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Matters of Life: Writing Lives in the Age of United States Slavery

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Benjamin Shearer Beck

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Matters of Life: Writing Lives in the Age of United States Slavery

by

Benjamin Shearer Beck

Doctor of English

University of California, Los Angeles 2019

Professor Christopher J. Looby, Chair

What is black life-writing beyond the canon of the slave narrative? *Matters of Life: Writing Lives in the Age of United States Slavery* shows that on the margins of the slave narrative exists a plenitude of forms, practices, and concepts that invite reconsideration of the premises that continue to structure understandings of the field of life-writing in the age of slavery. These premises include, but are not limited to, the following claims: that emulative lives begin in enslavement and end in freedom, that sophisticated narrative is the domain of autobiography, that authenticity and truth are the goals of life-writing. *Matters of Life* explores how biographical novellas, collective biographies, and scrapbooks offer alternative accounts about the possible life stories and forms that such stories take during the age of slavery in the United States.

The dissertation of Benjamin Shearer Beck is approved.

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2019

With gratitude for my family and my teachers

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For Kaitlyn, Simon, and Lois, everything.

VITA

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INTRODUCTION

BEYOND THE CANON OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE

“The blacks still wait a biographer,” writes reformer James Handasyd Perkins for *The National Era* in 1849. “Had the skin of Toussaint L’Ouverture been white,” Perkins continues, “he would have found a ‘Marshall’ long since, able and delighted to portray his acts” (121).¹ Referring to Chief Justice John Marshall of the U.S. Supreme Court and author of an important nineteenth-century biography of George Washington,² Perkins laments that black life-writing has not found a Marshall. There have been L’Ouvertures, Perkins points out, but without a “Marshall” who can rise to the challenge of writing a suitable biography, many such lives remain unwritten. Perkins is correct that there is no corresponding Marshall for L’Ouverture in 1849 despite his stated desire. However, Perkins never envisions that life-writing could take a form other than a monumental biography or that it might be written by someone other than a monumental author. Like Perkins, many have understood biography to have the following characteristics: it features a single subject; it has a single author; as a material form it is a bound book, sometimes in multiple volumes that testify to the subject’s grand achievements and place in history. With these assumptions about what counts as a biography, Perkins would have

¹ J.H.P. is James Handasyd Perkins (1810-1849). Perkins was born in Boston and then emigrated west to Ohio where he served as a newspaper editor, author, and reformer, among other vocations. For an overview of Perkins, see Goss 587-90.

² According to Scott E. Casper, Marshall’s biography was both a landmark publishing event and commercial failure. Marshall’s *Life of Washington*, particularly its fifth and final volume, was a lightning rod for partisanship. On the distribution success and commercial failure, see Casper 22-24, 27-30. On Jefferson’s rage at the fifth volume, see Casper 38.

found scant examples of black biography in 1849 of the scale, form, and tone he sought. Searching for a “Marshall” biography of L’Ouverture means substituting individual experience for the collective and in turn claiming a badge of representativeness. Such a desire also configures the vast field of life-writing according to restrictive and circular assumptions about what biography looks like, how it works, and why it’s worth reading.

Twenty-first century perspectives on nineteenth-century black life-writing echo Perkins’ search for heroic representativeness and generic conventionality. The autobiographical slave narrative is one of the most familiar forms of black life-writing to twenty-first century scholars and students where such heroic representativeness and conventionality is most legible.³ However, nineteenth-century authors had a much wider range of genres and forms and narrative arcs to choose from than what the slave narrative offers. My dissertation, *Matters of Life: Writing Lives in the Age of United States Slavery*, shows how attention to life-writing practices uncovers the rich and varied ways that authors navigated the cultural and political changes related to the fate of nineteenth-century chattel slavery in the U.S. I use the term “life-writing” for its capaciousness. Life-writing “involves, and goes beyond, biography. It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It embraces the lives of objects and institutions, as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups.”⁴ Despite the fact that the autobiographical slave narrative is only one form among many,

³ I retain the generic terminology of “slave narrative” but will use the term enslaved person unless otherwise noted. For an important and influential article on conventions in the autobiographical slave narrative, see Sekora.

⁴ <https://oxlifewriting.wordpress.com/life-writing/>

there is little work done on other life-writing forms.⁵ *Matters of Life* looks beyond the canon of the slave narrative to interrogate the plentitude of forms, subjects, and practices that abound in nineteenth-century black life-writing.

Since the 1980s critics have championed two influential and field-shaping autobiographies, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), as standard-bearers for nineteenth-century black life-writing. Despite important differences between Douglass's and Jacobs' narratives, they often appear as a pair because both feature novelistic devices, document the transformative effects of alphabetic literacy, and detail successful struggles for self-emancipation. Field-forming work by critics such as Robert B. Stepto, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William L. Andrews, and Frances Smith Foster demonstrated how slave narratives operate as sophisticated literary texts in addition to historical documents that testified to the lived experiences of enslaved persons. These critics and others fought not only to expand the literary canon to include Douglass and Jacobs but to include them in the literary history of autobiography, that venerable genre of self-making and world-making.⁶ This double emplotment has tacitly pushed myriad other forms, genres, and practices that do not figure prominently in Douglass's or Jacobs' autobiographical narratives to the margins despite the persistent presence of these other forms, genres, and practices in nineteenth-century life-writing. Moreover, the representativeness of Douglass and Jacobs prizes alphabetic literacy, specifically the ability to tell one's own story in

⁵ See Ernest, "Beyond Douglass and Jacobs." See also Drexler and White.

⁶ See Stepto, Gates, Yellin, and Andrews.

writing.⁷ As Douglass and Jacobs have risen, black life-writing has become strongly yoked to their autobiographical projects. Yet the autobiographical narratives of Douglass and Jacobs represent extraordinary cases. *Matters of Life*, in contrast, takes current unfamiliarity with many nineteenth-century black life-writing forms—such as scrapbooks, biographical novellas, and miscellanies, for example—as motivation to reconsider premises that continue to limit our understanding of this field’s richness: that sophisticated narrative is the domain of autobiography or that authenticity and truth are the goals of life-writing.

By looking beyond the canon of the slave narrative, my dissertation contests the coherence of a familiar arc celebrated in so many life-writing monuments, a life story that begins in enslavement and ends in freedom. This narrative arc becomes synecdochically representative of the slave narrative, and by virtue of this representativeness eclipses many of the stories and arguments that feature in the diversity of life-writing forms and practices during the age of slavery in the United States. Instead of autobiographical accounts that sketch an individual life’s progression from bondage to freedom, the chapters in *Matters of Life* outline the breadth, variety, and complexity of black life-writing. By turning attention to other life-writing forms such as scrapbooks and fictional biographies, we face texts that often appear inscrutable because the familiar interpretive framework for life-writing derives from the autobiographical slave narrative. For example, as I show in Chapter One when Frederick Douglass sets out to tell the story of

⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has termed this phenomenon the “writerly self” (167). See Hager for an insightful analysis of the difference between manuscript and print for thinking about literacy and emancipation. See Rezek’s brief but illuminating account on what Gates and his work’s legacy means for future work on African American cultures of print.

Madison Washington, the celebrated leader of the 1841 slave revolt aboard the *Creole*, he devises an intriguing life-writing form, a biographical novella. In this decision Douglass confronts a methodological dilemma because mid-nineteenth-century generic expectations for biography prioritized citational evidence.⁸ Because Douglass did not have any correspondence or personal artifacts from Washington on which to base a biographical narrative, he drew on imaginary literary techniques such as dialogue and other strategies to work around generic and methodological dilemmas. Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* illuminates how ideas and conventions about documentary proof predetermine the lives that can be turned into print. In another example, the primacy of autobiography's individualistic model of character makes the vast number of collective portraits—a widespread and commercially popular nineteenth-century form—appear repetitive in their sprawl. Instead, *Matters of Life* shows how Civil War-era collective biographies use collectivity as a selection procedure and as a theoretical intervention into political debates about democracy and race that raged during Reconstruction.

Matters of Life understands life-writing not only as a genre but also as a set of practices. These practices include an ensemble of actions—such as collecting documents, organizing archives, composing, printing, publishing, and distributing manuscript and printed texts—that shepherd life stories and events into material texts. This focus on material practices grows out of book history, a methodology that has transformed the study of African American literature in the past decade by showing how the influence of communities, technologies, and persons involved in creating material texts can enrich our

⁸ Correspondence is one significant source of evidence for biographies (Casper 137-53).

understanding of the relationship between the text and its production history.⁹ Of course the connection between African American literary studies and book history has a rich tradition outside of the academy, particularly among book collectors, librarians, and bibliographers.¹⁰ Essays by Frances Smith Foster and Leon Jackson, monographs by Eric Gardner and Derrick Spires, collaborative projects such as the Colored Conventions Project,¹¹ as well as edited collections such as *Early African American Print Culture* represent recent innovative contributions exemplifying what book history methods offer to scholars of African American literature and vice versa. In *Black Print Unbound*, Gardner argues for the importance of turning to ephemeral forms of print, such as the newspaper *Christian Recorder*, because they reveal information about communities that books and their circulation do not. Frances Smith Foster has argued for the centrality of religious institutions in nineteenth-century African American culture, and yet there remains significant work to uncover the print cultural impacts of such institutions.¹² At the same time, recovery projects—particularly modern scholarly biographies—continue to enrich our historical understanding of nineteenth-century lives and communities.¹³ My

⁹ See Foster, Jackson, and Cohen and Stein “Introduction” for overviews.

¹⁰ See Helton’s work on how Porter and other archivists shaped the emergence of “black archival publics.”

¹¹ <http://coloredconventions.org/>

¹² Gardner, Foster, Rezek, and Jackson all address the forward-looking stakes of work on cultures of print, other media forms, and discursive practices for scholarship on African American literary history.

¹³ See for instance Blockett’s work on Zilpha Elaw, Greenspan’s work on William Wells Brown, Levine’s work on the literary lives of Frederick Douglass, and Peter P. Hinks’ intellectual biography of David Walker. For a critique of narrative biography see Ernest, “Life Beyond Biography.”

dissertation builds on these interventions by showing how a focus on life-writing practices and texts can enrich both book history and African American literary studies.

Matters of Life examines life-writing between 1850 and 1875. This quarter-century period begins at roughly the moment when effects of the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law tore through U. S. culture.¹⁴ The Compromise of 1850 represents a contested event, one that marks both rupture (in that it dramatically rendered fugitive life safe nowhere within the United States) and continuum (in that it was yet another stalling tactic tasked with reconciling American notions of liberty and chattel slavery).¹⁵ The Fugitive Slave Law's effects crisscross American culture during the subsequent years. Many fugitives, such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, fled to England or to Canada. The Fugitive Slave Law impacted far more than American political and legal cultures. One also sees its impacts in literature from the period, such as Senator Bird's dilemma in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe 141-61). Although the Fugitive Slave Law galvanized antislavery activists throughout the United States, its 1850 passage is an important node on a much longer timeline of antislavery activism.¹⁶ The Civil War also looms over this dissertation's timeframe. The Civil War was indeed an epoch-defining event at the same time that the massive changes wrought by the war sometimes did not

¹⁴ For a brief overview, see Foner, *Give Me Liberty!* 411-15.

¹⁵ It is important to note that fugitive slaves were still legally unprotected before the 1850 bill. But the Compromise of 1850 strengthened the enforcement of the 4th Amendment's various clauses, primarily centered on "full faith and credit." See Waldstreicher 8-9. See also Minow (1n1).

¹⁶ See Sinha for a comprehensive history of abolitionism.

result in such massive shifts in personal experience.¹⁷ The postbellum era, as chapters Two and Three make clear, still grappled with antebellum issues. To mirror this longer history that in the nineteenth century often did not recognize when certain events would be epoch-defining, *Matters of Life* contextualizes its chapters without arguing for any single origin point.

1850 also marks an important development in the history of life-writing compositional practices. Scott E. Casper has argued that around the middle of the nineteenth century, biographers shifted from a compilative method to a compositional method. Prior to 1850, biographers acted mostly as fact finders who believed that dates, information, and other facts of someone's life corresponded to truthful declarations about a life. There was little—if any at all—evaluation of the facts as pieces of evidence that may not be exactly true, or may need interpretive assistance to find value in a given fact.¹⁸ As a result of this tendency toward accretion, many antebellum biographies are unwieldy compilations of facts that lack evidentiary evaluation and narrative interpretation. By the middle of the nineteenth century, confidence in the transparent relationship between facts and truth started to ebb, Casper points out, when notions of privacy shifted and scientific advancements challenged orthodox belief systems (Casper 205-6). Just as someone's life is more than dates and locations, mid-century critics felt that biography should be more than a chronology of events.

¹⁷ For a study of the profound effects of the war on American culture especially in terms of psychology and trauma see Faust. See Hager and Marrs on antebellum/postbellum periodization.

¹⁸ Casper 204-13.

Critics in the *North American Review* (and other leading periodicals of the era) advocated for shifting biography's core methods from compilation and didacticism to composition and inspiration (Casper 216). These critics encouraged biographers to be more like novelists.¹⁹ While Casper's account of the shift from compilation to composition is accurate for popular biographers such as James Parton, this shift from compilation to composition relegates post-1850 compilative life-writing texts and authors to an outdated past. In reality, older forms and practices continued to exist alongside newer narrative and technological developments despite Casper's argument that a genre-wide shift from compilation to composition occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. In Chapters Two and Three below, *Matters of Life* argues that compilation remained not only a persistent method for authors such as William Wells Brown and Sojourner Truth but that this compilative method enabled them to develop political and religious concepts enhanced by this methodological choice.

The following chapters offer a series of case studies that reconsider the terms and assumptions about nineteenth-century black life-writing. The chapters argue that older forms and practices—such as compilation—were redeployed in innovative ways even as newer forms and practices were available to authors. While the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed chattel slavery after its 1865 ratification, the United States, its institutions *and* its people, was not so easily able to escape the profound impacts of enslavement. For this reason *Matters of Life* includes the postbellum, post-Thirteenth Amendment period in the “Age of Slavery” because of the profound effects that chattel slavery wrought on U.S.

¹⁹ Casper writes that by mid century, “biographers were encouraged to write more like novelists—never forsaking ‘truth,’ of course—in order to satisfy critics and please readers” (212).

culture even after its abolition. As scholars have long pointed out, the transition from enslavement to emancipation was not nearly so seamless or absolute as hoped.²⁰ The persistence of old forms and genres of life-writing alongside newer generic and formal innovations mirrors how the legacies of enslavement continued to inform the question of how to write a life in the nineteenth-century U.S.

Chapter One, ““There are some Madison Washingtons in this country’: *The Heroic Slave* and the Diffusion of Character,” explores the idea of character that Frederick Douglass came to embrace before he wrote *The Heroic Slave*. Douglass’s shifting conception of character can be generative understood as an engagement with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s work on character, particularly in *Essays: Second Series* and *Representative Men*. There, Emerson unfolds a theory of heroic character that is both tied to an individual who can be representative of an age—such as Napoleon or Montaigne—at the same time that such heroism is untethered from the particular person and thus able to be seized at will. What Emerson models in these works is a concept that he later called diffusion. Diffusion forms the basis for Chapter One’s exploration of the relationship between heroic individuals and their place in a heroic history. Douglass adapts this concept of diffusion into a portable theory for black life-writing. His biographical novella, *The Heroic Slave*, is the result of this this theoretical development. Douglass’s case study is Madison Washington, the leader of the *Creole* slave revolt in 1841. Chapter One moves from how diffusion works as a rhetorical strategy in the biographical novella’s diegesis to exploring how Douglass’s theory of the diffusion of character

²⁰ See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; Litwack; Foner, *Reconstruction*; and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

resonates in other life-writing projects in *Autographs for Freedom*, the antislavery gift book where *The Heroic Slave* was first published.

Where the first chapter looks at a single subject, the second chapter investigates a collective subject. Chapter Two, “Compiling the Multitude in Civil-War Era Collective Biographies,” explores biographical readers that gathered biographical sketches of dozens of historical figures into a volume, an enduring and important form of life-writing known as collective biography. Chapter Two reads these collective volumes as an index to the racial and political dilemmas of Reconstruction. The first half of the chapter illustrates how Lydia Maria Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865), despite its avowed progressive educational goals, struggles to enact a collectivity-based reform project. The second half of the chapter turns to William Wells Brown’s *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867). There I illuminate how Brown’s compilative text constructs an argument in favor of political collectivity through its publication method as well as its rhetorical strategies. Whereas Child’s textbook advocates for natural-rights-based reform, Brown’s compilation identifies the limits of natural rights ideology. *The Negro in the American Rebellion* argues that natural rights remain tied to institutional racism, and thus natural rights cannot overcome institutional limitations. Instead, Brown advocates for political and legal protections to help tackle the reconstitution of black life in the Reconstruction Era.

The third chapter, on Sojourner Truth, investigates the intersection of Truth’s religious beliefs and her life-writing. “Sojourner Truth and the Matter of Life” explores how Truth, in the last decade of her life, embarked on an ambitious publishing and theological project that she called her “Book of Life.” I argue that the “Book of Life”

appendix—published in the 1875, 1878, 1881, and 1884 editions of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*—fuses scrapbooking as a material practice to a theological concept, the book of life as eschatological ledger. Truth spent decades amassing material evidence of her good works—letters, signatures and testimonials, newspaper articles, and publicity appearances, for example. But it is her redeployment of this ephemeral material that interests me here, because its arrangement and republication in the “Book of Life” argues that Truth displayed a startling sense of her own futurity as a figure despite the ephemerality of much of her scrapbooks’ contents. These practices and printed forms matter for Truth because they document a life of good works that will serve as evidence in favor of her salvation. Truth’s earthly and ephemeral “Book of Life” has heavenly and everlasting consequences.

A Coda, ““This Question is Still To Be Settled’: Du Bois’s *John Brown* and the Challenges of Biography,” turns to Du Bois’s biography of John Brown. Published in 1909 as part of the American Crisis Biographies, a series that narrated the history of Civil War through biographies of significant figures, *John Brown* challenged a prevailing and pernicious early twentieth-century myth: the Civil War’s causes and effects were safely ensconced in the nineteenth century. Instead, Du Bois uses the figure of John Brown to argue that the effects of chattel slavery not only defined the Civil War era but continue to structure life in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Coda takes up themes from the earlier chapters such as heroism, political agency, character, and the enduring effects of chattel slavery. I show how issues and generic practices present in nineteenth-century life-writing projects offer Du Bois a legible literary history to invoke and adapt in his challenge to the American Crisis Biographies series.

Throughout its chapters, *Matters of Life* shows how attention to biographical practices illuminates a divergent range of life stories published and theorized during the age of American slavery. These practices also operate at narratological levels, such as when William Wells Brown's compilative biography *The Negro in the American Rebellion* uses "compilation" to argue that character matters but not as much as political and legal protections. Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* addresses how the cultural moments of biography, such as in the biographical mania that surrounded Emerson's lecture series about "Representative Men," could be adapted to the developing democratic and antislavery political discussions occurring in the same time period. Above all, *Matters of Life* constellates a collection of case studies that together insist that close attention to material practices and the textual forms they produce invites a reconsideration of the generic possibilities for how people understand the stories of life. Different lives, different forms.

CHAPTER ONE

"THERE ARE SOME MADISON WASHINGTONS IN THIS COUNTRY"

THE HEROIC SLAVE AND THE DIFFUSION OF CHARACTER

1. GLIMPSES OF GREAT CHARACTER

The opening paragraphs of Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853), a biographical novella of the 1841 *Creole* rebellion leader Madison Washington, challenge historiographical and methodological assumptions that prevailed in mid-nineteenth-century narrative biography. In particular Douglass focuses on the symbiotic relationship between biography and the elucidation of heroic character. Prevailing ideas of biography required that the author substantiate claims about character with extensive primary source documentation.²¹ From its opening sentences *The Heroic Slave* highlights the inadequacy of this convention for writing biography about enslaved persons. Then it proposes an alternative. In the opening sentences the novella asks about the relationship between character and the archive, or to be more specific the absence of an archive. Douglass points out that the state of Virginia, where Washington hailed from, "is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen and heroes" (174).²² We know of these statesmen and heroes, according to Douglass, because "History has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds." Despite so many

²¹ Casper identifies that historical biographer Jared Sparks was significantly responsible for arguing that correspondence was the most authentic and thus important form of evidence for historical biography (137-53).

²² Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," *Autographs for Freedom*. Boston, John P. Jewett and Company, 1853. Hereafter all citations will be cited parenthetically. I will use italics for the title because it is a significant title that Douglass later printed in his newspaper and has been published recently in stand-alone scholarly editions. A recent scholarly edition of *The Heroic Slave*, edited by Robert S. Levine, John R. McKivigan, and John Stauffer, uses the Boston first edition as its copy-text.

famous Virginians Douglass points out that “not all the great ones of the Old Dominion have, by the fact of their birth-place, escaped undeserved obscurity” (175). Why such undeserved obscurity? Taking the example of Madison Washington as his guide, Douglass writes: “Let those account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry,—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson,—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the *chattel records* of his native State” (175, my emphasis). Douglass intimates that reasons for this certain kind of obscurity are simple to see: Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington were not chattel slaves; Madison Washington was.

Developments in the first half of the nineteenth century emphasized that biography should base its accounts of great character on extensive details and primary evidence, especially the subject’s correspondence.²³ Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington were ideal candidates for this burgeoning field of heroic biography, a life-writing subset that followed the evidentiary demands of biography and tied the subject into a larger, historical narrative. Monumental lives written by monumental authors, or in the formulation of James Handasyd Perkins, a L’Overturean life written by a Marshallesque author. Henry, Jefferson, and Washington left written records, were frequent subjects of public documentation in newspaper articles as well as executive and legislative records, and played prominent roles in the United States’ tumultuous and contested early era. If elucidation of character is based on an abundant

²³ For details, see the second section below, “Heroic Fabulation.”

and legible archive then that seems to be a problem, Douglass points out, for potential biographical subjects during the age of American slavery such as Madison Washington as well as historical biography itself. While he was the subject of newspaper coverage and a flurry of legislative records, there are no extant materials related to Washington outside of his role in the *Creole* rebellion. The title's provocation of yoking "heroic" and "slave" also signals that Douglass's life-writing project revise the very terms and associative categories that heroic life-writing has excluded. In exploring these archival and conceptual challenges, *The Heroic Slave* tacitly responds to James Handasyd Perkins' search for a "L'Ouverture" and a "Marshall."

Addressing the self-propagating assumptions that undergird heroic biography, *The Heroic Slave* stages a series of interventions into mid nineteenth-century biography through the concept of character. In the sentence after pointing out that greatness can exist beyond the familiar pantheons of Henrys, Jeffersons, and Washingtons, Douglass admits that "*Glimpses of this great character* are all that can now be presented. He is brought to view only by a few transient incidents, and these afford but partial satisfaction" (175, emphasis added). I argue that this claim and citation of "glimpses" can be generative understood as an intertextual reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Character" from *Essays: Second Series* (1844) and thus signals the larger life-writing conversation to which Emerson and Douglass each contribute. Emerson writes that "Character wants room; must not be crowded on by persons, *nor be judged from glimpses got in the press of affairs or on few occasions*. It needs perspective, as a great building" (505, emphasis added). *The Heroic Slave* goes to great lengths to develop these "glimpses" into the most substantial biographical account of Madison Washington even if

its narrative imagination encourages a healthy skepticism toward the truthfulness of Douglass's claims. This brief intertextual reference to Emerson's essay alludes to the interplay of fame and anonymity, individuality and representativeness, emulation and distinction that makes up what I call the "diffusion of character." Briefly, diffusion of character refers to a rhetorical strategy in which the historical import of an individual becomes less about individualism and more about a collective struggle in which the individual participates. The individual's actions enable others to join the cause. The individual is still important and often heroic, but the life-writing text that uses diffusion ultimately embeds the individual within a longer history and relevant genealogy. Douglass negotiates this balance between collective and individual identity in *The Heroic Slave*.

Emerson does not use the word *diffuse* until "The Uses of Great Men" (1850), but he begins outlining the conceptual framework in "Character" (1844), the essay that echoes in Douglass's opening paragraphs of *The Heroic Slave*. This chapter illuminates the ways that *The Heroic Slave* inaugurates a counter-tradition of heroic literature, one that operates with character diffusion as its methodological and narratological imperative. This chapter traces the developments in theories of character that encouraged Douglass to reject the prevailing models of emulative, individualistic heroism of his times and propose one of his own: a heroic model of character diffusion.

It is Emerson's work on character and individuality—what political theorists call "democratic individual personality" and what literary critics call "impersonality"—that offers Douglass the foundation for how he challenges prevailing narratives of white heroism. Prior to literary critic Sharon Cameron and political theorist George Kateb,

scholars championed Emersonian thought as dogmatically individualist. But Cameron and others find a recurring idea in Emerson, especially prominent in his essays “The Over-soul” and “Nominalist and Realist,” of a persistent “disillusion with the conventional idea that persons are separate and integral entities” (Cameron 2). Instead of a robust individual who anchors Transcendentalist thought, Cameron has traced out what seemed to be antithetical—even heretical—to prior understandings of the individual’s role in US political and intellectual cultures. She writes that “Impersonality is the antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic. It is so specifically because it refutes the idea that the mind is one’s “property,” that one’s relation to being is that of ownership, on the one hand, and separate identity, on the other” (2-3). In the wake of Cameron’s essay, critics have grappled with the ethical and political implications of the impersonal, not only for Emerson but also for areas of thought that have been tepid or outright hostile to Emersonian thought, particularly political abolitionism. Kateb, a political theorist, undertakes a similar project as Cameron, calling his contribution of this reconfigured Emerson, “democratic individuality.”²⁴

Douglass and Emerson shared personal and intellectual space in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Douglas A. Jones Jr. writes that “as [Douglass] read and heard more Emerson from the late 1840s onward, he came to believe that the transcendentalist logic of essential and immutable human sameness might exert an antislavery pressure in the nation’s collective consciousness that the realms of economics, law, and formal politics could not muster” (4). The impersonal is an “affirmation of an all-encompassing common

²⁴ See Turner and Jones for two notable discussions of antislavery politics and Emersonian thought that explicitly deal with Kateb’s and Cameron’s challenges, respectively.

nature [that] is at the core of what political theorists call Emersonian democratic individuality—a theory that demands we recognize how the impersonal that produces the infinitude of the world works through all persons without bias and produces the very same dignity and infinitude in every person” (Jones 3-4). In “The Uses of Great Men,” the opening essay in *Representative Men* (1850) and the only one in that volume that does not elaborate a particular virtue through a single historical figure, Emerson claims that “The study of many individuals leads us to an elemental region wherein the individual is lost, or wherein all touch by their summits. Thought and feeling, that break out there, cannot be impounded by any fence of personality. This is the key to the power of the greatest men,—their spirit *diffuses* itself” (630-31, my emphasis). If the tacit agreement about biography’s importance—especially in the wake of Romantic Individualism—lies in the absolute uniqueness of the biographical subject, then Emerson’s insistence that “their spirit diffuses itself” undercuts the very core of biographical individualism. Where does Emerson locate the individual? “But I find him greater, when he can abolish himself, and all heroes, by letting in this element of reason, irrespective of persons; this subtiliser, and irresistible upward force, into our thought, destroying individualism; the power so great, that the potentate is nothing. Then he is a monarch, who gives a constitution to his people; a pontiff, who preaches the equality of souls, and releases his servants from their barbarous homages; an emperor, who can spare his empire” (625-26). A biography, we might say, without a subject.

The Heroic Slave is a biographical novella and Douglass’s only known piece of published fiction. It recounts and reimagines the successful 1841 revolt aboard the slave ship *Creole*. The novella first appeared in an antislavery compilation gift book,

Autographs for Freedom, edited by Julia Griffiths, a British abolitionist and patron of Douglass. While copyrighted in 1853, copies were available for sale as early as December 1852 at antislavery fairs because gift books were often intended as gifts for the year to come. Douglass then serialized the novella in four installments in his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, in March 1853. (*Frederick Douglass' Paper* was the successor to *The North Star*.) The biographical novella contains four parts. The first three parts explore the relationship between Listwell, a white man from Ohio, and Madison Washington, an enslaved black man in Virginia. The first part adopts theatrical conventions as it has Listwell remain hidden while eavesdropping on Washington who delivers a moving soliloquy about the clash between his desire to escape slavery and devotion to a still-enslaved spouse. The second part jumps forward five years to Ohio and reunites Listwell and Washington, now a fugitive slave. Listwell helps Washington on the last leg of his escape from the Ohio border across Lake Erie to Canada. In the third part, Listwell happens upon a coffle while in Richmond, VA and recognizes Washington who was recaptured while attempting to help his wife escape. Listwell hands Washington three strong files as well as money before the two parts ways. The fourth part uses two sailors, one of whom was aboard the *Creole*, the ship where the revolt occurred, to report Washington's role in the successful revolt.

Commonly celebrated as Douglass' only work of published fiction, this generic classification overlooks *The Heroic Slave*'s pointed intervention into nineteenth-century biographical discourse, especially the mid-century flourishing of heroic life narrative. Robert S. Levine notes that "Douglass depicts key moments in the life of a heroic slave through a complex *mélange* of biography, autobiography, and fiction" (124). In that

“complex mélange” of genres this chapter identifies a pivotal moment in the literary history of black life-writing. I argue that Douglass seizes on the inability of existing life-writing narrative forms to accommodate the specific historical conditions of black life during the era of U.S. slavery as well as the inadequacy of heroic life narratives to account for someone such as Madison Washington. Douglass’s biographical novella reworks character according to the demands of revolutionary action that, by the early 1850s, had become a core tenet of his shifting conception of antislavery ideology. Douglass adapts the theory of diffusion at the heart of Emerson’s biographical project to the demands of a life-writing project based on Madison Washington. Paying attention to the diffusion of character highlights the heroic paradox of Madison Washington: that he is both a singularly stamped heroic individual at the same time that he seems to be beside the point, a historical contingency. Diffusion also signals the tension between the act of consolidating an archival evidence into a biographical narrative and the absence of such archives for many enslaved persons. A theory of diffusion suggests that character can exist separate from the archive. Through diffusion, *The Heroic Slave* reconstellates black heroic narratives in the era of American slavery.

