chattel and risks turned human futures into tradable commodities. Douglass’s text presents Madison Washington’s heroism not primarily as based on escape and violent revolt but on his voluntary and self-conscious act of seizing self-ownership and charge of his future. Thus, the novella bears witness to the inherently Janus-faced nature of risk, which indelibly ties its historic function as an economic tool of profitable slave trade to the liberating potential a probabilistic paradigm may hold for individual self-empowerment.

In 1845, when Justice Henry Adams Bullard ruled that the loss of 130 slaves, who were freed through mutiny and had escaped to the Bahamas, was not an insurable “peril of the sea” but that the “thing insured” had assessed “probable chance” and seized freedom (Levy 53), one of the most interesting cases of tort law of the antebellum period was decided before the New Orleans Supreme court. In 1853, Frederick Douglass published *The Heroic Slave*, a strangely fragmentary novella based on the Creole incident, which would remain his first and only piece of fictional writing. What connects the Creole case to *The Heroic Slave* goes beyond the story of black and white abolitionists turning historical material into heroic narrative: they are interlinked by a story of risk, of slavery, and of the struggle for agency in antebellum America, where the religious paradigm of providence was slowly but surely replaced by the possibilities and the repercussions of an open and contingent future.

Historically, the successful insurrection of nineteen male slaves on the brig Creole in 1841, who managed to subdue officers, crew, and passengers and flee
to the Bahamas, created a series of insurance lawsuits and a diplomatic conflict between the U.S. and Great Britain, whose government officials had allegedly “seized” American property and thus violated, as the Tylor-administration’s Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, put it, “the comity of nations” (Budney 198–200). Heated public debates over international rights and issues of slavery ensued, and, though little is known about the future fates of the mutineers, Madison Washington, the mutiny’s leader, became an object of fascination for abolitionists in public oratory, essays, and prose. After multiple mentions of Washington in talks and writing, in 1853, Frederick Douglass, for the first and last time of his life, chose a fictional form to publish his take on the significance of the case. *The Heroic Slave*, first published in Julia Griffith’s gift book and abolitionist fundraiser *Autographs for Freedom*, reveals paradigmatically the conceptual relevance of understanding risk in antebellum America: An emerging logic of risk and probability becomes crucial to abolitionist efforts, which base their demands on notions of African American agency as human individuals and seek to defy rhetorics of predetermination. In *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass’s struggle to overcome a Christian heritage of providential thought, which had been stunting African American historical agency and personal freedom, becomes paradigmatically evident. Insurgents re-appropriate their lives from slaveholders and insurers. They assume their personal risks and thus facilitate their liberation from the shackles of slavery, violence, and economic exploitation. Fascinated with the case, Douglass poetically converts the *Creole* incident into fiction and recounts a radical history of what it means for slaves to seize their future.

The term risk, due to its specific usage and narrow semantic spread in the antebellum period, was sparingly used in the case of the *Creole*, the publications on the incident and its later fictionalizations. But an inquiry into a contemporaneous semantics of risk may serve as a device to render visible crucial changes that take place across the nineteenth century. I use risk semantics to trace the transition from a providential paradigm to an essentially open and contingent future and to highlight the implications of such a shift in antebellum abolitionist discourse.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, before it became a ubiquitous expression within a paradigm of applied probabilistic thought, ‘risk’ was a specialized term of marine insurance. Faced with the uncertainties of maritime trade, ‘risk’ was developed as a financial product through which others participated in the future wins or losses of a marine business venture. While ‘hazards’ and ‘perils’ signified an objective causation of danger, a ‘risk’ specified a designated portion of a potential outcome, which an underwriter owned or ‘ran.’ Merchants sought to hedge their ventures against loss and insured risk as a tool allowed for a redistribution of the consequences of such an outcome, namely a sharing of profit in exchange for a partial redistribution of potential damage. It required an evaluation of probable outcome and of a likelihood of profit or losses in the context of marine insurance. As Jonathan Levy explains in his 2013 study on emerging capitalism and risk in America, *Freaks of Fortune*:

Buying and selling “risks,” long-distance trading merchants purchased from each other financial compensation in the contingent event that a “peril of the seas” or an “act of God” struck their long-distance voyages and destroyed their property. Risk did not then
mean extreme peril, hazard, or danger. It did not refer to the immaterial fear of an undesirable event. Rather, it originally referred to something material: a financial instrument for coping with the mere possibility of peril, hazard, or danger. (3)

Ian Baucom, Levy, and others have pointed out that marine insurance contracts were one of the supporting pillars of the transatlantic and, later, national American slave trade. To own a risk essentially signaled proprietary participation in a future event, and to turn chattel slaves into insured cargo meant an additional trade in the slave’s future and a redistribution of profits for the duration of agreed transportation. To not be able to run one’s own risk or to seize possession of one’s future were issues that stood at the center of abolitionist as well as legal and economic discussions over the ‘peculiar institution’ and African American agency. These issues cumulate in the case of the Creole.

My reading will show how Douglass’s fictional version of the historical Madison Washington uses elements of genre convention, narrative form, and symbolically charged space to reflect the “aleatory experience” of slave-life (Lee 109), in which bodies became chattel and risks turned futures into tradeable commodities (Levy 28). The novella employs a fragmentary style and strange hybrid aesthetic to make a case before the reader: it postulates African American agency by narratively staging the seizing of self-ownership. In making this case, Douglass’s text echoes the argumentative pattern of the insurance case and ultimately favors rational, legalistic discourse over sentimental Christian brotherhood and conversion within a providential paradigm. Douglass’s narrator addresses us, as readers, in a story that, for all its seeming heroism and abolitionist sentimentalities, bears all the marks of an emerging sense of an open future and a budding probabilistic paradigm: “Speaking of marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities, we come before our readers” (HS 5).

I. The Creole-Incident: “Perils of the Sea” versus the Inherent Vices of “Things Insured”

Douglass’s novella drew on events of the Creole incident of 1841, which became synonymous with a successful slave mutiny, a major diplomatic incident between the U.S. and Great Britain, as well as an important lawsuit that would, driven by economic interests, create legal precedence and lines of reasoning highly significant to abolitionist discourse. A closer look at the incident, the crew’s depositions, and the legal arguments presented in court shows that Douglass’s narrative shares a probabilistic outlook with the strategy of defense chosen by the insurance company that underwrote slave insurances on the Creole. For very different reasons and coming from entirely unrelated political camps, both rely on a logic of risk that is characteristic of the paradigmatic change in mid-nineteenth century American society.

