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"From David Walker to President Obama: Tropes of the Founding Fathers in African American Discourses of Democracy, or The Legacy of Ishmael"

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"Call me Ishmael," Herman Melville's elusive narrator instructs readers. The central voice in the lengthy saga called *Moby Dick*, he is a crewman aboard the Pequod. This Ishmael reveals little about himself, and he does not seem altogether at home. As the narrative unfolds, this enigmatic Ishmael seems increasingly out of sorts in the world aboard the Pequod. He finds himself at sea working with and dependent on fellow seamen, who are for the most part, strange and frightening and unreadable to him. Like the ancient Ishmael and the misplaced Ishmael of Melville's tale, African Americans have shared in a lengthy journey among seeming kin, only to find themselves onlookers who face constant reminders that they reside among people who deem them outsiders. Just as Melville's self-named Ishmael, African Americans are able to articulate their experiences and observations, but their narrative seems foreign to that of the collective or larger corpus.

Dating back to abolitionism, activists and intellectuals have maintained that the evidence of black literacy and a tradition of black belles-lettres would prove empowering for blacks, serving the cause for black rights. With the election of Barak Obama to the United States presidency, this belief seems validated. Obama has been internationally hailed for his written and oral eloquence, and many Americans expected that Obama's evident intellectual prowess would reverse prevailing stereotypes of black inferiority and illiteracy. Obama is regarded as the example of black achievement and excellence—that potential that resides untapped in black Americans. Obama's likeness to what is deemed excellence in western/white thinking, is then deemed representative of the potential that

resides in the larger population of blacks. Obama's gift at oratory, his mastery of the English language captivates his audiences and eases the fears of many white Americans as he ties his identity to a discourse and to icons that they hold dear. Obama speaks of the nation's founding fathers, the nation's founding documents, the nation's revolutionary pursuits as representative of a universal Americanness. His appeal to the crowd on the night of the 2008 North Carolina primary exemplifies his commonplace troping of America's patriarchs: Obama tells this presumed audience of Democrats, "we will have to remember who we are as Democrats—that we are the party of Jefferson and Jackson; of Roosevelt and Kennedy" (NC Primary Night Speech). The invocation of Jefferson and Jackson takes us to early patriarchal figures: Jefferson, who is the iconic figure of America's birth, and Jackson who is the iconic figure of American expansionism, both slaveholding presidents.

For one to see Obama's language mastery as transformative one must believe that language is a universal tool, granting equal power to all users. However, as critics such as Audre Lorde and Frantz Fanon have reminded us, language is not a universal, innocuous medium, but rather the product of cultural positionality, of hegemonic and imperialist enterprises.[1] The fallout in battles of words is often destructive for the oppressed when the weapon of choice, that is, the language of choice, originates from the arsenal of the adversary. Adetayo Alabi explains dynamics of this cultural confrontation through his examination of Shakespeare's Caliban: "in *The Tempest*, Caliban is oppressed, and his attempts to curse Prospero, slavery, and colonialism in Prospero's language, the only language Prospero recognizes, is ineffectual" (Alabi 50). Alabi captures the language dilemma that Caliban is unable to overcome, but as with many scholars of African American Literature he concludes that blacks are ultimately triumphant in their appropriation of western discourse. While he does not use the term heteroglossia to define this language phenomenon, his assertion of African

American narrative power rests in a notion of the merging of languages and uses that results in new language meanings. He argues that generations after Caliban, blacks find triumph in the language that ensnared their literary ancestor: "About a century after the publication of *The Tempest* . . . the resistance tradition prefigured in Caliban is developed by slaves . . . in their autobiographies. It is in these slave narratives that Calibans contest their image, as it appears in *The Tempest* . . . [and] argue that they had a culture before colonialism and that the rapist is not the slave, not the Calibans, but the slaveholders, the Prosperos" (51).