2. HEROIC FABULATION

The Heroic Slave envisions a different world for heroes, narrative, and politics—a world that nineteenth-century heroic biography foreclosed for Douglass. The rise of historical biography around 1820 meant that the role of historical evidence and the archive played a new and formative role.²⁵ In the 1820s and 1830s, Jared Sparks, a

Harvard-trained historian, argued that Johnsonian biography encouraged inaccuracy when the biographer did not have access to substantial primary evidence that could substantiate a subject's "domestick privacies" to use Samuel Johnson's evocative phrase. (Hence Weems' fabrication of the Cherry Tree myth.) "The biographer of an ordinary person could lapse all too easily into fiction, for "his materials are few—he is obliged to resort to his invention for incidents, and to his fancy for embellishments" (Casper 139). Sparks's solution was to collect correspondence, state papers, and other personal artifacts that could provide verifiable proof. And collect he did. Sparks amassed one of the largest personal collections of U.S. Presidential papers ever. He used this vast collection to help him advocate for a new version of biography that substantiated discussions of a person's character and life by citing archival evidence. According to Casper, "Sparks collapsed Samuel Johnson's distinction between biography and history. For Johnson and the American critics who echoed him in the early republic, biography possessed instructive value because it *differed* from history: its narratives allowed readers to view subjects' unique, personal characteristics apart from the public stage" (141). Due to Sparks's influence, historical biography became better known by the frequent subtitle attached to the work: life and letters.²⁶

Alongside historical biography, the other important biographical tradition that informed Douglass was heroic biography, and in particular biographies of black heroes. Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes* (1840) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850) are two of the most influential examples that formulated central tenets of heroic

²⁶ It is worth noting that Johnson's influential *Lives of the Poets* resembles literary criticism inflected biography more than the "domestic privacies" that he advocated in the *Rambler* and *Idler* essays. Boswell's biography of his mentor and idol Samuel Johnson is a classic example of "domestic privacy" biography.

biography. In the rare event that a work of life-writing does focus on a black hero, such as Harriet Martineau's biographical novella of Toussaint L'Ouverture, *The Hour and the Man: A Historical Romance* (1841), it usually inserts a black hero into white heroic genre conventions. Martineau, an English social reformer and author, focused *The Hour and the Man* on L'Ouverture, a familiar figure both in the cultural imagination as well as in heroic narratives. Susan Belasco notes that Emerson also alluded to L'Ouverture in his writing:

In the same year as his emancipation address Emerson also alluded to Toussaint in "Character"... using him as an example of the way in which "higher natures" can overpower "lower ones," despite the bond of an iron ring... Here Emerson clearly portrays Toussaint as an exceptionally talented leader; in a single sentence, Emerson suggests the plot that Frederick Douglass would later use in "The Heroic Slave. (187)

While Belasco is right to note the similarities between Emerson's brief plot and *The Heroic Slave*, the plot is the least of what Douglass takes from Emerson. Douglass of course knew of L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution before Emerson's 1844 commemorations.

In L'Ouverture and the larger story of the Haitian Revolution Martineau composed a narrative that, according to Belasco, "provided a rich and timely resource for those involved in the American [antislavery] movement, which by the end of the 1830s was moving into a more widespread and increasingly political phase." Nevertheless, Belasco continues, "Martineau's "historical romance" of Toussaint reveals the strikingly conservative perspective of many of those involved in the early antislavery movement in

Britain and America” (159). Choosing to meld fiction with fact was a significant contribution to antislavery literature, and one which, just a decade later, reached its apotheosis with the dual publication of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and then the *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.²⁷ While not a novel with a notable hero akin to L’Ouvverture, Stowe’s portrayal of Uncle Tom nevertheless aligned him as a pacifist hero along the lines of Jesus of Nazareth. But unlike *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Martineau drew pointedly on the romance tradition, indicated clearly in her subtitle, *A Historical Romance*. Martineau differed from Walter Scott-influenced historical romance conventions because she “was not dealing with her own national history” (Belasco 169). According to Belasco, Martineau “wished to take the accounts of Santo Domingo and Toussaint L’Ouvverture that she had read and—much as Hawthorne did in his conception of the American romance—depart from the novelist’s dedication to minute fidelity in order to emphasize the larger moral dimensions of her hero’s story” (169). By incorporating L’Ouvverture into a novelistic tradition that emphasized national identity and heroism Martineau’s novel implies that L’Ouvverture is a portable nation-destroyer and nation-builder. This representation of L’Ouvverture is a substantial contribution to antislavery literature because *The Hour and the Man* accordingly widens not only heroic narrative but also historical romance to include a black central character.

While the contribution is admirable, the details of a nineteenth-century white author tackling black historiography are more familiarly complicated. Like Stowe’s controversial depictions of black characters, Martineau’s portrait of L’Ouvverture also

²⁷ A complicated inverse of this is the ways that writing by black authors, especially formerly enslaved ones, faced skepticism about its authenticity by audiences. See Fabian chapter 3 and Cohen, *Fabrication of American Literature* chapter 3.

remained mired within its author's beliefs about race: "Increasingly, the figure of Toussaint served white abolitionists as a Romantic hero who demonstrated the capabilities of blacks released from the brutality of slavery, even as his story reinforced elitist notions about white superiority and conservative notions of societal reform" (Belasco 183-84). *L'Ouverture* offered symbolic capital to these reformers, and his widespread reach meant that even people on the fringes of abolitionism, such as Emerson, relied on *L'Ouverture's* fame to support antislavery arguments.

Douglass sought something other than what *L'Ouverture* and the literature surrounding him could offer to heroic life-writing. Douglass starts from the ground up by building a theoretical apparatus that explores what is entailed when imagining the generic limits of life-writing for dealing with black lives during the nineteenth century. Douglass's title belies what is actually a thorough and complex negotiation of emulation and representativeness. Far from a straightforward didactic tale that portrays Madison Washington as *the* heroic slave according to the parameters of heroic biographical narratives, *The Heroic Slave* lays bare the challenges that define slave life-writing as Douglass sees it. Bringing these aspects of *The Heroic Slave* to the surface illuminates the traditions and conventions that Douglass is working against—Sparksian biography and heroic biography—as well as Douglass's innovations.

Sparksian biographical methods proved influential for much of the nineteenth century, so much so that by the time Douglass turned to draft his biographical novella of Madison Washington, he could frame the historiographical problem of writing Washington's life using the language of Sparksian life and letters biography. Where were Washington's letters? His state papers? Records of his birth, land acquisitions, and

education? In other words, how does life-writing grapple with archival challenges that characterize the history of slavery? In *The Heroic Slave*'s opening paragraphs Douglass wonders what narrative possibilities exist for the slave and in particular for Madison Washington. How, Douglass asks, does one write the life of someone whose memory "lives now only in the chattel records?"²⁸ Biographies of "statesmen and heroes" are easy to write because "history has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds." They're blazoned not only in biographies and histories but also in newspapers, journals, diaries, deeds, birth and marriage certificates, and bank notes, among any other number of quotidian ephemera. The enslaved, conversely, often faces an *extremely* limited print public sphere defined primarily by commercial interests with which the enslaved person intersects: wanted ads, bills of sale, sale advertisements, probate records, and inventories of property, for example. Even though it is possible to read narrative in these ephemeral forms, as David Waldstreicher convincingly does, doing so returns to the question that Douglass poses in *The Heroic Slave*.²⁹ What happens when the material foundation that constitutes biography does not exist? *The Heroic Slave* ventures that the problem lies not in the source material—the material culture of a life—but in the generic and narratological reliance on such matters of life: "Curiously, earnestly, anxiously we peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of northern skies to reveal him" (175). The archives for Washington are dark, and he "is still enveloped in darkness" (175).

²⁸ Years earlier, in the beginning of his autobiographical narrative, Douglass had addressed similar lacunae in his own life.

The problem of source material—whether primary or secondhand, printed or visual—has been a formidable challenge for scholars working in African American literary history. In an essay for *Common-Place*, John Ernest polemically highlights the prevalence of the phrase “little is known” in biographies of black Americans. Ernest critiques the pervasiveness of this phrase at the same time that he notes its inescapability. When the very basic facts of human existence, such as a birth date, cannot be plotted on a calendar, how much can we really know? (Douglass addresses his approximate birthdate in the very opening of the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, when he mentions that chattel does not have birthdays.) Ernest offers a candid critique of contemporary critical efforts that myopically treat literary narrative biography genre as the only worthwhile biographical genre.

The drive to do more than admit that “little is known” can sometimes elide the startling and troublesome gaps that exist in the archive, gaps that often represent the suffocating tendrils of state-based power and racial subjugation. Biographers and literary critics have addressed this issue in innovative ways. One recent model of exhaustive research into even the slimmest, most spread out, and most deceptive archives is Ezra Greenspan’s biography of William Wells Brown. While acknowledging the missing pieces, Greenspan nevertheless reconstructs as much as possible from the archive. At the other end of the spectrum, Saidiya Hartman has developed a methodology that calls attention to the missing pieces and preserves their absences, what Hartman, drawing on narratology, calls “critical fabulation.” Asking if it is “possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive,” Hartman argues that “I [intend] both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling...This double gesture can

be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (11). Hartman cites Mieke Bal to name this double gesture:

The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. “Fabula” denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform action. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and [*sic*] event.” (11)

Douglass tackles the incomplete archive challenge from a perspective about genre and genre conventions, specifically the nexus of narrative fiction and non-fictional life-writing. On board the *Creole* Washington served as a cook. Robert S. Levine draws attention to this point and suggests that most cooks on board slave ships were not in chains. In this light, Listwell’s decision to give Washington three files to break his chains seems entirely unnecessary because Washington would not have been shackled. Considered from the perspective of heroic fabulation, though, this moment is important because it shows Douglass’s creative power and sense of constructing a narrative. He builds a moment of collaborative resistance between Listwell and Washington. More than that though, Douglass’s fictionalization impulse regarding the exchange of files from Listwell to Washington argues for the importance of seeing how archival and historical lacunae can be transformed from stumbling block to revolutionary catalyst through the potential power of critical fabulation. Douglass shifts the grounds for representing the

biographical subject away from archival plentitude and toward a theoretical discussion of character.

3. “WITH CHARACTER, WE SHALL BE POWERFUL”

Douglass’s interest in character, race, historiography, and representativeness has a rich history that precedes *The Heroic Slave*. This history establishes the intellectual genealogy for what occurs in *The Heroic Slave*. In the 14 July 1848 issue of his newspaper *The North Star*, Douglass published an article whose title asked “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?”³⁰ The answer lies not in amount (a lot, enough, too little, etc.) but rather in the subject of the question. White abolitionists, Douglass answers, “are nobly devoting themselves to our cause” (314). Indeed, “our white friends” are doing a lot, the article admits, “but it must never be forgotten that when they have exerted all their energies, devised every scheme, and done all they can in asserting our rights, proclaim our wrongs, and rebuking our foes, their labor is lost.” Douglass anticipates those who seize on lost labor: “yea, worse than lost, unless we are found in the faithful discharge of our anti slavery duties” (314). Black abolitionists welcome their white friends, but Douglass intones that ultimately “the main work must be commenced, carried on, and conducted by our-selves...It is evident that we can be improved and elevated only just so fast and far as we shall improve and elevate ourselves.” The stakes are clear: “We must rise or fall, succeed or fail, by our own merits” (314). What will determine whether Douglass’s audience will rise and succeed, fall or fail?

This article argues that “what we, the colored people, want, is *character*” (318). A pun on “want” registers both the lack that Douglass laments but also the desire for change. The paragraph’s insistence on character appears in almost every single sentence by name, and where it does not appear by name a pronoun refers back to the term: “Character is the important thing, and without it we must continue to be marked for degradation and stamped with the brand of inferiority” (318). Despite the one-sided rhetoric at work in this sentence—after all, who’s responsible for labeling blacks as degraded and branding them as inferior?—Douglass’s article accords a central role to the politics of character and representativeness. In fact, the article contends that character is as important as politics: “A change in our political condition would do very little for us without [character]” (318).

Douglass routinely offered himself as a model of emulative character. He famously pursues this project in serial autobiographical publications beginning with the *Narrative* (1845) and later continuing through *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and finally *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). At the same time that Douglass extolled the importance of cultivating character in “What are the colored people doing for themselves,” he worried that focusing on and celebrating exceptional portraits of heroic character might be counterproductive: “What matters it to the mass of colored people of this country that they are able to point to their Peningtons, Garnets, Remonds, Wards, Purvises, Smiths, Whippers, Sandersons, and a respectable list of other men of character which we might name, while our general ignorance makes these men exceptions to our

race? Their talents can do little to give us character in the eyes of the world” (318).³¹ Instead, Douglass argues, “we must get character for ourselves, as a people.” Douglass conspicuously omits Madison Washington from that list. It is conspicuous because by 1848 Douglass had already been using Washington as a test case for some of his thinking about character, politics, and agency for a few years.³² As revolutions rumbled across Europe Douglass no doubt sensed the growing role that politics and character could play if those revolutionary energies could be transported across the Atlantic.³³

Douglass’s position in “What are the colored people doing for themselves” looks like an argument for uplift politics: the ignorance of his fellow black Americans, Douglass intimates, is the condition by contrast with which figures such as Henry Highland Garnet and Charles Lenox Remond become exemplary. While Douglass certainly advocated for equal opportunity—a point I discuss below in relation to what Jack Turner calls “democratic egalitarian obligation”—the gist of Douglass’s critique in this article is for a more robust theory of character than an argument for uplift policies and ideologies. The process that Douglass begins in “What are the colored people doing

³¹ James William Charles Pennington, orator and minister; Henry Highland Garnet, minister and abolitionist; Charles Lenox Remond, Massachusetts-based abolitionist; Samuel Ringgold Ward, fugitive slave, author, minister, and newspaper editor; Robert Purvis, abolitionist who helped found *American Anti Slavery Society* in 1833; James McCune Smith, physician, abolitionist, and author; William Whipper, businessman and abolitionist; Jeremiah Sanderson, Bedford, MA born abolitionist.

³² See the following Douglass speeches for references to Madison Washington: 23 October 1845 speech, “American Prejudice against Color,” delivered in Cork, Ireland; “America’s Compromise with Slavery and the Abolitionists’ Work,” 6 April 1846, delivered in Paisley, Scotland; “American and Scottish Prejudice against the Slave,” 1 May 1846 in Edinburgh, Scotland; “Meeting in Faneuil Hall,” 30 May 1848, in Boston, MA.

³³ In *Autographs for Freedom* a biographical sketch of Lajos Kossuth (166-73) appears right before *The Heroic Slave*.

for themselves” and then more fully develops in *The Heroic Slave* is an argument for the diffusion of character rather than the celebration of character’s heroic greatness. It is a subtle but important difference. The 1848 article seems to list examples of emulative greatness only to say that these exceptional cases do not matter because they are exceptional. Cynthia S. Hamilton argues that this anti-heroic perspective not only represents Douglass’s growing unease with singular hero mythology but also that Douglass uses Washington specifically because of his differences from familiar heroic icons: “In contrast to Douglass or Toussaint, Washington did not maintain and develop his position of leadership over an extended period. As an ordinary man who behaved with exceptional coolness, sagacity, and character in one moment of crisis, however, he became a symbol of what ordinary men might achieve” (101). In an unpublished manuscript Douglass doubles down on his skepticism that the great hero is the best bet for historical change: “Without excluding the heroic from human life, I find real greatness of character to consist in the qualities that enable a people to bear and forbear, and to submit to wrong for the moment and bide their time for the opportunity and ultimate right” (qtd. in Hamilton 101-2). Douglass focuses on great men and character not to blindly extol and exhort his fellow black Americans to strive for heroic greatness. Drawing on Emerson, Douglass instead diffuses heroic greatness in order to challenge the tacit hierarchies that enable such characterizations and then revise the historical record to make space for the Madison Washingtons of the era. For Douglass, Washington is an important influence on heroic narratives because his role is limited to a single moment—the rebellion—and he then essentially disappears. In contrast to Toussaint or even

himself, Washington's example functions as a case study for Douglass to apply his interest in the diffusion of character.

It might seem contradictory that Douglass critiques heroic narratives at the same time that he practically raises Washington to that very level. Such contradictions, it has been pointed out, run throughout Douglass's intellectual career. How can Douglass both critique heroic agency (associated with the Penningtons, Garnets, et. al.) and ascribe such agency to other historical persons? Jack Turner helpfully points out that Douglass's thought is not as paradoxical as it might seem because, according to Turner, Douglass believes in "democratic egalitarian obligation."³⁴ Turner argues that Douglass can endorse the principle of self-help *and* urge governmental intervention because "individuals need some material basics to begin a life of self-help, and if family or natural environment cannot provide them, then the political community must" (49). Turner historicizes his argument by suggesting that the postbellum shifts in federal policy (most notably in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments) revealed that while Douglass still "preach[ed] the virtue of self-reliant exertion and the viciousness of dependency" (62) he simultaneously called for the government to intervene. In Turner's words, "the capacity for self-help is not determined solely by talent and will; it is also determined by social structures that organize economic opportunity" (62). I argue that a similar paradox operates with how character appears in Douglass.

Emerson might seem to be a curious figure to associate with Douglass's abolitionist interest in character during the late 1840s and early 1850s. After all Emerson

³⁴ Douglass's thought was no stranger to such paradoxes, as many scholars point out with respect to his postbellum career. For example, Douglass criticized the federal government's inability to ensure positive freedoms for black Americans at the same time that he repeatedly emphasized the importance of self-help.

was not a forceful antislavery advocate in the 1840s despite his well-received “West Indian Emancipation Address” (1844).³⁵ Even when he hit his stride in the 1850s with a series of public speeches that denounced the Fugitive Slave Law and encouraged his fellow citizens to resist its mandate, critics remain divided over how to account for Emerson’s antislavery politics. Hugh Egan helpfully summarizes the different camps: “Len Gougeon (along with Joel Myerson, Albert von Frank, and Linck Johnson) have sought to revive Emerson’s abolitionist credentials, while others (including John Carlos Rowe, Peter S. Field, and Cornel West) have argued that he was either indifferent or hostile to the interests of the slave and ended up on the wrong side of history” (190). Emerson’s reluctance to offer full-throated endorsement of abolitionism belies the ways that he was in fact influential, a point that Douglas A. Jones Jr. makes:

What seems to hinder critics from identifying Douglass’s intellectual debts to American Transcendentalism is a refusal to appreciate Emerson’s claim in ‘Circles’ (1841) that the ‘practical’ is one of the ‘degrees of idealism’ (*CW* 2: 183). In response to the mounting defeats of rationalist abolitionism in the 1850s Douglass did just that, as he increasingly tackled the question of what to do (i.e., the practical) from the vantage of transcendentalist idealism. (12)

Regardless of Emerson’s own politics, Emerson’s theorizations of character—which themselves attempt to balance seemingly incompatible elements—offered Douglass a constellation of portable ideas to rework. Indeed, the way that Douglass builds

³⁵ On the reception of this address, see Gougeon 84-85.

Washington's character evidences, to borrow a term from Egan, an "Emersonian impulse" (197).

Egan's phrase "Emersonian impulse" seems especially helpful in articulating the influence of Emerson's work outside of his own corpus. Len Gougeon argues in *Virtue's Hero* that the cleaving of Emerson from nineteenth-century antislavery cultures is due explicitly to the ways that biographies of Emerson did not discuss his antislavery activity. Gougeon suggests that the contentious debate around Emerson the abolitionist is a result of two polar opposite biographies. The first is Ralph Rusk's 1949 biography which described an Emerson deeply immersed in reform cultures; the second is Stephen Whicher's 1953 biography which traced Emerson's ineluctable retreat from popular culture and emphasized Emerson's intellectual separation. Gougeon points out that many of Emerson's antislavery writings were unavailable to earlier biographers, either because they were not published or not archived (2-3). Part of the problem, then, is that critics have inherited a distorted portrait of Emerson the abolitionist due to the generic effects of biography. This twinned archival-interpretive problem is an intriguing echo of the problem that Douglass raises in this opening paragraphs of *The Heroic Slave*.

Douglass's life-writing about Madison Washington reveals Douglass's own evolving belief that character played an essential and formative role in politics, and that writing about character does not need to require an archive. This political outlet for character's effects is worth emphasizing because it represents Douglass's break from Garrison and Garrisonian abolitionism. One of the catalysts for their split was the role that politics played in abolitionist activism: for Garrison, politics was too tainted with slavery. Garrison and his ilk strove to be above politics, drawing their power from and

shaping their strategies according to the principle of moral suasion. Garrisonians believed that the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery document and that only relentless moral suasion—neither political activism nor violence figured in their ideology—would end chattel slavery. Douglass had been a firm Garrisonian for the first half of the 1840s. He embraced its tenets so fully that when the Buffalo Anti-Slavery Convention debated whether to formally adopt the propositions put forward by Henry Highland Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves of the United States” in 1843, a speech where Garnet argued that violent resistance is necessary and justified, Douglass joined the “nay” votes which won by just a single vote. (Garnet’s speech was not officially endorsed by the convention.)³⁶ Douglass did not feel comfortable advocating violent resistance, a position and vote that aligned him with Garrison’s faction.³⁷ But by 1845 Douglass’s views had become less immutably Garrisonian, and he wondered if politics and physical action could aid the cause. Where Garrison remained entrenched in his absolutism, Douglass adapted. His thinking on Madison Washington tracks this adaptation.

Within a year of the article in *The North Star* Douglass delivered a substantial speech detailing his growing militancy, rejection of Garrisonianism, and full-throated belief in Washington’s revolutionary character in a speech known as “Slavery the Slumbering Volcano.” This speech is an important moment in the account that this chapter offers of Douglass’s embrace of a different type of character in the build-up to writing *The Heroic Slave*. In this speech Douglass promises that the built-up internal

³⁶ The Colored Conventions collaborative does clarifying work on this moment and many other conventions. See: <http://coloredconventions.org/exhibits/show/henry-highland-garnet-address/garnet-orations/garnet-1843>

³⁷ On Douglass’s break from Garrison, see Levine 112-16.

pressures over chattel slavery would erupt, like the unreleased built-up energy deep beneath the earth's crust. Moreover, Douglass warns, the eruption would resemble the rebellions that slaveholders feared. Douglass terms the late 1840s as none other than a state of war: "Some men go for the abolition of Slavery by peaceable means. So do I; I am a peace man; but I recognize in the Southern States at this moment, as has been remarked here, a *state of war*" (153). While it is impossible to know if Douglass had been thinking about *The Heroic Slave*, it is abundantly clear that Madison Washington continued to be a touchstone for Douglass as he navigated the widespread influence of "a state of war" in the U.S. South. Indeed, the speech highlights this bellicosity in comparison to Douglass's earlier Garrisonian pacifism:

I want them to know that at least one Coloured man in the Union, peace man though he is, would greet with joy the glad news should it come here to-morrow, that an insurrection had broken out in the Southern States. (Great applause.) I want them to know that a *black man* cherishes that sentiment—that one of the fugitive slaves holds it, and that it is not impossible that some other black men (a voice—we are all so here) may have occasion at some time or other, to put this theory into practice. (153)

This theory into practice, of course, is the history of slave rebellions in the United States, and Douglass expectedly points to Madison Washington as a model: "Sir, I want to alarm the slaveholders, and not to alarm them by mere declamation or by mere bold assertions, but to show them that there is really danger in persisting in the crime of continuing Slavery in this land. I want them to know that there are some Madison Washingtons in

this country. (Applause.)” (153). In Douglass’s hands, there will be some Madison Washingtons in the archive as well.

4. “CHARACTERISTIC OF THE MAN”

The trip between Richmond, VA and New Orleans, LA was routine for ships transporting chattel slaves between the two cities until 25 October 1841. On that day the brig *Creole* left Richmond. It carried 103 enslaved blacks when it left port in Richmond before loading another 32 in Hampton Roads, VA. Other than the enslaved, eight crew and five sailors, six white passengers, and goods—such as tobacco—were on board to travel down the coast, around Florida, before crossing through the Gulf of Mexico en route to New Orleans. By November 7 the *Creole* approached the northern edge of the Bahamas near Abaco Island where it planned to enter the harbor. About 9:30 PM, chief mate Zephaniah Gifford went below deck and discovered an enslaved male conspicuously among the enslaved women. Gifford returned with William Merritt, a white male who oversaw the slaves. Merritt and Gifford found Madison Washington, the head cook, in the hold:

Merritt tried to seize him, but was unable to hold on to Washington as the slave ran up the ladder. When Washington got on deck, he shoved Gifford and nearly knocked him back down into the hold. At the same time another slave fired a pistol, the ball of which grazed the back of the mate’s head. With the firing of this shot Washington called for other blacks to join him. (Jones, “The Peculiar Institution” 29)

Eighteen other blacks joined Washington to take control of the ship. With the forced cooperation of Merritt, who charted a revised course toward Nassau, the *Creole* set sail again and arrived on the morning of 9 November 1841 in the British colony. The mutineers were arrested but later released—thus effectively emancipating them from their American enslavers—by the British colonial government. All of the mutineers, including Madison Washington, were soon thereafter freed despite ongoing legal disputes between the British and American governments.

Douglass and other Americans learned of the *Creole* revolt by early December 1841 when newspapers began printing coverage. Even though there were other potential subjects for a life-writing account of a “heroic slave,” such as the *Amistad*’s Cinque, it matters that Douglass chose Washington who was less well-known as a national celebrity during the 1840s than Cinque and others from the *Amistad*. Douglass’s evolving sense of character found a keen subject in Washington. Abolitionist newspapers unsurprisingly gave extensive coverage to the revolt and its aftermath.³⁸ Interest in the rest of the United States also remained keen due to the recent *Amistad* case finally being settled at the U.S. Supreme Court in March 1841. The *Amistad* case was a major victory for the antislavery movement and major defeat for the pro-slavery movement, not to mention the persons involved in the ruling. The Supreme Court affirmed the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut (where the ship was taken to port and came under U.S. jurisdiction) who essentially ruled that the black captives had legally fought for their freedom on the open seas where an 1817 treaty between Britain and Spain outlawed the slave trade across the Atlantic. It was a watershed ruling. Despite its chronological

³⁸ Levine, Stauffer, and McKivigan have collected many of these responses and included them in their edition of *The Heroic Slave*, pp. 57-98.

proximity to the *Amistad* rebellion, the *Creole* case was never as significant as the *Amistad*. Robert S. Levine points out that one reason is because the central drama played out in the Bahamas rather than in Connecticut (128). Cynthia S. Hamilton notes that “In contrast to the wide public attention granted to the *Amistad* group, particularly to Cinqué, there was little interest in the personalities of the enslaved Americans aboard the *Creole*” (99). Nevertheless Douglass and abolitionists saw in the *Creole* case a power that the transnational abolitionist movement could exert on U.S. national politics. *The Heroic Slave* finds argumentative potential in the relatively nebulous details surrounding the *Creole*, offering Madison Washington as a test case to investigate the complexities of character. Character offers Douglass not only a way to practice historiography—“glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented”—but also a way to theorize political life for nineteenth-century black Americans.

An air of inevitability frames the actions of the *Creole* revolt in *The Heroic Slave*. This inevitability has to do with how Douglass elucidates the heroic character of Madison Washington. Indeed, in the apostrophizing opening paragraphs before Madison Washington is named, the narrator laments that “Glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented” (175). The opening paragraphs stage these mere “glimpses” as not only *the* challenge of black historiography but also the promise. It took Douglass several years to develop a sense of the political role that character could play during the age of chattel slavery. *The Heroic Slave* is a central node, although it is not the definitive statement of revolutionary character that Douglass would make in his life, either on Madison Washington or other historical persons that Douglass eulogized. Douglass

evidences his belief in the political efficacy—indeed the revolutionary capability—of character throughout his writing and thinking on Madison Washington.

The reader, like Listwell, the white voyeur of the first section, stumbles on Washington. When we finally see his name in print, it appears partial and parenthetical, echoing the glimpses and partial views of the opening paragraphs: “Madison (for that was the name of our hero)” (178). Despite such passive voice syntax and typographical cloistering, the narrative emphasizes Washington’s corporeal power. He appears fully formed, fully eloquent, fully powerful, fully masculine, and fully black (179). Compared to the biographical convention of beginning the life story with a family genealogy and then working chronologically from birth forward, Douglass’ *in media res* narrative hints that this text is a notable departure from the period’s life-writing, especially Douglass’ own 1845 autobiography, which famously begins “I was born.” Of course, there is a persuasive element to what’s going on with Washington—that *The Heroic Slave* wants to convert the unconvinced reader of Washington’s rightful cause in a transformation that Listwell himself experiences when he formally announces his antislavery conversion at the end of Part 1: “From this hour I am an abolitionist” he avers (182). As Robert B. Stepto helpfully points out, Listwell “listens well,” a clever encoding of how information can move in this world. I would add that just as Douglass works around the archival limitations for elucidating character, so too does Listwell’s perception work in this vein, for Listwell can grasp character through listening.

The second part of *The Heroic Slave* reveals how Washington and Listwell meet the second time. Where the first part seems voyeuristic, the second part seems fated. Washington and Listwell both appear sympathetic and determined in this second part, but

The Heroic Slave does not delve immediately into the diffusion of character. Instead, Douglass' biographical novella takes time to show its two main characters collaborating and supporting one another as well as laying the foundation for readers to revisit the *Creole* rebellion in light of a well of sympathy for Washington. Published in the aftermath of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* pointedly addresses the shortcomings that Douglass saw in Stowe's novel—particularly around the question of violence and agency.

Emerson writes repeatedly through “Character” as well as “Uses of Great Men” about the symbiosis between nature and character, how someone's character emerges out of and is imbued with nature: “Character is nature in the highest form” (503) and “This is a natural power, like light and heat, and all nature coöperates with it” (498). What's notable about Part III of *The Heroic Slave* is, instead, the incommensurability between “nature” and character. It is also a striking counterpoint to Part I because it presents the other side of the coin. Part III opens with a long description of a “famous public tavern” that sits on the outskirts of Richmond, VA. “In its better days,” Douglass mentions that the tavern was “quite notorious” “as being the grand resort for most of the leading gamblers, horse-racers, cock-fighters, and slave-traders from all the country round about.” This is a very different portrait of Virginia's history compared to the heroes and statesmen that the novella's first paragraph extols. “This old rookery,” Douglass continues, “the nucleus of all sorts of birds, mostly those of ill omen, has, like everything else peculiar to Virginia, lost much of its ancient consequence and splendor” (205-6). Critics have argued that the architecture of moral decay that defines the mansion and all beings—avian, canine, and human alike—who gather there is a rewriting of the novella's

opening emphasis on the glory of Virginia, now faded due to the corrosive impact of chattel slavery.³⁹ While it is true that the novella introduces many characters who evince a similar state of decay, such as Wilkes and his tavern compatriots, Listwell is out of place and everyone knows it, including Listwell. If nature is an originating power for Emersonian character, then Douglass creates a new challenge for Listwell and Washington in this third section. Each must rise to the challenge of Part III where the environmental decay on display threatens to dominate Washington's quest for freedom and Listwell's attempt to help.

Where the previous two parts of *The Heroic Slave* have worked to elaborate Listwell's admirable character exemplified by his transformation into an abolitionist in Part I and his efforts to help Washington in Part II, Part III shows his evasiveness and concealment. Douglass writes that "[Wilkes] was soon at this elbow, boring him with all sorts of questions. All, however, directed to find out his character, business, residence, purposes, and destination. With the most perfect appearance of good nature and carelessness, Mr. Listwell evaded these meddlesome inquiries, and turned conversation to general topics, leaving himself and all that specially pertained to him, out of discussion" (214-15). Wilkes may have been unsure about Listwell's character, his purposes, his business being in Virginia, but the opacity here differs from the opacity that defines Washington's diffusion in the opening pages. This obscurity is crucially different from Washington's obscurity in the archive, because Washington's obscurity is a result of his status as chattel. Listwell can choose to be obscure; Washington had no choice.