A close consideration of the context of the Creole case brings to the fore the strategies and semantics Douglass uses in The Heroic Slave to implicitly put forward an abolitionist case. Douglass is not content to appeal to white empathy and charitable Christian values. His literary text demands the reader’s recognition
of a slave’s human agency, of his ability to show foresight, and to assess probable chance. Both *The Heroic Slave* and the line of reasoning which slave owner, confederate politician, and southern lawyer Judah P. Benjamin presented in court, rest on the conviction of a non-providential open future; and both texts argue for a basic human capacity, in white citizens and African Americans alike, to assume responsibility and possess the risk of one’s own future.

In November 1841, the brig *Creole* left the port of Norfolk for New Orleans with a cargo of tobacco and 135 slaves under deck. According to common use, the cargo—which included the lives of the slaves—was insured by the slaves’ masters for the duration of transit. Upon reaching the open Atlantic, nineteen male slaves started an insurrection and coerced part of the crew to help sail the ship to the Bahamas.¹ Their plan succeeded. After their arrival in the port of Nassau, all attempts by Americans to take the ship and repossess the human cargo were thwarted by British Crown officials and the open support of the local population. British officials and the attorney general took depositions from the white crew members and held the nineteen mutineers for further questioning and to investigate the killing of sailor John Hewell.² The slaves aboard were pronounced free, and most of the mutineers were eventually released. The incident created a grave diplomatic conflict over the purported British seizure of American property, and American abolitionists celebrated the case.

In the wake of events, Thomas McCargo and other slave owners filed claims with their insurances. As the insurance companies refused payment, the insured started a process of adjudication, suing the marine underwriters for a compensation of loss of property in originally seven separate suits against four different insurance companies (Downey 133-34). After the Commercial Court of New Orleans had decided in favor of the owners, the insurance companies appealed and the case ended before the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1845, where it became best documented as *Thomas McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company* and *McCargo v. The Merchant’s Insurance Company of New Orleans.*

The lawsuit was complicated, and since slave insurance had been common practice since the early beginnings of transatlantic slave trade, much was at stake. Per contract, the owners were insured against “perils of the sea,” which, in 1850, was defined by Burrill’s *New Law Dictionary* as:

> Natural accidents peculiar to the sea, which do not happen by the intervention of man, nor are to be prevented by human prudence. 3 *Kent’s Com.* 216 [sic]. […] Under perils of the sea are comprehended those of the wind, waves, lightning, rocks, shoals, running foul of other vessels, and in general all causes of loss and damage to the property

¹ Apparently, the mutineers had heard of the case of the slaver *Hermosa*, which had been incapacitated by a storm in 1840 and towed by British wreckers to Nassau, where authorities had pronounced the slaves aboard free. The first mate’s deposition mentions an explicit reference to the *Hermosa*. Some of the slaves aboard came from Richmond, VA and were held in Robert Lumpkin’s slave pen, from which the *Hermosa* mutineers had been shipped (Levine et al. 73; also Levy 42).

² Two mutineers were sentenced to prison and died there, the rest were released, most of them probably went to Jamaica as freedmen, but their future fates are not documented. Only five returned to their masters at their own request (see Budney 198-200).
insured, arising from the elements and inevitable accidents, other than those of capture and detention. (793)

Following Kent’s *Commentary on American Law* (1826), mid-nineteenth-century legal works seek to define perils of the sea and to narrow down which perils are “extraordinary” and qualify for indemnity. *Bouvier’s Law Dictionary* hence specifies “events not attributable to natural causes,” which might include, “capture by pirates on the high sea and a case of loss by collision by two ships, where no blame is imputable to either, or at all events not to the injured ship” (315), but which would by all means be connected to a *casus fortuitus*, “an inevitable accident; a loss happening in spite of all human effort and sagacity.” Ultimately, the *Creole* suit hinges on the crucial question whether a slave insurrection was indeed a ‘peril of the sea,’ an ‘act of God or nature,’ or whether it was a consequence of human agency, which would include actions or failure to act by captain, crew, owners, or possibly even slaves themselves (Levy 43).

Legally, it was assumed that slave-owners along with their chattel also owned the “slave risk,” i.e., the financial commodity that represented the insurable portion of the slave’s future fate, and thus could insure it. Court cases over slave insurance were not uncommon but were historically deeply embedded in transatlantic trade and maritime law. The infamous *Zong* massacre in 1781, in which the crew of a British slave ship jettisoned more than 130 slaves to allegedly save water and provisions, entered the historical record first and foremost as an insurance case.

The lawsuit in the *Zong* case arose when maritime insurance underwriter Thomas Gilbert refused to reimburse Liverpool merchants for their loss of property. *Gregson v. Gilbert* covers all sorts of allegations from insurance fraud to negligence but not murder, since the slaves were considered property. Jettisoning cargo was protected under the principle of “general average” (i.e., sacrificing valuables and even human lives under duress to save more lives, the ship, or larger parts of cargo) and considered a legitimate practice (see Baucom ch. 3, esp. 106-10). In *Gregson v. Gilbert*, general average was contested by the insurance company, since negligence, imprudence, and navigational incompetence were suspected. Once the ship had missed its destination, Jamaica, where the slaves were to be sold, the potential value of the suffering slaves under deck diminished daily, leading Captain Luke Collingwood to the decision to “brutally [convert] an uninsurable loss (general mortality) into general average loss, a sacrifice of parts of cargo for the benefit of the whole” (Armstrong 173). Sixty years later, *Zong* deliberations, whether

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3 Contemporary reference works use similar definitions, most significantly *Black’s Law Dictionary* or, earlier, Shumaker’s *Cyclopedic Law Dictionary*, which in its 1901 edition also bases its definition here and in subsequent editions on the foundations of *Bouvier’s Law Dictionary*. The 1856 edition still cross-references it with ‘Act of God,’ which “denotes those accidents which arise from physical causes, and which cannot be prevented.” Later editions define *casus fortuitus* (be it of a fortunate or unfortunate fortuity) generally as an event which can be neither foreseen nor prevented. Cf. for instance *Bouvier’s* 1914 edition, 1290.


5 Numbers vary, but the underwriter contested the alleged necessity of throwing 132 of the 440 slaves over board and refused to pay the insured 30 pounds per head. Alerted by Olaudah
“slave risk” and “cotton risk” were equal in status, would resonate in the Creole case’s debate on “the peculiar nature of the property insured” (Levy 48-49). Indubitably, slave risk had to be different from cotton or tobacco risk to some extent, since non-human property could not revolt. But the concept of ‘perils of the sea’ was open to exegetic interpretation, which had to specifically exclude human responsibility and interference, and define causation of an ‘improbable event.’