Alabi considers *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* (Olaudah Equiano), *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* works that illustrate his argument. One would hardly argue that these works do not attempt to contest the denigrating representations of Africans and the legitimacy of slavery; however, a less convincing argument is that their authors, like Caliban, are not stifled by the matter of language. Alabi asserts that "despite all the odds that are against their literacy, they [Equiano, Prince, and Douglass] become literate in English, and, like Caliban in *The Tempest*, they learn the language and are able to curse slavery and its advocates in English. . . Unlike *The Tempest*, in which discourses are controlled by Prospero, the counter-discursive force of the slave narratives is triumphant" (72). The triumph, according to Alabi, is not the mere gain of freedom, for both Shakespeare's Caliban and African Americans are eventually emancipated. African American narratives represent triumph, Alabi argues, because through their narratives they construct and control the representations of themselves and their experiences. Given that Mary Prince's autobiography is not penned by Prince, it is problematic to claim the text a narrative triumph. Prince launches a powerful criticism of slavery and slave masters, but how do we reconcile the paradox of her strong anti-slavery

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[1] In Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967), Fanon reminds us that to take on a language is to take on a culture. In Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) she proclaims

sentiment with her fond memory of her childhood master who Prince recalls, "used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little nigger" (187)? Additionally, though Prince places great value in literacy, learning to read and write, she does not author her text. In a story that is the account of Prince's experience in slavery, even her transcribed narrative does not stand on its own; Prince's text concludes not with her own voice and story, but with a supplement by her white editor that is as lengthy as Prince's own account.

Certainly the autobiographies of Equiano, Prince, and Douglass offer overt criticisms of slavery as well as profess black humanity; however, with a language blueprint that rests in presumptions of whiteness as the universal or prototypical, the result is anything but a confirmation of black humanity. After a year among the English, Equiano explains the identity transformation he has undergone. He is emerging into manhood, into a superior or advanced manhood, and he advises that this maturation is the consequence of his contact with British culture: "I could now speak English tolerably well, and perfectly understood every thing that was said. I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement . . . I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction . . ." (51-52).Thus, while Equiano argues passionately for African civility, he proclaims himself ultimately an Englishman and though free and aware of his origins, he chooses not to return to his native Ibo home, but remains a citizen of England.

Echoing Equiano's narrative, Douglass's autobiography also declares his equal worth and humanity and like Equiano, Douglass rests assertions of his humanity on validations of western

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that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

cultural hegemony.[2] Clearly, he does not find whites and their culture without fault, for he critiques slavery and slaveholders as the worst faces of humanity. For Douglass, however, slavery is more representative of an aberration in western culture, just as the American South represents an aberration of American idealism. Douglass declares his right to freedom and charges the slaveholders themselves as the harbingers of barbarity, but Douglass's prototype for human and cultural excellence rests in presumptions of whiteness as universal. For Douglass, blacks demonstrate their humanity through their transformation into white ordained forms. Douglass represents himself through the common western dichotomy of lightness and darkness, with darkness symbolizing the dejected, ignorant, barbaric self. Douglass reads the period of his illiterate existence as synonymous with the primitive, unintellectual, subhuman nature of the uncultured and untrained African. Taking on the language and thus the culture of whites, Douglass sees himself as transformed into a beacon of manhood.

When he learns the knowledge of his white master—that literacy grants men power over other men—he professes to have made a life-altering discovery. This discovery places Douglass in intellectual league with his master. Emerging into the knowledge that literacy would make him unfit to be a slave, that his master in fact fears the possibility, Douglass possesses the knowledge that moves him out of darkness: "It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things . . . It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly" (*Narrative of the Life* 78). Douglass thinks himself superior to the lot of illiterate slaves, especially those he criticized for thinking that "the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves" (63). Douglass fails to consider that this adaptation of the master's language and the value he subscribes to it bears a striking resonance with the slaves he demeans for aligning the master's stature with their own. Douglass and the fellow slaves he scorns have developed a sense of self worth and identity that privilege of white patriarchal authority. The

[2] For detailed critique of Douglass's self-constructions and his allegiance to western intellectualism, see "Conflicting Epistemological Selves in the Narratives of Frederick

slaves worship patriarchal figures whose powers lie in material wealth, self-interest and unchecked exploitation of the disempowered. Douglass and Equiano, however, worship western patriarchy that is no less hegemonic but that is couched in grand language that supposes the natural superiority of whites.

Equiano's chosen home is England, and his western models are the English. In kind, Douglass's western centered assessment of humanity and intellectual achievement echoes that of his enslavers—America's patriarchal icons. Those founding fathers to date, despite their glaring contradictions to their purported idealism, still invoke proclamations of an unparalleled American democratic history. The exact canon of founding fathers is not a confirmed one; however, there are figures whose memberships have been historically unquestioned and longstanding. Men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, for example enter into the American historical and social psyche from the earliest stages of institutionalized education. While these men are cited as the founders of the formal and federal union that is now the United States of America, they are linked to an earlier founding body called the Pilgrims. From the Plymouth patriarch William Bradford to successors such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, American school children learn that their country was founded by virtue of God's providential will, and that history played out to fulfill this tenet. Instead of facing the compromising history of a country born out of the annihilation of native people and the theft of their lands and resources, students are taught that English settlers occupied lands that were either vacant or that they legitimately came to possess.