³⁹ See Levine 151.

The almost-contradictory logic of character diffusion—both a celebration of heroism and its critique—reaches its apex in Part IV. Whereas Listwell and Washington—and their friendship—ground the first three chapters through their interactions (both seen and unseen), the fourth and final section stages a dialogue between two white sailors who meet at Richmond’s “Marine-coffee house” (226). (Richmond, a symbolic epicenter of the relationship between American government and American slavery, would, within a decade, become the capital of the Confederate States of America.) There, in the coffee house, Jack Williams, “a regular old salt,” addresses Tom Grant, the first mate aboard the *Creole* (226). Douglass turns the narrative over to two white men, one of whom serves as an embodied representation of the slave trade (Grant), the other of whom parlays stock racist ideas (Williams).

Douglass has Grant and Williams reinterpret the novella’s opening gambit. The conversation between the two men serves as a microcosm of Douglass’s belief that character traits transcend hierarchical racial typologies, a position that challenged widespread mid-nineteenth-century belief. Such a claim was directly aimed at prevailing ideologies that argued for hierarchical relationships between races and genders; Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* gives literary form to these hierarchical ideologies, for example. Williams fires the first salvo, claiming “that whole affair on board of the *Creole* was miserably and disgracefully managed.” Doubling down, he gruffly argues that “The whole disaster was the result of ignorance of the real character of *darkies* in general” (226). The tacit critique here addresses what was a persistent paradox regarding the agency of the enslaved: in defining chattel slaves as property and thus objects, the question of agency should have been a moot point for Williams and Grant. Williams

implies that if only Grant and the rest of the crew aboard the *Creole* had properly understood the racialized hierarchy—what Williams calls “the real character of *darkies*”—then they would have properly managed the situation, thus avoiding a revolt at sea. Intriguingly, Williams tacitly concedes that a desire to gain liberty at any cost is part of this “real character.” In a way, Williams and Douglass share a similar perspective on the capacity for character’s revolutionary capability but of course for Williams it must be shackled and managed, not fomented and memorialized in print and speech. Williams lays bare his hand in this moment, establishing a counter-narrative that would challenge pernicious myths that arose around “real character” and racial inequality in nineteenth-century U.S. culture.

A similar conceptual problem troubles nineteenth-century fiction, according to Myra Jehlen. In a subtle but forceful argument that focuses on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Jehlen writes that “slaves in fiction are a fatal contradiction because the novel—particularly after Richardson—is invested in characters with the ability to self govern. To have a “thing” or “chattel” as a character is thus not possible” (383). The same impossibility extends to the slave author, and Jehlen’s argument extends its rhetorical force even further: “any representation of a slave as a feeling and reflecting character (not a mere prop) is contradictory and potentially unstable. There are in fact very few” (384). In combining fiction and biography, two genres that are often antithetical, Douglass harnesses the power of history *and* fiction in order to examine the limits of both.

Reframing this question of agency and character, history and fiction through Emersonian character helps explain the novella’s conspicuous absence of action aboard

the *Creole*.⁴⁰ We learn about the *Creole* through second-hand accounts—not through the deposition or other materials—of Grant who was, as critics have pointed out, knocked unconscious. As readers we are removed multiple levels from what happened. In this way Washington’s agency seems beside the point, even ancillary. In “Character” Emerson writes that “The hero sees that the event is ancillary: it must follow *him*” (499). This line of argumentation is not to suggest that individual action, in this case represented by Madison Washington, is immaterial and unimportant. Far from it. Rather, the point of displacing Washington’s agency in this last section illustrates a different kind of racial character. In “Character,” Emerson asks: “Is an iron handcuff so immutable a bond? Suppose a slaver on the coast of Guinea should take on board a gang of negroes, which should contain persons of the stamp of Toussaint L’Overture; or, let us fancy, under these swarthy masks he has a gang of Washingtons in chains” (498). L’Overture and Madison Washington are both identified in this quote by name. Moreover, Emerson’s opening rhetorical question could be evidence of a patronizing “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps” ideology. But Emerson points toward a group of individuals. In this logic L’Overture and Washington are placeholders in Emerson’s elucidation of the diffusion of character. Douglass seizes on these operative principles and thus removes Washington from the sphere of influence in the fourth section.

For Douglass the diffusion of character explains why Washington is simultaneously foregrounded and diminished because like all great heroes, according to the diffusion of character, he is valuable precisely because one day he will in fact be absent. The closing scene encapsulates the paradox of character diffusion. Grant narrates

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Carrie Hyde’s work on agency, metaphor, and history. See Hyde 102-3.

the resolution of the *Creole* rebellion from his perspective. The *Creole* captives, “deliberately gathered up their baggage before our eyes, and, against our remonstrances, poured through the gangway,—formed themselves into a procession on the wharf,—bid farewell to all on board, and, uttering the wildest shouts of exultation, they marched, amidst the deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathizing spectators, under the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, MADISON WASHINGTON” (238-39). In this scene Washington and the rest of the former captives walk from the ship under their own power. The language points toward the gathering accumulation of bodies into a “procession” which then moves among a “multitude.” This collective is contrasted not only with Washington’s typographically prominent name but also the novella’s characterization of him in relation to the procession: “the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer.” After Washington’s emphasized name appears Douglass’s own signature. I see the diffusion of character at work in this apposition, in this case a visual representation of diffusion. With Washington’s role complete, Douglass can step in to continue the fight. In Emerson’s words, “Great men are thus a collyrium to clear our eyes from egotism, and enable us to see other people and their works” (626). Washington is thus valuable for the fact that he functions as a “collyrium,” a liquid eyewash, and thus enables “some Madison Washingtons in this country” to continue the fight. The diffusion of character spreads, “running out threads of relation through everything” to borrow Emerson’s language from “Uses of Great Men” (618).

The historical record complements this theory of the diffusion of character as well. As Douglass and other biographers of Washington record, after leaving the *Creole* in Nassau’s harbor, Washington effectively disappeared from printed notice. We see him

through “glimpses” and “flashes” for two reasons: the archive of enslavement but also because Washington remained off the public stage. (I am not suggesting that Madison Washington chose to be “invisible” but I do want to point out that the beginning of *The Heroic Slave* is doubly resonant in this way.) For the biographer’s task, Washington slipped back into the anonymity of the everyday, having done his duty both on board the *Creole* but also in a larger sense. In Douglass’s theorization of diffusion, Washington’s disappearance makes way for other “Madison Washingtons” in this country. This theorization contributes to the project that Emerson outlines in “Uses of Great Men:” “When nature removes a great man, people explore the horizon for a successor; but none comes, and none will. His class is extinguished with him...The power which they communicate is not theirs. When we are exalted by ideas, we do not owe this to Plato, but to the idea, to which, also, Plato was debtor” (623). Washington’s power is that he communicates to Douglass and to Douglass’s audience that the idea of freedom is one that will not be extinguished with Washington or Douglass. In this way *The Heroic Slave* marks a historical event and clears the way for the exaltation of an idea: freedom at all costs. In this manner it is important to read *The Heroic Slave* in its original publication context in *Autographs for Freedom*. In the rest of the collection, particularly in the selections the immediately surround *The Heroic Slave*, the influence of Washington and Douglass spreads, “running out threads of relation through everything.”

5. “RUNNING OUT THREADS OF RELATION THROUGH EVERYTHING:” DIFFUSION AND THE DILEMMAS OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN *THE HEROIC SLAVE* AND *AUTOGRAPHS FOR FREEDOM*

Even though the presence of multiple genres and modes in *The Heroic Slave* is well known—what Levine calls the “complex mélange” of autobiography, biography, fiction, and non-fiction—the default interpretive imperative repeatedly falls on autobiography. To disentangle the claims for an autobiographical reading, this section turns first to the role that intertextuality plays in *The Heroic Slave* before turning to consider how intertextuality operates between *The Heroic Slave* and other selections published in *Autographs for Freedom*. Both of these strategies show how diffusion can operate through intertextuality and allusions.

Some critics have long considered *The Heroic Slave* to be a thinly-veiled version of Douglass’s life story. Robert B. Stepto was the first critic to suggest that Washington’s story resonated with Douglass because, in many ways, it was his story. Ivy Wilson writes that “it is as if the author is inserting himself into the protagonist, as if Douglass is attempting to make himself Washington” (463). Levine deviates slightly from critics who deride the novella’s similarities to Douglass: “rather than scoff at Douglass, we might take his strong identification with Washington as similar to Flaubert’s identification with the heroine of his most famous novel when he reputedly declared: “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi*” (156). But there is good reason to not conflate Douglass’s thinking and writing about himself with *The Heroic Slave*. I do not deny the important work that the autobiographical writing did for Douglass’s non-autobiographical writing—indeed, Douglass did return to and revise again and again his life story in print and in speech, a practice that could be considered an autobiographical form of fabulation. This conflation between Douglass and Washington is not entirely surprising although it is misleading to suggest that *The Heroic Slave* is interesting because of its connection to Douglass rather

than for its generic interventions into literary history, specifically the limited imagination of narrative biography during the mid-nineteenth century. Such a collapse also shifts the impetus back toward the domain of autobiography at the expense of Douglass's pointed generic decision to publish a fictional biographical account of Washington. How intertextuality works in *The Heroic Slave*—especially what appears to be self-referential citation of British poet Lord Byron—further elucidates the interpretive promise of diffusion to unlock Douglass's deployment of character in this period of his writing.

The text encourages readers to be skeptical about conflating Douglass and Washington at the same time that Douglass saw a kindred spirit in the stories he crafted about Washington. Tellingly, Douglass cites another author for two epigraphs, himself a cult-hero subject, to help demarcate the literary representation of Washington from Douglass. Consider the epigraphs to Parts III and IV. There, Douglass quotes from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Byron's poem, published in four long cantos between 1812 and 1818, told the story of Harold's travels throughout the Mediterranean. The epigraph to Douglass's Part IV includes the oft-quoted line from Byron, "—Know ye not / Who would be free, *themselves* must strike the blow" (41). This allusion's applicability to *The Heroic Slave* is clear enough. The biographical novella's investment in black agency and revolutionary violence is one major reason that the work, despite its invisibility to critics for many decades, is gaining momentum. In terms of distinguishing between the autobiographical impulse—to see Douglass and Washington as one and the same—and Douglass's decision to write a biographical account of Washington, the epigraph to Part III ("—His head was with his heart, / And that was far away!") is intriguing because it comes from Canto 4 of Byron's poem. In the Preface to Canto 4

Byron expresses his weariness that readers have continually assumed that Childe Harold is just a thinly-veiled autobiographical version of Byron:

With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive: like the Chinese in Goldsmith's 'Citizen of the World', whom nobody would believe to be a Chinese, it was in vain that I asserted, and imagined, that I had drawn a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in the composition, that I determined to abandon it altogether -- and have done so.⁴¹

Byron decides to demote Harold from such a prominent place in the last canto with the hope that audiences might engage with the poem rather than with the cult of Byron. According to John Stauffer, Douglass and other abolitionists such as Gerrit Smith and James McCune Smith “frequently quoted Byron in their correspondence, speeches, and published writings as a source of inspiration, particularly those lines that invoked rebellion and self-transformation” (62). *The Heroic Slave* quotes the expected rebellion line from Byron, but its citation of the Preface to Canto 4 displays Douglass’s canny awareness not only of his own self-representational creations but also the growing importance of cult-like heroes. It would be hard for Douglass to find a better citation than Byron in this respect. Although I have been unable to determine the provenance or

⁴¹ <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Byron/charold4.html>

publication information of the copy of Byron's poem that Douglass consulted, Douglass did own an 1840 edition of Byron's complete poems.⁴²

In this way the Byron citations appear straightforwardly mimetic. But the citation's context in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* argues otherwise. Douglass cites the Preface to Canto 4 where Byron expresses frustration over readers' inability to see the distinction between Byron as author and his literary creations. In this way *The Heroic Slave* establishes a running theme of diffusion where the heroic spirit of the authors—in this case Douglass and Byron—can be separated from their correlated literary subjects, Washington and Childe Harold, respectively. Byron also existed as a martyr to the revolutionary spirit of early and mid-nineteenth century Europe. He died while fighting for Greece in their war for Independence.

To discount the similarities between Douglass and Washington or to sideline the engagement that characterizes Douglass's relationship with Washington is to belittle Douglass's decades-long investment in Washington. Indeed, Washington exerted profound influence on Douglass. Nevertheless, emphasis on such autobiographical affinities between Washington and Douglass casts *The Heroic Slave* within an autobiographical mode. It thus participates in a genre tautology that suggests Douglass, the great autobiographer, would always be trying to rewrite his life narrative. It is true that he published distinct life narratives throughout his life: the *Narrative of Frederick*

⁴² <https://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/collections.htm>. Despite my efforts on various online databases as well as contacting the staff at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, I cannot confirm whether the 1840 edition that Douglass owned includes the Preface to Canto 4. Of course the matter of when Douglass acquired the 1840 edition remains another hurdle that may or may not have an answer. Other books in his collection could bear on how Douglass came to understand character in the late 1840s and 1850s, such as Clara Lucas Balfour's *Moral Heroism* (1846).

Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1883), and a revised *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), not to mention the countless speeches or the portraits through which he communicated revisions of his identity.

While intertextuality can be used to establish forms of affiliation or to signal intellectual debts, it works differently in *The Heroic Slave* because of diffusion. Rather than ascribing affiliation between Douglass and Byron—and thus shoring up their mutually reinforcing claims to heroic greatness—the biographical novella’s use of diffusion is in line with the tone of the Byron’s frustration in the Preface to Canto 4. It would seem that citing Byron talking about himself and his frustrations over autobiographical interpretations of Childe Harold supports arguments in favor of Madison Washington as yet another textual instantiation of Frederick Douglass. Instead, I argue that diffusion’s persistent role in *The Heroic Slave* suggests otherwise: diffusion explains that the seeming paradox of a hagiographic treatment of Madison Washington is just one phase among a potentially endless proliferation of justice-seeking action. It is true that Douglass celebrates a heroic history. It is also true that Douglass does not want single heroes to be the standard-bearer of heroic history. The referential citationality from Byron to Douglass and the Washington to Douglass sets up what is Douglass’s view of heroic history: in Emerson’s words, “great men exist that there may be greater men” (“Uses” 632).

Diffusion of character runs into pressure elsewhere in *Autographs for Freedom*, particularly in the cluster of texts that precede and succeed *The Heroic Slave*. A biographical sketch of Douglass, written by Reverend Robert R. Raymond, espouses the

very individualistic hagiography that Douglass challenges through diffusion. Raymond's sketch, "Outline of a Man," functions as a counterpoint to Douglass's diffusion. Raymond's use of Douglass (rather than, say, Madison Washington) shows not just how pervasive the heroic model of history was in the middle of the nineteenth century but that Douglass himself was an obvious representative case for heroic individualism at the same time that *The Heroic Slave* theorizes an alternative framework for heroism. Raymond says that when he was younger he used his imagination to devise "an *Africo-American for the time*" (148).⁴³ This man of the time, Raymond explains, would be "a colored man, who had known by experience the bitterness of slavery, and now by some process free, so endowed with natural powers, and a certain degree of attainments, all the more rare and effective for being acquired under great disadvantages,—as to be a sort of Moses to his oppressed and degraded tribe. He was to be gifted with a noble person, of course, and refinement of manners, and some elegance of thought and expression" (148). This imaginative vision fades as years pass by until Raymond, while walking down a Hartford street, joined a crowd assembling around a speaker. It turns out to be Douglass. Raymond writes that Douglass was "the most remarkable man of this country, and of this age; and—may I not dare to add—the almost complete fulfillment [*sic*] of my early dream!" (150). Raymond then proceeds to relate Douglass's efforts to learn to read while enslaved, his longing for freedom, and his escape. Raymond both narrates the events and cites Douglass's writings on the themes, namely his autobiographical *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*.⁴⁴ Raymond assures his audience that his language is free from

⁴³ Raymond 148-60. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

⁴⁴ See 152-53 for an example.

exaggeration (154); nevertheless, Raymond claims that Douglass's "present character, attainments, and position constitute a phenomenon hitherto perhaps unprecedented in the history of intellectual and moral achievement" (155). Like Harriet Martineau whose *The Hour and the Man: A Historical Romance* nominates L'Ouverture as a representative and timely hero, Raymond's own searching for "an Africo-American for the time" (148) extols Douglass's achievements without connecting Douglass to a longer history of activism. In this way Raymond's sketch of Douglass configures Douglass as an isolated individual, "a phenomenon" without precedent.

Raymond's celebratory biographical sketch of Douglass stands in stark contrast to what Douglass accomplishes in *The Heroic Slave*. Where Raymond isolates Douglass as an "unprecedented" "phenomenon," Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* goes to length to place Madison Washington within a longer history of activism that begins in the American Revolution (in the tale's opening paragraphs) and continues to the present moment in the early 1850s. Through the concept of diffusion, *The Heroic Slave* presents Washington as someone with precedent, someone who is emphatically *not* a phenomenon. In the ending of *The Heroic Slave* Washington recedes to make room for others; in "Outline of a Man," conversely, Douglass looms large as a heroic man without precedent.

Two other biographical sketches, "Kossuth" and "Placido," reinforce the monumental model of heroic history. In "Kossuth," a biographical sketch of Hungarian revolutionary and statesman, Lajos Kossuth, Syracuse-based abolitionist John Thomas⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Thomas edited Gerrit Smith's *Liberty Party Paper* before it merged with Douglass's *North Star* to become *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Stauffer 166). Thomas also worked on the Jerry Rescue. <http://www.nyhistory.com/gerritsmith/jerry.htm>.

“confidently” says that Kossuth “is the great man of the age” (166).⁴⁶ In “Placido,” a biographical sketch of Afro-Cuban poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809-44), Professor W.G. Allen extols the poet known as Placido, writing that “Great men are a nation’s vitality. Nations pass away, —great men, never” (256-57). The tone does not moderate: “Placido was a great man. He was a great poet besides (257) and “Great was Placido in life,—he was greater still, in death” (258). Placido was charged with conspiracy to “overthrow slavery” in Cuba and was executed as a result (262). Professor W.G. Allen hearkens back to Kossuth, asking near the end of the sketch, “Do you honor Kossuth?—then forgot not him who is worthy to stand side by side with Hungary’s illustrious son” (262).

“Outline of a Man,” “Kossuth,” and “Placido” seem to contradict the theory of diffusion in *The Heroic Slave* when viewed independently. They trumpet the heroic individualism that Douglass goes to lengths to challenge and reroute through diffusion. But considered within *Autographs for Freedom* in relation to *The Heroic Slave*, these sketches can be assembled into the very sort of genealogy that the tales, when considered as discrete examples of hagiographic narratives, preclude. Put another way, diffusion runs out threads through everything else in *Autographs for Freedom* and can operate indifferently to what the biographical sketches themselves might contain. Kossuth, Douglass, Washington, Placido, all become examples of precedent for future figures. How diffusion operates within *The Heroic Slave* reconfigures the cluster of sketches that surround Douglass’s life-writing text. Where the language of hagiographic honor seems to contradict Douglass’s project in *The Heroic Slave*, diffusion runs “threads of relation”

⁴⁶ Thomas 166-73. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

out through everything and can thus reorient these sketches into a collective. Instead of individuals, considered in success these tales constitute a freedom-fighting genealogy that is a core component of how Douglass theorizes diffusion, specifically its ability to make way for greater figures to come.

Intertextuality serves Douglass's arguments in *The Heroic Slave* as well as *Autographs for Freedom* because it enables Douglass to build a genealogy of great men who existed and support his view that "there may be greater men" to exist. Intertextuality helps Douglass establish historical precedents for his version of heroism, and this includes more than the revolutionary figures whose names appear in the opening paragraph, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry. Reading *The Heroic Slave* as part of *Autographs for Freedom* nominates a number of other revolutionary figures, from Placido to Kossuth as well. This genealogy includes Douglass himself even though to assume that Douglass writes about Madison Washington as an autobiographical project is to overlook the pointed ways that the this life-writing intervenes in nineteenth-century biographical discourse through its configuration of the diffusion of character. *The Heroic Slave* also cites European revolutions through the association of Byron and Kussoth. Through fabulation and intertextuality, *The Heroic Slave* develops Douglass's theory of the diffusion of character.

6. NAMES, ANONYMITY, AND DIFFUSION: THE HEROIC SLAVE (WOMAN)

Published just two stories before *The Heroic Slave* in *Autographs for Freedom* is a short story titled "The Heroic Slave Woman." Written by white abolitionist reformer and Samuel J. May, "The Heroic Slave Woman" offers an alternative to the logic of

character diffusion. “The Heroic Slave Woman” describes a complicated relationship between gender, agency, and heroism. It functions as a companion piece to *The Heroic Slave* by highlighting how the gendering of familial duty is a form of agency that remains inscrutable because of how masculine action structures understanding of heroism and agency. The biographical sketches in *Autographs for Freedom* that I have discussed above all feature male heroes engaged in physical acts of emancipation. In *The Heroic Slave* Douglass shows how prevailing mid-nineteenth-century biographical practices cannot tell the story of Madison Washington and other black heroes. When Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* seizes on archival absences as a way to reconfigure the project of black life-writing, the text associates heroism with masculinity and corporeal emancipatory actions. In contrast, May’s “The Heroic Slave Woman” highlights how the account of heroic character made possible by the diffusion of character runs into trouble when writing the life of an anonymous enslaved black woman whose emancipatory action is, paradoxically, one that maintains her enslavement.

Compared to the heroic hagiography of “Kossuth” and “Placido,” sketches in which the names of the heroic individuals appear frequently throughout the sketch as well as in the titles, “The Heroic Slave Woman” never reveals the name of its eponymous figure, the heroic slave woman. It’s not that May abstains from naming; after all, May’s sketch names English abolitionist Edward S. Abdy (161) and English religious thinker William Paley (163). May himself is listed throughout the sketch’s first-person narration and also through a scrawled reproduction of his autograph at the sketch’s end, a feature of all of the contributions in *Autographs for Freedom*. May tells of an encounter that he had along with Abdy during the latter’s tour of the U.S. from 1833-34. While lounging at

May's Connecticut residence the two men see a coach drive past with a white family and an enslaved black woman (162). May and Abdy follow the coach to a hotel where they talk with the enslaver who admits that, considered in the abstract, enslaving humans is wrong. But he says that's not true for black and white people, who depend on the system's social order. He agrees that if May and Abdy can convince the woman to leave them in Connecticut (a free state), she can go (162). They try, but the enslaved woman recounts her promise to the wife to return with them: "*I promised* mistress that I would go back with her and the children" (163). Abdy and May are amazed at the enslaved woman's moral character and determination to honor her promise but frustrated that this moral code between enslavers and an enslaved woman will not supersede state law. The story ends with May relating how he watched Abdy accompany the enslaved woman with the family's luggage to the next destination. She may "have longed for liberty, [but] she longed for a clear conscience more" (164).

Unlike Kossuth, Placido, and Washington, all of whom are celebrated for their actions and contributions to justice-seeking causes, the heroic slave woman is held up for what she does not do: escape. Debra J. Rosenthal points to the differing notions of contract and language as bond that exist between Abdy's and May's understanding of this occurrence and the enslaved woman's understanding of her promise, how "the slave woman's promise fastens and binds her to the very mistress from whom she wants liberation" (21). It is clear that the enslaved woman understands the arguments that Abdy and May outline, that "having been brought by her master into the free States, she was, by the laws of the land, set at liberty." Abdy and May remain incredulous that she does not just leave her enslaver: "We adduced cases, and quoted authorities to establish our

assertion that she was free” (162). But the enslaved woman remains intransigent and even displays some annoyance with Abdy’s and May’s repeated emphasis that she can just escape. After Abdy, who grew “impatient,” asks “is it possible that you don’t want to be free?” the enslaved woman responds, “was there ever a slave that did not wish to be free? I long for liberty. I will get out of slavery, if I can, the day after I have returned, but go back I must, because *I promised* that I would” (163). Abdy and May, either unwilling or unable to recognize this woman’s cognizance of the situation, finally come around to seeing her perspective. The enslaved woman’s conviction that this contract must be honored demonstrates, in the words of Rosenthal, that “For the slave-woman, the moral and spiritual self-binding hold faster than the bonds of slavery, which could easily be severed simply by remaining in Connecticut. To her, a clear connection exists between her word and her moral obligation” (26). The enslaved woman honors a contract that she entered into. Under the logic of chattel slavery, such a contract would be a non-issue because enslaved persons could not enter into contracts. In this aspect May’s story does present a slight corrective to the logic of agency and personhood through contracts. What does May’s story reveal about the relationship between diffusion and character in *Autographs for Freedom*? Can there be mental freedom while remaining enslaved?⁴⁷ Will her longing for a “clear conscience” bear fruit in the long run?

⁴⁷ In the context of his fight against Covey in *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass discusses how important it was to feel a “man” again instead of the “slave” before the fight, especially the famous sentence, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (50). The gendered language is not incidental to this contrast between Douglass’s masculinist emancipation through violence and the heroic slave woman’s remaining enslaved through a linguistic bond. For an influential reading of the role of gender in *The Heroic Slave*, especially masculinity, see Yarborough.

In the opening paragraphs of *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass shows how historiographical norms exclude heroic slaves, men such as Madison Washington. If we think about May's "The Heroic Slave Woman" as offering a counterpoint to the archival revisionism of Douglass, we confront the problem of anonymity anew through the tacit gendering of Douglass's title. This woman exists in the archive, but she a representation of heroic moral obligation. This moral obligation maintains the bonds of enslavement. Kossuth, Placido, Douglass, and Washington all represent freedom fighters in each sketch. They are named, they are celebrated as persons as well as persons made through action, and they are consecrated in print. Even Madison Washington exists by name in the archives, even sparsely and dimly as Douglass writes. Washington still gets named. His actions get attached to a name, and the principles of diffusion allow Washington to join the genealogy of heroes by name, thus becoming an individual who populates a heroic genealogy of other individual heroic men: Kossuth, Placido, Douglass, Madison Washington, Jefferson, Henry, and George Washington. "The Heroic Slave Woman" nominates an enslaved woman as worthy of the same accolades and yet upholds anonymity. While the archives of enslavement are full of anonymity and absence, the case of the anonymous heroic enslaved woman is conspicuous in *Autographs for Freedom* where so many other accounts of heroic men prioritize the naming and the record of freedom-fighting accomplishments. Life-writing projects can turn "glimpses" into fleshed-out portraits of heroic character, as in the case of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*. Yet "The Heroic Slave Woman" points to the ongoing dilemmas of how to write and read life-writing about lives whose anonymity challenges the generic and

interpretive limits of heroic life-writing and its normative assumptions about what counts as heroism and how such heroism is expressed.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPILING THE MULTITUDE IN CIVIL WAR-ERA COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHIES

Collective biographies are one of the oldest biographical genres, often used to catalog similar accomplishments by notable figures. From volumes that detail the lives of saints or the “parallel lives” that Plutarch preserved for posterity, this life-writing form builds collective portraits out of a concatenation of feats that, in their compiled form, are greater together than apart.⁴⁸ “Compiling the Multitude” focuses on two collective biographies published in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Lydia Maria Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865) and William Wells Brown’s *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867). I focus on these two texts because both targeted newly emancipated black communities, via the Freedmen’s Bureau schools for Child and reading communities seeking military histories that feature black soldiers. Child and Brown compile dozens of biographical sketches to paint a portrait of “freedmen” and military valor, respectively. This chapter shows how these texts’ reliance on a compilative method offers a key for understanding the portrait of identity that these collective biographies theorize, what I call a “compilative identity.” A compilative identity describes a form of belonging that relies on its presence in a group and yet can stand alone at the same time, an identity that political theorists have come to term the “multitude.”

This chapter argues that the character-centric portraits found in Child’s and Brown’s collective biographies address a pressing debate in wartime and post-bellum US culture: “How would millions of African Americans—nearly four million recently freed

⁴⁸ See Booth for an overview of one form of collective biography known as prosopography.

and now repositioned wherever they were—rebuild their lives in a newly reconstituted nation?” (Greenspan 423). Child’s and Brown’s volumes offer different answers to this pressing question. Child encouraged rebuilding through a focus on character, believing that through careful and persistent cultivation of “good character” among freedmen, political, social, and cultural changes would inevitably follow. Brown argued that cultivating character was not enough on its own. In Brown’s view rebuilding meant participating in the legal and political realms of U.S. culture.

Collective biographies offered dozens of biographical sketches that emphasized virtues such as kindness, courage, intelligence, and probity, to name just a few. Considered individually, each sketch presents an emulative model. Considered together, a compilative biography constellates diverse sketches into a coherent whole that nevertheless preserves the distinctive differences contained therein. Compilative biographies make the *multitude*. Interpreting Civil War and Reconstruction-era compilative black biographies with an understanding of the multitude illuminates why some authors turned to collective lives rather than single-subject biographical texts. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that a multitude is made up of and sustains plurality (99-102). The multitude does not try to smooth over difference; instead, it exists only when this difference can be sustained and protected. Hardt and Negri write that “the multitude is not unified but remains plural and multiple...The multitude is composed of a set of *singularities*—and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different” (99). Political theorists, tracing the concept back to Aristotle, argue that specific social possibilities emerge out of the multitude: “the presence of others would cause individuals to amplify

socially valued characteristics and repress those that are disapproved, leading groups to act better and do more than single men” (Cammack 188). The vectors at work—both positive and negative instruction—point toward the transformative capabilities of these collectives. Certain collective biographies compile records of these diverse groups and their political participation. What Child and Brown accomplish in their volumes is exactly this: a compiled source book for learning about the impact that collectives have on the world.

As a material form, collective biographies structurally represent the community they seek to fashion. We might consider the inverse to be true as well: that single-subject biographies are about the subject’s ability to transcend their contexts. In a study on compilative biographies of women throughout history, Alison Booth argues that “biohistoriography or prosopography has been instrumental in constructing modern subjectivities and social differences.” Booth, drawing on and quoting Benedict Anderson’s famous work on nationalism and identity, notes that “modern nationhood aligns with [in the words of Anderson] ‘the inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography’” (12). As political theorists point out, such character traits can have political effects through the multitude, a tradition that Daniela Cammack points out begins even before Plutarch first collected biographical sketches together expressly for morally didactic purposes:

Aristotle was not interested in the benefits of pooling diverse knowledge, but in the political authority of *aretē*, “virtue,” understood in its general sense as a capacity for right action encompassing both ethical and intellectual qualities. He was concerned with the quantity of *aretē* that could be possessed by different

agents, and his claim in this passage was that some multitudes, when they act collectively, can exhibit more *aretē* than even highly virtuous individuals. [Aristotle] believed that all forms of virtue—perhaps especially courage and justice, the two that he associated most with large numbers—are easier to practice in groups than alone, and this supported the view that a multitude could be an effective political agent. (177)

When collective biographies compile a multitude into print, they outline how to participate in remaking the political world.