In McCargo v. New Orleans Insurance Company, after assessing the situation and numerous depositions, the inimical parties took two very different stances. The slave owners claimed “perils” and argued that the loss of property was de facto not caused by the rebelling slaves themselves, but by the British government in Nassau. Though technically committing an act of piracy, which was considered casus fortuitous at sea, the slaves remained chattel. As the plaintiff’s counsel argued, slaves might rebel but did not have the power of freeing themselves because they were not legal subjects and could not claim themselves as property (Levy 54). Instead, the actual loss of cargo could only take place through the British proclaiming the slaves free in the harbor, which made British interference proximate cause to the destruction of property (and seizure of property by pirates and foreign government was covered by ‘perils’).

One of the insurance’s lawyers, Judah P. Benjamin, himself a Southerner, slave owner, and trusted advisor and later Secretary of State under Jefferson Davis, focused in turn on disabling the ‘perils’ clause. He built the defense on two aspects: criteria of agency and nature of the cargo. He employed a catalogue of criteria, which was traditionally used to eliminate agency and establish ‘peril of the sea’ in a legal sense. A given case only qualified as fortuitous if it happened despite all reasonable prudence and if foresight, volition, and responsibility could be excluded. In a second step, the defense argued that part of the ‘peculiar nature’ inherent to the property insured was in fact a drive towards freedom. If it could be argued that the longing for liberty and waiting for a seizable opportunity were an inherent characteristic of the slave, a mutiny would not be a ‘fortuitous event’ but an ‘inherent vice,’ a term which usually covered all sorts of tendencies through which cargo might self-destruct its value (e.g., the tendency of fresh produce to rot, livestock to die, etc.). A slave revolt would no longer qualify as an unlikely event or ‘freak’ of fortune, but an event to be expected and thus uninsurable risk under the perils clause adopted by all maritime insurances.

Surprisingly, the judge followed Benjamin’s argument. Applying the checklist for human agency, he ruled that the actions of the “things insured” had evidenced foresight, volition, and prudence. The slaves had thus shown not just their inherent will to freedom but also their capacity to moral agency. In freeing themselves, the mutineers had voided the insurance contract when they repossessed the insured risk, made their future fates their own, and took on the moral responsibility for

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Eduardo, Granville Sharpe took a keen interest in the proceedings and was present during at least part of the trial. Despite all efforts, the case was never brought before a criminal court and allegations of murder were never discussed, once Lord Justice Mansfield had dismissed the viability of such a case (Gearey et al. 73-81).

6 Navigational errors might have been unforeseeable, but lacked prudence.
destroying merchant property, i.e., the value of the financial product of insured ‘risk’ (Levy 42-57).

Clearly, neither party was fueled by any concern over human rights. But the documentation of the deposition statements and the case made by the defendant provided lines of argument which were of tremendous interest to abolitionist parties. In a curious fusion of capitalist self-interest, emerging risk semantics, and liberalist arguments, insurance companies became (self-interested) advocates of the broad range of human agency because the presence of human agency would void the insured case of ‘perils of nature’ or ‘acts of God’ and thus allow them to shirk their liabilities:

Not surprisingly, there was no greater advocate of the scope of human agency than a sued insurance company. Just as, for the same reason, there was no greater advocate for the “acts of God” than the insured owner of a destroyed cargo. (Levy 47)

Thus, in its own strange way, the Creole case serves as an indicator of imminent change in nineteenth-century episteme when debates on slavery and abolition became a forefront in American society’s struggle with altered notions of an open future. As my reading will show, Douglass’s novella reflects the contesting providential and probabilistic discourses of the period in that it appropriates an altered logic of chance and anticipation that is no longer exclusive to the specialist discourse of a legal case over indemnity.

The Heroic Slave brings to the fore the intricate and conflicted link between an emerging semantics of risk and Douglass’s literary aesthetics of African American agency. A closer look at contextual framing, narrative form, and the novella’s use of socioeconomically charged settings reveals how Douglass’s fiction comes to terms with the Janus-faced capitalist phenomenon of uncertainty. Risk has been deeply complicit in the exploitative history of transatlantic slave trade and economy, but it also offers the empowering perspective of an open future, in which the aleatory experience of slavery may be converted to the entrepreneurial hazards of self-ownership.

II. Re-writing History: The Creole and Fiction

Unsurprisingly, antebellum abolitionists showed great interest in the Creole incident and its political and legal repercussions, and many writers and orators came to cite it as a memorable instance of black heroism.7 African American ora-

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7 Tellingly, with the exception of the 1856 novel Wolfsden, abolitionist accounts focus on Madison Washington, while other ringleaders, who were mentioned in the depositions as more violent protagonists, e.g. Doctor Ruffin, Elijah Morris, and especially Ben. Blacksmith Johnstone, are elided (see Captain Ensor’s, second mate Lucius Stevens’, and seaman Blinn Curtis’ depositions in “Message”). Garnet and Douglass most likely read reprints of the depositions and the collectively filed “protest” of captain and crew in the Liberator. All pertinent statements, letters, and depositions were presented in congress on January 20, 1842 (27th Congress, 2nd Session) and printed as part of the proceedings as “Message from the President” Congressional Serial Set Vol. No. 396, Session Vol. No. 2. The Tyler administration had to deliberate on the international
tor Henry Highland Garnet, in his “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” at the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, cited the Creole revolt among other instances to illustrate his demands, which were deemed extreme by the more moderate Garrisonians (cf. Grant 89). Only two years after the Creole incident, Garnet invokes Madison Washington in an effort to sketch historical genealogy of African American active resistance, including Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Amistad’s Joseph Cinque—which documents Madison Washington’s presence as a highly charged figure in antebellum abolitionist debate.8

In 1853, after mentioning the figure of Madison Washington in various speeches, Frederick Douglass published his most comprehensive engagement with the Creole incident as a fictional one—his novella The Heroic Slave. It appears as a contribution to the first volume of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, edited by Julia Griffiths. Autographs for Freedom, conceptualized as a gift book and abolitionist fundraiser, was a compilation of various materials from prominent abolitionists and sympathizers. Douglass’s text, which he also serialized in Frederick Douglass’ Paper the same year, was the antepenultimate entry in a thirty-nine piece collection of addresses, poems, letters, essays, and fictional pieces by abolitionist figureheads like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Horace Greeley.9 All contributions ended with a facsimile print of the authors’ autographs, symbolically connecting the act of underwriting (in the financial sense) to adding a votum to the common cause of “freedom.”10 In the semantically charged nexus which connects nineteenth-century literature to its emerging economic context of security and risk-taking, the act of signing a name went beyond the evident act of signing a petition and echoed early insurance practice. Significantly, Lloyd’s underwriters were known, somewhat poetically, as “Names.” When Douglass, who had been legally a free man since the “purchase” of his freedom from Thomas Auld in 1846, signs his text, he signals a close relationship between claiming proprietary rights to a text—he owns it morally, creatively, and economically—and the empowerment of owning one’s own future and risk.

