At the start of the 1850s, as African American writing begins to blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, two texts appeared which attempted to novelize the African American narrative voice. William Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel* and Frederick Douglass’s novella “The Heroic Slave” were both published in the same year (1853) and both addressed issues of narrative voice—but in different ways. Brown’s labyrinthine textual strategies leant heavily on a number of mid-nineteenth century discourses—most notably, the domestic ideology that was ascendant at the time—producing a polyphony of narratives, many of which grow out of the “cult of domesticity.” Douglass, however, charts a different course. The protagonist of his text, Madison Washington, is constituted—in Lacanian terms—as a speaking being, and the narrative drive of the novella (in direct opposition to that of the slave narrative tradition) is authoritative, rather than authentic. “The Heroic Slave” can be described as an invocatory narrative—one that establishes narrative authority by creating a central narrative voice to which we, as readers (and listeners), must attend.

“The Heroic Slave” ostensibly breaks with the domestic imperative, basing its argument, as more than one commentator has noted, on a “masculinist logic” (Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano* 42). However, Douglass’s and Brown’s texts are not conceptually divergent. Douglass’s novella does not ultimately eschew domestic values. The narrative strength of his text, which he invests symbolically in the physical strength of his narrator, does not lead African American fiction into a new aesthetic, but rather creates an aesthetic that brings African American subject closer to nineteenth-century America’s conceptual center—the cult of domesticity.

**Terms for Order**

Voice, for Jacques Lacan, is an “object a”—a primordial object that creates desire (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 242). It has the power to evoke unity, wholeness and symbiosis, while its breakdown (or lack) produces their antithesis—that is, the panic engendered by discontinuous
subjectivity. It is through the voice that the subject begins to structure itself as a desiring being, and through the “invocatory drive” (of the ear and hearing), in connection with the “scopic drive” (of the eye and the gaze), that desire continues to function in emerging subjectivities. In these terms, it may be productive to apply Lacan’s framing of the desiring individual to the historical desire that helped produce African American fiction.

Houston A. Baker, Jr., once claimed that the “object of black America’s quest has always been the same—a meaningful set of what Kenneth Burke calls ‘terms for order.’” He continued, “The search for coherent arrangements of objects and events implies, at one level, the disruption of a prior unity, no matter how strained or tenuous. On a more abstract plane, it suggests a process existing on the far side of chaos” (1). Just as the invocatory drive aims to take the subject from the panic of discontinuous subjectivity, the African American subject “quests” for “coherence” and “unity”—a remedy for “chaos.” Baker asks, “As slaves in perpetuity, as men and women deemed lower than animals, where could the first black Americans turn? What terms for order were available to them as they looked upon chaos?” (3). We may ask a similar question about the first African American writers of fiction, who attempt to create a narrative voice within a symbolic system that images them as silent objects.

In broad terms, there were two fictive models which the first generation of African Americans could have followed in creating their own fiction. The most obvious, of course, was domestic fiction. The producers of white domestic fiction—all too famously derided by Nathaniel Hawthorne as a “mob of scribbling women”—dominated the literary marketplace in the middle of the nineteenth century. The domestic ideology, which essentially linked their novels, was not an ideology in the narrow sense, but rather a fluid cultural force based around the mythical ideal of home. In contrast to this domestic ideology, more marginal “masculinist” novelists were trying to give another expression to nationality in the nineteenth-century United States. This counterbalance, which charts its course from the foundational rhetoric of the revolutionary fathers, seems to be typified by the masculine domain of nation-building and the cult of the frontier man. R.W.B. Lewis famously describes the exclusively male circle of writers traditionally associated with the American Renaissance as the first of an “Adamic” tradition (5). “The American Adam,” he writes, like “Huck Finn, is able to light out for the territories” turning his back on the prevalent domesticity of the nineteenth century while building an American literary tradition writ large across the “new” west (100).

Given this (imagined) dichotomy between the domestic sphere of women and the public/masculine sphere of empire, the first generation of African American novelists found themselves struggling to find an appropriate genre from which to write. The genre of domestic fiction, of course, presented almost irresolvable
political difficulties for minority writers. It was also, though commercially successful, seen as capable of indirect influence, rather than direct force (Romero 124). The “Adamic” tradition was too distant from the social reality of antebellum American race relations, removing, as it did, the hero from society and “putting him where he belonged—in space,” space here figured as “the unbounded, the area of total possibility” (Lewis 91). In any event, the outstanding success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel so obviously “domestic and of the family” (Sand 3), seemed to virtually take the choice of genre away from black abolitionist writers.