Both Child and Brown turned to their biographical projects after decades of writing and publishing antislavery literature that sought to remake U.S. culture through the abolition of chattel slavery and institutional racism. Lydia Maria Child's first foray into this world was also, arguably, her most enduring. In 1833 she published *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans called Africans* with the prestigious Boston publishing firm, Allen & Ticknor. Child had already built a considerable reputation and was a widely admired and popular author. But her *Appeal* alienated much of her audience because in it Child argued for unqualified social and political equality. In 1833, the organized, nation-wide antislavery network was nascent,⁴⁹ and radical abolitionist arguments like Child's were still very much on the margins of antislavery discourse. In the three decades between *An Appeal* and *The Freedmen's Book*, Child edited the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, served on executive boards for antislavery organizations, and continued to assail white supremacy, the patriarchy, and other forms of social injustice. Brown, on the other hand, first published *Narrative of William Wells Brown* in

⁴⁹ See Sinha for a recent and important reconfiguration of the history of abolitionism.

1847. Over the next two decades, he published widely and diversely: novels, plays, and additional memoirs. While not as prominent as Frederick Douglass or Martin Delany, Brown was nevertheless a popular and at the same time puzzling public presence. In particular, Douglass's criticisms of Brown's plagiarism helped Douglass maintain a moral high ground even though Brown continued to sell books and occupy a public role as an abolitionist among his many other activities. Both Child and Brown interpreted the Civil War's effects on American culture through literary output, specifically compilative biography.

In what follows this chapter devotes extensive analysis to two selections from Child's and Brown's volumes that, according to my argument, function as internal keys to unlocking an interpretive logic for understanding *The Freedmen's Book* and *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. These selections, Child's "The Meeting in the Swamp" and Brown's "President Andrew Johnson," both center on white figures before displacing them from the narrative. In those newly created spaces, the stories then nominate black multitudes who have political power, a convention in "The Meeting in the Swamp" and a delegation in "President Andrew Johnson." By choosing to center my reading on white figures in books devoted to detailing black history and aimed at circulating within black communities, my point is to show that these two selections argue for displacing white hegemony in order to make room for black publics.

I. LYDIA MARIA CHILD'S *THE FREEDMEN'S BOOK*

1. "CLOTHED IN NEW AND AWFUL POWER:" THE DILEMMA OF REFORM AND PERSUASION

South Carolina, 1812. Mr. Duncan was having a rough evening. This difficulty was not necessarily because the U.S. and Great Britain, a mere thirty years after the

American Revolution ended, were hurtling toward another war. No, Mr. Duncan was thirsty, and after ringing a bell to summon one of his house-slaves, he waited. No one appeared. Although Lydia Maria Child's short sketch, "The Meeting in the Swamp," published in *The Freedmen's Book* (1865),⁵⁰ doesn't explicitly mention Mr. Duncan's deteriorating physical and emotional well-being, his unslakable thirst and frustration must have been getting worse by the minute. So Mr. Duncan "rang a second time, but waited in vain for the sound of coming footsteps" (104). Was he being ignored? That seems impossible because Mr. Duncan "was an easy sort of master" whose good humor and understanding would, presumably, engender greater loyalty than slave masters whose cruelty and malevolence would encourage spite, ingratitude, even escape. But being "an easy sort of master" did not endear Mr. Duncan to everyone: "[Duncan was] generally thought by his neighbors to be too indulgent to his slaves" (104). The neighbors had to worry about the British army which, everyone suspected, "would land in some part of the Southern States and proclaim freedom to the slaves" (104). The story implies that Mr. Duncan's indulgence perhaps misled him into a lack of concern over the loyalty of the enslaved persons on his plantation and in his home. The spectral British threat, represented through its navy hovering off the coast, worried his neighbors who also suspected that Mr. Duncan was not as immune as he thought. This British threat was familiar, especially after being enshrined in the *Declaration of Independence* which accused King George III of orchestrating "domestic insurrections" against the colonists. British meddling proved a durable phantasm. In both "The Meeting in the Swamp" and *The Declaration of Independence* the British served as scapegoat, effectively absolving

⁵⁰ Hereafter "The Meeting in the Swamp" will be cited parenthetically.

the U.S. and its policies from any responsibility whatsoever. The U.S. wielded texts to fashion its inhabitants and their practices (whether settler colonialism or enslavement) as victims of British manipulation rather than as belligerents in their own right.

That evening's unfamiliar scenario encouraged Mr. Duncan's self-reflection. He recalled that he had recently been peppered with requests to attend Methodist meetings in the area. Moreover, "in every instance [Mr. Duncan] complied with the request." "Thinking over the passes he had given, he remembered that all the house-servants had gone to Methodist meeting" (104). The "Methodist meetings had lately been more frequent than usual," Mr. Duncan recalled. Were the neighbors correct? Was Mr. Duncan's overly indulgent disposition a problem? "He was in the habit of saying that his slaves were perfectly contented, and would not take their freedom if he offered it to them." Still, "the frequency of Methodist meetings made him a little uneasy and brought to mind a report he had heard that the British were somewhere off the coast and about to land" (104). Maybe the suspicion that his neighbors expressed about Mr. Duncan's over-indulgence would be his downfall after all. So he formulated a plan. Child's sketch never reveals whether Mr. Duncan ever got that glass of water he wanted so desperately.

After a good night's rest, Mr. Duncan saddled up his horse and went out for a ride in the neighborhood to gather some information: "in a careless way [he] asked the slaves on several plantations where was the Methodist meeting last night. Some said it was in one place, and some in another,— a circumstance which made him think still more about the report that the British were going to land" (105). Then Mr. Duncan decided that he needed a more covert plan to figure out what was going on: "He bought a black mask for his face, and a suit of negro clothes, and waited for another Methodist meeting. In a few

days his servants again asked for passes, and he gave them” (105). Donning his blackface costume, Mr. Duncan “followed them over field and meadow, through woods and swamps” (105). Embodying a theatrical performance of stereotyped blackness, Mr. Duncan even imitated their “words and tones” to avoid detection when other travelers addressed him. At last the travelers reached their destination: “After passing through a rough and difficult path, they came out into a large level space, surrounded by majestic trees, whose boughs interlaced, and formed a roof high overhead, from which hung down long streamers of Spanish moss. Under this canopy were assembled hundreds of black men and women” (105). Mr. Duncan finds a political convention hidden deep in the South Carolina woods. What occurs next is a lively, multifaceted conversation that terrifies and fascinates Mr. Duncan: “A tall man mounted a stump and requested silence. ‘I suppose most all of ye know,’ said he, ‘that at our last meeting we concluded to go to the British, if we could get a chance’” (106). Mr. Duncan’s neighbors were right.

But the evening’s agenda would confirm a pervasive if unspoken fear among southern slaveholders: retributive violence. Even though the gathering “concluded to go to the British,” the moderator noted that “we did n’t all agree what to do about our masters. Some said we could n’t keep our freedom without we killed the whites, but others did n’t like the thoughts of that. We’ve met again tonight to talk about it. An’ now, boys, if the British land here in Caroliny, what shall we do about our masters?” (106). Some counsel forgiveness while others counsel violence: “Blood for blood” one man says (107). Even one of the enslaved persons owned by Mr. Duncan participates to the consternation of Mr. Duncan: “I would n’t murder *my* master, said one of Mr. Duncan’s

slaves. ‘I don’t want to work for him for nothin’; I’s done got tired o’ that; but he sha’n’t be killed, if I can help it; for he’s a good master” (107).

The debate continues but takes a turn to address the importance of education, knowledge, and literacy: “a short man, with roguish eyes and a laughing mouth” stood up to share a story about knowledge and literacy. This short man, Jack, relates how he and his friends would pass messages by wrapping newspaper around tobacco. Rather than devise some cryptic manner of communication, this man, Jack plays on pervasive white assumptions of slave illiteracy: “So I gibb him de backy in de bery bit ob newspaper dat tell de British gwine to lan’. I marks it wid brack coal, so Jim be sure to see it. An’ Massa Gubernor hissself carry it! Massa Gubernor hissself carry it! I has to laugh ebery time I tinks on’t.” Upon ending his story, Jack “clapped his hands, shuffled his feet, and ended by rolling heels over head, with peals of laughter.” In response, “The *multitude* joined loudly in his merriment, and it took some time to restore order” (109, my emphasis). Jack’s story reveals that a powerful current of communication, knowledge, and power flows beneath white assumptions of black illiteracy and subservience.

After this collective expression of riotous affect, this multitude models democratic governance by voting on resolutions after debate. While Child’s story does not mention Mr. Duncan’s reaction to Jack’s story or to the debates, the amount of corrective information on display—literacy, communication, knowledge, and governance, for example—would have been overwhelming to the slave master. The multitude reaches two decisions: “A large majority were in favor of being merciful to the masters; but all, without exception, agreed to join the British if they landed” (109). Mr. Duncan, finally convinced that he is safe, absconds with his life. The story’s perspective follows Mr.

Duncan as he retreats. Reflecting on what he witnessed, he “never forgot the lesson of the night” (109-10). While he came to believe that “Slavery *was* oppression,” he lacked the courage to emancipate those he enslaved (110). Nevertheless, Mr. Duncan did find courage to advise “the magistrates not to allow any meetings of the colored people for religious purposes until the war was over” (110).

The story ends quickly after this consensus-making climax, but the effects of experiencing the multitude compel Mr. Duncan to see the familiar world anew once he has some physical distance from his nighttime voyeurism: “With thankfulness to Heaven, Mr. Duncan again found himself in the open field, alone with the stars. Their glorious beauty seemed to him clothed in new and awful power. Groups of shrubbery took startling forms, and the sound of the wind among the trees was like the unsheathing of swords” (109). Blazing in the night sky, the stars are clothed anew with an “awful power.” The change recalls the “blaze of pine torches” (105) that first illuminated the multitude who gathered under the oak trees. After witnessing the meeting, Mr. Duncan could no longer see enslaved persons as “perfectly contented.” He saw enslaved persons like the stars, “clothed in new and awful power.” Clearly haunted by the prospect of violence, “blood for blood” (107) in the story’s phrase, Mr. Duncan experiences the sound of the wind “like the unsheathing of swords” (109). Rather than committing to the antislavery cause, he quails.

“The Meeting in the Swamp” is the second time that Child told the story of Mr. Duncan. In 1841 Child had published an earlier version “The Black Saxons” in *Liberty Bell*. “The Black Saxons” opens with Mr. Duncan reading “Thierry’s History of the

Norman Conquest” (182).⁵¹ Child’s story emphasizes Mr. Duncan’s sympathy with the “brave and free-souled Harold” and “the fair-haired Ediths,” “that bold and beautiful race [who] became slaves!” (182). Just as Mr. Duncan is reflecting and philosophizing about the plights of the oppressed English (“Troubled must be the sleep of those who rule a conquered nation!” the story relates), “a dark mulatto opened the door, and making a servile reference, said, in wheedling tones, “Would massa be so good as gib a pass to go to Methodist meeting?” (183). The juxtaposition of Mr. Duncan’s historical perspective on oppression and his inability to see chattel slavery as oppression jars this early moment and provides the thread for Mr. Duncan’s response after he witnesses the meeting in the swamp. Aside from the framing device of Thierry’s *History*, “The Black Saxons” and “The Meeting in the Swamp” share many similarities, even down to sentences that reappear when Child published it again in 1865. The depiction of the meeting is mostly identical between the two versions.

The most significant difference follows from the title change: its shift suggests that the story’s framing of the meeting can stand on its own and does not need Mr. Duncan’s hypocritical historical musings about English history. The elimination of the Black Saxon heritage and Thierry’s *History* in “The Meeting in the Swamp” means that the meeting’s importance lies beyond anything that Mr. Duncan can offer in terms of understanding. It is the title change from “The Black Saxons” to “The Meeting in the Swamp” and resulting revisions to the opening paragraphs that argue for emphasizing the

⁵¹ Jacques Nicolas Augustin Thierry, *History of the Conquest of English by the Normans* (1825). Child reprinted “The Black Saxons” in *Fact and Fiction: A Collection of Stories* (1846). According to Karcher the only change between the 1841 and 1846 versions is an epigraph from James Russell Lowell’s poem “Prometheus” that Child included in the 1846 version (182n1).

meeting as a process, an event, a possibility instead of Mr. Duncan's experience of the meeting. "The Black Saxons" might even be more accusatory with respect to Mr. Duncan's hypocrisy than his characterization in "The Meeting in the Swamp." This is not to say that Mr. Duncan is a more sympathetic character in Child's reworking of the story. By minimizing Mr. Duncan's hypocrisy and removing the bombastic historical associations he makes between reading Thierry's *History* and his voyeuristic excursion to the swamp, "The Meeting in the Swamp" revises the emphasis away from Mr. Duncan and affords the "meeting" itself a chance to take center stage.⁵²

In Child's revision to the story, Mr. Duncan's character becomes a framing device and perspective through which we can access the covert meeting and its world-changing discussions, votes, and constituted political actors. Mr. Duncan fades away. Child's editorial statement that closes the story reiterates his role as a vehicle: "I have called him Mr. Duncan, but *I have in fact forgotten his name*. Years after he witnessed the meeting in the swamp, he gave an account of it to a gentleman in Boston, and I have stated the substance of it as it was told to me" (110, my emphasis). The 1841 version focused on Mr. Duncan as an individual whose musing on the Norman conquest in England illustrates his hypocrisy even as Mr. Duncan does nothing to "lead to the emancipation of his bondmen" (191). Child does mention that she adopted "fictitious names, because I have forgotten the real ones" (191). But the 1865 revision specifically targets the erasure of Mr. Duncan ("I have in fact forgotten his name"). Moreover, its title shifts from Mr.

⁵² The word multitude does not appear in "The Black Saxons." It is introduced in "The Meeting in the Swamp." While not decisive for interpreting the story, it is nevertheless a substantive emendation, particularly because of the story's publication in a pedagogical reader.

Duncan's framing of the meeting's participants as "black Saxons" to "The Meeting in the Swamp." This title change highlights the centrality of the meeting for the short story.

In offering a caveat about the limits of moral suasion, "The Meeting in the Swamp" offers another way forward: the political, decision-making potential of a community. The group gathered under the oak canopy debates and then votes. They pass a resolution. Even though the story ends before the British land on the coast of South Carolina and the enslaved persons can act on their resolution, *The Freedmen's Book* presents "The Meeting in the Swamp" as a story that hinges on the world-changing decision-making acts of the multitude. In this particular case, the fact that the story presents multiple viewpoints and does not *resolve* them adds credence to the political potential for a reading of the multitude.

The rhetorical work of collectives has caught the eye of critics before. In "Rebuilding Babylon: The Pluralism of Lydia Maria Child," Scott L. Pratt traces the emergence and persistence of a pluralism that, under the right circumstances, can become a rule of life, a way of living, a praxis. From Pratt's perspective, Child is an early pioneer in a democratic praxis that flourishes in nineteenth-century feminist thought and then influences American pragmatism.⁵³ Over a publishing career spanning more than five decades Child developed an "ongoing pluralism" that thrived because its practitioners "live on an intimate border" between distinct communities (Pratt 96). Where Pratt focuses on Child's *New York Letters*, Jessica Enoch turns attention to *The Freedmen's*

⁵³ John Dewey writes that "the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy" (qtd. in Pratt 92). Dewey's seeming tautology, Pratt points out, actually comes from Jane Addams's *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902): "the cure for the ills of Democracy is more Democracy" (qtd. in Pratt 93).

Book and in particular “The Meeting in the Swamp.” Enoch, an education historian, analyzes “The Meeting in the Swamp” according to historical educational practices in nineteenth-century schools. In particular, Enoch focuses on the multi-vocal debate that takes place during the meeting. According to Enoch, the multi-vocal debate is important precisely because it models both sides rather than settling for one versus the other (30-31). The result is different from “dominant pedagogical texts” of the time period because “Child makes available to her readers revolutionary rhetorical tactics that prompt them to contribute to and share civic and communal conversations” (31). Enoch’s argument offers a compelling historical portrait of rhetorical education, but it overlooks the lurking dilemmas of character that structure *The Freedmen’s Book*.

Despite the multitude’s potential in “The Meeting in the Swamp,” a formidable antagonist haunts the short story. Mr. Duncan is supposed to be a changed man, but this potentiality capitulates to maintaining the status quo of white supremacy. Because the story emphasizes his mental realization that “slavery *was* oppression” but contrasts it with a lack of action, framing the dichotomy in this way points to the challenge of moral-suasion abolition. Institutional and systemic oppression still exists because Mr. Duncan invokes its stifling power even if he becomes “changed” on the inside. Character in this case is not enough for Mr. Duncan to change his relationship with himself and others, unlike Listwell’s abolitionist transformation.⁵⁴ Child’s story is powerful in at least two ways: 1) it portrays the world of unseen slave communication that scholars have long worked to uncover, especially the role that religion played in sustaining visions of equity and liberation that would come to be a core component of the postbellum multitude; 2) it

⁵⁴ Listwell is the white character in *The Heroic Slave*, who, in listening-well to Washington’s soliloquy in the first part, commits to the abolitionist cause.

simultaneously highlights one of the challenges that abolitionist arguments for sympathetic transformation faced: sometimes a change in character runs up against institutional inertia. (If William Wells Brown had rewritten “The Meeting in the Swamp” he would have highlighted Mr. Duncan’s indolence as evidence for political and juridical action.) By all accounts Mr. Duncan had what looks like a profoundly transformative experience, one that convinced him that enslavement is a grave wrong. And yet Mr. Duncan, unlike Listwell, does nothing more than register his changed feelings. In this case feeling right does not translate into doing right, thus intimating that the politics of sentiment might have unwelcome limits. Even as the multitude debates and votes, even as Mr. Duncan sees the natural world “clothed in a new and awful power,” even as Mr. Duncan sees slavery as oppression, his craven character wins out.

2. RECONSTRUCTING CHARACTER

Public education expanded rapidly in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. This rapid expansion drastically increased the need for classroom supplies such as books. Two prominent aid organizations, the American Missionary Association (AMA) and the American Tract Society (ATS), published textbooks and readers for postbellum schools that served black Americans. The AMA and ATS texts overwhelmingly advocated that postbellum black Americans practice forgiveness and submission to white Americans. In this homogeneous marketplace, *The Freedmen’s Book* stands out for many reasons. Child’s textbook reprinted dozens of texts by black authors such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, George Horton, Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, and Charlotte Forten. Alongside these poems, essays, and journal entries by black authors, Child

authored biographical sketches of Benjamin Banneker, Ignatius Sancho, Phillis Wheatley, and others. Child also composed biographical sketches of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Madison Washington, figures who represent heroic resistance in different forms. These three sketches comprise more than twenty-five per cent of *The Freedmen's Book's* 260 pages. If you were to include Child's honorific poem to John Brown and a historical essay about emancipation in the West Indies, explicit accounts of resistance and warfare would account for almost forty percent.

The tone and contents of *The Freedmen's Book* are strikingly different from the two major publishing ventures that provided readers and other textbooks for Freedmen's Bureau schools: the ATS and AMA textbooks. Consider the portraits of Frederick Douglass in the different textbooks. The American Tract Society's *Freedman's Third Reader* has a three-page biography of Douglass—this version of Douglass is a passive figure who constantly benefits from white largesse and generosity. The central moment of Douglass's life, according to the ATS narrative, is when white benefactors purchase Douglass's freedom for him while Douglass stands idly by in perpetual gratitude. This financial-emancipation is a historical example of the indebtedness that Hartman identifies throughout the nineteenth-century's struggle to come to terms with the legacy of chattel slavery: "Emancipation instituted indebtedness. Blame and duty and blood and dollars marked the birth of the free(d) subject. The very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility that mandated that the formerly enslaved both repay this investment of faith and prove their worthiness" (131). In *The Freedmen's Book* Child's biographical portrait of Douglass, by contrast,

describes a historical figure whose choices and actions determine the outcome of his life, just as Douglass's own many autobiographies emphasize.

Child faced formidable challenges when she decided to publish *The Freedmen's Book*. First, she needed to be able to compete financially against well-funded, large organizations. Child wanted to keep costs low enough to make the textbook affordable and thus more likely to be adopted in Freedmen's Bureau schools. She explains the challenge this way to James T. Fields, her longtime publisher, in a 27 August 1865 letter: "my idea is to get as much into every page as is consistent with sizable type; no spaces left at top or bottom."⁵⁵ Compiling *The Freedmen's Book* became, in effect, an optimization challenge. One finds virtually no unused space anywhere on any page. For instance the sketch of Madison Washington ends halfway down a page; to fill the remainder of the page Child included a brief extract from the Virginia Bill of Rights: "The election of members to serve as representatives of the people in Assembly ought to be free; and all men having sufficient evidence of permanent common interest with, and attachment to, the community have the right of suffrage." Child then adds this editorial statement after the extract: "The Virginia Bill of Rights was unanimously adopted by the people, in June, 1776; and when they met, in January 1830, to amend the constitution of the State, they voted that the Bill of Rights needed no amendment" (154).

The space challenge also meant that reprinting unabridged autobiographical texts would mean fewer authors and text selections even though Child made an effort to reprint authors of color in their own words when possible. (This meant that most of the selections were poems.) Child rationalizes this decision to Fields not as wanting to speak

⁵⁵ Selected Letters 458.

on behalf of the subjects but because the space constraints presented a significant editorial challenge:

The reason my name appears so often in the Index is that I re-wrote all the Biographies. They are not only interspersed with remarks of my own, but are so completely and entirely told in my own way, that I cannot, with any propriety ascribe them to any one else. This I shall explain in the Preface. My object in doing this was to *condense* as much into small space as possible, and to give the *most interesting* facts only, and those in very *clear* and *simple* language. (Child, *Selected Letters* 458-59)

Even Douglass's shortest *Narrative* would have filled more than one-third of the book's space. Most important though, Child wanted *The Freedmen's Book* to be readable by as many people as possible, and rewriting gave Child the chance to simplify and clarify the language. Child believed in the didactic potential of biography.

Despite their important differences, both *The Freedman's Third Reader* and Child's *The Freedmen's Book* emphasize a key feature of the biographical genre: didacticism. Both textbooks want their readers to absorb lessons and then emulate successes while avoiding setbacks. Didactic biographies present models of lived experience to help an audience imagine how to live. Biography had always practiced didacticism, but as Casper outlines, in the mid-nineteenth century didacticism's easy-to-interpret role in the genre came under pressure. This pressure arose from a shift away from biography as compilative text and toward biography as compositional text. Prior to mid century, as discussed in the Introduction above, American biographers acted mostly as fact finders who believed that dates, information, and other details of someone's life

amounted to transparent lessons about a life. There was little—if any at all—evaluation of the facts as pieces of evidence that might not be transparent, or might need interpretive assistance to find value in a given fact.⁵⁶ Biographies in the early federal and Jacksonian eras preached didacticism for emulative purposes. It was important to catalog (hence the compilative nature of most early biographies) facts in order to make the lessons of exemplary life decisions as clear as possible. The biographer should be practically invisible because they had no interpretive duty; their sole task was to collect and compile facts. But by the mid-1850s, critics encouraged biographers to adopt the compositional practices of novelists. Biographers were no longer compilers; now, they also had to compose meaningful narratives based on the facts of a subject's life. In 1865, Child could still draw on these different types of histories in the same volume. *The Freedmen's Book* is both a compilation and a composition.

While researching and drafting the biographies included in *The Freedmen's Book*, Child relied on printed accounts for source material that she then rewrote. For example, to write Douglass's account she turned both to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). In both of Douglass's life narratives he offered a chronologically robust account of his life, beginning from his earliest memories and what he could find out about his childhood. Moreover, Douglass revisited pivotal moments in his life history and retold them with different emphases, a practice that, according to Robert S. Levine's influential account, unites all of Douglass's life-writings part into a single, ongoing revisionary project (instead of discrete texts). Child, through comparing these different accounts (to say nothing of letters to Douglass

⁵⁶ For an argument about this shift see Casper 204-13

and the vast amount of other printed material that he produced and that was produced about him), could see Douglass's life from multiple perspectives.

For William and Ellen Craft, Child only had their sensational *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), an autobiographical narrative of their famous 1848 escape when Ellen passed as a white, male slavemaster and her spouse William acted as Ellen's slave. They escaped from Macon, GA, and after four days of coach, train, and ship travel arrived in Philadelphia where they held over for several weeks before continuing on to Boston with the help of the Underground Railroad. *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* is notable because it is less an autobiographical slave narrative than it is an autobiographical account of their escape. William writes as much in the preface: "this book is not intended as a full history of the life of my wife, nor of myself *but merely* as an account of our escape; together with other matter which I hope may be the means of creating in some minds a deeper abhorrence of the sinful and abominable practice of enslaving and brutifying our fellow-creatures" (iii-iv). Child could give an account of their escape by consulting the 1860 narrative, but her interest in providing pedagogical lessons about character meant that *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* did not offer enough information about the Crafts as characters to study according to Child.

To fill in the gaps she turned to the larger abolitionist network to find out more about the Crafts before they escaped. No extant historical evidence suggests that Child approached the Crafts to learn more about their lives. She did write to William Cooper Nell, the Boston-based black abolitionist, historian, and education reformer, "but he could only procure newspaper scraps about what occurred while they were in Boston" (Child, *Selected Letters* 456). Child also wrote to Garrison on 7 July 1865:

I want some help, which perhaps you can render me. I know you will, if you can. I am writing an account of William & Ellen Crafts, and I cannot obtain all the information I wish. I applied to Mr. Nell...I have also Theodore Parker's Life, wherein they are mentioned; and Conway's Letters to the Commonwealth. But what I want more, and cannot get, is something about them before they came North. Did they belong to the same master? How old were they? When did they first begin to think about freedom, and *how* was it? Did William then know a trade, and what trade was it? Were their masters kind or severe? *Had* William a *young* master, for whom Ellen passed herself off? &c. &c. *When* did they arrive in Boston?

Was there any pamphlet about them published at the time? Or was there a full account in the Liberator? If there was, I wish you would take it off file, if you can without injury, and send it to me. I will send it back carefully very soon. If you cannot get it off file, I will come to the office and consult it, if the account is a copious one.

Perhaps Mr. Louis Hayden can give some information, or tell where it can be obtained. (Child, *Selected Letters* 456)

Answers to some of those questions appear in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. For instance, William alludes to the behavior of his master and offers an important qualifier to the question about whether the master was "kind or severe":

It is true, our condition as slaves was not by any means the worst; but the mere idea that we were held as chattels, and deprived of all legal rights—the thought that we had to give up our hard earnings to a tyrant, to enable him to live in

idleness and luxury—the thought that we could not call the bones and sinews that God gave us our own: but above all, the fact that another man had the power to tear from our cradle the new-born babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate, haunted us for years. (1-2)

He also mentions that he was apprenticed to a cabinet-maker (10). It is unclear if Child did not read *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* closely enough, or whether some of these details did not stick in her memory.⁵⁷

The Freedmen's Book's insistent focus on character, particularly visible in the biographical sketch of Ellen and William Craft, ends up constraining the goal of the compilative volume: to present a range of life stories in order to argue that there are many ways of fashioning oneself in the postbellum era. This goal is even present in the title, where a simple shift in Child's version signals the overarching importance of the multitude: it is *FreedMEN*. The American Tract Society, on the other hand, titles its readers *FreedMAN* (my emphasis). Freed-man is singular. The idea of a single, homogeneous mass is part of the rhetorical argument here, and as such, the mass has been understood to be an entity for social control.⁵⁸ The mass demands conformity, and *The Freedman's Third Reader* dispenses lessons aimed at producing a stable, docile subject.

⁵⁷ In 1858 Child contributed “The Stars and Stripes,” a melodrama based on the Crafts’ escape, to the *Liberty Bell*. Carolyn Karcher argues that *A Romance of the Republic*, published in 1867, is the companion piece for white audiences (504-5). Karcher reads the biographical sketches of Madison Washington and the Crafts in *The Freedmen's Book* as “the two most ‘romantic,’” and she posits that the “pleasure [Child] derived” from writing these sketches served as “stimulus” to begin *A Romance of the Republic* (507).

⁵⁸ Hardt and Negri contrast the multitude with the mass and other plural collectives (99-100).

One freedman, so the logic presumes, should be no different than the next. The individual becomes part of the mass. Child's title, *The Freedmen's Book*, sets multiplicity against conformity. In the hundreds of pages in *The Freedman's Third Reader*, a single narrative is driven home: forgive, forget, submit. Every story, every biography, every spelling lesson teaches submission. But Freed-Men can be more. Moreover they can live multiple lives, have multiple stories, and even constitute themselves, in effect, into a multitude.

The incomplete version of the Crafts' lives, with which Child would have been familiar from *Running a Thousand Miles*, ended up presenting a similar methodological problem that Douglass encountered when writing the life of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*. At first glance, Child and Douglass both ended up undertaking the problem of incompleteness by turning to the imaginative power of fiction. But where Douglass made the incompleteness a component of his theoretical intervention regarding the concept of character—through what I have called “diffusion”—Child did not rework how she approached character.

As a result of this ossified conception of character, *The Freedmen's Book* ends up struggling at times to overcome the limitations of the very method it employs. Even though Child's *The Freedmen's Book* employs a compilative practice to assemble a wide-ranging array of voices and subjects, the framing logic of the mass encroaches in subtle ways. Instead of heterogeneity, all too often *The Freedmen's Book's* compiled content congeals into a homogeneous mass. There are moments such as “The Meeting in the Swamp” where *The Freedmen's Book* highlights a different view of the world, one where persons gather together, debate, and then vote on desired outcomes. As some scholars have pointed out, such as Jessica Enoch, this polyvocality models a progressive approach

to education. But in terms of political versus natural rights, Child's *The Freedmen's Book* struggles to forge a worldview that does not rest entirely on character. Changing character, it is supposed in *The Freedmen's Book*, can change culture. Mr. Duncan's intransigence seems frustratingly prescient now: even as "The Meeting in the Swamp" portrays the performative power of the multitude as it embraces self-governance, Mr. Duncan wields a greater power: visibility and credibility within institutions of American culture. And he exerts power. Thus *The Freedmen's Book* illuminates a dilemma that these compilative biographies encountered: how to reconstitute life in the United States after the Civil War. Can character do it alone, as *The Freedmen's Book* hopes?