As Douglass’s Heroic Slave shows, the significance of the Creole case and its adaptations for an understanding of antebellum thinking lies in the way in which the probabilistic logic of an insurance case is not restricted to a specialist discourse, but is indicative of a process of reconsideration in a public debate. Much more than his fellow writers, Douglass uses the incident and his knowledge of diplomatic implications of the case, which ended in the U.K. paying a reparation of $110,330 through the Anglo-American Claims Commission in 1853 (Budney 198-200).

8 In similar, less radical endeavors, William Wells Browns included a chapter on Madison Washington in his history The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (1863) and in his post-emancipation account “Slave Revolt at Sea” (1867). Lydia Maria Child writes on “Madison Washington” in 1865 in her Freedmen’s Book, and Pauline Hopkins in “A Dash for Liberty” (1901). All anthologized in Levine et al. 141-87.

9 Other contributors include William Jay, William H. Seward, Henry Ward Beecher, Lindley Murray Moore, who met Madison Washington personally, and Gerrit Smith, who supported Douglass financially and who is mentioned in Douglass’s novella.

10 On the connection of writing and underwriting, literature and contractual law, see Eric Wertheimer’s Underwriting: The Poetics of Insurance in America, 1722-1872.
The case to reach beyond the revolt itself. Despite its suggestive title, the novella is discontent with restoring the heroism of a singular figure on which an African American genealogy of individuation and emancipation may rest. It negotiates human agency and the capacity to assert one’s right to own one’s future.

The question of divine providence versus human agency and individual responsibility for an open and uncertain future is key in the abolitionist debate. Many slave narratives of the time share the generic biographical elements of teleological plot development (i.e., ending in the protagonist’s freedom, leaving him or her to tell the story) and providential outlook, within which chance was merely shorthand for human ignorance in the face of inscrutable divine plans. Douglass, who through the 1840s and 50s struggles with his indebtedness to the Christian heritage of Garrisonian abolitionism, uses providential vocabulary early on but becomes more and more clear in his rejection of a preordained paradigm in favor of human responsibility and individual agency towards an open future. The struggle to come to terms with these conflicting worldviews strongly manifests itself in The Heroic Slave.

The novella insists on individual decision-making. It foregrounds the performative act of choosing freedom and taking possession of one’s fate as the foundation to seizing self-ownership. The Heroic Slave uses Madison Washington’s soliloquy in the woods to dramatize a turning point in his life; it thus emphasizes not the moment when he actually escapes but the moment when he establishes volition and takes his future into his own hands (see part I). Analogous to Benjamin’s line of reasoning in McCargo v. New Orleans Insurance Company, Douglass’s fiction builds on a similar exegesis of human agency that insists on excluding force majeure or “acts of God” as proximate causation. The novella strives to establish similar categories for its black protagonist: For Washington, freedom does not happen as a fortuitous event in the wake of a successful mutiny but is brought about by his inherent capability for moral reasoning and a right to self-ownership, as he demonstrates foresight, volition, and prudence.

My reading emphasizes the aspects of risk, agency, and ownership that emerge from the legal hermeneutics of the insurance case and its socioeconomic context and sheds light on the novella as a text which uses sentimental generic conventions and stock elements as fictional vocabulary while decidedly refuting their ideological coding. The deep ambiguity of the text, which is divided between its

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11 For a comprehensive account of abolitionist positions on violence and of the intricacies of the Douglass-Garrisonian split and their reflection in The Heroic Slave, see Cynthia Hamilton’s “Models of Agency.” For a discussion of the significance of the American Revolution, see Krista Walter’s “Trappings of Nationalism.”

12 A few years later, Douglass radically rejects the notion of providence in an exchange of letters with Maine abolitionist and “Christian General” Oliver Otis Howard in July 1870. Howard addresses the question of Providence, seeking to pit his own convictions against what he perceives to be Douglass’s secular skepticism. (While the letter is briefly cited in John A. Carpenter’s 1964 biography of Howard, the letter remains unpublished, but can be accessed in an aide-de-camp copy ledger Howard kept of his outgoing letters, archived as part of the Oliver Otis Howard Papers, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives at the Bowdoin College Library, to which I am indebted here.)
African American agenda and the attempt to reach a white readership, does not resolve into an appeal to humanity and sympathy for a charitable granting of human brotherhood, as the title, the strange instrument of the “white” perspective, and the use of sentimental rhetoric would make us believe. The carefully composed four-part novella uses intricate narrative and aesthetic strategies of fragmentation, incompleteness, and interruption to transform the material of a historical incident into a fictional declaration of African American agency in a contingent world.

While I offer a closer, comprehensive reading elsewhere, I here focus selectively on aspects which highlight the intense process of negotiating contemporary notions of futurity and probability in ways that I find exemplary. Reading Douglass’s novella through the lens of the *Creole* case foregrounds how the fictional exploration casts agency versus fortuitousness, human foresight and prudent decision-making versus ‘perils’ and ‘acts of God.’ *The Heroic Slave* thus insists that the series of hardships and strife which shape slave narratives in form and content must not be masked as *force majeure* but must be exposed as the social and historical consequences of a slave economy, which ultimately stacks the odds so harshly against the slave’s claims to humanity and freedom.

III. “Possibles and Probabilities”:
*The Heroic Slave’s Aesthetic of Assuming Risk*

*The Heroic Slave* is presented to us as a story of unwritten and untold history, an attempt to bring to light events and the heroic character of a person, who, while as worthy as Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, or George Washington, has left mere traces in the chattel records of Virginia. Due to the inequality and forgetfulness of racist historiography, the account of Madison Washington’s life may grant only “glimpses” and “transient incidents” that leave the rest “enveloped in darkness” (*HS* 4). Its four parts relate events which span almost seven years between 1835 and early 1842, which lead up to the Creole mutiny and closes in its immediate wake.