The Pilgrims were God's elect, the new Israelites, who would settle the new world, bringing to fruition the failed mission of the ancient Israelites to establish the light on the hill. America was destined to be the example of Christian greatness and for the Pilgrim descendants, the great satellite of

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Douglass," in *CLA Journal* 52.1 September 2008 pp. 13-37.

western culture. It was this presumption that informed the patriots' rhetoric during their struggle against their mother country, England. While the Revolutionary patriots branded themselves sons of rational and scientific thinking, they did not, when it served their purposes, shy away from invoking the unproven and emotional proclamations that frequently informed colonial religious devotion. In his treatise that would stand as one of the seminal calls to war against England, Thomas Paine, a father of American Rationalism, did not hesitate to bind his so-called "Common Sense" to the Pilgrim doctrine of manifest destiny. Paine appealed to the colonists to accept the charge of war as this was a cause preordained: "The Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America: As if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety" ("Common Sense" 962).

Thomas Paine made impassioned pleas to the colonists, calling on them to recognize that they were the victims of an evil tyrannical foe. He declared that British taxes levied against the colonists amounted to theft—the British government stealing colonial labor and wealth. Paine would dare to call this slavery and to assert that it was a human evil: "Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to TAX) but 'to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER,' and if being bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth" ("The American Crisis" 965). The irony and raw hypocrisy of Paine's argument is glaring if we consider the juxtaposition of "enslaved" colonists and that of enslaved blacks, brought to the colonies, held against their will, laboring against their will and terrorized into a slave system that guaranteed their posterity the same fate. Paine's plea to his fellow colonists reveals that the freedom he imagines innate to men does not include blacks. It is abominable to rob a white man of the fruits of his labor, but the theft of black labor need not be addressed. Similarly, in his patriotic call, "Give me liberty or give me death," Patrick Henry expresses his disdain for a government or world that would reduce him to slavery, proposing that death is preferable to such an option. He asks colonists, "Is life

so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" ("Give Me Liberty"). His widely recorded response is that he will take death over slavery: it is beneath humanity to submit to an institution as odious as slavery. Again, however, Henry makes clear that enslaved blacks do not register in colonial notions of the rights to human liberty. It is the threat of white slavery that the colonists must arrest.

When Thomas Jefferson pens *The Declaration of Independence*, he too asserts a vision of human rights that is race specific. Jefferson proclaims that all men are created equal, that all have the rights to life and liberty, and that the denial of these rights justifies retaliation against the offending government. Ironically, however, Jefferson makes this proclamation as he holds hundreds of men, women and children in bondage, amassing his wealth from their unpaid and involuntary labor. His vision of a white America is confirmed in "Query 14" of his 1787 account, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this text that Jefferson writes to educate his European peers on specifics of the new world, he offers his presumed scientific study of blacks, asserting that they are naturally inferior to whites in all endeavors that signify humanity. While he concludes that blacks must eventually be emancipated, he argues that they must be removed from America. The resultant deficiency in numbers will then be filled with the importation of whites (264-270).

Jefferson's *Declaration* paints the portrait of an America founded on principles of hard and honest labor, of tolerance and mutual respect among men. One of Jefferson's famous co-founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, often criticized early Americans for their racial intolerance and their social and political hypocrisy; however, like Jefferson he too would represent America to his European peers with a rhetoric that echoed his American compatriots. In his 1784 essay, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America," Franklin tempts potential immigrants with images of America that echo the high-minded promises of the Declaration but ironically also suggest that America is a country whose idealism rests in Anglocentric hegemony. Like his patriotic peers, Franklin maintains that

America is a land of workers whose rights to their labors are protected: "America is the Land of Labour . . . and every one will enjoy securely the Profits of his Industry" (5). Again despite the reality that America's economy is deeply rooted in generational slavery, Franklin would have his European audience envision a land of hard working common folk making their living by their labor. He further praises America for its religious tolerance, but Franklin reveals a notion of religious tolerance that does not extend beyond the Christianity: "serious Religion under its various Denominations, is not only tolerated but respected and practiced. Atheism is unknown there, Infidelity rare and secret, so that Persons may live to a great Age in that Country without having their Piety shock'd by meeting with either an Atheist or an Infidel" (13). Man of reason that he is, Franklin draws on the Pilgrims' vision of manifest destiny, to suggest that America is a country that has been especially designed and sanctioned by God: "And the Divine Being seems to have manifested his Approbation of the mutual forbearance and Kindness with which the different Sects treat each other, by the remarkable Prosperity with which he has been pleased to favour the whole Country" (13).