3. COERCIVE CHARACTER AND THE "SHAPE OF FEAR"

"How is it that men who want certain things done by brute force can so often depend upon the mob? Total depravity, human hate and *Schadenfreude*, do not explain fully the mob spirit in America. Before the wide eyes of the mob is ever the Shape of Fear." (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* 678)

While Child's biographical sketches of black subjects and reprinted texts by authors of color do in fact work to outline the importance of an emergent multitude that draws on strength of character to transform culture, *The Freedmen's Book* is bookended by what Saidiya Hartman calls "indebted servitude" (131). When Child uses direct address, such as in the prefatory letter "To the Freedmen," and the closing "Advice from an Old Friend," *The Freedmen's Book* establishes an indebtedness that looms over the rest of the volume's contents.

Child's letter "To the Freedmen" opens with a deceptively simple admission that "I have prepared this book expressly for you" (iii). The short letter ends with a description of Child's own investments that furtively describe an extraordinary amount of obligatory labor: "I take nothing for my services; and the book is sold to you at the cost of paper, printing, and binding" (iii). This is accurate. But the letter continues to outline the importance of the labor that Child conducted "expressly for you," thus inculcating a sense of indebtedness for these labors: "Whatever money you pay for any of the volumes will be immediately invested in other volumes to be sent to freedmen in various parts of the country, on the same terms; and whatever money remains in my hands, when the book ceases to sell, will be given to the Freedmen's Aid Association, to be expended in schools for you and your children" (iii). Child's generosity is apparent, but the letter's tone makes it clear that a lot is requested in return. While the letter is not so brazenly transactional, the message is abundantly clear: look how hard I worked, and I'm not even getting money for it because I'm giving it back, so heed these lessons. Moreover, the main verb in the above quotation is, "you pay," which echoes the transactional nature of this apparent beneficence. Child signs the letter "Your old friend" to reiterate the decades-long labor that she contributed "To the Freedmen." It is no coincidence that the logic of indebted servitude reappears in the penultimate section, "Advice from an *Old Friend*" (my emphasis).

Part encouragement to persist and part caveat to be ready for discouragement in this persistence, "Advice from an Old Friend" also reanimates a central tension in American democracy: that since its framing in the U.S. Constitution, black Americans were excluded from a system of governance founded on the premise of freedom and

opportunity. Against the backdrop of the Civil War Amendments' hemming and hawing through the political process, "Advice from an Old Friend" lurches backward despite its call to build "strong, smooth rails for the steam-car called Progress of the Colored Race" (276). Although *The Freedmen's Book* opens space for an emergent pedagogical multitude, it simultaneously outlines how the "Shape of Fear" that constituted white racism in the Reconstruction period stood strong and imposing, ready to crush an emergent multitude.

Child's "Advice from an Old Friend" is cloaked in the generous tone of advice. Embedded in this advice is a contractual inequity that relies on the tacit belief that black Americans are unworthy of white American generosity. Child writes, "Year by year, if you respect yourselves, you will be more and more respected by white men. Wonderful changes have taken place in your favor during the last thirty years, and the changes are still going on" (275-76). The calculus of respect in the first sentence suggests that the burden is on blacks to earn the respect of whites. There is no mention—indeed no "Advice to [white people] from an Old Friend"—that such relationships are not passive affairs. The passive voice "changes have taken place" doubles down on the problematic agency floating around in this selection. If the unspoken logic of the first sentence is that white people have utmost respect to give *only* on the condition of black worthiness, then the unspoken logic of the second sentence both removes black action from the antislavery cause and normalizes white action as the site of normative historical change. The next sentence reiterates who worked for whom according to Hartman's concept of indebted servitude. Child writes that, "The Abolitionists did a great deal for you, by their continual writing and preaching against Slavery" (276). This sentence formulates a contract that

enacts two related myths. First, it interprets Abolitionism as an institutional organization associated with writing and preaching, practices heavily associated with white Abolitionists. For example, John A. Collins, a white Garrisonian abolitionist, infamously and imperiously told Douglass, “Give us the facts” because “we will take care of the philosophy.”⁵⁹ Second, the sentence establishes a contract that has yet to be ratified because there is an implied inequality. *We’ve* done a great deal, Child’s tone implies, but what have *you* done?

Several of the late selections in *The Freedmen’s Book* exhibit the logic of indebted servitude. Child includes an “Extract from speech by Hon. Henry Wilson to the Colored People in Charleston, S.C., April, 1865.” In this speech Wilson, who served as U.S. Senator from Massachusetts (1855-73) and Vice President of the U.S. (1873-75), offers this admonition: “Understanding [freedom] to be your position,—that you are forever free,—remember, O remember, the sacrifices that have been made for your freedom, and be worthy of the blessing that has come to you!” (259). Later, the speech does not sound that different from the tone of the AMA and ATS readers that counsel submission and forgiveness: “But your duties commence with your liberties. Remember that you are to be obedient, faithful, true, and loyal to the country forevermore” (260). Adopting a pedagogical framework, Wilson continues: “The great lesson for you in the future is to prove that we were right; to prove that you were worthy of liberty...that you were worthy of freedom...that you are worthy to have your names enrolled among the freemen of the United States of America. [Great cheering.]” (260-61). Immediately following the Wilson speech Child reprints “Extract from a speech by Hon. Judge Kelly

⁵⁹ Recounted in Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* 289.

to the Colored People in Charleston, S.C. April, 1865.” Kelly reminds black Americans that this new behavioral boundedness has divine repercussions as well: “I will not, my colored friends, talk to you of the past. You understand that all too well. I turn to the hopeful future; not to flatter you for the deeds you have done during the last four years, but to remind you that, though you no longer have earthly masters, there is a Ruler in heaven whom you are *bound to obey*” (261, my emphasis). The argumentative thrust of Kelly’s and Wilson’s speeches as well as Child’s “Advice from an Old Friend” is to harness the potential multitude and turn it back into a single entity, “bound to obey” the cultural strictures. Creeping through the last few pages of *The Freedmen’s Book*, the multitude begins to congeal into a constrained mass due to compulsory obligation.

It is hard not to see the writing on the wall as the country faced the dawn of Reconstruction *and* the dawn of backlash racist politics. The seeds for backlash politics preceded Reconstruction, and we might think of Reconstruction as a brief legal and political challenge to the persistence of white racism. Despite such teleological clarity from today’s vantage, Child could not see the imminent danger that the logic of “indebted servitude” posed for Reconstruction policies. Yet the tone and tacit arguments in “Advice from an Old Friend” suggest the all-too-familiar yoking of democratic egalitarian discourse with structural inequality: “Racism now appears not anomalous to the working of American democracy, but fundamental to it,” as Matthew Frye Jacobson writes (12). Thus *The Freedmen’s Book* reveals the tensions that defined the Age of Reconstruction: that promise of emancipation faced the tidal wave of persisting cultural racism and institutional inequality. Even a book with powerful moments of resistance and reform such as Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book* also trafficked in coercive character, and

nevertheless whitewashed and erased the role that the white community played in the system of slavery.

One of the challenges for the interpretation of the multitude as it appears in Child's *The Freedmen's Book* is that despite the plurality and polyvocality, the larger political and cultural context remains entrenched. *The Freedmen's Book* argues that with the right character, with the right arrangement of personal qualities, U.S. culture would inexorably change. It is aspirational but unreachable. The arguments presented in *The Freedmen's Book* look a lot like the moral persuasionist position that "The Meeting in the Swamp" critiques. In William Wells Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, Brown points out the limitations of a vision of postbellum U.S. culture founded on natural rights. Instead, Brown highlights the crucial need for political and legal protections. "Talk not of civil without political emancipation!" (356), he writes. The multitude, we will see, is a core component of this important shift from natural rights to political rights in Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion*.

II. WILLIAM WELLS BROWN AND THE POLITICS OF COMPILATION

1. "MERE COMPILATIONS"

Writing in 1881, Charles Chesnutt expresses frustration over William Wells Brown's authorial practices: "Dr. Brown's books are mere compilations, and, as Thos. Jefferson says of Phillis Wheatley's poems, 'beneath the dignity of criticism.' If they were not written by a colored man, they would not sell enough to pay for the printing. I read them merely for the facts, but I could appreciate the facts better if they were well

presented.”⁶⁰ Scholars have grappled with what to make of these “mere compilations,” particularly Brown’s penchant for copying material indiscriminately without attribution. For much of the twentieth century Brown was marginalized because of such indiscriminate and unattributed copying. Recently, the tide has shifted. Recent work by Lara Langer Cohen and Geoffrey Sanborn argues that Brown’s purposeful copying and plagiarism was actually a way for him to build a multi-layered conversation that repurposed print culture itself.⁶¹ A recent monumental biography of Brown, Ezra Greenspan’s *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (2014), confirms Brown’s resuscitation and highlights new directions for research. (Notably Greenspan published *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* with W.W. Norton, not an academic press. This decision suggests that W.W. Norton expects a wide-enough audience to justify their involvement.) Literary scholars have understandably focused on Brown’s literary works, especially his important novel *Clotel* (1853), but despite this critical renaissance and reevaluation among literary scholars, Brown’s other works—such as the compilative biographical histories *The Black Man* (1863) and *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867)—have mostly gone unexamined.

Brown’s *The Negro in the American Rebellion* offers the chance to interrogate why Brown’s histories have been excluded and how including them can reframe Brown’s compilative method. This volume of black military history is frequently “decried” “as a hasty scissors-and-paste job comprised of miscellaneous, loosely organized materials” (Greenspan 331), indeed what Chesnut lamented as mere compilations. Nevertheless,

⁶⁰ Qtd. in William Wells Brown: A Reader 331.

⁶¹ See Cohen, “Notes from the State of Saint Domingue” and Sanborn.

Greenspan does note an important perspectival innovation in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*: “Brown’s manner of presentation replaced the conventional commanding centralized narrative perspective with a shifting narrative gaze that moved freely across the Civil War landscape with no explicit logic” (333). In this section I argue that there is in fact an explicit logic despite such loose organization and scissors-and-paste authorship. The *disorganizing* logic of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* is the logic of the multitude, decentralized and multiple.

The Negro in the American Rebellion looks like many of the other compilative collective biographies published in the nineteenth century. Bound between the front and back cover is a wide-ranging portrait of black military heroes united under a theme: heroism. The opening few sketches rehearse a familiar narrative of black heroism that would be equally at home in Henry Highland Garnet’s speeches or Frederick Douglass’s newspaper editorials: Crispus Attucks, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Madison Washington each appear. What distinguishes prosopography from other forms of collective biography is that the organizing logic is that which constitutes the form. Collective biography is defined by who’s collected: farmers, territorial governors, Pennsylvania Quakers, or virtually any other imaginable shared identity. Group biography, in contrast, is often familial or some other kinship-based connection. But collective biography can span generations and familial or kinship communities. The members of a collective biography do not necessarily know one another. This expansiveness “poses problems of selection and omission” (Booth 4). These problems are also a source of critical promise: selection and omission. When Brown and Child turned

to centuries-long stories of black heroism, whom did they recognize and select? Whom did they omit?

Brown's military collective biography distinguishes itself from other collective military biographies because *The Negro in the American Rebellion* explores the lives of common soldiers in addition to generals and other familiar stock character-types from military biographies. "Chapter XXXII: Injustice to Colored Troops" illustrates Brown's innovative approach. There, he cites both named and anonymous rank and file soldiers whose testimonies catalog pay discrepancies and other forms of systemic injustices that black Civil War soldiers faced. The life stories that form this chapter and many others construct multiple, and sometimes contradictory, portraits in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. Brown's panoptic perspective on the Civil War required an appropriately broad narrative strategy. The injustices that privates and other rank and file soldiers experienced were different from what higher-ups experienced. Nevertheless, it is injustice all the same. Brown's expansive collective biography documents that as black Americans from all locations, communities, education levels, and classes fought against the Confederacy's war to maintain chattel slavery, they remained subject to discrimination and racism. This portrait challenges one of the foundational myths of the Lost Cause that would arise in the post-bellum period: that blacks were content in slavery and that they did not turn against those who enslaved them. The rhetorical argument of collective biography helped Brown not only catalog the individual lives who contributed to the defeat of the "American Rebellion" but also to challenge the nascent revisionary histories that sought to erase slavery from the developing plot of the U.S. cultural imagination.

Brown's innovation is that his collective biography makes space for the rank and file in the historiography of the Civil War and the longer narrative of black abolitionism.

The Negro in the American Rebellion is not the first text devoted to black military history. William Cooper Nell's *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) and George Livermore's *An Historical Research* (1862) were inspirational models as well as key sources for history, names, dates, and other vital information for Brown's project. Livermore's *An Historical Research* provided Brown with information that Brown directly copied and reprinted, part of what Geoffrey Sanborn identifies as Brown's plagiarism aesthetic.⁶² Brown writes in the Preface that "For the information concerning the services which the blacks rendered to the Government in the Revolutionary War, I am indebted to the late George Livermore, Esq., whose 'Historical Research' is the ablest work ever published on the early history of the negroes in this country" (v). Although Brown's plagiarism of Livermore only appears in Chapter 1, Sanborn identifies six distinct passages there, totaling 907 words out of the chapter's roughly 2100 words. *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* does not seem to appear in Brown's work, although one of Nell's 1861 articles does appear in Chapter 11 of *The Negro in the American Rebellion*.⁶³

Brown frequently turned to newspaper articles rather than books, particularly because so much of the information about the Civil War was printed in newspapers and periodicals. In the Preface Brown writes that "In collecting facts connected with the

⁶² Sanborn does not explicitly address *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. But it is present in *Appendix A* where Sanborn compiles all of the extant examples of Brown's plagiarism (149).

⁶³ See Sanborn 149-50 for a breakdown of the plagiarism in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*.

Rebellion, I have availed myself of the most reliable information that could be obtained from newspaper correspondents, as well as from those who were on the battle-field” (v). In addition to newspapers and veterans, Brown consulted “the slew of Civil War histories and other kinds of war-related books issuing even in the course of the fighting...and an array of materials saved up from previous books” (Greenspan 431-32). Brown’s compilative cannibalism of Livermore has important stakes precisely because of how Livermore himself approached his role as a book collector, historian, and cultural gatekeeper. Greenspan describes the “patrician bibliophile” this way:

In his practice as an amateur historian, Livermore drew on advantages well beyond Brown’s reach. He had excellent access to people in power from federal and state capitals to learned societies, libraries, and universities. He had an honorary MA from Harvard, even though he groused to a confidant it should have been a DD. He possessed one of the finest private libraries in the country, thanks to his large fortune. It was particularly strong in rare Bibles, including a Gutenberg, an Eliot Indian Bible (the first English Bible printed in the New World), a Mormon Bible (inscribed to Joseph Smith), and even a Confederate Bible salvaged from a blockade-runner. Broad and deep as it was, his collection contained precious few books by people of color, though with one noteworthy exception: a personally autographed copy of Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. (432-33)

In this case Brown’s compilative practice with respect to Livermore’s *An Historical Research*, mirrors his authorial strategy in other works, such as *Clotel* (1853), that have been the focus of scholars. *The Negro in the American Rebellion* “was a dynamic,

popular history written close to ground level from odd angles, created from a grab bag of sources and populated mostly by common people performing heroic actions. Brown's history-making pen put black men in the center and relegated everyone else to the periphery" (Greenspan 433). *The Negro in the American Rebellion* relegates Livermore's claim to authoring an important historical work to the margins by reconstellating his work in *The Negro in the American Rebellion* without specific citations.

Brown's collective biography advocated for political rights such as enfranchisement. Considering the ways that collectivity and groups were constructed in this era's biographical texts illuminates how textual manifestations of the multitude showed the promise of voting and other political rights. *The Negro in the American Rebellion's* compilative practice points directly to the political implications of collective biography. Toward the end of the book, in the chapter titled "Protection for the Colored People," Brown unfolds the stakes of his argument regarding political and civil emancipation when he answers this question: "Now, what shall be done to protect these people [freed blacks] from the abuse of their former oppressors?" (355). Brown notes that the "Civil Rights Bill passed by Congress is almost a dead letter." Black Americans cannot "look for justice" in their own States which have "relapsed into the hands of the late slave-holders" because these late slave-holders are now "the executioners of the law" (355). So, Brown invokes revolutionary rhetoric: "We answer, the only thing to save him is the ballot. Liberty without equality is no boon. Talk not of civil without political emancipation!...If a man has no vote for the men and the measures which tax himself, his family, and his property, and all which determine his reputation, that man is still a slave" (355-56). Some members, such as Radical Republicans, agreed with Brown's assessment.

“[U.S. Representative Roscoe Conkling argued that] “This emancipated multitude has no political *status*. Emancipation vitalizes only natural rights, not political rights” (Du Bois 289). It is political rights that must follow.

2. “A BIG MAN IN LITTLE THINGS:” DISPLACEMENT AND THE MULTITUDE IN “PRESIDENT ANDREW JOHNSON”

Brown included a biographical sketch of Andrew Johnson, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, toward the end of *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. It is a searing critique of a president, who, in 1867, when Brown’s compilative biography appeared, was still very much President and still very much driving Reconstruction-era politics. (Perhaps it is more accurate to say steering Reconstruction off a precipice.) The sketch is notable for many reasons, particularly Brown’s ability to see Johnson’s role in maintaining white supremacy as well as Brown’s adumbration of a psychological biography of Johnson’s racism. “President Andrew Johnson” also contains a record of an important conversation between Johnson and a delegation of black leaders. Brown uses “President Andrew Johnson” to thematize the necessity and emergence of the multitude in the Reconstruction Era.

Invoking the multitude’s polyphony, Brown’s sketch effectively marginalizes the imperious president while simultaneously re-centering black voices. Unlike the fictive polyphony in Child’s “The Meeting in the Swamp,” Brown presents another side of the historical record when, in recounting a tense meeting between black delegates and President Johnson, Brown erases Johnson’s words and in turn reinscribes the black voices

that Johnson sought to silence.⁶⁴ Similar to how Brown embedded Livermore's history within a black archive that Livermore himself disregarded, Brown's "President Andrew Johnson" sketch thematizes and constructs the multitude. It exists as a counterweight to white-washing attempts by subsequent Lost Cause historians because Brown compiles a multitudinous record of black political participation despite Johnson's (and his ilk's) attempts to prevent such participation.

Chapter 41, "President Andrew Johnson," presents a skeptical, critical assessment of Johnson. The sketch uses biography to critique the distorting effects of biographical propaganda. The sketch opens with a familiar, albeit compressed, genealogy. That it combines the origin story with an overtly negative evaluation of Johnson is especially impressive, because from the opening clause of the sketch, Brown dispenses with the disinterested, neutral stance that most biographical authors adopted: "Springing from the highest circle of the lowest class of whites of the South" (328). Brown reminds readers that Johnson "had taken a glass too much on the day of his inauguration as vice-president" before offering facetious justifications for Johnson's notorious public drunkenness such as "The weather was cold" and that his "host of friends...like himself, were not afraid of the 'critter'" (328). This opening prelude argues that Johnson was no "Moses of the people" and that he had cleverly and forebodingly deceived his supporters "as well as the National-Republican Convention that nominated him in 1864 for the Vice-Presidency" (329-30).

⁶⁴ Philip S. Foner points out that this meeting was a flashpoint for abolitionists and Radical Republicans (588). The newspaper article appears in *Washington Weekly Chronicle* as discussed below. Douglass mentions the meeting and reprints the newspaper article in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (390-94). Du Bois recounts the story in *Black Reconstruction* (296-300).

The deception was cleverly cast because Johnson could speak out against slavery and thus appear “as a friend of liberty and republican institutions” (332). But Brown exposes Johnson’s duplicity: “That he hated the slaveocracy, there is not the slightest doubt; for they were far above him, and all his efforts to be recognized by them as an equal had failed” (332). To support such a claim Brown relays an anecdote about Johnson’s youth as an apprentice tailor:

young Johnson was passing along the street with a pair of pants upon his arm, when a well-dressed free negro accidentally ran against him, pushing the tailor into a ditch; whereupon, the latter threw a handful of mud at the black man, soiling his clothes very much. The negro turned, and indignantly said, “You better mind what you ’bout, you low white clodhopper, poor white trash!” This retort of the negro no doubt touched a tender chord; for it reminded the rising young man of the “pit from whence he was digged,” and it is said he hated the race ever after. (332)

Brown offers a psychological genealogy of Johnson’s racism, entangling Johnson’s racism with class resentment as well. Brown’s sketch makes no pretension toward objectivity. He seeks one goal: to disparage Andrew Johnson in print. “*But it must be acknowledged* that Mr. Johnson is a big man in little things” such as “taking advantage of the Union feeling, and especially the antislavery sentiment, of the North” (332). Johnson’s duplicity rankles Brown who uses this short biographical sketch to answer the following question: “After all, what is the real character of the man?” (Brown 332). The real character is the worst character.

Over the next few pages, “President Andrew Johnson” purposefully decenters Johnson from the biographical sketch. Brown emphasizes this removal by contrasting two meetings that Johnson had with two different delegations. The first meeting with a group aristocratic Southerners, “lords of the lash” (333), features Johnson and the Southerners engaging in a back and forth discussion about Federal policies in the postbellum South.⁶⁵ Johnson’s voice and responses feature prominently even as he appears rankled. This rankled tone makes sense because it displays Johnson’s class resentment. But the second discussion, with a delegation of African American leaders, is fundamentally different. In this second report of the meeting between President Johnson and a black delegation, Brown’s sketch thematizes the multitude in the following way: Brown prints the words of the black delegation *and* powerfully silences Johnson. Moreover, framing Brown’s narratological methods as thematizing the multitude resonates with current scholarly assessments of Brown’s plagiarism and citationality, assessments that foreground the multiple sources that flow throughout Brown’s works. This multitudinous rhetorical strategy mirrors the larger decentralization of narrative perspective that has been a reason to derogate the sprawl of *The Negro in the American Rebellion*.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “Lords of the lash” is Charles Sumner’s phrase from an 1848 speech he delivered in Worcester, MA. Sumner critiqued the the alliance between southern enslavers “lords of the lash” and northern cotton merchants “lords of the loom.” True to Brown’s authorial practice, he does not cite Sumner. I thank Chris Hunter for pointing out the attribution.

⁶⁶ The editor of the Ohio University Press edition of *The Negro in the American Rebellion* has this to say about Brown’s work: “Unquestionably, Brown’s *The Negro in the American Rebellion* has serious limitations as ‘history.’ It is anachronistic, anecdotal, episodic, moralistic, partisan, poorly documented, thinly researched, sensational, sentimental, and repetitious. The chapters rarely follow one another logically. Some chapters consist entirely of verbatim quotations from contemporary newspapers with little interpretation, analysis, or context” (Smith xxxiv-xxxv).

Unlike President Johnson, whose selfishness and deception render him *non-*representative of the U.S. populace he supposedly represents according to Brown's sketch, the delegation of black leaders is emphatically described as emerging by choice: "[In early 1866,] while in Washington, Douglass attended a convention of colored men called to express the sentiments of the Negro people on the issues of Reconstruction. Delegates from Wisconsin, Alabama, Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, the District of Columbia, and the six New England states met in the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church and, with Reverend Henry Highland Garnet as presiding officer, discussed for two days the Freedmen's Bureau Bill, the Civil Rights Bill, the proposed Fourteenth amendment, and other pending legislation" (Foner, *Frederick Douglass* 586). The convention appointed a committee to represent the convention before the President: Frederick Douglass, John Jones, William Whipper, George T. Downing, and Lewis Douglass were selected (Foner, *Frederick Douglass* 586).⁶⁷ The men met with Johnson on 7 February 1866.

President Johnson's bloviating deception finds a match not only in the "committee of colored men" but also in how Brown chooses to describe this meeting (338). Even though "Mr. Downing, the delegate from New England, first addressed [Johnson]," Brown merely mentions that Downing's "finely chosen-words, and well-rounded periods, no doubt made the President not a little uneasy, for he looked daggers at

⁶⁷ John Jones (1817-1900), born enslaved in Virginia before escaping north to Elmira, NY where he worked on the Underground Railroad; William Whipper (1804-1876), born enslaved in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania before moving to Philadelphia where Whipper became a successful businessman and abolitionist; George T. Downing (1819-1903), born free in New York, active abolitionist and successful restaurateur; Lewis H. Douglass (1840-1908), eldest son of Frederick Douglass, worked as typesetter and served in the 54th Massachusetts.

the speaker” (338). After Downing it was Douglass’s turn to address the President. Again, Brown does not record what Douglass said, although, as with Downing, the sketch displays Johnson’s hostile reaction: Johnson eyed Douglass “from head to feet” and was reminded “of the well-dressed free negro, who, nearly forty years before, had pushed him into the ditch” (339). Douglass needles Johnson by recalling the President’s “promise to be the negro’s Moses. This last remark was cruel in the speaker,” Brown writes because it “carried Mr. Johnson back to the days when he was carrying out that deceptive policy by which he secured the nomination on the ticket with Mr. Lincoln; and he appeared much irritated at the remark” (339). In an interesting turn that now begins to silence Johnson, Brown’s sketch writes succinctly that “[Johnson’s] whole reply to the delegation was weak, unfair, and without the slightest atom of logic” (339). Over the next two pages, Brown records Downing’s and Douglass’s speeches in detail.

In the early section the sketch’s report of the meeting between the delegation of black leaders and President Johnson moves back and forth between who speaks and the reactions of Johnson. But after setting the scene and emphasizing Johnson’s growing irritation at the men, the sketch switches gears in order to thematize the multitude in a brief but effective moment. After Douglass’s second speech, Brown admits, “I omit Mr. Johnson’s long and untruthful speech, and give the reply of the delegation, which he would not listen to:—” (341). Although there have been silences in the sketch’s earlier reportage of this meeting, none of them displays the one-sidedness that Brown now highlights. Johnson begrudgingly responded and listened, and Brown accordingly uses “President Andrew Johnson” to outline the growing distance between the two parties.

Now though, “he would not listen.” So Brown does what he does best, which is redeploying historical print records to create a polyphonic archive of black experience.

What Brown prints—in place of “Mr. Johnson’s long and untruthful speech—” comes from an article published in the *Washington Weekly Chronicle*.⁶⁸ This article, “Reply of the Colored Delegation to the President,” seems to be the source for Brown’s account in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. In that line break between Johnson not listening and the delegation’s reprinted response in Brown’s sketch, Douglass, Downing and the other men conducted a savvy publicity campaign in support of their agenda. Their campaign began almost immediately, involving interviews with Washington D.C.-based reporters as well as publishing editorials in newspapers, such as the one published in the *Washington Weekly Chronicle*.⁶⁹ Abolitionist newspapers also voiced their support for the delegation’s efforts (Foner, *Frederick Douglass* 587-88).

Brown includes this *Washington Weekly Chronicle* article almost verbatim. He seems to have made a few slight edits such as changing “the undersigned” to “we” and thus drawing attention to the differences between print and speech.⁷⁰ In a critical move that shows how the multitude can become an effective political agent, Douglass’s written

⁶⁸ <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014002/>

⁶⁹ See “The President and the Colored Delegation,” *New-York Daily Tribune*. New-York [N.Y.], 12 Feb. 1866. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1866-02-12/ed-1/seq-1/>.

⁷⁰ Brown also edits the following line from the newspaper article: “Besides, even if it were true, as you allege, that the hostility of the blacks toward the poor whites must necessarily project itself into a state of freedom, and this this enmity between the two races is even more intense in a state of freedom than in a state of slavery, in the name of Heaven...” Brown’s edited version is this: “Besides, even if it were true, as you allege, that the hostility of the blacks toward the poor whites must necessarily *be the same in a state of freedom as in a state of slavery, in the name of Heaven...*” (343, my emphasis).

account in *Washington Weekly Chronicle* does not assign speakers to the different arguments presented. Instead, the editorial speaks as a collective. Johnson is alluded to throughout the essay, but it is to rebut his specious arguments about disenfranchisement and colonization, for instance. In “President Andrew Johnson,” the delegation’s multitudinous reply is the longest uninterrupted speech in the entire sketch (341-44). Over multiple pages the black delegation eviscerates Johnson’s logic. The reply notes that, “It is not necessary at this time to call attention to more than two or three features of your remarkable address” (342). They challenge Johnson’s specious argument in favor of black disenfranchisement: “The first point to which we feel especially bound to take exception is your attempt to found a policy opposed to our enfranchisement, upon the alleged ground of an existing hostility on the part, of the former slaves towards the poor white people of the South” (342). The reply also challenges Johnson’s pro-colonization stance: “On the colonization theory that you were pleased to broach, very much could be said. It is impossible to suppose, in view of the usefulness of the black man in time of peace as a laborer in the South, and in time of war as a soldier at the North, and the growing respect for his rights among the people, and his increasing adaptation to a high state of civilization in this his native land, that there can ever come a time when he can be removed from this country without a terrible shock to its prosperity and peace” (343-44). After reprinting the delegation’s reply, Brown’s biographical sketch of Andrew Johnson ends with two brief sentences that reiterate Johnson’s abhorrent character, summarizing the president this way: “a mind whose moral degradation is without its parallel” (344). Johnson has been ridiculed and critiqued, but most importantly he has been sidelined in favor of the polyphonic multitude.

Abolitionists and the abolitionist press defended the delegation's argument and declared its victory over the president. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that "Who that reads the speeches of the colored delegation, and the President's can help seeing how much better Douglass understands the philosophy of social life and republican institutions than the President?"⁷¹ The *Anti-Slavery Standard* succinctly notes the differences between Douglass and Johnson:

One of the speakers in this dialogue is President of the United States, representing by his official position what there is best in the civilization of the Anglo-Saxon race. The other is Frederick Douglass, a Negro, with nothing to back him but his own manhood and talent...It would be hard to surpass the brief address of Frederick Douglass, for fitness to the occasion and point. It would be hard to find a worse speech than the diffuse, illogical, clumsy, and coarse reply of the President. (Foner, *Frederick Douglass*, 588)

Why print the diffuse, illogical, clumsy, and coarse reply of Johnson when Douglass and the other delegation are so effective in their evisceration of the President's positions? Brown's decision to centralize the delegation's speeches is heightened because of the missing responses. In this way, the dialogue's rhetorical force arises through the tension when the sketch effectively turns a dialogue into a version of polyphonic monologue.

Brown's "President Andrew Johnson" is a damning portrait of Johnson's ill temper, racism, and illogic at the same time that it celebrates the black leaders' collective strength and virtue. Brown's sketch supports the political potential of the multitude: "some multitudes, when they act collectively, can exhibit more *aretē* than even highly

⁷¹ Qtd. in Foner, *Frederick Douglass* 588.

virtuous individuals...this supported the view that a multitude could be an effective political agent” (Cammack 177). In this way compilation—that Brown interjects evidence gleaned from contemporary newspaper accounts while simultaneously silencing Johnson’s arguments—establishes the multitude as a formidable political opponent. In this early phase of Reconstruction, Brown hopes that compilative practice can harness the power of print in order to shape public opinion. With Johnson pushed aside by a rhetorical strategy that manifests the multitude’s decentralized logic, “President Andrew Johnson” shows how compilation can be not just an authorial practice: it can also be an interpretive strategy. For Brown’s *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, individualism itself, represented in this last sketch through the character of Andrew Johnson, is decentered as the book’s myriad contents sprawl across the history of the Civil War and the abolition of chattel slavery’s effects on U.S. culture in the postbellum era. In the individual’s place is the incipient multitude.