Part I, set in 1835 Virginia, introduces us to Madison Washington, then still a slave in Virginia. Framed by the commentary of an authorial narrator, the first chapter describes the first encounter of a nameless white protagonist, later identified as an Ohio farm owner named Listwell. Listwell overhears Washington’s soliloquy in the woods, in which the slave resolves to take his chances and seize his liberty, and, deeply impressed, vows to join the abolitionist cause. Part II recommences five years later, in the winter of 1840 on Listwell’s farm in Ohio, where runaway slave Madison Washington happens to seek refuge. After Listwell reveals their previous, one-sided acquaintance, Washington tells the story of his escape.

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13 As part of my larger book project *The Edge of Reason: Fiction, Risk, and Probability in American Antebellum Narratives*, I discuss aspects like the novella’s narratology, use of genre conventions, and intertextuality (such as the double-coding Douglass introduces through the epigraphs) in more detail.
and survival. The Listwells offer shelter and aid his escape, for which Washington thanks them in a letter from Canada, asserting his physical freedom (26). In Part III, set in 1841, Listwell again travels through Virginia. Chancing upon a group of slave-traders in a run-down tavern, he reencounters Washington as part of a chain gang driven to Richmond for sale. Unable to purchase Washington, who had been recaptured in an attempt to free his wife, Listwell follows to Richmond and slips the captive a set of files before the group embarks for New Orleans on a slaver, the Creole. In Part IV, a few months later in a “Marine Coffee-house at Richmond” (42), a group of sailors discuss the Creole incident, its potential causes and consequences. A heated debate between a local sailor, Jack Williams, and the Creole’s first mate, Tom Grant, ensues.\(^\text{14}\) Grant is grudgingly but honestly impressed by the bravery and skill of the mutineers, and by Washington’s commanding intelligence in particular, and professes his distinct conviction that the institution of slavery is a disgrace to Virginia and to patriotic republican sensitivities (45). The novella ends with Grant’s account in direct speech instead of returning, as might be expected, to a frame of final authorial commentary.

As this brief outline shows, The Heroic Slave’s plotline is riddled with temporal elisions between the events depicted, which the reader can fill only partially through information mediated in various characters’ retrospective storytelling. The novella’s mere “glimpses” never pretends to salvage more than “transient incidents” from the obscurity of “chattel records,” cargo manifests, hearsay, and the fringes of legal and administrative documents (HS 4). The novella thus denies the reader the experience of stringency provided by the teleology of historical romance or the slave narrative’s logic of providentialism.\(^\text{15}\) Douglass cultivates a novel aesthetic of incompleteness. As William Andrews puts it, “[h]e made the lack of knowledge about Washington […] the gambit of his text” (29).

The novella’s narrative form, even more than its content, draws our attention to the act of reconstruction and to what remains irretrievable from the opaqueness of what we cannot know. Just as Douglass collects his details from reports, second-hand narration, and published depositions, the reader pieces together a story from sources in the novella’s four parts. Devotion to historical truth is demonstrated not through an empirical veracity of accumulating all the facts but through the way in which an incongruous form draws attention to the novella’s fictionality. The Heroic Slave makes a case for African American historical agency through fictional form. It interweaves moments of knowing and not-knowing and keeps reminding us of how information is mediated, biased, and incomplete. Clearly, the novella cites sentimental conventions and appeals to the romantic sensitivities of an anticipated readership, and both the title and the publication context seem

\(^\text{14}\) The name historically documented for the actual first mate is Zephaniah C. Gifford, but Levine et al. suggest the character may be modeled after William Merritt, who had taken the position of an overseer in exchange for free passage, and whose deposition Douglass would have read (xxx). W. W. Brown’s “Madison Washington” (1863) gives “Merritt” for the first and “Gifford” for second mate.

\(^\text{15}\) See Lee 106-07 for a reflection on providential design and antebellum slave narratives. In many instances, providentialism also becomes a cover for uncertainty and erratic experience rather than an actual trajectory of predestination.
to confirm such expectations. But it also uses visible artifice and self-consciously designed strategies of conveyance and mediation, which emphatically address the reader’s rational faculties, such as scenic presentations, eyewitness reports, and statements that provide information in marked retrospection. *The Heroic Slave* builds a case and presents it for the reader to judge. It demonstrates that truthful storytelling, which strives to include what has been marginalized and elided, must necessarily rely on cultural techniques of conjecture. Such storytelling may procure operational closure, but its newly filled-in trajectories never obscure to the reader their speculative character and, hence, the bifurcations of their own contingency.

Thus, its alignment with sentimental narrative traditions, plot development, and narrative progression are structured by a series of twists and turns, unobserved listeners, surprising disclosures, and unlikely reencounters. But unlike abolitionist texts that aim, above all, at affecting the reader and inciting sympathy, *The Heroic Slave* creates friction and narrative incongruities that disturb the pleasurable immediacy of vicarious excitement and education of sentiment. The narratological layout and framing seem strangely ill-suited to tell the tale of the slave’s heroic escape and garner support for the abolitionist cause: the heterodiegetic third-person narrator relates the story as a historical tale, introduces characters, describes settings, and frames it with authorial commentary. It voices keen criticism of the institution of slavery and its impact on republican society (at the beginning of parts I, III, and IV), and yet it remains silent at the novella’s end and leaves the last words to character dialogue instead of providing closure and guiding commentary. Moreover, Parts I through III partially use Listwell as a focalizer: He becomes the reader’s point of entry to the story when his perspective as a hidden listener and onlooker shapes our acquaintance with Washington during his soliloquy in the woods. But Listwell’s unlikely chance encounters end in Part III and leave the actual revolt, which the reader might have waited for as climactic action and key historical moment, to a personal recollection in a scenic exchange between sailors. The text provides us with longer sections of Washington’s speech and storytelling directed at other characters and thus gives a sense of Washington’s voice, but it elides “the thoughts and feelings, the hopes and fears, the plans and purposes, that revolved in the mind of Madison” (*HS* 25). The absence of insight into Washington’s character, his inner life and view, as well as his fate after the mutiny creates a surprising lacuna at the center of the text.