The absence of blacks or the acknowledgement of slavery is a remarkable silence in the democratic rhetoric of the founding fathers. This is particularly so when we consider that despite slavery blacks were front and center at the start of colonial resistance. Images of Crispus Attucks, the first colonist to die in what came to be called The Boston Massacre, are readily accessible to date. However, Attucks, a black man, has never been hailed as one of our revolutionary fathers. Similarly, Peter Salem, the African American rebel who shot and killed the commanding British officer in the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill, finds no place among the countless images of America's Revolutionary fathers. Moreover, the black troops who fought for the colonial cause and were important in the final victory over England have been all but erased from the national narrative of this history. This erasure from the master narrative, however, did not dictate the narrative of African Americans as they penned the story of their struggles and their achievements, or as they asserted their equal place among their

human counterparts. At the birth of African American belles-lettres, African American writers interrogated and appropriated rhetorics and images of the mythical founding fathers.

David Walker emerged as one of the most fierce early African American activists. In *Walker's Appeal* (1829), Walker scripts a manifesto of black rights and a call for action. He speaks to fellow blacks and to the founding fathers who have cast them out, and his discourse is shaped in reaction to these icons and their failed idealism. Walker demands that slaves rebel, and he openly derides the founding fathers who would claim rights for themselves that they simultaneously denied to blacks. The very lengthy title and the physical framing of Walker's manifesto speak to the critique that unfolds in the text. The full title, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829,* shows Walker signifying on the ideals and document that lie at the heart of America's self-definition. With the announcement that his text includes a preamble and articles that follow, Walker suggests that his manifesto carries the serious and righteous import of the Constitution—that document it emulates. This imitation of the Constitution is addressed not to whites, however, but to the people whose existence and human rights they ignored. Walker's title not only identifies his audience as black, but he calls them citizens: his constitution speaks to the rights of blacks, originating in Boston, the place that symbolizes American resistance against the British. The organization of the *Appeal* further calls to mind the *Constitution*—that sacred document composed by the founding fathers. Like the *Constitution*, the *Appeal's* preamble establishes the legitimacy and purpose of the document and for whom it is concerned. Just as the founding fathers called their brethren to the pursuit of the fundamental rights of man, Walker seeks to awaken his audience to their rights. Walker's preamble speaks to a black audience, however, reminding them that America—whites—are the tyrant usurpers and he dismisses American idealism as hypocritical and absurd.

Walker's preamble is followed by a series of four articles, but Walker limits his work to four articles and his emphasis is not explication of governmental structure. Instead, Walker dismantles that very structure and democratic theme central to the *Constitution*. The figure central to Walker's critique is the highly celebrated (and by 1829, deceased) iconic father, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson makes an especially useful rhetorical target: although he is among the colonial patriots, he is a southerner and a slaveholder—the clear antithesis to the national document he helped compose. Walker dismantles the image of the great lover of liberty, reducing him to little more than a calculating, self-aggrandizing profiteer: "It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts[3], should speak so of a set of men in chains. I do not know what to compare it to, unless, like putting one wild deer in an iron cage, where it will be secured, and hold another by the side of the same, then let it go, and expect the one in the cage to run as fast as the one at liberty" (20-21). Walker maintains that in their treatment of blacks Jefferson and his fellow Americans have abandoned their proclaimed principles of fairness, equality and liberty. Throughout the *Appeal* Walker shifts his dialogic dynamic with Jefferson: he alternates between speaking about Jefferson and speaking to Jefferson. The effect in all cases, however, is his rejection of claims to Jefferson's (and thus, America's) greatness, and alternatively to show that blacks are the real victims seeking redress and freedom from exploitation. In a direct address to Jefferson in Article I, Walker makes this point, ironically employing language that clearly resonates with the Revolutionary discourse of patriarchal fathers such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine: "Here let me ask Mr. Jefferson, (but he is gone to answer at the bar of God . . .). I therefore ask the whole American people, had I not rather die, or be put to death, than to be a slave to any tyrant, who takes not only my own, but my wife and children's

[3] Walker is signifying on Thomas Jefferson's claims to white physical and intellectual superiority, posited in Query 14 of *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

lives by the inches? Yea, would I meet death with avidity far! ! in preference to such servile submission to the murderous hands of tyrants" (25).