It is important here to acknowledge the enormous difficulties that this choice (or non-choice) presents for the nascent African American novel. To return to the language of Houston Baker’s rhetorical question, what “terms for order” could domestic fiction provide for an African American novelist staring into the void of writing? In the domestic model, a stable and nurturing (national) family represents “prior unity,” the contrapositive of “chaos” (Baker 1). Historically speaking, of course, antebellum slaves could not gaze back to the same “stable” family condition championed by domestic fiction. Thus, the first black American novelists, who came to write from within the rubric of the pro-abolition domestic fictions of the 1840s and 50s, begin from a decentered position. The pre-existing domestic genre relies on “terms for order” that amount to the tenets of a white, and at times alien, domestic ideology.

It is certainly no coincidence that African American novel-writing begins with William Wells Brown’s long preambulatory lament on the degraded state of the black family. “The marriage relation, the oldest and most sacred institution given to man by his Creator,” charges Brown, “is unknown and unrecognized in the slave laws of the United States” (59). The point was not new. Antislavery rhetoric had consistently portrayed slavery as an agent that fractured the traditional familial bonds of African Americans, rendering them subject to cruel separations, suppressed ancestries, and enforced illegitimacy. As Douglass himself put it, “slavery made my brothers and sisters strangers to me; it converted the mother that bore me into a myth; it shrouded my father in mystery and left me without an intelligible beginning in the world” (*Life and Writings* 224-5). Again and again, slavery is presented as a mystifying agent that would obscure or confound the achievement of familial stability. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass describes the central purpose of slavery as the removal “from the mind and the heart of the slave, all just ideas of the sacredness of the family, as an institution” (29). The powerful polemical trope of opposing the “sacredness of the family” with the slave system’s concerted effort to profane that institution proved to be one of abolitionism’s most consistently resonant motifs, culminating in the blistering rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. 
Madison Washington in Opposition to Uncle Tom

The most typical way to begin discussion of “The Heroic Slave” is probably to follow Robert Stepto in highlighting the ways in which Madison Washington, as a masculinist hero, enables Douglass to express his ideological independence from the model of black hero as feminized domestic sufferer, which had been so effectively perpetuated by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Tom, as Elizabeth Ammons has famously argued, is conceptually, thematically, and symbolically a “female” character. “Tom’s passivity, his piety, his gentleness, his inexhaustible generosity of spirit, his nonviolence, his commitment to self-sacrifice,” she writes, make him the “ultimate heroine of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (158). Tom’s “womanliness,” his commitment to both white and black families, and his self-denying guardianship of others, according to this often rehearsed argument, enable him to inhabit and personify Stowe’s conceptual mother/Christ figure. It is vital, according to Ammons, that this act of inhabitation be purely conceptual and non-literal. She writes, “In making one of her motherly Christs a physically powerful black man (as opposed, for example, to a black woman), Stowe insists on the symbolic content of her argument” (169).

Stowe’s textual construction of Tom relies on what Slavoj Žižek in another context terms the “barrier separating the Real from reality” (19, 20). “The Real,” as defined by Jacques Lacan in *Ecrits*, is the world at a level of experience which precedes both language and representation; “reality,” in contrast, is “constituted by the system of the symbolic” (Lee 136). In Stowe’s representation of Tom, “real” materiality collapses under the heavy “symbolic content” of a particular nineteenth-century representation—the mother/Christ figure. The absence of physicality from Stowe’s Uncle Tom should therefore be understood in Lacanian terms. We may recall here Žižek’s observation that “the barrier separating the Real from reality is ... the very condition of a minimum of ‘normalcy’: ‘madness’ ... sets in when this barrier is torn down, when the real overflows reality” (20). Stowe protects this “normalcy” by upholding the barrier between Tom’s potential threatening physicality and the “symbolic system,” in which the black subject is signified by passivity, gentleness, and suffering.