Instead, we are constantly reminded of the process of narrative mediation and sources of information, as we are forced to rely on hearsay and perspectivated storytelling. We do not witness events in narrative ‘real-time,’ but hear characters’ retrospective accounts and ‘depositions’—all obviously shaped by their communicational situations. The Listwells prompt Madison to tell the story of his escape, and the reader is reminded by the insistent questioning that their guest cannot well refuse his benefactors, who declare themselves “deeply interested in everything which can throw light on the hardships of persons escaping from slavery” (18). They request a story that meets their generic expectation of sensational and exciting “incidents,” to which Madison duly responds, but, anticipating their expectations, warns against potential “disappointment” (18-19).
Listwell’s reencounter with Washington at the tavern switches between third-person narration of his adventure, scenic presentation, and the narrator’s reiterating Listwell’s retrospective testimony (31, 33)—which also becomes a tool of readerly di-identification with the character.\(^{16}\) When Listwell hides his identity as an abolitionist, he tells the enchained Washington he cannot help: “Put your trust in God, and bear your sad lot with the manly fortitude which becomes a man” (38). Enacting a bitter echo of sentimental Uncle Tom discourse, Listwell remains inert and all too content to shift responsibility to a providential agency, while his own fear of the tavern-dwellers, and his failure to stand up “without compromise and without concealment” clearly lack the Christian “manliness” (33) he recommended to Madison Washington (only later, when rescue has become improbable upon Washington’s boarding the slaver, does he provide him with files). Scathingly, the narrator lets us know that sentiment and empathy affect Listwell so that, at the tavern, with Madison in chains, he indeed could not “relish his breakfast” but only “manage a cup of coffee” (38, 39). In that light, Listwell’s consideration of his and Madison’s interaction as “destiny” appears apologetic because the “mysterious web of circumstances which enfolded [Madison]” (39) is all but a sentimental euphemism for the victimizing forces of slavery. Through interrupting identificatory patterns with the white protagonist, the novella exposes the brutal arbitrariness of the slave economy, in which the aleatory experience of unfathomable causation and the denial of self-ownership of one’s life, risk, and future reduces existence to a series of “freaks and fancies” (20).

Thus, strangely for a novella concerned with African American agency, the depiction of the black heroic figure seems to be filtered through others, subject to their selective perception, representation, and interpretation. Like a court case, the novella lets the reader piece together events, which are in large portions recounted, staged in dialogue, filtered through the focalization of a character or explicitly reconstructed based on hearsay, leaving the reader with a narrative trajectory based on various levels of conjecture: “As a type, everything about ‘The Heroic Slave’ is known, but as an individual, nothing can be said of him, for the individual is invisible, lost due to indifference, in the mystery of unrecorded history” (Hamilton 127).

\(^{16}\) Much scholarship focuses on Douglass’s use of generic traditions and on Listwell’s function in the novella, but may, as I would claim, underrate the irony and the implied criticism that stems from Douglass’s agenda to establish agency and entitlement to ownership of one’s future. Paul C. Jones’ “Copying What the Master Had Written” reads the text mainly against the template of the popular genre of the plantation novel; Krista Walter criticizes Douglass’s use of intertextual references to republican revolutionary discourse as undermining his political agenda; and Richard Yarborough finds the entire novella deeply flawed due to its misdirected strategies of appealing to a white readership, wondering “whether the tools of the master can ever be used to achieve the complete liberation of the slave” (183). Robert B. Stepto praises the craft of the novel, yet insists on Listwell’s position at the center of the novella. He argues that Listwell functions as the good abolitionist, a facilitator and proliferator of Washington’s story who forms a “true bond” across racial boundaries (“Storytelling” 116-117). Levine similarly emphasizes the importance of Listwell and reads him as an allegorical encoding of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who demonstrates the power of sentiment (see “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” 71-93).
What we do know of is Washington’s ability to seize the opportunity to free himself in spirit from the constraints of a repressively deterministic paradigm and to act in the dangerous venture towards appropriating his own future. Time and again the narrative foregrounds processes of deliberation, anticipatory foresight, and decision-making based on probabilities: Washington weighs consequences and calculates probable chance (HS 6). He claims “necessities” (18) and assesses dangers and threats to his safety under duress (19). He foresees possibilities of “freak or fancy” (20), acts “wisely” (21) and circumvents “anticipated danger” (203). In the legalistic terminology of the Creole case, Washington’s will to freedom and his capability to act on it are thus shown as “inherent vice.” To ignore his volition and agency as proximate cause for his freedom would mean to stay within the logic of chattel slavery with which the plaintiff in McCargo v. New Orleans Insurance Company had argued that it was effectively the officials in Nassau that had freed the slaves: For, as Levy puts it, “to be a slave was to have someone else own the risk on your life, to be free was to own that personal risk yourself” (57).

Ultimately, the novella uses strategies of conveyance and mediation, which question the teleology of Christian providence and interrupt the sentimental in its affective illusion of immediacy. Generic elements are exposed as ideologically charged and the narrative, through its contradictory and hybrid composition, builds on a consciously rational appeal instead. The reader is challenged with the task and the responsibility of piecing together information and interpreting incomplete accounts of events. Douglass consciously explores the potential of fiction to engage with the generic conventions and identificatory patterns found in traditional abolitionist genres like the slave narrative in order to “expose and exorcise the spirit of liberal racism” (Hamilton 124). Only if the reader is willing to push beyond the well-meaning projection of a type and is ready to read between the lines of accounts, tales, dialogues, and depositions can he realize an agency beyond the racist prejudice of “ethnographic thinking” (Douglass in Hamilton 127, orig. citation unconfirmed).

IV. Rural Taverns & Marine Coffee-Houses: Loafers, Gamblers, Sailors, and Socioeconomic Spaces

In a counterpart to the tavern scene in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin,17 Douglass situates Part III of The Heroic Slave in an old public tavern, “[j]ust upon the edge of the great road from Petersburg, Virginia, to Richmond” (HS 27). Stepto discusses the parallel as part of a common predilection for symbolically charged settings (“Sharing” 147), and clearly, the location marks the tavern’s significance as way station in a slave-trading geography en route of the sea-bound passage from Richmond to New Orleans.

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a tavern functions as a site for social allegory, racist topography, and ideological conflict. Chapter XI, “In which Property gets into

17 Serial publication in the National Era started in June 1851 and the tavern scene (Chapter XI) was published on August 14, 1851. See https://nationalera.wordpress.com/textual-transcriptions/.
an improper state of mind,” begins with a traveller arriving at a Kentucky vil-

gage bar-room, where “our traveller” as focalizer observes the picturesque local

color: “[G]ame-bags, hunting dogs, and little negroes, all rolled together in the

corners” (Stowe 93) painting a cozy, casually racist picture of “the jollities of a

Kentucky tavern” (94). The scene describes rural antics to grant the reader comic

relief between a chapter in which Tom is taken away in fetters (Chapter X) and

one which focuses on the gruesomeness of slave-trading practices (Chapter XII).