Walker's *Appeal* represents the beginnings of a long tradition of black voices that would invoke America's most sacred patriarchs along with their rhetorics of Americanness to expose the country's horrific treatment of blacks. In general Walker rhetorical manipulations of these icons and their words underscores a method that would serve African American activists across genres. Walker's alternating scrutiny and rejection of these patriarchs to his occasional appropriation of their discourse is at work in the works of his nineteenth-century counterparts and beyond. While this seems to make the case for Alabi's assertion that the African American writer emerged as a new and victorious Caliban, even fiery Walker cannot fully overcome the culturally loaded core of the language that is his tool. While Walker openly charges whites with hypocrisy and savagery, he ultimately submits himself and other blacks to proving themselves men according to the standards of the very men who have violated and abused him. For example, his Patrick Henry-like proclamation that slavery is unacceptable—to the extreme of chiding slaves who would choose life as slave over death—plays into the discourse of the masters. The logical end to his assertion is that the masses of blacks living as slaves lack the manhood or humanity to reject slavery and declare themselves free. He fails to acknowledge that oftentimes it takes more courage to live and to hope than it does to simply die. He has accepted a concept of manhood that then undermines the possibility of representing black and slave as man or human. In similar fashion, Walker charges blacks to obtain a formal education to prove themselves the equals of whites (26). Here Walker submits to a western paradigm of humanity, one that represents no absolute truth, but rather a specific cultural construct. He then obligates blacks to prove their humanity to those who have violated them by their own self-serving rules.

The language trap that ensnares Walker infects the writings of other black abolitionists whose writings are also touted as examples of early black defiance and activism. William Wells Brown's

novel, *Clotel: or The President's Daughter* (1853), represents this phenomenon through fiction. Brown follows Walker with the selection of Thomas Jefferson for his target iconic figure. Brown's critique extends to the deeply personal, however, as he cites Jefferson as not only political hypocrite but one whose inhumanity extended to his own kin. Brown's fiction is based on Jefferson and his slave, Sally Heming, whom Jefferson had been publicly accused of maintaining as a mistress. Public accusations had also charged Jefferson with fathering children by Heming. In *Clotel*, Brown changes Heming's name to Currer but Jefferson is identified by his name and his legacy. Thus, when the daughters of Currer have been auctioned in the slave market, Brown clearly informs the reader that his fictional villian is the real-life hero of American democracy—the Virginian, Thomas Jefferson. He exposes the callous and barbaric nature of men who engage in human trafficking, and he suggests America's third president ranks among them: "Clotel was sold for fifteen hundred dollars . . . Thus closed a negro sale, at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder!" (123). Brown emphasizes the shocking depth of Mr. Jefferson's inhumanity with the depiction of the fictional Jefferson selling his own children into slavery. Jefferson is depicted further as villain with the narrator's repeated reminders that Jefferson's daughters were by all physical accounts, white. That he would send his young daughters—white by all practical terms—into a life of sexual exploitation and misery, suggested that an unimaginable monster resided just beneath the surface of this patriotic icon.

In Frederick Douglass's 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave*, he would maintain Virginia, the home of some of the most celebrated Revolutionary figures—Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Monroe—as the geographical center of his tale. As a place, Virginia brings to mind the ideals of American democracy and heroism. The *Heroic Slave* does not directly critique specific founding figures, but the narrator reminds us of their past presence and greatness in this great state: "The State

of Virginia is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen and heroes. She has been dignified by some of the mother of statesmen. History has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds" (25). The narrator then suggests the reverence of his hero, the slave Madison, by overlaying his image onto that of the state's great (white) patriarchs: "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" (25). Though a slave, Madison is a hero, and his heroic status is claimed on the basis of his resonance with the great white founding fathers. Even though *The Heroic Slave* is based on the account of a real slave insurrection and its leader, Madison Washington, Frederick Douglass offers no black likeness for his fictional hero. Douglass's fictional hero is cut from the prototype of America's founding icons—those very men who designed a government and a political discourse that denied to blacks.