CHAPTER THREE

SOJOURNER TRUTH AND THE MATTER OF LIFE

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1869 Sojourner Truth considered biography and found it wanting. This consideration occurred on a speaking tour in New York City when, during her stay with Theodore Tilton, Tilton proposed that “he should write her life” (*BL* 234).⁷² Truth declined. His proposed biography of Truth would have legitimized her lived experience because of Tilton’s social standing—he was a wealthy, educated, white male with longstanding connections to Garrisonian abolitionism and New York City publishing. A Tilton biography would be conversant with mid-nineteenth century biographical conventions: single author, chronological plotting, narrative coherence, for example.⁷³ Truth’s fame would be ancillary to Tilton’s authorizing credentials because of racial and gender bias in American culture. She declined Tilton’s offer of legitimization, I will argue, because Truth sought to bypass mid-nineteenth century biographical conventions by creating an alternative path in order to legitimize her life-writing narrative. This rejection, moreover, is all the more important because just a few years later Truth and a collaborator produced a biography. Clearly she had opinions about how she wanted her life narrative to be written.

In 1875 Truth eventually assented to publishing a biography, although she overhauled the genre on her own terms. The result is titled *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*;

⁷² Hereafter citations from the *Book of Life* editions of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* will be abbreviated *BL*. Citations from the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* will be abbreviated *NST*.

⁷³ See Tilton’s 1871 “Victoria C. Woodhull: A Biographical Sketch.”

a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life." What differentiates this 1875 text from the more familiar 1850 *Narrative* is the added appendix, what Truth calls "*Her 'Book of Life.'*" This appendix is twice as long as the *Narrative*, and the "Book of Life" version swells to more than 300 pages. It is crowded with an unruly mix of private and published accounts of her life, its component parts resembling a life-writing portmanteau: autograph facsimiles from holographs and common-place book inscriptions, reprinted newspaper articles detailing her experiences, correspondence, and occasional editorial comments.

To compile the "Book of Life," Truth and her collaborators spent decades scouring the print marketplace for published accounts to clip from periodicals and newspapers and then preserve in one of three scrapbooks. Additionally, Truth saved correspondence, solicited inscriptions, and sought autographs for her other scrapbooks. Rather than relying on dictation alone (the strategy that produced Truth's *Narrative* (1850), Truth collated a complex network of sources and evidence that were already authorized because they appeared in print, much like William Wells Brown; to this network Truth added coterie genres (such as autographs, inscriptions, and correspondence) in an attempt to craft an authorized version. The "Book of Life" is a material object that highlights how Truth innovatively used life-writing genres to navigate a hostile literary marketplace and re-authorize printed accounts of her life. It is Truth's narrative authorization of her life built entirely on the writing of others.

The "Book of Life" appendix is strange enough that Sojourner Truth scholarship struggles to make sense of it. John Ernest's assessment is representative of the dearth of

contemporary critical interest in the “Book of Life:” it is a “world full of information that fails to inform” (“Floating Icon” 482).⁷⁴ Such accounts tacitly refuse to consider that the “Book of Life” amounts to anything more than a disorienting hodgepodge. I argue otherwise. The “Book of Life” presents an astounding mix of life-writing genres and print-media forms that, in their heterogeneity, testify to the ways Sojourner Truth relied on alternative print production practices such as compilation and collaboration to adapt the life-writing narratives that circulated in American culture. I suggest that the text’s mix of impersonal publications and coterie documents represents evidence that she not only understood the gender and race-based limits of mid-to-late nineteenth-century print culture but that she actively used printed texts to work around such limits.

Truth uses the very title “Book of Life” to signal her text’s connection to theological judgment, and then in a subtle but crucial move, announces herself as worthy of being judged. Truth repurposes language from *Revelation to John*, the apocalyptic last book in the New Testament. There, as *Revelation*’s author John relates, a book of life contains records of human life that will facilitate divine decisions about who will enter heaven and who will be banished to hell. The book of life’s clearest articulation occurs in

⁷⁴ See Painter 261. Margaret Washington is perhaps the exception among Truth’s scholarly biographers (Mabee, Painter, Washington). The very last pages of *Sojourner Truth’s America* suggests that the “Book of Life” celebrates abolitionism’s accomplishments and should be read in that context (378-79). Washington cites a Leigh Hunt poem, “Abou Ben Adhem,” as inspiration. Xiomara Santamarina does note that the 1875 Titus edition “draws attention mostly for the fascinating collection of clippings and famous autographs it contains that attests to Truth’s widespread reform work after 1850” (38). Ellen Gruber Garvey notes that Truth owned scrapbooks, but she misidentifies the number of scrapbooks that Truth owned (two rather than three, although only one is known to survive today). Garvey notes that the scrapbooks may have been disassembled for their saleable autographs, and that’s certainly a possibility (215). One scrapbook likely burned in the Michigan Historical Center (Lansing, MI) fire in 1951. Another scrapbook, possibly sent back to Ulster County, NY (Truth’s home county), has disappeared.

Revelation 20:12. But it appears elsewhere in *Revelation* and in other Bible books as well.⁷⁵ At the simplest level, Truth's "Book of Life" is a record of her life's activities. But through the religious genealogy as well as arrangement of the text's reprinted and transmediated records, Truth's "Book of Life" advances the much more audacious claim that she is worthy of being judged.

Viewing the "Book of Life" through the two-fold perspective of life-writing genres and nineteenth-century religious cultures reveals a portrait of Truth as a canny producer and authorizer of printed life narratives. Truth's life-writing texts exhibit an expansive awareness of genres, a trait that I call "genre literacy." Like other literacies, genre literacy involves several steps, from awareness to analysis, recognition to creation. Genre literacy illuminates an entire field of cultural production where authorship is not necessarily the *sine qua non* evaluative factor. Despite her genre literacy, Truth's alphabetic a-literacy⁷⁶ has long discouraged scholars from seriously considering that Truth was not only an adept student of print culture but also a strategic author, even if she could not "write" her own texts. There are excellent studies of her canny use of photography, her powerful oratory, and her collaborative work in the dictated

⁷⁵ Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15. "A number of passages in the Bible refer to a book called "the book of life," a figurative expression that originated from the ancient customs of (a) keeping various kinds of records like genealogical records (Neh. 7:5, 64; 12:22, 23) and of (b) registering citizens for numerous purposes (Jer. 22:30; Ezek. 13:9). Accordingly, God is represented as having records of men, of their works, and of God's dealings with them. See <https://bible.org/seriespage/revelation-appendix-6-book-life>.

⁷⁶ I follow Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's usage of a-literacy, rather than the more familiar term illiteracy, because a-literacy "underscore[s] that lack of literacy in English is less the result of failure than force" (Dillon 265n27).

autobiographical *Narrative*.⁷⁷ The “Book of Life” contains material that necessitates a multifaceted approach: its facsimile autographs display visual culture literacy; its speeches archive Truth’s incredible mobility and arresting rhetorical skill, rehashing and revising the “talking book” trope that has long anchored interpretations of African American literary history; its reprinted newspaper articles challenge ideas of authorship as dozens of signatures appear throughout the “Book of Life.” Despite these diverse visual and sound-based media, print remained a central vehicle for Truth to shape her public image. Throughout her life she turned persistently to life-writing genres, adapting them to suit her rhetorical purposes.

Her first printed life story appears in a pamphlet titled *Fanaticism* (1835). Authored by Gilbert Vale, *Fanaticism* provides an overview of the Kingdom of Matthias, a religious cult that Truth joined. In *Fanaticism*, Vale helps Truth publish what amounts to a legal defense that buttressed her slander accusation against Benjamin Folger, another Kingdom of Matthias member. Vale’s pamphlet combines several forms of testimony, including Truth’s own statements, in a bid to bolster her ability to refute Folger’s accusations. It worked; Folger recanted and Truth emerged slighted but victorious. Her second effort, the eponymous *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), entered the print marketplace during the height of the slave narrative genre’s popularity. Truth’s *Narrative*, published just five years after Douglass’s seminal *Narrative* (1845), struggles with the slave narrative’s rigid framework. Truth’s third and final effort are the “Book of Life” editions (1875, 1878, 1884). If we were to use biographical genres to describe the “Book of Life,” it contains parts of each of the following sub-genres: life and letters, life

⁷⁷ See Grigsby, Fitch and Mandziuk, and Humez.

and adventures, life and travels, life and times, even life and labors among others. This range shows how Truth opened up the generic possibilities of a single biographical text.

2. AUTHORIZATION AND BIOGRAPHY

When Truth rejected Tilton's offer she created the opportunity for her "Book of Life" to revise biography with an eye toward authorizing other ways of recording lived experience. Biography both overtly and covertly deals with authorization. Unauthorized life stories—and the scandals surrounding their composition, publication, and reception—perhaps better and more succinctly illustrate the tacit yet outsized role that authenticity exerts on expectations about life-writing. Biographies garner authority from a combination of conditions: 1) an intimate relationship between author and subject; 2) a reputable publication record; 3) cultural prestige of the author or subject; 4) evidence that is both documented and published in the narrative; 5) institutional imprimatur. No exact combination of these conditions guarantees an authorized narrative, but these conditions do provide a series of tests that any biography, seeking an authoritative position, must meet.

Tilton's offer would have given Truth's biography several of these conditions that the "Book of Life" otherwise does without because Tilton (as a white man) was tied into institutional antislavery at the same time that Truth (as a black woman) was relegated to its margins. Tilton's name on the title page or cover would signal institutional imprimatur, cultural prestige of the author, social standing of the author, and a reputable publication record. This is not to say that if Theodore Tilton had published *The Life of Sojourner Truth* that he could have secured James Osgood as publisher or mobilized the

country-wide abolitionist network that Frederick Douglass, for example, relied on to purchase his work. But it would be naïve to suggest that a wealthy, educated, and socially connected white male would have made little difference as the author of Truth's biography. Truth's life-writing is an important test case for thinking about authorization, recognition, and life-writing genres because it emerged out of Truth's connections to antislavery institutions but it also worked around many of the institutional demands that white antislavery made on the movement's printed material.

There are more ways that life-writing texts accrue authority than through the author's social position. Intriguingly, Truth's 1875 "Book of Life" jettisons virtually all of the other ways—Truth is the publisher but no publishing house or firm appears in the text; there are dozens of authors, both known and anonymous, for example—but the "Book of Life" still manages to present an authorized version of its subject, Sojourner Truth. Truth's "Book of Life" approaches authorization in a number of unconventional ways that demand attention precisely because it is so unconventional. Perhaps most startlingly, it disrupts the Boswell-Johnson dyad that models how biographical collaboration emerges out of intimate interpersonal relationships. While it is true that Truth and her collaborator, Frances W. Titus, were neighbors and friends, the vast majority of the "Book of Life" contents are reprinted newspaper articles. These unsigned articles are the antithesis of the intimate relationship between biographer and biographical subject that has long been a cornerstone of the genre especially in the nineteenth century (Lee 11-12). Truth's "Book of Life" relies on the specter of authorization that biography tacitly invokes, a specter that is assumed to be best represented in the relationship between the author and subject. At the same time it

proposes that authorization can emerge in other ways beyond the author-subject model of biography, such as networks built around anonymity in the literary public sphere.

Authors have been the most visible way for texts to establish authority since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Michel Foucault connects the emergence of a concept of the author in Western literary history to how conceptions of intellectual property make a person's creations (such as a text) subject to laws during the Enlightenment. Authorship leads to authorization because the concept gains legitimacy through its intersection with law. With many authors (but no single author), how does the "Book of Life" grapple with authorization? There is no author listed on the cover or title page of Sojourner Truth's *Narrative*. There is a copyright holder, Frances W. Titus, and there is a subject, Sojourner Truth. It is "published for the author" according to the title page even though that author's identity remains unclear elsewhere in the paratexts.

Many slave narratives—as well as the critical assessment of literature by former slaves—emphasize that the author is the same as the subject, a special kind of autobiographical act. Lara Langer Cohen identifies a "critical consensus" that values "The literature of former slaves to the extent that it produces both words and selfhood. Such an approach makes two assumptions: that selves produce words, and that words produce selves" ("Notes" 162). This self-word/word-self chiasmus gets strained in the case of Sojourner Truth and many other nineteenth-century figures who did not write their self into being but rather relied on others to do it. When the text involves mediation or compilation, most commonly because of a collaborator or a co-author, many critical assumptions about texts and authors have trouble accounting for mediated texts and lives. As a result the canon keeps such texts at a distance until there is more certainty about its

origins.⁷⁸ In a biographical model—rather than the autobiographical model—how does the self/word transaction occur? And how does authorization work in this model? From where does such authorization originate?

Sojourner Truth's "Book of Life" does not easily divulge its origins. It resembles many other illustrative test cases that illuminate the complexities of authorship in nineteenth-century literature; yet it has not been investigated despite its similarities. Like Harriet Tubman's biography, Truth's contains many reprinted articles and is a mediated narrative composed by a white collaborator. Like William Wells Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, Truth's "Book of Life" practices citationality. At the same time, Truth's work is unique. Unlike the traceable citations in *Clotel*, the "Book of Life" cites unsigned newspaper articles from papers all over the U.S.; Truth's sources for her life narrative are essentially anonymous. Where *Clotel* cites, the "Book of Life" compiles. Both texts have been subject to denigration, and while critics have now welcomed *Clotel* into their ken, Truth's "Book of Life" remains sidelined. These other production methods—such as citation and compiling—offered avenues around a-literacy. Sojourner Truth, this chapter suggests, is keenly aware of genre and remakes the biographical genre in a way that is not reducible to existing interpretive practices. As a material text, the "Book of Life" models the eclectic nature of nineteenth-century textual practice: an amalgamation of writing, speech (albeit recorded as printed words), and print.

⁷⁸ Ann Fabian talks about how important it was for slave narratives to be connected to a formerly enslaved person's physical presence, a connection most often forged through book tours where audiences could see the person and their narrative. When an author did not circulate with their narrative, as in the case of James Williams, significant (and often insurmountable) doubts arose about the authenticity of the narrative (79-116).

3. TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF THE BOOK OF LIFE

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life.” *Revelation* 20.12

As a title, the “Book of Life” invokes two textual traditions. One is sacred, where it appears in *Revelation*, the apocalyptic final book in the Christian Bible. The other tradition is in conversation literature, where it appears as a trope in spiritual autobiographies and periodical literature during the long nineteenth-century leading up to when Truth published her scrapbook. For Truth the “Book of Life” had a personal connection. She recalls a formative moment early in her religious education that suggests just how important this book of life trope would be. Here is the full passage:

[Truth’s] mother, as we have already said, talked to her of God. From these conversations, her incipient mind drew the conclusion, that God was ‘a great man;’ greatly superior to other men in power; and being located ‘high in the sky,’ could see all that transpired on the earth. She believed he not only saw, but noted down all her actions in a great book, even as her master kept a record of whatever he wished not to forget. (*NST* 59)

Pairing divine judgment and its material record remains a consistent preoccupation throughout Truth’s secular life as an American symbol and her religious life as a devout believer. What is this great book? From this example in her *Narrative*, the book serves as a form of record keeping. The passage also compares “a great book” to a slave-master’s record, presumably part of a bound book that included dates of birth, names, acquisitions and sales of enslaved persons, for example. “Even as” emphasizes the heavenly record book and subordinates what “her master kept” to God’s “great book.” At the same time,

this recollection demonstrates how Truth conceptualized her relationship to the divine through the relationship between enslaver and enslaved in her mundane life.

This recollection is a brief but pivotal moment in Truth's early religious life. Throughout the next eight decades, Truth would return to the language of this "great book" from *Revelation* and refashion this metaphorical language into a world-building practice. The pervasive influence of *Revelation* in Truth's life offers a rubric for making sense of her complex and shifting spiritual life, from her role as an itinerant preacher, her time in the Kingdom of Matthias, and the roles that judgment, eschatology, and history play in her life-writing. With *Revelation* in mind, Truth would do more than just record her life's sojourns, sermons, and speeches; she would, in essence, position her scrapbook as another chapter in the Biblical narrative. With echoes of exodus and persecution, faith and doubt, Truth's "Book of Life" nominates an a-literate, formerly enslaved black woman to the pantheon of those awaiting judgment at the gates of heaven.

Other early accounts suggest that in addition to her mother's teachings, Truth lived in environments where judgment and evidence were fertile metaphors that controlled social relations. The most prominent early example comes from Truth's involvement with a religious cult in New York, known today as the Kingdom of Matthias. Robert Matthews, a Scots Presbyterian born and raised in New York's "burned over district,"⁷⁹ underwent an increasingly stringent and fickle conversion experience in his teenage and early adulthood years. Once a carpenter and rising middle-class New Yorker, Matthews suffered from bad investments and financial panics in the early decades of nineteenth century. By the late 1820s, Matthews had left his family, started

⁷⁹ The phrase is Whitney Cross's. See Cross, *The Burned Over District*.

street preaching in New York City, and appointed himself Prophet Matthias, the Jew. There Matthias perched himself on the edges of various revivalist movements anchored among the city's Finney-sympathizing elite.⁸⁰ Sensing a power vacuum, Matthias convinced these urban revivalists that he could help them in their spiritual quest. With a financially well-off flock willing to cater to Matthias's every need, the Prophet's hunger for power and cultural standing faced few limits.

By 1832 Sojourner Truth was living in New York City and working as a house servant for Elijah Pierson, a wealthy New York merchant whose perfectionist practices brought him into contact with Matthias, when she first encountered the religious group that would dominate her life for several years. When Truth met Matthias, she was still known as Isabella Van Wagenen. Van Wagenen, whose own religious visions helped her gain trust and sympathy during the Second Great Awakening, soon joined the group of people surrounding Matthias, eventually working directly as Matthias's servant as well as a spiritual practitioner.

The Kingdom of Matthias offered a potent mix of spiritual striving and corporeal passion. This mix labored under the shifting power struggles between Matthias and his followers who gradually grew suspicious of his volatility and quest for power that knew no bounds. His self-anointed monarchical position was one way that Matthias consolidated power and staved off challenges.⁸¹ Material possessions were another:

⁸⁰ Reverend Charles Finney was one of the Second Great Awakening's most celebrated figures. His followers are known as Finneyites.

⁸¹ Johnson and Wilentz are the standard (and only) scholarly account of the Prophet Matthias and his followers. Their book is based on rich primary source material, primarily Gilbert Vale's *Fanaticism*, William Leete Stone's *Matthias and His Impostures*, and a ghostwritten pamphlet, *Matthias. By His Wife*. For an overview of the major primary sources see Johnson and Wilentz 193-95.

“Matthias demanded furnishings and clothing befitting the incarnate Spirit of Truth...With his followers’ money, Matthias built one of the most extravagant wardrobes the city had ever seen” (Johnson and Wilentz 98). As Matthias’s personal servant, Van Wagenen would have had to wash and store his extravagant clothing as well as clean and maintain housewares and furnishings. In each coat and hat, table setting and dining chair, spiritual purity clashed uneasily with ostentation. To drive home the point that Matthias knew how to manipulate the soul, he commissioned custom silverware, emblazoned with the Lion of Judah (Johnson and Wilentz 98). The Lion of Judah is “the beast that would open the book revealing the names of the righteous” (Johnson and Wilentz 98). Technically speaking, the Lion of Judah appears in *Revelation* 5.5: “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (*New Revised Standard Version*). Biblical scholars pay careful attention to the original Greek language, noting that the Lion of Judah will open a scroll, not the book that Johnson and Wilentz offer as shorthand.⁸² Rather than worry the difference between a scroll and a book, it seems more instructive to focus on the similarities: the Lion of Judah’s scroll and the book of life are both material texts that proffer redemption. When she handled Lion of Judah silverware multiple times a day, set the table for the Kingdom’s elaborate meals, then washed and polished such silverware, *Revelation*’s metaphors of judgment and power surrounded

⁸² In fact, Biblical scholars and commentators differentiate between the Book of Life and the Lion of Judah’s scroll, agreeing “that this sealed scroll represents the redemptive plan by which God’s purpose will be achieved” (Farmer 114).

Van Wagenen. She lived and worshipped in a millennial atmosphere where imagery and language from *Revelation* flowed freely.

4. TOWARD A LITERARY GENEALOGY OF THE BOOK OF LIFE

The book of life from *Revelation* has an important and varied history within African American literary cultures. One of the earliest examples comes from John Marrant, who published *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* in 1785. It fervently pins hope on salvation, a goal that publication, circulation, and consumption of his book all conspire to reach. Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings*⁸³ uses conversion accounts, specifically that of Mary Scott's conversion after hearing a sermon based on the book of life passage from *Revelation*, to underscore the lesson that salvation is open to all and can take many forms. Although Sojourner Truth never wrote a *de facto* conversion narrative, her choice of the title "Book of Life" suggests that conversion and salvation were never far from her thoughts. Marrant was "an eye-witness of the remarkable conversion of a child seven and half years old, named Mary Scott" (Marrant 124). In the tradition of the conversion narrative genre, Marrant hopes that publishing an account of Scott's religious awakening in addition to his experience will reach "my young readers" who will see "it useful and profitable" (124). Here Marrant seeks a wider audience by including a child's conversion.

Marrant contrasts his corporeal conversion that struck him like a ton of bricks with Scott's psychological conversion that stems from reading and reflecting during school. Conversion and salvation can overcome the physical body (in the case of

⁸³ I will abbreviate Marrant's autobiographical narrative in this way to distinguish from Truth's *Narrative*.

Marrant) and it can come gradually through careful deliberation (in the case of Mary Scott). Scott's lesson that morning in school comes from *Revelation* 20:12, the same verse that outlines the book of life's eschatological role: She read, "'I saw the Dead, small and great, stand before God,' &c.'" The "&c." stands in for the verse where the book of life is delineated, the same book of life to which Truth's title alludes: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life" (Rev. 20.12). Scott would go on to renounce earthly, corporeal existence in favor of "her desire to depart, and be with Christ" (Marrant 125). Scott's conversion then inspires her mother to convert as well, creating a palimpsest of conversions: Mary Scott, Mrs. Scott, and inevitable conversion of the dutiful reader (not to mention Marrant's own conversion as well). These cascading conversions reiterate affective and pedagogic potential for Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings*' audience, a potential that was always a goal for Christian ministers and evangelists, such as Marrant and Truth.

The Scott episode reiterates the importance—both symbolic and material—of books as objects. A book is the source for Scott's conversion (as opposed to Marrant's aural experience of Whitefield), and the verse responsible for her conversion literalizes eternal life (and damnation) through an extended meditation that takes the form of a book. Critics of Marrant's *Narrative*, certainly under the aegis of Gates' influential "talking book" trope, have usually undertheorized the "book" part of the talking book. Gates' talking book trope transfers the power and prestige of print to a person who relies on the talking book trope due to a-literacy. This transference is the result of a process of becoming literate that follows on the initial estrangement of an impenetrable book (what

Gates calls the “absence” of voice in the talking book (167). The a-literate person learns to read and write, and then the talking book trope shifts meaning and use again. Now, in the hands of someone who can marshal the trope’s power (the same person who once talked at the book) through specific acts of graphic literacy (writing), the talking book trope facilitates the acquisition and redeployment of cultural power through the book as a material object. According to Gates, the talking book offers a compelling analytical tool for understanding how literacy and publication can be wielded by those whom literacy and publication once excluded. Like figures in Gates’ influential analysis—Gronniosaw, Marrant, for example—Truth relied on the cultural prestige and circulating materiality of the book. Unlike Gronniosaw and Marrant, though, Sojourner Truth worked with a-literacy. The talking book remained a talking book to Truth, not least because she needed others to help her access print’s content in a conventional sense associated with reading. But reading is merely one way among many to use books.

Tara Bynum differentiates Marrant from conventional accounts of literacy in religious contexts: “Worthy is the Lamb who feels right enough to die for humanity; that the believer might be worthy enough to read and live the Word of God. Marrant seeks to emphasize this point with his revisions—that a reader need not possess book learning but instead the worthiness of the Lamb” (78). Worthiness may be valued, but the book—and print in general—remains of utmost importance for Truth. Book learning does not have to be synonymous with alphabetic literacy. By moving away from the centrality of reading, it becomes possible to see how other literacies shape lived experience. For someone like Sojourner Truth, religious literacy and the books that inform such literacy, for example, need to move outside reading comprehension, toward “a way to make meaning and

purpose out of the biblical Word” (Bynum 77) that does not rely solely on alphabetic literacy.

About a century after Marrant’s *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings* details how *Revelation* led to Mary Scott’s conversion, *Revelation* reappears as a conversion catalyst for Julia A.J. Foote, who published a spiritual autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* (1879). Like Truth, Foote was born and raised in Schenectady in New York’s “Burned Over District” to pious parents and later experienced a call to preach and travel. Unlike Truth, Foote was born to former slaves who had purchased their freedom before their daughter’s 1823 birth. Unlike Truth, Foote was able to read and ended up as an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church (Andrews, “Introduction” 9-10). Foote’s conversion combines Mary Scott’s reflective consideration and Marrant’s physical reaction. While the “Book of Life” is not cited by word, Foote does cite *Revelation* as the catalyst for her conversion. She was fifteen years old, and it occurred “on a Sunday evening at a quarterly meeting” where the minister selected *Revelation* 14.3 as the lesson’s text (180). The verse struck a nerve with Foote who “beheld my lost condition as I never had done before” (180). Foote experiences visions in which someone following her says, “Such a sinner as you are can never sing that new song.” She closes this chapter with a simple exclamation, “Glory to the Lamb!” (181). For Foote, her *Revelation*-centered conversion is the point around which her entire narrative turns. For Mary Scott, the book of life conversion experience hastens her death, an event which Marrant’s account nevertheless celebrates because Scott gets to enjoy heavenly salvation. The altering power of book of life tropes serves as key plot points in the narratives where Scott’s and Foote’s trajectories change inexorably.

By the mid-nineteenth century in the U.S., periodicals and newspapers participated book of life discourse hoping to take advantage of the trope's power. These book of life articles repeat a similar question: imagine your life as book; how do you want to be read and remembered? It is unclear when Truth titled her scrapbook "Book of Life," but internal evidence suggests that it was in place by 1870 (*BL* 232-33). Truth's "Book of Life" gestures outward to the mid-to-late nineteenth-century periodical culture's investment in book of life rhetoric. The phrase—where it appears outside of the Bible—had already been in use for decades by 1870. The earliest newspaper record that I have found comes from 1840.⁸⁴ The phrase picks up steam around the mid-nineteenth century and enters a more generalized usage than the specific theological discussions in religious periodicals. Books of life were popular outside of Sojourner Truth and the friends, acquaintances, and supporters who collaborated on her scrapbooks. The phrase is clustered in religious periodicals but is nevertheless present in a range of newspapers and periodicals, from *Ladies' Home Journal* to *National Era*. Truth's "Book of Life" looks far less idiosyncratic against this background.

Some book of life articles draw on a recurring analogy that the human body is a book. The familiar analogy has a long history. One of the most famous examples in American literature comes from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* where he proposed his own epitaph, figuring his deceased body "Like the Cover of an old Book" (44). *Home Magazine*, following in this tradition, declares that "Life is a book, with the title-page and contents to be known, and read clearly and intelligibly in the spiritual world." The next sentence complicates the opening sentence: "It is being written now in this world, set up,

⁸⁴ Conservative and Holly Springs Banner. (Holly Springs, Miss.) 9 Oct. 1840, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov.

revised, struck off, and bound up in its appropriate volume.”⁸⁵ Even though the book “is being written now in this world,” it will be read “clearly and intelligibly in the spiritual world.” *Home Magazine* departs from the Franklinian model where all that remains of the body’s book is the cover, “stript of its Lettering and Gilding” ready to be remade into a “new & more perfect Edition” (Franklin 44). Where sin makes type blurry, virtue “stamps / In letters clear.”⁸⁶ Human beings *are* books that are written, set in type, printed on paper, papers gathered, gatherings bound, and then circulated to consumers. It was no different for Sojourner Truth. In one reprinted letter in the “Book of Life,” Parker Pillsbury writes that, “The wondrous experiences of that most remarkable [Sojourner Truth] would make a library, if not indeed a literature, could they all be gathered and spread before the world” (*BL* 137). Here, a letter describing Truth’s experience echoes the “human beings are books” discourse found in periodicals and other popular materials from the mid-nineteenth century.

Other periodicals had a more direct connection to Sojourner Truth, such as *Zion’s Herald*, an anti-slavery, Methodist newspaper published in Boston (Mott 67). Truth knew *Zion’s Herald* not least because Reverend Gilbert Haven gifted her a copy (*BL* 216). The 18 July 1872 *Zion’s Herald* newspaper writes, “The course of human lives may be compared to the pages of a book.”⁸⁷ The article’s unnamed narrator presents several books and lives for the audience to examine: “a volume, elegantly bound, ample;” another volume is equal in size to the first but with “coarser and more crude” pages in the

⁸⁵ “THE BOOK OF LIFE,” *Home Magazine*, August 1853, 104.

⁸⁶ Ladies’ Home Journal, 1890.

⁸⁷ “Our Social Meeting,” *Zion’s Herald*, 18 July 1872, 346.

opening chapters.⁸⁸ Books with crude covers might have pristine pages, while books with gilded Moroccan leather covers might have errata-filled pages. Other book of life articles from the time period dive into specific theological arguments. Reverend S.E. Quimby raises questions about how grace and works function in book of life passages (278). In another article, Ella F. Mosby specifically cites *Revelation* 20.12 to argue that book of life inscriptions also appear on the soul, not just the body (158). Whether diving into doctrinal debates over grace and works or suggesting that the soul also bears impressions of lived experience, book of life articles strive to be reflective of life. From conversion narratives to articles in popular periodicals and newspapers throughout the nineteenth century, book of life was an enduring phrase that drew power from its theological potential. Truth's title, "Book of Life," resonates in this larger tradition.

5. BORN AGAIN: CHRONOLOGY AND CONVENTION IN LIFE-WRITING

Sojourner Truth's life-writing projects emerged out of a rich tapestry of life-writing genres that circulated in the latter half of the nineteenth century: scrapbooks, autobiographies, biographies, and conversion narratives, for example. Looking at the "Book of Life" through this life-writing genre tapestry highlights the influential predecessors that helped define the horizon of possibilities for Truth's project as well as the limitations. The hybrid text that emerged, her "Book of Life," works around many of these limitations, mashing pieces together into an unruly yet meaningful final text. This section considers how Truth's "Book of Life" overhauls life-writing through targeted

⁸⁸ Ibid., 346-47.

interventions in how life-writing texts deploy chronology to convey a sense of their subjects' identity.