In making Tom symbolically the “ultimate heroine” of her work, Stowe inflicts a double disembodiment on the African American subject. There is, of course, the very obvious connotation of emasculating the “physically powerful black man,” but because his “ultimate” womanhood is suggestive of maternity, the “real” Tom becomes absolutely impossible to discern within the text. Motherhood, for Lacan, is unrepresentable or “noumenal” (existing beyond the realm of the senses). He refers to the mother as “the thing in itself” (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 106); and “*Das Ding*” is for him the “beyond-of-the-signified” (54). The symbolic content of Stowe’s argument, therefore, serves
to deny the actual presence of African Americans within the polity of antebellum America.

If *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sublimates the “real” Tom (the “physically powerful black man”) to “reality” (the disembodied Christ/mother), it becomes the task of the African American writer to reinstate a material black presence within abolitionist fiction. As Stepto suggests, a comparison between the first descriptions of Stowe’s Tom and Douglass’s Washington points to the ways in which Douglass rewrites Tom, in an effort to break down the “barrier” highlighted by Žižek and achieve a more “real” black self. Stowe introduces Tom as a large, broadchested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity. (21)

Though it bears echoes of Stowe, the black writer’s portrait of Washington ultimately represents a significant revision:

Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong. In his movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, a lion’s elasticity. His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. His face was “black but comely.” His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard, under a brow as dark and as glossy as the raven’s wing. His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulder. A giant’s strength, but not a giant’s heart was in him. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness. (179)

In Douglass’s description there is a departure from Stowe’s consistent symbolic content (“truly African features”) to a slightly chaotic and less ‘safe’ characterization of the black subject. Douglass’s confusion of images (the “lion,” the “raven,” “polished iron,” a child at play) implicitly questions the symbolic unity of Stowe’s Tom.

Marianne Noble has pointed out that “Frederick Douglass resists falsely coherent images of black subjectivity, giving voice instead to black interiority” (60). And indeed, the most significant point of departure between the two characters occurs in the portrayal of voice. In Stowe’s narrative, Tom’s voice is not described. In Douglass’s presentation of Madison Washington, the voice—which Douglass describes as “that unfailing index of the soul”—is presented as “full and melodious,” yet also possessing that which could “terrify as well as charm” (179).

In Douglass’s narrative, Washington, to echo Lacan again, becomes a subject constituting himself in relation to others. Lacan describes this act of constitution as an act of self-assertion that relies on both sight and sound. “What is involved
in the [scopic] drive,” Lacan explains, “is making oneself seen (se faire voir). The activity of the drive is concentrated in this making oneself (se faire).” And indispensable to both enterprises is the creation of voice, or “making oneself heard” (The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis 195). “[I]n wanting to be heard,” as Ellie Ragland and Elizabeth Wright have pointed out, “one demands the narcissistic reassurance of being recognized” (483). Recognition—the reinstatement of the Real in African American representation—becomes the ultimate task within “The Heroic Slave”: a task that is notably achieved through Washington’s mastery of voice. Douglass was always aware of the indispensability of black corporeality within political discourse. In speeches to white audiences about the slave revolt aboard the Creole—the incident on which “The Heroic Slave” is founded—Douglass insists on Washington’s blackness, as well as on his perfection of masculine qualities. It should always be remembered, he states, that “it was a black man, with woolly head, high cheek bones, protruding lip, distended nostril, and retreating forehead, [who] had mastery of that ship [the Creole]” (Life and Writings 117). In taking control of the Creole, Washington displays levels of masculine agency, bravura, and gallantry that had not been attributed to a purely black character depicted in any previous work of fiction.

**Revolutionary Voice: The Invocation of (Hyper)Masculinity**

The achievement of freedom through violence echoes Douglass’s own strike for freedom in his autobiographies. The often-cited physical contest between Douglass and his brutal overseer Covey is illustrative in this regard. The 1845 Narrative describes this incident as follows:

I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. ... I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. ... This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. ... I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (76)

Describing this moment of violent contest, thus, as an epiphanic, quasi-religious experience, Douglass presents a natural antithesis to Stowe. The sublimation of black corporeality by “symbolic content,” witnessed in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, is completely reversed. Here, the black body becomes the very modality through which the “slave in form” is sublimated to transformative masculinity. This is an important rhetorical move in all of Douglass’s writing, positioning the black body not only as the Lacanian “Real” (the world of things),
but also as Lacanian “reality” (the realm of the symbolic). Douglass’s autobiographical self, like his fictional Madison Washington, can only attain symbolic identity through the body. After the Covey episode he is “slave in form,” but man in fact, and he achieves this changed identity not by negating the body, but by transforming it. The symbolic imperative, which Ammons cites in the creation of Tom as “domestic heroine,” obviously serves to deny the corporeality of this “physically powerful black man” (Ammons 167), and Douglass’s fictive response to Stowe is certainly alive to the damaging potentialities of this denial.