The Heroic Slave does not recall black heroes like Crispus Attucks, Peter Salem or even Toussaint L'Ouverture—the most celebrated black general of the new world. These men were certainly known to Douglass. Madison's words take us instead to the discourse and the images of America's celebrated heroes. In his opening soliloquy we hear resonances of Patrick Henry's ultimatum and Jefferson's declaration of inalienable rights. Garnering the strength to pursue his freedom, Madison declares, "Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it. . . If I get clear . . . liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man, precious and priceless, will be mine. My resolution is fixed. I shall be free" (27-28). Throughout *The Heroic Slave*, Madison is likened to the founding fathers; he deserves freedom because he is a man as man is defined in the white cultural ethos. At no time in the text does the narrator measure Madison's manhood by an assessment other than the white male paradigm that dominated nineteenth-century American discourse. Madison is well spoken as

grand speech is defined in white intellectual discourse. He is rational—not that black creature described by Jefferson as prone to his sensations. He is courageous and daring, and a born leader of men. He is not the unlearned, childlike, dependent slave stereotyped in white racial rhetoric.

Because Madison is so much the image of white manhood, he can be deemed heroic and be awarded the right to defend his life. At the novella's close, Madison reaffirms his likeness to the founding fathers. "I am not a murderer," he proclaims. He then adds, "God is my witness that LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work. . . . We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they" (66). Madison equates his strike for freedom with the colonials' efforts against the British. In contrast to *Walker's Appeal*, *The Heroic Slave* tenders no outright challenge to America or its founders for their inhumanity, for their contradictions, for the shortfalls of their society or their self-proclaimed superiority. He does not challenge presumptions of white universality; instead, he simply hitches black humanity to the wagon of white ethnocentrism. He requires that his black hero not only justify himself to whites but also that he collapses his very identity and history into whiteness.

While we cannot dismiss the heroic stature of Douglass's fictional hero, the detriment of this assimilation is that it requires Madison to invoke as models the very founding fathers who caste him aside as little more than a subspecies of man. Through the portrait of Virginia narrated in the text, Douglass suggests that the greatness of America's patriarchs has been compromised by the legacy of slavery. *The Heroic Slave* begins with an account of the grand legacy of Virginia and its great patriarchs, but midway into the narrative the narrator paints the picture of the great state in decline. Upon Madison's return to Virginia to rescue his wife, the narrator describes a once famous road to Richmond that is now marked by a tavern frequented by gamblers, slave traders and other such no accounts. Its deteriorated state—physically and morally—represents the decline of the once great state

itself (47). Though he signals the decline of Virginia and thus the decaying legacy of the founding fathers, Douglass still constructs Madison out of these mythological prototypes.

Madison, like the biblical Ishmael, is an outsider, an outcast. Can his fate be different from his biblical likeness? What can he gain by asking inclusion into the house of those who have cast him out? Would the descendants of the ancient Ishmael have claimed Isaac as their founding father? Would Native Americans ever invoke the likes of William Bradford or Cotton Mather as their founding fathers? How then can Madison—slave or free--stand among the patriarchal icons who represent a homogenous vision of a white America? Douglass's novella suggests that this assimilation can be achieved if readers simply see Madison as the darker version of the revolutionary fathers. With this, Madison is presumably transformed from slave and outcast.

More than 150 years later, employing a discourse that echoes the black Ishmaels of the nineteenth century, Barak Obama has cast a trail of speeches that similarly invoke America's white fathers. With his emergence onto the national political scene, Barak Obama set the tone for what would become a staple in his rhetorical arsenal. In his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama opens by summoning the words to America's sacred founding document—Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. Although Thomas Jefferson envisioned equality and liberty for white men, Obama suggests that this centuries-old declaration was directed to all of America's inhabitants. He proclaims that "there is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America" ("Keynote Address"). This becomes Obama's rallying cry—that America is a union of diverse population entities, that that equality is rooted in the foundation of the nation, and that the founding fathers were a body of men with the insight and the humanity to declare and acknowledge the rights of all men.