It was common for nineteenth-century biographies to open with a brief genealogical history of the subject's family. Washington Irving's *George Washington*, for example, opens with a genealogy of Washington's ancestors that stretches almost back to the Norman Conquest. And James Parton's *Life of Andrew Jackson* takes readers to the open fields of Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries before moving across the ocean to Irish settlements in the Carolinas where Andrew Jackson was born. The expectation is that the biography opens with a relevant pre-history of its subject; Parton's Jackson has a family who, seeking a better life in Colonial America, immigrates and then settles into a hard-scrabble existence. In Parton's portrait, Jackson emerges from this honest, hard-working genealogical mythology.

Not all life-writing texts could begin with such an extensive genealogy that celebrates freedom of movement and chronological and geographical certainty. When was Sojourner Truth born? This is a complicated question, not least because Truth was born "Isabella Van Wagener" and was born enslaved. Truth's friends and biographers—as well as most scholars—pinpoint Truth's birth to the period between 1797 and 1800. But not all life-writing texts could enjoy the luxury of straightforward chronologies. Sojourner Truth published her *Narrative* in 1850, a mere five years after Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* appeared. What scholars now recognize as the slave narrative did not emerge in mid-century, but it certainly began to cohere as a distinct genre at that time. Enslaved life-writing—a sub-genre that includes autobiographies, biographies, and dictated narratives—has a different task at its beginning. Prefatory material, such as

letters and testifying documents, usually precede the opening narrative sentence. These materials, what John Sekora calls a “white envelope” because it surrounds the “black message,” generally disrupt the origin story of biography in order to confer authenticity, authority, and legitimacy on the black message’s subject. Sekora offers binaries, message/envelope, black/white. The black/white binary has loomed largest in the wake of Sekora’s essay, and many treatments of the slave narrative focus on the dynamic of trying to locate a black voice within white paratexts.

Sekora’s argument raises questions around authenticity, exemplified in the white/black binary, but his essay also works through the publishing culture and its connection to mainstream abolitionism that produced and structured many famous nineteenth-century slave narratives. Mainstream U.S. abolitionism was heavily white and often tinged with paternalism and racism. The institutional discourses have not been as consistently integrated into slave narrative criticism as the racial collaboration aspect of authorship has been integrated. They resonate importantly for Truth’s *Narrative*, because Truth was on the margins of organized abolition and so too were her collaborators, Olive Gilbert and Frances Titus. Nevertheless, the margins provide a helpful perch for gaining perspective on a genre’s center where Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845) has long held court. Sojourner Truth’s *Narrative* would always sit uneasily in this genre history, even though it has many of the same markers as Douglass’s narrative: prefatory statements by famous abolitionists (Garrison), first-hand testimony of slavery’s injustices and abuses, an escape scene, connection to prominent abolitionist organizational networks, and religious conversion, for example. Despite these similarities, few scholars would agree that Truth’s

Narrative is a canonical slave narrative in the same way that Douglass's *Narrative* is canonical.

Even though Truth's biographical texts open with a conventional statement about when she was born, such straightforward chronological ordering begins to fall apart. In the Preface to the 1875, edition Frances Titus, Truth's amanuensis, states that Truth was a "twin sister" for the United States, meaning that she was born in 1776 (*BL* vi). Later, Isabella baptizes herself "Sojourner Truth" in 1843 before she leaves New York City on her first self-appointed preaching tour (*NST* 100). So one can make the case that Truth was born in 1843. And as many have pointed out—including Truth herself—Sojourner Truth is as much a symbol as a person. So the 1776 date isn't as strange as it sounds, especially if one considers Truth a symbol of the irreconcilable combination of chattel slavery and American liberty. In Titus's characterization, Truth and the US had had one remarkable first century of existence.

Celebrating "centenarians" was a widespread, even esteemed, act in the years around the American Centennial. William Dorsey, a prominent Philadelphia scrapbooker, collected many notices of centenarians for his scrapbooks that celebrated African American culture. Dorsey preserves these printed notices (often obituaries) and strives to preserve the twin histories of American culture's first century, that of the birth of American freedom and the continuation of chattel slavery. In fact, these centenarians' lives emphatically yoke slavery and freedom in an era when it was not unusual to downplay the legacies of chattel slavery in Reconstruction Era. Centenarians could become "the *most* representative of the nation's history" writes Ellen Gruber Garvey (138-40). According to this logic, exaggerations (strategically misinformed or outright

fabrications) about Truth's birth in 1776 "became a crowning distinction, like an honorary degree" (Garvey 141). But it was not always such an innocent act to misrepresent age. P.T. Barnum bought Joice Heth in 1835, an elderly black woman, and then claimed that Heth was close to 150 years old and also that she had been George Washington's wet nurse. Barnum exploited both Heth and credulous audiences at the same time.⁸⁹

Yoking narratives of individual lives with American national mythologies has been a consistent feature of such biographical practices. In the early nineteenth-century, biography—in almost all cases—deployed a version of civic republicanism that ties the glory of an individual's life to the inevitable progress of national culture. The subjects of these biographies are statesmen and politicians, military heroes, and prominent public figures. One can turn to Jared Spark's *Library of American Biography* (1834-1848) to see examples of this biographical style.

Especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, biography sought to present its subject's character in a series of digestible, and thus emulative, lessons. "One's performance or actions on the public stage *revealed* one's character (true self), and at the same time they *fixed* one's character (reputation) in others' eyes" (Casper 6). Moreover, the idea of character existed at the center of American civic republicanism because it moved between individual and collective identity. Scott Casper argues, "In emphasizing the revelation of character in public, these definitions coincided with the essential tenet of post-Revolutionary American republicanism: that a republic's survival depended on its citizens' civic virtue, their commitment to participate in public life and

⁸⁹ For an extended treatment of the relationship between Barnum and Heth see Reiss.

place the public good before private interest” (6). The defining aspect of character in the Federal period—and through the first few decades of the nineteenth century—is its publicness because of the important role that being-public played in American republicanism.⁹⁰

This version of biography is different from Samuel Johnson’s theory of “domestic privacies,” the prevailing definition of biography at the end of the eighteenth century. In a pair of essays, one in *Rambler* 60 and one in *Idler* 84, Johnson contends that the best biographies do not focus on public actions, because acting in public involved some degree of calculation and potential dishonesty.⁹¹ Instead, Johnson argues that how a person acted in “domestic privacy” was the truest way into understanding character. James Boswell famously followed this Johnsonian theory for modern biography’s *magnus opus*, Boswell’s *The Life of Dr. Johnson*. Scott Casper notes that, despite the fame and saturation of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) in England and the European continent, it did not make comparable waves in the United States “before 1820 largely because most Americans did not share his notion of character” (6). Even after 1820, American biographies remained invested in etching dual destinies of national and individual progress. They continued to grow in popularity because it was “*the* medium that allowed people to learn about public figures and peer into the lives of strangers”

⁹⁰ Michael Warner’s *Letters of the Republic* is the classic theorization of republican character and the public sphere. See Brooks, Fraser, Looby, Loughran, and the Black Public Sphere Collective for challenges to Warner. See also Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics.”

⁹¹ On Samuel Johnson’s theory of “domestic privacies,” see essays in the *Rambler* and the *Idler*. For a summary of Johnson’s views on biography, see Sisman 153-57.

(Casper 2). Life-writing texts combined national mythologies and individual character to make a nationalistic life narrative.⁹²

Where other black centenarians celebrated their age like an honorary degree, Sojourner Truth did not look as kindly on this honorarium. Garvey may be right that others saw fabricated or exaggerated accounts as a “crowning distinction” but Truth’s “Book of Life” offers a contrasting insight: “The constant and repeated inquiry made by visitors, as to her age, she considers as somewhat trying, as it is what she has done and is to do, that she considers of the most importance” (*BL* 233). When newspaper coverage described Truth as “that lively old negro mummy, whose age ranges among the hundreds” (*BL* 203), Truth’s “somewhat trying” response to such patronizing exaggeration is a politic understatement. This response also echoes the language with which she rejects Theodore Tilton’s offer to write her biography, because Sojourner Truth has lots yet to accomplish, making a biography premature (*BL* 234). While it might seem that Truth, by including these racist caricatures and degrading exaggerations, runs a risk of amplifying these attacks on her character, it seems clear from the many examples in the “Book of Life” that Truth speaks back to them. In this way she gets the last printed word.

More than just a question of how to begin a biography, the “Book of Life” mounts a subtle but relentless argument that highlights a theological challenge to such a

⁹² Daniel Walker Howe defends “the legitimacy of writing a book on the subject of the construction of the self *in America*.” He claims that while self-construction is a universal concern, there exists in the US a particularly self-conscious pervasiveness to the question and how it connects to constructions of national identity. Howe writes that this dualism “is invoked in the Declaration of Independence as the right to the pursuit of happiness. Thus it is related not only to our individual but also to our collective project of self-construction” (16-17).

seemingly straightforward question. Truth makes a puzzling admission later in her “Book of Life:” “I only count my age from de time day I was ‘mancipated. Then I’gun ter live” (*BL* 213). According to this newspaper article—printed in the *Boston Post*, then clipped for Truth’s scrapbook, and finally reprinted for the 1875, 1878, and 1884 editions of the enlarged *Narrative*—Truth believes that her life began on the day of her emancipation.⁹³ The roughly four decades she was enslaved do not count. Like the figure of Christ she so admired and championed, Truth sees emancipation as a time-schism: 1827 was year Zero, the moment when life began. “Then I’gun ter live.” Even if Truth admitted that she found the constant inquires about her age exasperating, she also knew that answers carried symbolic importance. The answers Truth would give later in life consistently shifted between being born after slavery’s abolition in New York (1827) and then again at the federal level (in 1863 and then 1865) and her religious salvation. For Sojourner Truth, to be born again was a matter that probed the nineteenth century’s great events: the abolition of chattel slavery and evangelical religious awakenings.

The *Narrative* follows generic conventions that are beholden to a white-abolitionist ideology, one oriented toward slavery’s abolition. But Truth’s “Then I’gun ter live” is not part of the dictated *Narrative*. It comes from a newspaper article via Truth’s scrapbook before being reprinted in her “Book of Life.” This is not to say that the newspaper is any less mediated—but it is to say that the generic conventions are different and perhaps meaningfully so. Unrestrained by generic conventions of the slave narrative’s critical anchoring of Truth’s life in slavery, the newspaper article, and its

⁹³ It is unclear whether Truth considered herself emancipated when she walked away from Dumont or when New York’s legislative emancipation occurred, both of which took place within a few months of each other.

various transmediated locations (in scrapbooks, commonplace books, etc.), can be accommodated in the “Book of Life.”

Truth sees each life-writing text participating in a process of becoming that must always be incomplete. The opening sentence of “Part Second, / BOOK OF LIFE” argues for such an in-process becoming of Truth’s life-writing representations: “The preceding narrative [1850] has given us a partial history of Sojourner Truth. This biography [the 1850 *Narrative*] was published not many years after her freedom had been secured to her” (*BL* 129). Truth earned her emancipation from New York State in 1827, roughly twenty-five years after her birth and roughly twenty-five years before she published her autobiographical *Narrative*.

Truth often subordinated earthly freedom to heavenly freedom. For Truth, ultimate freedom meant salvation. She was not born in 1776, despite what many claimed. She was born between 1797 and 1800. She was born again in 1827. And she was born again, as Sojourner Truth, in 1843. All life-writing forms, whether biography or autobiography, capture a person in time. Truth’s efforts are no different. But I have been arguing that taken together, these life-writing texts and the sometimes-paradoxical evidence contained therein encourage an alternative way of representing lived experience. Truth’s “Book of Life” should be read always in relation to itself as well as the other life-writing texts that Truth published. It is understandable then that she published the “Book of Life” in the same volume as the *Narrative*.

Even though Truth owned the plates for the 1850 *Narrative* (and thus, crucially, owned her printed words), and would have been unlikely to pay for errata corrections, I think there’s a better explanation for why she reprinted the *Narrative*: it is a material text

that emerged out of a particular set of historical contingencies. Truth collaborated with Olive Gilbert on the *Narrative*. It was a dictated autobiography, what Jean Humez calls a mediated life story. There is no *urtext* of Truth's life, no master narrative. There are, instead, discrete representations. One can revise a single text, but one can also just keep producing. That seems to be the way that Truth created a life-narrative. She kept producing, kept compiling. Including the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in the "Book of Life" edition turns the *Narrative*, in effect, into a newspaper clipping that Truth compiles into a larger, ongoing, in-process revision of a life-writing project.

6. THAT OLD SYMBOL, THE LIBYAN SIBYL

She was born Isabella Bomefree. She matured as Isabella Van Wagenen. She endures as Sojourner Truth. Truth changed names when she embarked on new periods in her life. Her last and most recognized name resounds with symbolism connecting her itinerant preaching (Sojourner) with her devotion to spiritual perfectionism (Truth). But Truth was less enthusiastic about given appellations, especially when the suggestion's connotations missed the mark. Such is the case with Harriet Beecher Stowe's effort to baptize Truth as "The Libyan Sibyl." Truth used the "Book of Life" to reclaim her public persona from Stowe's paternalist patronage. The "Book of Life" works to undo static depictions of Truth's life that conventional biography prioritized of which Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" is a representative example of biographical stasis. Truth's "Book of Life" uses compilative practices to reauthorize, through the way that reprinting enables reclamation, her life narrative.

Based on the stunning commercial success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe cultivated an aura of being a literary-Midas. But Stowe was more than a Midas; her texts, in addition to being lucrative, created literary characters so memorable that Uncle Toms and Evangelines lived on long after the novel fell out of favor.⁹⁴ So when Stowe submitted "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" to *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863, Truth stood likely to gain from the association. No doubt the authorial by-line would help Truth extend her reach from itinerant preacher who mostly enjoyed name-recognition among audiences in favor of her abolitionism and feminism to larger swaths of Americans. The *Atlantic Monthly* was also a respected and popular magazine. Truth also faced a predicament because of the article. Would Stowe's characterization of Truth as "the Libyan Sibyl" overshadow the persona that Truth sought to create for herself? Evidence suggests that Sojourner Truth lived in the Sibyl's shadow. Newspaper articles frequently cited Stowe's moniker, for example, and many are reprinted in the "Book of Life."⁹⁵ If one were to take the repeated allusions and citations of Truth as the "Libyan Sibyl" in the "Book of Life" at face value, then Truth's persona seems beholden to the epithet Stowe created.

In her sketch of Sojourner Truth, Stowe embellishes a single meeting between Truth and herself that took place a decade earlier in Andover, MA where Stowe was living in 1853. The article's opening sentence belies an awareness of the ensuing decade's changes: "Many years ago, the few readers of radical abolitionist papers must often have seen the singular name of Sojourner Truth, announced as a frequent speaker at

⁹⁴ See Gossett.

⁹⁵ For other references see *BL* 146, 200, 201, 219, 232, 240, 241, 249, and 278.

anti-slavery meetings, and as traveling on a sort of self-appointed agency through the country” (*BL* 151). Where Truth was known to a fringe readership in 1853, her name recognition expanded to the *Atlantic Monthly*’s vast, transcontinental and transoceanic audience a decade later in 1863. Stowe accurately describes Truth’s fame as an orator but misstates Truth’s reasons for her traveling—far from self-appointed agency, Truth believed that God sent her on the road.

The rest of the article evinces an uneasy balance between an attempt to render Truth’s singular tone and notable character traits in a truthful manner and Stowe’s deployment of racially charged caricature. Stowe followed tradition in depicting Truth’s speech in eye dialect: “Well, honey, de Lord bless ye! I jes’ thought I’d like to come an’ have a look at ye. You’s heard o’me, I reckon?” (*BL* 152). The article mentions that Truth traveled with her grandson, whom the article paints in tones similar to Sam and Andy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Truth’s “little grandson of ten years [was] the fattest, jolliest woolly-headed little specimen of Africa that one can imagine,” a veritable “African Puck” (*BL* 152-3). When Stowe attempts to describe Truth’s otherness, she “dwelled at length on descriptions of [Truth’s] body” (Painter 98). These attempts often bordered on ludicrous. She describes the scene when Truth met Calvin Stowe and other guests in the Stowe household: “[Truth] stood among them, calm and erect, as one of her own native palm-trees waving alone in the desert” (*BL* 153). Palm-trees are not native to New York State; neither are deserts.

“Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” creates a mythologized portrait of Truth as part country-bumpkin, part non-conformist preacher, part hymn-singer, and part wanderer. Judging by the newspaper articles that reference Stowe’s article when

introducing Truth, this portrait struck a chord. While admitting Truth's oral power and wit, the article disregards Truth's 1863 persona as a radical and outspoken antislavery feminist, choosing instead to essentialize her as a non-threatening curiosity. Although "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl" relates how Truth called herself a "sign unto this nation" (*BL* 152, 164), the article is more invested in turning Truth into a sign of immobility, able to be analyzed as a statue. Harriet Beecher Stowe suggests that rather than inspiring women's rights and antislavery, Truth's legacy lies in being an object of aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, Stowe casts herself as the heroic agent who secured this legacy for Truth. The article ends with Stowe in Rome, visiting William Wetmore Story, the American expatriate sculptor. "I related Sojourner's history to Mr. Story at a breakfast at his house," Stowe recalls:

The history of Sojourner Truth worked in his mind and led him into the deeper recesses of the African nature—those unexplored depths of being and feeling, mighty and dark as the gigantic depths of tropical forests, mysterious as the hidden rivers and mines of that burning continent whose life history is yet to be.
(*BL* 170)

The result is a statue Story titled the Libyan Sibyl. Stowe's article constructed a portrait of Sojourner Truth cluttered with a haze of caricatured representations before Story carved this portrait into white marble.

The "Book of Life" reprints "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl" in its entirety. It is, I am arguing, a strategic move that makes sense because Truth wanted to set up Stowe's article as a symbol itself in order to redefine its meaning. For critics who lament that the "Book of Life" lacks order, a semblance of order appears in relation to Stowe's

article. The “Book of Life” offers a foreword and an afterword in the form of two articles that address “The Libyan Sibyl,” thus making the case that despite Stowe’s fame, it is Truth herself who can authorize and reauthorize published life-writing accounts.

The “Book of Life” prints a multi-page letter from Joseph A. Dugdale that appears before directly before Stowe’s “The Libyan Sibyl” (*BL* 146-50). Dugdale, a Quaker minister, farmer, and reformer, was born in Pennsylvania before moving west to Ohio and then Iowa.⁹⁶ If Truth had not met Dugdale before June 1870, they likely met when he worked to set up an Iowa Woman’s Enfranchisement Convention in Mount Pleasant. The “Book of Life” includes a brief note from Dugdale, sent from Mount Pleasant, Iowa (*BL* 264). This note was quite possibly solicited during that very convention when either Truth asked Dugdale to sign her common-place book or she started a correspondence relationship with him. Dugdale’s letter to the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* makes a strange but important value judgment about print’s inability to do justice to Sojourner Truth: “The graphic sketch of her by the author of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ has doubtless been read with interest by thousands. No pen, however, can give an adequate idea of Sojourner Truth” (*BL* 146). While it might be disconcerting to see such a claim because it raises the possibility that the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (which precedes the letter) and the “Book of Life” (which contains Dugdale’s letter) are completely inadequate, a more pointed critique lies in the letter. Understood in light of Stowe’s “graphic sketch,” Dugdale’s critique acknowledges the outsized influence of Stowe’s penned portrait while attempting to undermine its influence at the same time. Including this letter from Dugdale, a letter that preempts the

⁹⁶ <http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/>

effectiveness of Stowe's "graphic sketch," Truth's "Book of Life" establishes strategic prolepsis.

The "Book of Life" doubles down on its strategy of redefining Stowe's characterization of Truth. After "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" ends, the "Book of Life" reprints a pair of articles from the *Advertiser and Tribune*, a Washington, D.C. newspaper. The first covers Truth's work during the Civil War on behalf of black soldiers. The second, printed in "spring of 1864," builds toward Truth's meeting with Abraham Lincoln but opens with a nod to Stowe's story's influence: "Many of our citizens are doubtless acquainted with the name of Sojourner Truth, have seen racy anecdotes of her from time to time in the newspapers, read Harriet Beecher Stowe's narrative of her in the *Atlantic Monthly*" (BL 174). Truth was an important fixture in American culture, and this opening covers a range of ways that Truth appeared as a public persona. Because she could not read in a conventional sense, Truth relied on willing friends to relate the news about her. There were exceptions: "She would never listen to Mrs. Stowe's 'Libyan Sibyl'. 'Oh!' she would say, 'I don't want to hear about that old symbol; read me something that is going on *now*, something about this great war'" (BL 174). Truth's statement signals a subject keenly aware not only of how her public persona appears but also of the many sources that craft her persona. Truth's exclamation clearly registers her refusal to be overtaken by Stowe's story. It thus serves as a substantive bookend to Dugdale's letter in that they both deemphasize Stowe's representation of Truth's persona. At the same time Truth's exclamation contains a vague yet pointed conundrum. Who is "that old symbol?" Is that old symbol Truth or is it Stowe's representation of Truth? She was constantly revising her public image, a point

made emphatically and repeatedly by Truth scholars. One of the *carte-de-visite* that Truth sold to audiences, for example, had on its verso the printed message, “I sell the shadow to support the substance” (Truth even copyrighted the phrase). Articles, such as Stowe’s, used dialect and racially caricatured physical descriptions to turn Truth into a stock symbol of black caricature. Truth’s avowal that she is an “old symbol” rings true because of her life-long project of life-writing representation.

I see a more complex side to this “old symbol” as well, and it points directly to Stowe’s appropriation of Truth’s life story. This old symbol is not Truth herself, for she is and has always been a symbol (as her adopted name attests), but the caricatured symbol of “the Libyan Sibyl.” There is both an etymological argument and temporal argument at work here. In classical mythology, a sibyl is a woman who functions as an oracle. She utters prophecies on behalf of a god. Recognizing Truth’s reliance on her voice’s aural impact, Stowe aptly chooses the sibyl as a symbolic referent for Truth. The oracle speaks for someone else, and we can see that Truth as the Libyan Sibyl speaks on behalf of Stowe, whose caricature renders Truth a sterilized, one-off oddity. The Libyan Sibyl is a whitewashed immobile statue who is distinctly non-threatening. But Truth rejects *that* old symbol. She is not an oracle because she does not speak on behalf of anyone else, especially Stowe.

While Truth understood herself to be a vessel for God, she always spoke *her* understanding of God. For Truth, God’s perfectionism made it impossible (even bordering on heretical) to claim to speak on behalf of God. Truth saw this danger intimately when the Prophet Matthias made such claims on behalf of God. The italicized now, moreover, manifests Truth’s belief that she could always revise her image. Within a

year of its publication (to say nothing of the decade-lag between their meeting and the article's publication), "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl" was out of date. *Now*, the article intones, is the Civil War. *Now* is Sojourner Truth, dedicated Army worker, the subject of the two articles. *Now* rebukes Stowe's claim that Truth "has passed away from among us as a wave of the sea" (*BL* 170). Not only is Truth alive in 1864; she is well enough to carry on the project of self-revision.

Reading the "Book of Life" in this manner considers how content and arrangement interact to create interpretive possibilities. The "Book of Life" is exactly the sort of text that affords the chance "to develop both a new conception of the mediated life-story text and new textual analysis techniques that will help us contextualize it most fully within its production process" (Humez 47). One of its most salient production processes is the way that Truth's "Book of Life" enfolds different life-writing genres into its narrative fabric. Seeing the histories behind these life-writing genres makes it possible to reconsider the ways that the "Book of Life" produces a vernacular biographical practice. Excluded from the major pathways of life-writing markets—Truth was female, black, and a-literate—the "Book of Life" elucidates how Truth combined existing life-writing genres in order to develop a new text attends to the contours of vernacular life. The *now*-ness of Truth's plea draws attention to the complex ways that temporality works in her life-writing.

Truth cleverly relied on the authority that Harriet Beecher Stowe and the *Atlantic Monthly* offered as guarantors of broader audiences. Of course Truth would select "The Libyan Sibyl" for her scrapbook; it is evidence of Truth's growing influence and presence in the very same American culture that would have dismissed her in earlier

years. The article walks a precarious line between trying to capture Truth's gravitas and rendering her character in non-offensive terms. I have argued that Stowe's sketch deploys racially caricatured physical description and sanitizes Truth's character, thus immobilizing her through language before Story translated the anecdote into white marble. But when the "Book of Life" reprints the Stowe article with an undercutting "foreword" and dismissive "afterword," the life-writing text highlights the highly contingent nature of authorization. In other words, Stowe's sketch helped in 1863 but needed to be supplanted less than a year later when Truth complains about "that old symbol" in the 1864 "afterword" that appears directly after Stowe's story in the "Book of Life."

7. SOJOURNER TRUTH AMONG THE MASSES

Sojourner Truth was no stranger to creating a public persona. Others, such as Stowe, created a public persona for her as well. It was incumbent on Truth to counter these stories with her authorized self-representations. She toured country-wide, giving lectures to thousands. Hawking *cartes-des-visites* and copies of her *Narrative*, Truth offered audiences the chance to purchase a material reminder of the experience. Truth's roles as photographic subject and speaker have consistently fascinated critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries despite the fact that Truth turned to print just as often.⁹⁷ I maintain that Truth's use of print is especially important because of the fact that she could not consume or produce print in conventional ways of understanding literacy: reading and writing. Nevertheless, Truth was a keen student of print culture and tireless

⁹⁷ On Truth as photographic subject see Grigsby. On Truth as speaker see Fitch and Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator*.

producer of it as well. Accordingly, Truth and her life-writing are case studies for thinking about how life-writing texts deploy authority in ways that are not reducible to a single author or even an author-function.

Truth's networks furnish not just the audiences but also the raw materials of such relationships that Truth would later collect then republish in the "Book of Life." Because Truth used collaborative authorship to create her texts, these networks were doubly important. They furnished the materials that Truth would later compile in her scrapbooks, then re-compile and publish in the "Book of Life." The second part of this section turns to how Truth's life-writing texts represent a specific subset of collective identity through Biblical allusions and adaptations.

Despite Casper's argument about this shift, Truth's "Book of Life" is proof that the shift was an incomplete process and that older modes persisted even as new narrative modes and methods gained traction among authors. The "Book of Life" deploys an archive of reprinted evidence that shows how Truth maintained, moved among, and mesmerized publics, thus directly countering Stowe's patronizing caricature that sought to immobilize Truth as a statue. But not all publics are the same. The 1875 edition goes to great lengths to differentiate groups of people, using a remarkable range of terms throughout its pages: phalanx, assemblage, audience, majority, mob, rioters, multitude, crowd, community, and congregation, for example. Seeing this diversity of vocabulary reveals not only etymological accuracy but also a calculated effort to position Sojourner Truth as consequential public figure. In an era of gendered and racial segregation, the "Book of Life" unfolds an insistent argument in its dozens of reprinted articles that Truth relied on a range of methods—circulating texts and circulating herself as a body, for

example—to work around nineteenth-century social barriers. The dual-circulation, both embodied and disembodied, challenges many of the reigning models for understanding how cultures produce and are produced by print.

As I have been outlining, life-writing provided Truth with a set of conventions to adapt and revise. Revision of genre conventions was a crucial step because biographical genres used implicit and explicit conventions for narrating gender: “If biographies of men are dominated by external events, most biographies of women are a blend of external and internal...It may be true that most women are still judged heavily by their private lives and men almost exclusively by their public” (Lee 127-28).⁹⁸ In the rare event that women’s life-writing appeared in print in the nineteenth century, it usually focused on their inner piety. Spiritual autobiographies and conversion narratives are a key example of this phenomenon. Sojourner Truth’s life-writing is emphatically invested in her conversion, but it is also invested in documenting her life as a public figure. It promotes this view through the dozens of reprinted articles that depict Truth as a circulating figure among networks. Truth relies on these vast networks—print networks, epistolary networks, and coterie networks—to furnish evidence of her life’s accomplishments and activities.

A seemingly endless succession of reprinted newspaper articles recounts Truth’s public appearances throughout her wide travels. The newspaper articles stretch for more than a hundred pages. Wouldn’t five or ten articles get the point across in the same way as thirty or fifty? Seeing the articles as individual entities yields information at a micro-level: regional variations on speeches and audiences, for example. But the “Book of Life”

⁹⁸ Here, Lee quotes Paula R. Backscheider (132, 11, 147).

concatenates these articles together; they are separate from the correspondence, signatures, and common-place book entries. At a macro-level these aggregated articles tie Truth's "Book of Life" to the influential—and up to this point in history—masculine sub-genre, *life and times*. The "Book of Life presents articles as both content and evidence: they exist as content because the articles appear more or less as-is (occasional editorial comments function as transitions). They exist as evidence because as the nineteenth century wore on, published life-writing increasingly relied on documentary evidence to substantiate claims about its subject.

Truth circulated far and wide in contradistinction to the conscripted movements that dominated life for many nineteenth-century African Americans, both enslaved and free.⁹⁹ Truth herself encouraged print coverage of her travels. By granting permission to publish second-hand coverage, Truth grants authorization to published accounts of her life. In a November 1864 letter to Rowland Johnson, a Philadelphia Quaker and abolitionist who served as Vice-President of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Truth writes, "You may publish my whereabouts, and anything in this letter you think would interest the friends of Freedom, Justice, and Truth, in the *Standard* and *Anglo-African*, and any other paper you may see fit" (*BL 180*).¹⁰⁰ Of particular importance is Truth's desire that the *Anglo-African* receives notice of Truth's whereabouts because the *Anglo-African* newspaper was at the vanguard of African-American literary history:

⁹⁹ For an essay on the movements and intimacies in Sojourner Truth's life and communities, see Greyser.

¹⁰⁰ On Johnson, see <https://hsp.org/blogs/archival-adventures-in-small-repositories/run-away-to-johnson-house>

Two major features set [the *Anglo-African*] apart from its African American and abolitionist journal peers. First, it was introduced to the public as a literary and scientific magazine. Second, it invited contributions solely from African American and Afro-diasporic writers.¹⁰¹

Truth sought publication in a periodical that prided itself on African American writers. While it is unclear who this letter's amanuensis was (it could have been her grandson or a white friend, such as Frances Titus), what matters is that this desire takes shape within a publication network where Truth exerts influence over the development of her narrative. By giving instructions to publish accounts of her travels, Truth creates a publication network that would continue to produce the necessary material record of her life, a record that she would assiduously collect and then compile into life-writing narratives.

The chronicling of Truth's travels is just as important as what she does during her travels. From Kansas to Missouri, Iowa to Michigan, Michigan to New York, the "Book of Life" details Sojourner Truth's itinerant life. Taken *en masse* these articles vary little. In this way they thus suggest a stable portrait of Truth's itinerant life. At the same time, however, Truth's travels arose out of many different purposes. She was not always speaking about temperance and urging audiences to sign her petition and purchase her books in the same instance. *En masse* these articles also resist a coherent and stable representation of Truth. In this sense then the articles offer two-fold evidence of Sojourner Truth as symbol (a stable and unified life) and Sojourner Truth as manifold, in-process subject. One of the consistent senses of Truth's self is her religious identity and how this religious self emerges out of group interactions. One episode comes from the

¹⁰¹ Marina Bilbija "The Anglo-African Newspaper."