The second crucially symbolic point about the Covey episode is, again, the role that voice plays in the encounter. Holding Covey’s windpipe and obstructing his speech, Douglass points to the interrelationship between physical body, linguistic self-assertion, and actual freedom. It is an act of violence that reasserts the pre-eminence of the corporeal as a means of effecting transformative voice, and vice versa. Here, Lacan’s act of self-constitution is dramatized as physical contest. Paul Gilroy ironically echoes Jurgen Habermas in pronouncing the choking of Covey an “ideal speech situation” (62). “The ideal speech situation” is, according to Habermas, the “fulfilled condition of reciprocity,” which examines and challenges—and has the potential to establish—“rational consensus” (180). Here, Douglass establishes “consensus” with his oppressor not through “reciprocal exchange,” but by suppressing the voice of the other. Thus, he achieves unarguable identity as non-slave, which is tacitly acknowledged through Covey’s subsequent silence.

Similar rhetorical strategies are in evidence in “The Heroic Slave.” “Whereas making oneself seen is indicated by an arrow that really comes back towards the subject,” Lacan reminds us, “making oneself heard goes towards the other” (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 195). In “The Heroic Slave,” Madison’s act of self-constitution can only happen through the speaker/listener, subject/object dialectic. Thus, we first encounter Madison Washington through the white liberal Listwell who, as the ideal reader/listener, mutely “overhears” Washington’s soliloquy on freedom in a Virginia forest. Having “stealthily” heard the speech, Listwell “remain[s] in motionless silence” (181). His first speech act is not to discourse with the impressive Washington, but to exclaim to himself, “Here is indeed a man” (181)—an utterance that points to the central linkage between voice and masculinity that runs throughout Douglass’s novella.

Washington’s course is one of manly bravery that refutes the Tom stereotype in a way similar to much of the black writing produced during slavery—not least Frederick Douglass’s own autobiography. Douglass’s fictive hero attempts to transform domestic “passivity” through the foundational symbology of the Revolutionary fathers. In Douglass’s autobiography, of course, the moment of masculine challenge to paternalistic authority is encapsulated in the most reso-
nant phrase of the American Revolution: Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death” (86). Douglass’s Narrative argues that slave insurrection did “more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death” because all that could be achieved was “doubtful liberty at most,” and what was risked was “almost certain death if we failed” (86)—a model that coheres with his strategy, in writing “The Heroic Slave,” of overgoing the ideals of American manhood. There is an obvious problem, as Robert Nowatzki has pointed out, in “pattern[ing] his conception of black manhood after the example of Anglo-Saxon manhood set by the slaveowner Henry” (62-3). However, Madison Washington rejects passive paternalism in order to become an active, and hence legitimate, heir to the Founding Fathers.

At a key point in the narrative, Washington is accused of being a “black murderer” and responds with typical eloquence:

You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night’s work. ... We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man’s heart be in you, you will honour us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they. (234-55)

Again, the just invective is supported by the masculinist imperative. The pointed “true man’s heart” replaces Stowe’s description of Tom’s “gentle, domestic heart,” which she had seen as the “peculiar characteristic of his unhappy race” (88). There is an unassailable logic to Douglass’s narrative here. Charged with being a black murderer, Washington responds only to the term “murderer,” leaving the racial signifier uncontested. In this way, he challenges his white listeners to find new definitions and new positions—disassociating the two concepts of blackness and violence. Douglass demonstrates that white listeners cannot reject the black patriot without rejecting their own spiritual descent from revolutionary America. Thus, voice indexes a radical and unprecedented connection between black and masculine/heroic qualities.