But the atmosphere shifts as we realize the identity of the traveler: what may have

appeared a harmless “set of loafers” to a white viewer presents a deadly danger to

the runaway slave in disguise. Through a generic sentimental surprise twist, as a

passing neighbor recognizes George, Eliza’s husband, in the travelling “Spanish”

gentleman, the scenario becomes charged with changed significance. The back-

room of the tavern becomes the site of a confrontation of worldviews in which

George scathingly mocks Mr. Wilson’s suggestion that he meekly submit to divine

providence and instead proclaims he will tip the odds of the risk he runs in his

favor through the use of a set of pistols if need be (99-100).

Douglass in turn paints the social space of the tavern with biting satire as an al-

legory of Virginia society. His “famous public tavern” had been “quite notorious

in its better days,” and has, “like everything else peculiar to Virginia, lost much of

its ancient consequence and splendor; yet it keeps up some appearance of gaiety

and high life” (HS 27). Significantly, it had once been “the grand resort for most of

the leading gamblers, horse-racers, cock-fighters, and slave traders” (HS 27) and

now provides a meeting point for an assortment of local “loafers.” Similar to

Stowe, Douglass uses a rural variant of the “loafer” as a symbol of the downfall

and moral decrepitude of the state of Virginia brought about by its reliance on the

slave economy.18 For the loafers live off “the science of scraping acquaintance to

perfection […]. Money they seldom have; yet they always have capital most reli-

able,” namely the cultural capital of information (HS 28).

When Listwell stops at the tavern, the novella renders his encounter with one

of the loafers scenically, a dramatic element that appears on the page like dia-

logue written for the stage. The narrator suspends all mediating commentary to

let the reader be eye- and ear-witness to Wilkes’s strategy, which is to compete

with other locals for the attention and trust of newcomers and to excel at the

game of wheedling information and drinks out of visitors to the local tavern. The

exchange foregrounds the connection between the loafer’s livelihood and the

Virginian slave economy, which is brought into close proximity with gambling,

betting, and speculation. Wilkes speculates whether Listwell might be a slave-

trader—a profession which he praises as exemplary for its economic savvy and as

18 Arac gives Richard Henry Dana’s mention of “the newly-invented Yankee word of loafer” in Two Years Before the Mast (1840) as earliest OED citation (81), H.L. Mencken cites “The Late Ben Smith, Loafer” in The Knickerbocker VI in 1835 (156). The term gained currency first as an urban phenomenon when the panic and ensuing unemployment of 1837 forced men into idleness and became a visible element of street life and evokes the volatile labor market of mid-nineteenth century bust and boom economy, before it transitions into other semantic fields. In what seems like a reference to Dana, Douglass uses nautical terms to denote “loafers” as “hangers on, […] holders on to the slack, in every-body’s mess, and in no-body’s watch.” (HS 28)
a role model for the Virginian economy in general: “it stands to reason that it’s a money making business; for almost all other business in Virginia is dropped to engage in this” (HS 30). As Jackson Lears has pointed out, southern society of the antebellum period saw a shift in attitude towards valuing leisure that becomes apparent in the risk culture of gambling: “By the 1820s, Southern gambling was less a signifier of superior status than of cross-class male resistance to the encroachments of evangelical rationality—in particular the bourgeois reverence for disciplined labor [...] which constantly scandalized Northern moralists” (113-14). Along these lines, The Heroic Slave exposes the idealization of leisure and betting as a product of the slave economy, which produces not just gentleman gamblers and speculators in slave labor but also lower-class loafers and conmen. As the tavern scene suggests, living off the labor of others as a gentlemanly ideal promotes an ideology of “something for nothing,” which proves detrimental to southern society in general. The narrator’s position anticipates what Grant later states in the coffeehouse scene, namely that the institution of slavery is “a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia” (45) according to republican self-understanding. As the loafers, who make a questionable living off the bartering of gossip (28) and betting (32), and the dilapidated tavern serve to demonstrate, slave trade may promise high profits to few but turns out to be socio-economically imprudent in the long run.

The novella contrasts the rational-moral agency of its African American protagonist with a decadent, morally and materially decrepit southern culture that corrupts an entire society. Washington shows himself an agent capable of running his own risk and of seizing responsibility for the enterprise of his own future, which makes him well-suited to a burgeoning capitalist market economy. Douglass shuns the sentimental and racist binarism of the allegedly emotional African whose goodness, simplicity, “tropical warmth and spontaneous emotionalism” puts him at a disadvantage against the “cold and calculating Anglo-Saxon” race, as Stowe put it in A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (452). The novella emphasizes the calculating, anticipating, rational faculties of the black protagonist against the decadent “culture of chance” of gambling, betting, and speculating in slave trade, which turns slaves into passive subjects of a fluctuating market and uncertainty. As Lee points out, slave narratives emphasize the precarious status and the fundamentally aleatory experience of slavery. Slaves pay the price for their masters’ misfortunes, “unexpected deaths, accidents, mood swings, and—with telling repetition—debts incurred from horseracing, poker, dice, and stock speculation” (Lee 109). In that sense, the unlikely twists and turns of The Heroic Slave’s plot, which include impossible chance encounters and multiple narrow escapes, become an expression of the “freaks of fortune” (Levy). The slave economy in a rising capitalist market has turned human lives into the most profitable commodity, dis-owned human subjects of the profits of their own labor and future, and ultimately stacked the odds heavily against the African American subject.

Against these steep odds, Washington makes his escape in a daring revolt aboard the brig Creole before his captors have a chance to sell him into the plantation labor of the Deep South. And yet, The Heroic Slave does not end with this climactic struggle and its resolution, but stages its final scene as a verbal exchange between sailors in a coffee house, who recount and discuss the mutiny after the
Critics have commented on the surprising choice of a “marine coffee house” rather than a seadog’s tavern. (Stepto argues that Douglass might not have wanted to taint such a centerpiece of ideological discussion with the suggestion of a lack of temperance [“Sharing” 148].) But, considering Douglass’s use of and sensitivity to the expressive force of semantically and symbolically charged spaces, the choice of setting seems hardly circumstantial.