Narrative and the second episode comes from her “Book of Life.” A comparative perspective showcases structural similarities but also key differences that suggest an evolving sense of how Truth understood her religious identity.

Toward the end of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Truth recounts a camp meeting that she attended near Northampton [MA]. Much to everyone’s dismay, “A party of wild young men, with no motive but that of entertaining themselves by annoying and injuring the feelings of others, had assembled at the meeting” (115). Those in charge of the meeting “grew impatient and tried threatening” the group. Taking umbrage at such threats, the wild young men “collected their friends, to the number of a hundred or more” and upped the ante, threatening to burn the gathered tents. Seeing no other option, the camp meeting leaders sent for the constable. They ignored Sojourner Truth, who, during the building conflict, hid in a tent behind a trunk. Fearful that because she is “the only colored person here,” the group’s “wicked mischief will fall [on her] first, and perhaps fatally” (*NST* 115). Truth is recognized in the moments with the mob at the camp meeting. Truth must figure out how to construct a social sphere where she can determine the basis for recognition and the authority that results from this moment of recognition. She recounts this episode, narrating it in language that resembles the New Testament teachings where Jesus Christ calmed the storm and also showcasing her ability to build networks between groups.

The “Book of Life” places even greater emphasis on the spiritual and theological elements of Truth’s work among the multitudes than what one encounters in the *Narrative*. In one representative moment, Sojourner Truth relates the obstacles formerly enslaved people faced after Emancipation. Whites withheld employment, housing, food,

education, and protection from newly emancipated blacks. Sojourner Truth sought “to mitigate their sufferings” and worked at the individual level, finding homes and employment for what people she could relocate” (*BL* 191). But Truth soon saw systemic obstacles to such reform and the Sisyphean efforts that lay ahead.¹⁰² The “Book of Life” draws on the language of collectives and mingles its portraits of earthly suffering with Biblical tropes to illustrate comparisons between Truth and Biblical heroes. Truth encounters “the vast multitude, composed of both sexes, and all ages from helpless infancy to tremulous sensibility, roaming about, having no possessions but the bodies which had recently been given them by a dash of Abraham Lincoln’s pen” (*BL* 191-92). In the next sentence, the vast multitude becomes a “motley crowd” en route to a “hungry mass” (*BL* 192). The same collective appears as multitude, then crowd, then mass. These distinctions invite closer attention to figure out why such fine-grained transitions appear in Truth’s life-writing.

The “Book of Life” renders this scene as a truncated “feeding of the masses” parable from the New Testament.¹⁰³ It is hard to miss the parallels: between a hungry mass gathered in Washington D.C. in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and the gathered masses in the Bible who had mourned the execution of John the Baptist; and the Freedmen’s Bureau (“a measure of relief”) as the disciples who “furnished to the refugees 700 loaves of bread” (*BL* 192). The hungry mass crucially becomes “refugees,”

¹⁰² Her friend and colleague Josephine Griffing, working under the auspices of the Freedman’s Bureau to secure employment for freed blacks, placed about ten percent of the 2,100 job applicants. In eight months of work Griffing found employment for 254 out of 2,114 (Washington 326).

¹⁰³ There are two different mass-feeding parables in the New Testament. The “Book of Life” conflates the two into a single story.

an important shift that registers their displacement and precarious social position. Granted there is no magical transformation of a few fish and bread loaves into quantities large enough to feed thousands; but in a cluster of pages in the “Book of Life,” Biblical overtones dominate. The author of this episode is likely Frances Titus because she contributed many of the editorial comments that can be found interspersed among the articles and other contents of the “Book of Life.” I have not found record of this incident anywhere other than the “Book of Life” editions. By the time that Titus and Truth were building the “Book of Life,” the Freedmen’s Bureau had been forestalled through federal defunding and state-based intransigence. So when the “Book of Life” notes that the 700 loaves “served to sustain life” they were “inadequate to meet the emergency; for civilization has needs which cannot be supplied by bread alone” (*BL* 192). In the New Testament gospels, the “multitude feeding” miracles testify to Jesus Christ’s compassion and divine abilities. No such miracle exists in the “Book of Life.” Even after the Freedman’s Bureau distributes 700 loaves of bread, they remain “the hungry mass.”

This episode also cites Psalm 137 to elaborate a longstanding homology between African Americans and persecuted Biblical groups. The “Book of Life” writes: “Languishing with homesickness, the worst of ailments, [the gathered African Americans among whom Truth worked] were a striking counterpart of those sorrowing captives who, sitting by the rivers of Babylon, hung their harps upon the willows and wept for remembered joys” (*BL* 193). A tension exists here, as the passage both draws on histories of persecution while also establishing a similarity between persecuted Jews who weep “for remembered joys” (presumably from life before their exile from Jerusalem) and the state of life before emancipation, chattel slavery. It is worth noting that the “Book of

Life” calls them a “striking counterpart,” and this description argues against a direct connection between circumstances and Biblical history. Rather, the “Book of Life” works to draw together discourses of persecution and social justice in resonant passages such as this.

Truth’s “Book of Life” adds another layer of complexity and contributes to the mythologization that characterizes so much of Sojourner Truth’s persona. At the end of the passage, a pressing question challenges the Biblical allusions—it asks if there’s a Moses and whether Truth could ever be a Moses-figure. In 1859, Frances Ellen Watkins lamented that the African American community had no Moses despite Frederick Douglass’s (160).¹⁰⁴ Douglass was on an upward trajectory, and after the 1855 publication of *My Bondage, My Freedom*, Douglass was heralded by many as the *de facto* African American leader. But Harper was not so sure that nineteenth-century African Americans had found their Moses in Douglass. The “Book of Life” agrees:

Would a Moses appear to remove the bands from wrist and ankle, and with uplifted finger pointing to the pillar of cloud and promise, lead them forth from this sea of troubles and plant their weary feet upon the Canaan of their desires? Would manna descend from heaven to feed this multitude, who were morally, physically, and intellectually destitute? (*BL* 196)

These rhetorical questions carry forward the metaphors from earlier in this passage: feeding of the multitude, the sea of troubles ahead, for example. But there is an unequivocal break when the “Book of Life” answers these rhetorical questions: “As neither man nor miracle appeared, Sojourner said, ‘Lord, let me labor in this vineyard’”

¹⁰⁴ Watkins does not mention Douglass by name but the fact that he is omitted is conspicuous.

(*BL* 196). I want to emphasize that Truth is not characterized as a salvific Moses-figure in this answer. Rather, there is something more subtle about the role of collective labor that this biblical citation addresses.

Truth's statement cites the Biblical story commonly referred to as the Parable Workers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20.1-16). Her "Book of Life" records two other instances of Truth citing this particular parable (*BL* 205, 250). The two other uses appear in reprinted newspaper articles, so it seems probable that Truth felt that this parable offered particularly apt language to describe her understanding of labor and justice. Additionally, the parable's appearance in reprinted newspaper articles suggests that Frances Titus did not fabricate this allusion. Here, Truth rejects the singular hero in favor of working with others. The reward comes at the end of the day. Regardless of how many hours different laborers worked, their compensation is the same. Scholars point to an egalitarian sense of economic justice that undergirds this story, suggesting that all labor is valuable, none more than others. Truth's simple fiat, "let me labor in this vineyard," mounts a tacit argument in favor of collective identity. Just as she rejected the singularity that Stowe's article tried to foist on her, so too does she move beyond wanting to be represented as a heroic individual. Truth celebrates what labor can yield; in this case, it earns her salvation.

The "Book of Life" reprints dozens of articles that portray Truth among groups of people. She positions herself as one member in a group rather than someone separate from these groups. One of the text's goals is to show how compiling many articles belies the assumption that they reiterate a single message. Instead, compilation can produce instability through subtle variations, variations that resist the sense of a coherent self.

Truth's "Book of Life" celebrates the many possible selves that comprise her persona. At the same time, it foregrounds just how central religious identity is to Truth's self-representation through articles that cite and repurpose Biblical allusions, parables, and verses.

Recently critics have called for moving beyond the "book" to build a fuller sense of literary expression in marginalized nineteenth-century cultures.¹⁰⁵ This is an urgent and sensible challenge to scholarship. But as Sojourner Truth's example suggests, the book remained an important—even aspirational—form. While ephemeral literary forms such as pamphlets, newspapers, and personal letters indeed hold promise as analytical and interpretive sources, the "book" also has many lessons left to teach. Truth's "Book of Life" is one such form with impactful lessons. Because Sojourner Truth is both singular and representative—singular because she was one of the most famous African American women before the Civil Rights era, representative because she was a-literate, economically precarious, and oppressed on the basis of race and gender—the fact that she published a "Book of Life" necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between printed matter and the lives such matter records.

¹⁰⁵ See Gardner, *Black Print Unbound* and Rohrbach for two recent examples of this call.

CODA

“THIS QUESTION IS STILL TO BE SETTLED”

DU BOIS’S *JOHN BROWN* AND THE CHALLENGES OF BIOGRAPHY

Matters of Life constellates a collection of case studies that demonstrates how close attention to material practices and the textual forms they produce invites a reconsideration of the generic possibilities of black life-writing. As I have outlined in the previous chapters, particularly in Chapters Two and Three, the ending of chattel slavery as an institution did not necessarily lead to wholesale changes in how black Americans experienced postbellum life. (And for that matter, white Americans too.) Despite widespread beliefs around the turn of the twentieth century that the Civil War and the abolition of chattel slavery had closed a painful chapter in history, the legacies of chattel slavery were very much a structuring force in everyday matters of life. This coda turns to W.E.B. Du Bois’s biography of John Brown because, in this biography and in the series of which *John Brown* is a part, Du Bois challenges the promulgation and upholding of the rhetoric of closure and finitude that defined the decades after the Civil War ended. In effect, Du Bois tells the story that *Matters of Life* has been building throughout the previous chapters.

W.E.B. Du Bois published a commissioned biography of the white abolitionist John Brown (1909) as part of the American Crisis Biographies series, a collection of biographies that told the story of the Civil War through the lives of eminent figures.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ The list of biographies, prices, and ordering information appear on the recto of title pages of early editions; see W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown*. Philadelphia, George W. Jacobs & Co., 1909. Civil War enthusiasts could purchase a cloth-bound duodecimo

Edited by historian Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer,¹⁰⁷ the Series “will constitute a complete and comprehensive history of the great American sectional struggle in the form of readable and authoritative biography” (vii). The Series assures “freedom from any suspicion of wartime prejudice” because not only did Oberholtzer commission Northerners to write on Northern subjects and Southerners to write on Southern subjects but also because the authors come from a “younger generation” (vii). To write a biography of John Brown, according to Du Bois, is not to write a salvific story that paints Brown as a white savior. Instead, Du Bois uses Brown as a cipher whose life can help to tell a story about the “inner development of the Negro American” (7).

In this Coda I argue that Du Bois agreed to write a biography on Brown for a series on the Civil War *not* to write a heroic biography of John Brown per se, but to challenge the very American Crisis Biographies series of which it is a part. In *John Brown* Du Bois argues that there is no impartiality, that there is no “complete and comprehensive history” precisely because, in the words of John Brown which Du Bois uses to close the biography, “this question is still to be settled—this Negro question, I mean. The end of that is not yet” (396). *John Brown* is a history of U.S. race relations masquerading as a biography of John Brown. Du Bois’s *John Brown* reconstellates the American Crisis Biographies Series around chattel slavery. The Series as a form enables

for \$1.25 or have it shipped for \$1.37. By the time *John Brown* was ready in 1909, the following subjects were also in print: Abraham Lincoln, Thomas H. Benton, David G. Farragut, William T. Sherman, Frederick Douglass, Judah P. Benjamin, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Alexander H. Stephens, John C. Calhoun, and “Stonewall” Jackson.

¹⁰⁷ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer (1868-1936) was an author and historian. In addition to his biography on Lincoln for the American Crisis Biographies, Oberholtzer wrote biographies of Henry Clay, Jay Cooke, and Robert Morris as well as a multi-volume history of Philadelphia among other works.

Du Bois to build connections where others might avoid the issue. By framing racial inequality through economic language (“the price of repression is greater than the cost of liberty” (17)), Du Bois argues that the problem of racial inequality is institutional and in fact traceable at the individual level. Moreover, this problem is ongoing; it is emphatically not a relic from an earlier generation. “The end of that is not yet,” in John Brown’s memorable phrase. Du Bois’s *John Brown* uses a logic of the series against the American Crisis Biographies Series itself.

“I shall be very glad to undertake the biography of John Brown,” writes Du Bois in a spring 1904 letter to Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer. Du Bois’s enthusiasm notwithstanding, his agreement to write on Brown came on the heels of months of offers and counteroffers, rejections and withdrawals between Oberholtzer and himself. Consistent throughout this back and forth is Du Bois’s insistence on yoking a large-scale history of slavery in the U.S. to a single biographical subject. In this way, Du Bois’s approach resurrects what John Marshall had accomplished in his biography of George Washington: Marshall’s biography of Washington was really a history of the Federal Era, and this project rankled pretty much everyone. (Anti-Federalists panned its partisan perspective, and Federalists complained of Washington’s sparse presence in the pages.) Oberholtzer first approached Du Bois about writing a biography of Frederick Douglass for the Series, and Du Bois quickly agreed. Later, with contrition, Oberholtzer needed to rescind the offer because an outstanding, lapsed response from Booker T. Washington arrived in the mail, accepting Oberholtzer’s earlier offer of an invitation to write on Douglass. Du Bois then proposed that he would write a biography of Nat Turner for the

Series: “Around him would center the slave trade, foreign and internal” (qtd. in Lewis 356). Lewis summarizes the letter this way: “[Du Bois] proposed to trace slave insurrections from Toussaint L’Ouverture to John Brown, recapturing the beginnings of abolitionism, the activities of free Negroes in the North, [and] the antebellum plantation economy” (Lewis 356).

Even though Du Bois ranked his biography of John Brown as one of his best works,¹⁰⁸ critics have chided *John Brown* for its lack of “original” research, its errors, and its partisanship. Oswald Garrison Villard, whose own 1910 biography of Brown eclipsed Du Bois’s, published an anonymous review in *The Nation*, of which he then served as editor. Although accurate about the shortcomings of Du Bois’s work as a piece of scholarship (despite Du Bois’s caveat that *John Brown* would be a reinterpretation without new research), Villard’s review is nasty. When Villard claims that “So little have the negroes themselves as yet done to honor the memory of John Brown that [Du Bois’s *John Brown*] might have taken on a special significance” (Lewis 405),¹⁰⁹ Villard displays his prejudice about what counts as “honoring the memory” because he was certainly aware of Osborne Perry Anderson’s *A Voice from Harpers Ferry* (1861). More recently Paul Finkelman writes that “It is a generally competent history of Brown’s life, but as a work of scholarship it is, frankly, unimpressive” (xxv). David Levering Lewis calls it “uneven” (357). R. Blakeslee Gilpin writes that *John Brown* is “terribly flawed” and “plagued by factual errors and a lack of serious research” (84).

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. in Lewis 357.

¹⁰⁹ In a letter to Villard, “Du Bois stressed frankly that he was writing an interpretation and was “not trying to go very largely to the sources” (qtd. in Lewis 357).

Du Bois is less interested in the project that his critics want *John Brown* to be. Instead Du Bois is clear that he's offering an interpretation based on existing work. It is not going to be a work with serious new archival research substantiating its pages. Du Bois boldly declares this goal in the Preface, where the opening paragraphs verge on hyperbole, thus making clear that *John Brown* is polemical, partisan, and far from the Series' avowed impartiality from "wartime prejudice" (vii). In the second paragraph of Chapter One Du Bois lists several of Brown's contemporaries, some of whom are figures in the American Crisis Biographies: "[Anthony] Benezet, Garrison, and Harriet Stowe; Sumner, Douglass and Lincoln—these and others, but above all, John Brown" (15). Oberholtzer himself wrote the Lincoln biography for the series, and it appears first in the prefatory list of "Now ready" and "In preparation" volumes, signaling not only Oberholtzer's editorial position of primacy but also offering an overt argument of Lincoln's towering position in Civil War history. Du Bois contests this configuration when he writes "above all, John Brown," thus signaling that Du Bois understands Brown to be a constellating force for understanding the Civil War. For a biography that is part of a series of which the series editor wrote the volume on Lincoln, Du Bois's reversal of hierarchy is brazen.

Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid¹¹⁰ is now an integral part of the Civil War Era, the other volumes in the American Crisis Biographies hardly muster up any sympathy for Brown and do not grant him much importance. When he is mentioned, Brown is mostly singled out for his failed raid at Harpers Ferry. Occasionally, brief mentions of Brown evoke a tone of finitude that appears elsewhere in the Series. The biography of Robert E.

¹¹⁰ I will retain the modern spelling of Harpers Ferry unless quoting from historical sources when the town's name included an apostrophe, Harper's Ferry.

Lee, written by Philip Alexander Bruce, a historian of Virginia,¹¹¹ describes the Harpers Ferry Raid this way: “News came to the War Department that John Brown, of bloody notoriety in Kansas, accompanied by a band of raiders, had crossed the Potomac, seized the national arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, and from that point, by arming the negroes, was seeking to spread the horrors of a slave insurrection throughout the Southern states” (62). Lee took “command of a squad of marines” and then marched to Harpers Ferry where, after many tense hours, the marines broke into the Armory where Brown, his men, and their hostages had taken cover, to arrest Brown and his men (62). After this unsympathetic but informative description, Bruce’s narrative takes a marked turn when he reflects on the larger significance of the Harpers Ferry Raid: “Such was the prompt and *complete extinction of a little flame* which was designed to create a conflagration from one end of the South to the other” (63, my emphasis). The rhetoric of finality, of an event firmly ensconced in the past, echoes the language found elsewhere in the American Crisis Biographies, from Oberholtzer’s preface to Booker T. Washington’s description of the era of slavery as closed. Brown and his “band of raiders,” hoping to start a conflagration with their “little flame” were promptly and *completely* extinguished. In Bruce’s retelling, Brown and his men met their fate at the hands of Colonel Robert E. Lee and the bellicose arm of antebellum, slavery-upholding justice.

Du Bois saw it differently: Brown and his cause were hardly a little flame promptly and completely made extinct. According to Du Bois, the history of John Brown

¹¹¹ Bruce is most famous for his work on Jefferson and a multi-volume history of Virginia. His first book, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*, refuses to consider the effects of chattel slavery on postbellum black communities in Virginia, offering a similar rhetoric of finitude that is legible in some of the American Crisis Biographies (v-vii).

is less the story of a single man than the story of the collective conflict over enslavement. In this way Du Bois uses Brown to propose additional series-based networks. *John Brown* consistently connects incidents in Brown's life to a larger revolutionary history. Consider the opening of the fifth chapter, "The Vision of the Damned": "There was hell in Haiti in the red waning of the eighteenth century, in the days when John Brown was born" (75). The specter of slave insurrection was never far from American slavery, and Du Bois suggests that a revolutionary spirit moved from Toussaint L'Ouverture to John Brown. (That Du Bois's first choice for his contribution to the Series was Nat Turner supports my interpretation of this revolutionary sensibility.) *John Brown* thus participates in a long tradition of yoking together multi-millennial, multi-national histories of revolution. Osborne Perry Anderson, one of the black abolitionists in Brown's group, participates in the same genealogical project: "there is an unbroken chain of sentiment and purpose from Moses of the Jews to John Brown of America; from Kossuth, and the liberators of France and Italy, to the untutored Gabriel, and the Denmark Vesseys, Nat Turners and Madison Washingtons of the Southern American States" (2).

Connecting Brown to a revolutionary genealogy is one strategy that Du Bois uses to make the issue of enslavement bigger than the Civil War itself, to challenge the logic of the Series that casts the war as a discrete event. Even in Booker T. Washington's biography of Frederick Douglass, published in 1906 as part of the American Crisis Biographies, Washington minimizes the effects of chattel slavery. In the volume's preface, Washington obliquely refers to enslavement, firmly rejects any stoking of historical bitterness, and praises Douglass as an exceptional individual. It is, in almost every aspect, the antithesis of Du Bois's *John Brown*. The preface's opening sentence

talks about enslavement as “chance or destiny:” “The chance or destiny which brought to this land of ours, and placed in the midst of the most progressive and the most enlightened race that Christian civilization has produced, some three or four millions of primitive black people from African and their descendants, has created one of the most interesting and difficult social problems which any modern people has had to face” (5). The third sentence agrees with the Series’ framing of the Civil War as a closed event in the past: “Frederick Douglass’s career falls almost wholly within the first period of the struggle in which this problem has involved the people of this country,—the period of revolution and liberation. That period *is now closed*” (5, my emphasis). Douglass must rise above all the controversies and erase any possibility of bitterness: “This book will have failed of its purpose just so far as anything here said shall serve to revive or keep alive the bitterness of those controversies of which it gives the history; it will have attained its purpose just so far as it aids its readers to comprehend the motives of, and the men who entered with such passionate earnestness into, the struggle of which it gives in part a picture—particularly the one man, the story of whose life is here narrated” (5-6). In an allusion to Washington’s own perspective and writing career he closes the Preface with this admonition: “No Negro can read and study the life of Frederick Douglass without deriving from it courage to look up and forward” (7).¹¹²

One could wonder if Du Bois’s opening chapter, “Africa and America,” is written in direct response to Washington’s evasiveness. Du Bois uses the word “slavery” rather than talking about enslavement as “chance or destiny” as Washington does; Du Bois contextualizes Brown as a life in context of a much greater history, hence the opening

¹¹² It is hard to miss the allusion in “looking up” to Washington’s *Up From Slavery*.

title's chapter, "Africa and America" and elsewhere. The sweeping nature of Du Bois's perspective on Brown is apparent throughout the biography, especially in the early and late chapters. The first chapter, "Africa and America," opens with a sentence that displays the grand scale as well as the terms of the argument: "The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America" (15). At the end of the biography, Chapter Twelve, "The Riddle of the Sphinx," and Chapter Thirteen, "The Legacy of John Brown," move out from Brown's life by re-invoking the opening chapter's scale. Du Bois sweepingly writes that "If we are human, we must thus hesitate until we know the right. How shall we know it? That is the Riddle of the Sphinx...Only in time is truth revealed. To-day at last we know: John Brown was right" (338). Where Washington wants people to "move on" and avoid "the bitterness of those controversies," Du Bois digs in and makes the controversies not just ongoing but uses ire over enslavement and racial injustice to stoke fires of bitterness. Where Washington wants people to "look up and forward" without looking back, Du Bois argues that looking back must precede looking forward.

The "Lost Cause" looked back to the Civil War to undergird its regime of hate in the present. Supporters of the Lost Cause looked forward to the continuation of white supremacy by looking back.¹¹³ Du Bois yoked Brown to Du Bois's own theorization of the "color line," thus implicitly linking the American Crisis Biographies to the ongoing crisis of white supremacy in the early twentieth century. *John Brown* argues that the crisis of white supremacy is very much alive. The crisis has not changed all that significantly since the Fugitive Slave Law, since the raid at Harpers Ferry, since the

¹¹³ See Gallagher and Nolan.

treaty at Appomattox, since the ratification of the Civil War amendments. The end is not yet, as Brown suggests.

Two chapters in the middle of *John Brown* articulate the anti-heroic biographical history that define how Du Bois's biography outlines a different take on the "series" as an organizing concept. Chapter Nine, "The Black Phalanx," is a history within a history: it describes the decades between 1830 and 1860, aiming to describe this period as possible only because of the work of black communities. Du Bois writes, "To most Americans the inner striving of the Negro was a veiled and an unknown tale: they had heard of Douglass, they knew of fugitive slaves, but of the living, organized, struggling group that made both these phenomena possible they had no conception" (247). Du Bois catalogs the "living, organized, struggling group" in specific terms: he lists activists and businesspeople, newspapers, conventions, social organizations, and events.¹¹⁴ The chapter is densely detailed with names, dates, and places. John Brown appears throughout the chapter, but his actions and networks emerge only because of the preceding work that Du Bois ascribes to black communities.

After this deep dive into details and networks establishing the vitality of black communities, the next chapter, "The Great Black Way," offers a more sweeping historical perspective than the previous granular level of black communities. This historical perspective challenges the dominant narrative of historical whiteness. Chapter Ten opens with a citation of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Halfway between Maine and Florida, in the heart of the Alleghenies, a mighty gateway lifts its head and

¹¹⁴ Du Bois includes David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet (240), lumber merchant Stephen Smith (241), *Freedom's Journal* (240), conventions in Troy, NY, Cleveland OH, Buffalo, NY (242-44), Negro Odd Fellows (242)

discloses a scene which, a century and a quarter ago, Thomas Jefferson said was ‘worth a voyage across the Atlantic’” (273). In this passage from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson describes the spectacular beauty of the Harpers Ferry region. Du Bois continues to quote Jefferson on the beauty of this area and mentions that its beauty was one reason Brown settled on Harpers Ferry, in addition to various strategic reasons (273-74). Du Bois’s citation of Jefferson pushes in two opposing directions. First, Jefferson offers substantial cultural authority as an intellectual forebear. As a champion of Virginia’s beauty, Jefferson has few equals, so it makes sense for Du Bois to cite Jefferson in this capacity. Second, but in tension with the first, is the connotation of a “voyage across the Atlantic” considered in a book that is emphatically about the effects of chattel slavery on U.S. culture.

In the first chapter of *John Brown*, titled “Africa and America,” Du Bois alludes to the middle passage: “At first the [enslaved] black men writhed and struggled and died in their bonds, and their blood reddened the paths across the Atlantic and around the beautiful isles of the Western Indies” (16). Jefferson was not alluding to the middle passage when he writes that the beauty of the Harpers Ferry region was “worth a voyage across the Atlantic.” But considered against the background of the argument that Du Bois mounts in *John Brown*, this context of “a voyage across the Atlantic” takes on added significance. Du Bois’s citation of Jefferson in these two chapters that prioritize black communities puts Jefferson’s claim in a different context.¹¹⁵ In effect, Du Bois uses Jefferson against himself, similar to how *John Brown* uses the series against its intended

¹¹⁵ Du Bois joins other black authors who cite Jefferson in order to refute his reasoning. For a reading of the politics of this citational strategy in David Walker, see Jarrett.

argument for impartiality and heroic history. Considered in light of the work that Douglass undertakes in *The Heroic Slave* as well as in relation to how Child and Brown construct compilative identity, Du Bois's efforts in *John Brown* show that impartiality and heroic history are still malleable concepts fifty years after the Civil War.

Even though Brown appears more centrally in "The Great Black Way" than in the previous chapter, Du Bois prioritizes the black community. When recounting the known members of Brown's raid, Du Bois lists the black members first, beginning with Osborne Perry Anderson (280). It is a subtle shift but an important one, made more conspicuous due to a biography of Brown that, when it appeared just two years later, implicitly rebuked Du Bois's life-writing project. Oswald Garrison Villard's *John Brown* biography (1911) lists white members of the raid before the black members in an appendix. The body of Villard's biography mentions Anderson by name but only to describe his roles. And even though Villard includes biographical information for members of the raid, one can sense his condescension regarding Anderson, whom Du Bois described as "first in importance...a printer by trade, 'well educated, a man of natural dignity, modest, simple in character and manners'. He wrote the most interesting and reliable account of the raid" (280).¹¹⁶ Villard's first line of the brief biographical sketch says that "*Osborn Perry Anderson*, colored, survived the raid to die of consumption at Washington D.C." in 1872.

¹¹⁶ It's unclear whom Du Bois is citing in the description of Anderson. Here is Villard's description of Anderson: "*Osborn Perry Anderson*, colored, survived the raid to die of consumption at Washington, D.C., December 13, 1872. Born July 27, 1830 at West Fallowfield, Pennsylvania, he was in his thirtieth year at the time of the raid, of which and of his escape he left a record in 'A Voice from Harpers Ferry,' which contains, however, many erroneous statements. He learned the printing trade in Canada, where he met John Brown in 1858. After his escape he returned to Canada. During the Civil War, in 1864, he enlisted, became a non-commissioned officer, and was mustered out at the close of the war in Washington" (685).

Villard also claims that Anderson's *A Voice from Harpers Ferry* is full of "many erroneous statements" (685). In Villard's account Anderson is merely a body who fights and errs in recording his memories, *only* to "die of consumption" later. Du Bois uses John Brown as an occasion to catalog not only Anderson's presence, but his character and contributions. Du Bois's *John Brown* makes room for more actors, particularly black members of the "living, organized, struggling group" who have been veiled in previous accounts, and as Villard's biography confirms, will be veiled in future ones. Chapters Nine and Ten demonstrate how Du Bois strives to use John Brown's life as an occasion to elucidate the "inner development of the Negro American" and to enter into the historical record the members of the "living, organized, struggling group."

What does it mean to read *John Brown* as part of the American Crisis Biographies? The biography's tension—a result of toggling between heroic biography and history masquerading as biography, and presenting the crisis of race relations as a personal story and an institutional one—reanimates the very dilemma that the larger Series argues is settled: that the Civil War was an earlier generation's problem. According to this perspective, which the American Crisis Biographies proudly declares, the Civil War's legacies and impacts can now be impartially written by Northerners and Southerners because they are firmly ensconced in the past. Oberholtzer writes in his prefatory material that "The Civil War will not be treated as a rebellion, but as the great event in the history of our nation, which, after forty years, it is now clearly recognized *to have been*" (vii, my emphasis). That Oberholtzer assumes his regional assignments would in fact be impartial implies that the logic of factionalism is very much alive: that the South can only tell stories about the South, that the North can only tell stories about the

North. This emphasis on narrative does not absolve the South of its upholding of slavery or the North's complicity. In critiquing the rhetoric of finitude prevalent in the American Crisis Biographies, Du Bois's *John Brown* rejects the premise that slavery's institutional effects are not constitutive factors on an individual life. The network that the series builds between its subjects—from Lincoln to Johnson, Douglas to Douglass, Clay to Sherman, Grant to Lee—is thus the very tissue of a network-based argument that Du Bois uses in *John Brown* to place chattel slavery at the center of Civil War historiography.

Matters of Life places Du Bois's biography of Brown within a history of life-writing projects and practices that explore the ongoing effects of chattel slavery on life in the United States. In effect, the American Crisis Biographies sought to marginalize Brown and his colleagues from its historical account of the Civil War by denying that questions remain unsettled about U.S. history and culture from that period. In *John Brown*, Du Bois offers a powerful rejoinder to Oberholtzer's claim that the Civil War is "the great event in the history of our nation." According to Du Bois's *John Brown* the great event in the history of the United States is not the Civil War; it is the ongoing effects of enslavement on black life.

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