On one level, this strategy enables Douglass to present a more accurate black self than any previous writer of fiction had been able to produce. Put simply, his mastery of speech means that Madison Washington, unlike Uncle Tom for example, is able to retain his physicality and viscerality. Some of the best-known scholarship on Douglass’s novella thus produces a broad reading of “The Heroic Slave” as a black masculine counterpoint to Stowe’s (white feminine) domestic ideology. Yet, as I will argue below, Douglass did not ultimately intend to refute that ideology. His intention was not to challenge the terms of domestic ideology, but to make revolutionary challenge the basis for inclusion into that ideology.

There is, however, an unavoidable contradiction here, the irony being that, though Stowe’s hero retains an identifiably, albeit obviously problematic, “black”
voice—speaking in a stilted version of black plantation dialect—Douglass strategically insists that his hero speak in a highly rhetorical form of Standard English. Indeed, the voice that Douglass gives to his slave has proved very problematic for many readers of the text. Richard Yarborough and Robert Stepto both criticize Douglass for creating a black character who speaks with an essentially “white” voice. The extremely literate and articulate nature of Washington’s tone leads Stepto to describe the heroic slave’s speeches as “overwrought and hence not ‘true to nature’” (146). At one point in the narrative, the racist Tom Grant, who is a witness aboard the Creole, notes that in the moment of hearing Washington’s heroic speech-making, he “forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech” (235). That his white audience should forget the fact of his black body never threatens to deny Madison’s corporeality; however, the “whitening” of his voice is of strategic significance.

Washington (over)performs a white type. His bold pronouncement that if the slave rebels are “murderers”, so were the American Revolutionaries, stated with Jeffersonian liberal invective, reclaims an exclusively male national genealogy for the African American subject. Indeed, the overt masculinity of Washington’s interaction with white men, particularly his central relationship with Listwell, creates an overtly homosocial quality within the novella. Madison Washington must not only perform white male heterosexuality, he must perform it with such clarity and force that it impresses white heterosexual men. In taking on this role, he points to the limitations of the normative ideal. Judith Butler writes of the male heterosexual gender norm as an “inapproximable ideal,” which operates through the “regulated production of hyperbolic versions of ‘man.’” “Such norms,” she continues, “are continually haunted by their own inefficacy” (237). We may say that in writing a character who does efficaciously produce this “norm” (figured here as both authoritative and nationalistic, as well as heterosexual and male), and in making that character conceptually, thematically, and symbolically a black man, Frederick Douglass questions the very texture of the construct.

Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of Washington’s relationship with Listwell (speaker to listener) effectively serves to “unman” the text’s central white male character, making his “gender haunting” manifest. Listwell’s awed exclamation, “here is indeed a man,” defines masculinity as an exterior object. In Lacanian terms, Washington succeeds in “constituting himself in relation to others” (Ragland and Wright 483). He has “been seen” and “been heard” by Listwell, who in contrast remains hidden and silent. The white man’s reaction to the heroic slave’s opening soliloquy, which is punctuated with exclamations of self-assertion such as “here am I, a man,—yes, a man!” (177), is to “remain ... in motionless silence, ... fastened to the spot, ... [while] the speech of Madison [rings] through the chambers of his soul, and vibrate[s] through his entire
frame” (181). It is a reaction that renders Listwell not just silent, but passive and symbolically penetrated. Given the central dichotomy of American race in the nineteenth century, it seems, the creation of black masculinity leads inevitably to an uncertainty over white heteronormativity.

Maggie Sale argues that Douglass’s manipulations of the rhetoric of the American Revolution “are not merely derivative but are formative of new positions” (“Critiques from Within” 697) and that as “that rhetoric is used in the service of people other than those for whom it was originally developed, its meaning changes” (702). “The Heroic Slave,” however, does not merely alter the meaning of revolutionary American masculinity. The final consequence of Madison Washington’s appropriation of the white male ideal is his tearing down of that ideal as a useful construction.

**The Pursuit of (Domestic) Utopia**

Yet, there is more to Douglass’s text than engagement with American masculine types. At the heart of his fiction lies a deep, frustrated longing to inhabit the familial terrain of America—not only the usually mentioned movement towards patriarchal revolutionary genealogy, but also, silently and tacitly, a movement towards the symbolic heart of the cult of domesticity.