More than four years after his breakout speech at the 2004 convention, transformed from senator and candidate to president, Obama continues to invoke America's national origins narrative. In

his 2009 inaugural address, he asks Americans to commit again to their "better history," and to "carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness" (2009 Inaugural Speech). He invokes the longstanding story of the Pilgrim settlers who have come to represent the stock image of Americanness, and maintaining the first person plural voice he then collapses the lineage and experience of all Americans into this master narrative: "For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth" (ibid). Like so much of the standard American history that has been recited for hundreds of years, Obama's quick survey, even when he alludes to a nonwhite presence, collapses Americanness into a white patriarchal hegemonic narrative. To suggest that generations of white settlers considered the welfare of Native Americans or African Americans as they "settled the West" passively plays to the presumptions of manifest destiny that justified the taking of lands, bodies and possessions in the making of America. It diminishes the experiences of those victimized in the course of this democratic experiment, and it underscores what Fanon and Lourde warned, that use of the master's language by the oppressed can readily become an exercise in self-erasure, self-denigration, and a validation of injustice.

The invocation of America's founding fathers by black writers brings to mind the imaginary exercise that Toni Morrison describes as inherent in much of American Literature. Morrison writes, "Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century [and] reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction (*Playing in the Dark* 6). Black writers who would claim the nation's founding fathers as ideological ancestors must in turn adopt the coded language, the silences, and the presumptions of white

superiority that informed their national discourse. From David Walker to President Obama we find a legacy of black writers who challenge racism but fail to dismantle or challenge its core. Walker openly identifies Jefferson and American democracy as hypocritical and absent of morals, but he does not challenge the epistemological hegemony that rests at the core. While he understands that whites point to black illiteracy as evidence of black inferiority, Walker does not consider that white presumptions about literacy do not amount to a universal truth. Illiteracy may indicate an absence of formal learning or academic achievement, but it does not signal an absence of intelligence nor does it mark the absence of civilization. He severely chides the founding fathers, but he grants authority to their racial and ethnocentric ideologies.

In a nexus to David Walker, many celebrated black writers and activists commit a dual shortfall: in their attempt to imagine racial equality and an inclusive America they appropriate both the compromised ideologies of the founding fathers and the fathers themselves. Into the twenty-first century this rhetorical legacy promises to continue as we see the most revered and recognized black mind of our era follow suit. Admittedly, the entirety of Obama's writings and speeches do not adapt the coded language of American nationalism. In particular, his 2008 response to the Jeremiah Wright controversy was probably one of his more candid public articulations of America's tainted racial past. Although he starts the speech with his customary homage to America's sacred origins, he does speak to its glaring trouble spot. He still, however, engages in soft and slightly veiled language. Instead of stating outright that he is drawing a connection to America's long history of white privilege and racism, he acknowledges by negation: "We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country"("Race Speech"). Though he will not name the architects of this racial injustice, he does recount the lingering historical implication, that is, that "so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow" ("Race Speech").

As candidate and now as president, Barak Obama must with great scrutiny consider and anticipate the anxieties and suspicions of his predominate audience—white Americans. In this respect he is no less burdened than his black literary predecessors. Even Walker who made clear that he was addressing blacks, knew well that whites would read his *Appeal* as well. In contrast to Walker, Frederick Douglass targeted his early writings to an anticipated white readership. Today, Barak Obama writes with similar audience expectation. Like Douglass, Obama knows that he taps into a black readership and audience, but he is both politician and writer. His politics are rooted in the promise of consensus building: he wants to build a multiracial coalition, and he is aware that this requires a special appeasement of white voters as he needs their numbers. Success in this regard is unlikely if he should offend this voting block or if he should leave them feeling othered or isolated. By collapsing his image onto that of the founding fathers, he quells potential fears that America's origins narrative (and thus, white authority) is at risk. The fallout of this comprise is felt most severely by blacks who are required to accept icons and discourses that embody their outcast and denigrated status at the birth of this nation. We can continue to relish the superior elocution of men like Douglass and Obama, but it would serve us to explore the deep-seated implications of their words on our presumptions about race and national identity. Language is not free of culture, history, or perspective and, as poet Natasha Trethewey reminds us in her narrative reflection on Hurricane Katrina, "political contests over the public memory of historical events undergird the dedication of particular sites, the objects constructed, funds allocated, and the story that is to be told" (56). The history we remember shapes the story of who we are (and are not): maintaining stories of America's white patriarchs as the national narrative promises a narrative continuum of exclusion and otherness for blacks in the country's collective memory.

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