Ever since the first maritime insurance market was founded in 1688 and named after Lloyd’s Coffee House in London, marine coffeehouses have been closely tied to the rise of insurance business and its probabilistic culture. In setting, Part IV counters the Virginia Tavern with a diametrically opposed socioeconomic tradition, as marine insurance signals a “culture of control” and its probabilistic semantics of risk and containment which ran contrary to the gratuitous gamble of “something for nothing.” Early nineteenth-century coffeehouses existed in cities like New York and Philadelphia; the Boston “Exchange Coffeehouse” opened in 1808, and New Orleans’ “Exchange Alley” became an important venue located as a nodal point to incoming traffic from the harbor, seats of insurance companies, the cities’ market place, and its slave pens (Levy 34). In the absence of systematic actuarial knowledge, they were important meeting places for merchants and insurers, and sites of negotiation and communication. Most importantly, they offered exchange of information, which merchants would seek to be able to underwrite as prudently as possible, hedge their bets, and calculate their premiums based on their probable estimate of loss.

Douglass’s coffeehouse is set in the Upper South and populated with “a company of ocean birds” (HS 42), whose rough jargon and spinning of yarn marks them as part of a maritime sphere, a mobile culture of vivid exchange much different from the stagnant drinking and brawling at the tavern. Despite the former sailors, idlers, and hangers-on that might frequent it, the setting signals the progressiveness of maritime trade, as opposed to the Virginia loafers and slave-traders, who are symbolically connected to decrepitude and the past.

As a recognizable institution to the contemporaneous reader, the marine coffeehouse thus signals a space charged with probabilistic semantics of maritime risk-assessment and individual entrepreneurship. Its difference from the tavern lies in the setting’s social compilation and prevailing logic, as becomes evident in the presentation of Grant’s character in dialogue with his pro-slavery counterpart. Grant relates his experience of the mutiny as a protagonist and eyewitness to testify against any suspicion of negligence, imprudence, or cowardice, let alone qualms of humanitarian conscience (HS 45-46). He also expresses his unwilling admiration of Madison Washington’s bravery, intelligence, and skill (echoing the historical depositions by Merritt and others). In doing so, Grant involuntarily discloses a moment of cognitive dissonance, as he states his surprise at the undeniable evidence of the observed, which contradicts all his previous experiences, convictions, and frames of reference. Centrally, Grant’s “deposition” claims prudence, competence, and responsible actions on behalf of the crew—which would suggest that the mutiny was a casus fortuitous, a peril that could not have been anticipated. But, evolving in dialogue, the narrative effectively dissects the mechanisms behind assumptions of an ‘improbable event.’ To the other sailors at the
tavern, the slave uprising appears like a “mysterious disturbance of nature,” and, as Williams puts it, entirely “unaccountable,” if not “carelessness or cowardice” (HS 46) were involved.

But, as Grant’s “deposition” shows, the moment of surprise is indeed caused by a blind spot of racist stereotyping and ignorance, which causes a lack of foresight and error of judgment of the slaves’ capabilities. As he tells the story in retrospect, Grant reluctantly becomes aware of his appreciation for the active courage and rationally calculated decisiveness displayed by Madison. By recounting the events, Grant comes to realize the incongruity of his habitual beliefs on the one hand and his rational and heart-felt convictions of experience. In a moment of recognition that highlights the virtue of second-order observation, which Grant develops during his retrospective account, he also locates the source of this cognitive dissonance:

I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference in action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior. (HS 50-51)

While Grant had misjudged his counterpart, Washington himself shows cunning, foresight, and the ability to anticipate his adversary’s probable next move and thus turns the situation to his advantage. The novella, which seems to withhold all commentary and judgment by choosing a scenic presentation, thus exposes “grave faults” before the court of its readers, the responsibility for which lies not so much in the mistaken individual but in the systemic, selective blindness of a slave-keeping society. Indirectly, by fleshing out the events suggested by the historical crew’s depositions, The Heroic Slave presents the racist expectations of the white crew as incapacitating and relocates it as a secondary proximate cause of the successful mutiny, next to the mutineers’ seizing of opportunity.

The marine coffeehouse as a site of rational economy also becomes the site of Grant’s conversion, which is, in contrast to Listwell’s, not sentimental but based on rational conviction and allows him to take an open stance among the racist group of Southerners. It represents by no means a utopian space, as the racist commentary embedded in the dialogues makes abundantly clear, but it becomes a space of hope for recognition of African American agency, precisely because of its logic of rational assessment. To Douglass, Grant is much closer to the ideal abolitionist than Listwell: he undergoes a gradual conversion, which is not based primarily on sentiment and sympathy for the suffering victim but on an empathetic assessment of individual action. This becomes clear when he professes his distinct conviction that the institution of slavery is a disgrace to Virginia and an offense to patriotic republican sensitivities (HS 45).

19 Washington demonstrates this ability as he apprehends the mate’s plan to intentionally mis-navigate the brig: “I know what you are up to” (HS 49).

20 The parallels to Captain Delano’s condition in Melville’s novella of slave-mutiny, the 1855 Benito Cereno, are apparent. See Helen Lock’s comparison or Maggie Sale’s Slumbering Volcano.
Ultimately, Grant owns his error by admitting to his surprise and his misjudgment of Washington’s capabilities. He addresses slavery not just as morally wrong, but as imprudent, debilitating, and incapacitating. The scenic exchange of part IV avoids too overt didacticism but resolves in Grant’s monologue. It encourages the reader, who initially only overheard with Listwell, to again “see” for himself; it requires the reader to reevaluate the bits and pieces brought before him and question habitual beliefs. In reading a literary text as hybridly pieced together as Douglass’s narrative case, the reader experiences a crucial function of literature, to which non-fictional forms do not have access: The novella allows the reader to assess the plausibility of a model of thought, to pit various views against each other, and to become a self-aware second order observer who may at least partially locate blind spots of assumptions which are embedded in his or her episteme. In the motion of realizing the incompleteness of perception, and of correcting at least partially and pragmatically the discrepancies of perceived reality and lived experience, Grant is indeed granted the last word in Douglass’s novella. Ultimately, Douglass thus negotiates his conflicted attitude towards risk and capitalism’s emerging probabilistic economy through the self-reflexive, reader-activating function of fiction. The dialectics of setting remind the reader of the deep contingency at the heart of the novella: The Heroic Slave foregrounds problematic historical ties of transatlantic trade, slave economy, and risk, but also the immense promise and potential which the logic of an open future holds for African American agency. As the novella presents its narrative as an unresolved historical case, fiction gives room for reflection on the strange convergence through which an antebellum semantics of risk connects the insurance rhetoric of a slave economy and the abolitionist struggle for African American freedom.

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