Paul Gilroy describes insurrection as the “moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means” (68). Though Douglass’s insurrectionary narrative exists in this “moment,” the “utopia” which is pursued is not necessarily divergent to the domestic utopia pursued in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “The discourse of black spirituality which legitimates these moments of violence,” Gilroy continues, “possesses a utopian truth content that projects beyond the limits of the present” (68). Here, Gilroy is using the examples of Douglass’s violent resistance against Covey and of Margaret Garner’s famous choice of infanticide over slave motherhood to refute the Hegelian supposition that the slave rationally chooses bondage over death. Madison Washington’s decision to enact violent mutiny rather than acquiesce in his slave condition, together with his first great soliloquy—“What, then, is life to me?” (176-8)—can be read in a similar fashion.

In our context, however, Gilroy’s language has further implications. The “utopian truth content that projects beyond the limits of the present” clearly points to the imperative of human liberty. However, it could equally speak of the “process existing on the far side of chaos” that Houston Baker describes as “the object of Black America’s quest” (1).

Madison’s own quest follows a similar trajectory. His first strike for freedom begins with the “indescribable anguish” of “leaving [his] poor wife and two little children” (189), an action which begins a period of aimless wandering—
“travelling,” as he puts it, “in the dark” (190). Separated from his slave family, he flounders, the clouds that prevent him from discerning the guiding North Star becoming analogous to his domestic dislocation. “[I]n losing my star,” he admits, “I lost my way” (190). In the end, he “arrive[s] at home in great destitution” (190), but this is a return not to his wife and children, but to his master’s plantation—a “home” that can no longer signify home to Washington, who, like his creator, has resolved to no longer be “slave in fact” (Douglass, Narrative 76). At this point in his narrative, Washington attempts to “make the woods [his] home” (192) but, as he tells the Listwells, a fire drives him from this temporary dwelling:

I will not harrow up your feelings by portraying the terrific scene of this awful conflagration. There is nothing to which I can liken it. It was horribly and indescribably grand. The whole world seemed on fire, and it appeared to me that the day of judgment had come; that the burning bowels of the earth had burst forth, and that the end of all things was at hand. (193)

According to Lloyd Presley Pratt, this episode displays that Washington is a “witness to ‘jubilee,’ or in New Testament terms, ‘Judgment Day,’ because his decision to break for freedom places him in a unique position: ‘the end of all things’ follows, here, from Washington’s revolutionary activity” (69).

In Paul Gilroy’s terms, “jubilee” is justified by the pursuit of “utopia,” so it is, indeed, interesting that the location into which Washington is delivered is the home of white liberal anti-slavery Quakers. The desperate wandering produced by this “moment of jubilee” ends as the heroic slave arrives at the Ohio house of Listwell, who sits with his wife “by the fireside of their own happy home” (182). Here Washington is offered temporary sanctuary from his heroic, masculinist narrative. He is given the “best room of [Listwell’s] house” (186), and the reader is assured that nothing will occur “to endanger his liberty, or to excite alarm” while he remains “in his quiet retreat and hiding-place” (203). In this way, he temporarily crosses the chiasmus from destitution to transcendence. It can be said, therefore, that he achieves utopia, if only metaphorically—and it can equally be said that Listwell’s idyllic white homestead represents that utopia.

The narrative does not, therefore, replace the domestic ideology of writers like Stowe with the masculinist American Revolutionary heroism of figures like Patrick Henry (white mother with white father). Madison Washington invokes American hypermasculinity only to gain access to feminized domestic utopia.

And yet, the moment at which Washington reaches the very center of this utopia, we find his invocatory narrative faltering for the first time in the text. His reaction to being shown the bedroom of Listwell’s house in which he is to sleep is one more of alarm than of gratitude (202). Unsure of himself in the heart of
the white home, he uncharacteristically “hesitate[s]” (203). Moreover, Madison Washington, who up to this point in the narrative has so effectively constituted himself as a speaking being, is rendered virtually speechless for the first time. His voice subsides, and an omniscient narrator takes over to continue this part of the story diegetically: Madison Washington, we are assured, is safely “secreted at the house of Mr. Listwell,” but the text itself announces its intention to “pass over” whatever he will experience while situated here (203). There is a real sense, indeed, that just as Washington’s powerful masculinist rhetoric produces an inapproximable masculine ideal which haunts his white male listeners, Listwell’s family home produces a similar haunting effect on the African American hero. He has entered the utopian space of American domesticity, but entered it uncertainly: his invocatory narrative stalls, his voice falters.

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Inapproximable Domestic Ideals: Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave”…


