5-1-2017

Abolitionism and the Logic of Martyrdom: Death as an Argument for John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass

Maximilian Umberto Martini
Southern Illinois University Carbondale, max.u.martini@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/theses

ABOLITIONISM AND THE LOGIC OF MARTYRDOM: DEATH AS AN ARGUMENT FOR
JOHN BROWN, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS

by

Maximilian Martini

B.A., Loyola University Chicago, 2011
B.S., Loyola University Chicago, 2011
M.S., Southern Illinois University, 2017

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of English
In the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
May 2017

THESIS APPROVAL

ABOLITIONISM AND THE LOGIC OF MARTYRDOM: DEATH AS AN ARGUMENT FOR
JOHN BROWN, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS

By
Maximilian Martini
A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the field of English Literature

Approved by:
Joseph Shapiro, Chair
Ryan Netzley
David Anthony

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 10, 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Maximilian Martini, for the Master of Arts degree in Literature, presented on 10 April 2017, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: Abolitionism and the Logic of Martyrdom: Death as an Argument for John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Joseph Shapiro

This paper looks at three significant instances of the representation of abolitionist martyrdom in nineteenth-century America to first sketch the abolitionist discourse and its varied conceptualizations of martyrdom and second question the rationale and success of this strategy for manumitting slaves. Accordingly, I start with Brown, who (with help from sympathetic Northerners and the megaphone of the Associated Press) appealed to the martyrological tradition in order to transform his paramilitary failure at Harper's Ferry into a powerful symbol of his own abolitionist righteousness over and against the state's iniquity. Though the superficial differences between Brown and arch-sentimentalist Harriet Beecher Stowe have discouraged their comparison, a look at the logic of martyrdom reveals a similar strategy at work in both Brown's martyrization and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which makes death an argument for the manumission of slaves. I argue that this hugely successful novel reveals the potency of martyrological thinking in 19th-century America as it also reveals martyrdom and its logic to be the foundation of sentimentalism like Stowe's. Finally, I look at the speeches and nonfiction of Frederick Douglass to argue that his own martyrization of John Brown is different than what we see in Brown and Stowe because it provokes change rather than validating abolitionism that already exists. To various degrees, these writers seem aware that there may be a problem in the rhetorical use of martyrdom against the putatively secular state; they consequently employ different strategies for negotiating the meaninglessness of suffering and death with the soteriological and eschatological

assumptions of their day. These negotiations reveal the extent to which martyrdom could be

taken seriously as a hammer of abolitionism by different authors and thus also indicate the

degree to which martyrdom can be taken seriously as a political solution whatsoever. Ultimately,

I want to argue that martyrdom and its logic are at best dubious when applied to secular politics

precisely because it relies upon the analogy to Jesus Christ as savior, which cannot hold outside

Christianity. Simply put, the death of a mortal cannot register eschatologically and, more

importantly, death does not make a cogent argument for anything. Instead, martyrdom is

preaching to the choir *par excellance*; whether the choir is Christian, abolitionist, or something

else, martyrological appeals do not grow its membership, as martyrologists since early modernity

have assumed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will look at three significant instances of the representation of abolitionist martyrdom in nineteenth-century America to first sketch the abolitionist discourse and its varied conceptualizations of martyrdom and second question the rationale and success of this strategy for manumitting slaves. In other words, I question how someone like John Brown, waiting for the gallows, could plausibly imagine that he was "worth more to hang than to any other purpose" in his pursuit of the abolition of slavery.

Accordingly, I start with Brown, who (with help from sympathetic Northerners and the megaphone of the Associated Press) appealed to the martyrological tradition in order to transform his paramilitary failure at Harper's Ferry into a powerful symbol of his own abolitionist righteousness over and against the state's iniquity. Though the superficial differences between Brown and arch-sentimentalist Harriet Beecher Stowe have discouraged their comparison, a look at the logic of martyrdom reveals a similar strategy at work in both Brown's martyrization and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which makes death an argument for the manumission of slaves. I argue that this hugely successful novel reveals the potency of martyrological thinking in 19th-century America as it also reveals martyrdom and its logic to be the foundation of sentimentalism like Stowe's. Finally, I look at the speeches and nonfiction of Frederick Douglass to argue that his own martyrization of John Brown is different than what we see in Brown and Stowe because it provokes change rather than validating abolitionism that already exists.

To various degrees, these writers seem aware that there may be a problem in the rhetorical use of martyrdom against the putatively secular state; they consequently employ different strategies for negotiating the meaninglessness of suffering and death with the

soteriological and eschatological assumptions of their day. These negotiations reveal the extent to which martyrdom could be taken seriously as a hammer of abolitionism by different authors and thus also indicate the degree to which martyrdom can be taken seriously as a political solution whatsoever.

Ultimately, I want to argue that martyrdom and its logic are at best dubious when applied to secular politics precisely because it relies upon the analogy to Jesus Christ as savior, which cannot hold outside Christianity. Simply put, the death of a mortal cannot register eschatologically and, more importantly, willingness to die does not make a cogent argument for anything. Instead, martyrdom is preaching to the choir *par excellance*; whether the choir is Christian, abolitionist, or something else, martyrological appeals do not grow its membership, as martyrologists since early modernity have assumed. Consequently, I argue that Douglass's conception of John Brown and movement away from the martyrological tradition should be both further studied and better remembered.

Hazel Catherine Wolf's *On Freedom's Altar* (1952) is probably the first book-length study on nineteenth-century abolitionists' appeal to the logic of martyrdom as a strategy for. It's a strange book that can't seem to decide whether to extol or to chastise 19th-century abolitionists for their application of martyrdom to the problem of slavery; it vacillates between praise and criticism in an ultimately confusing attempt at objective historicizing. More importantly, it leaves unanswered questions regarding the conceptualization of abolitionist martyrdom and its imagined potential in the abolitionist discourse. Wolf argues that America has a long and foundational tradition of respect for and credence in martyrdom that was carried over from England by the Quakers and Puritans who later extensively relied on the concept to explain the

purported sacrifices of the founding fathers in the American Revolutionary War. Specifically, she traces the increasing religious zeal of abolitionism from the late 1820s through the Civil War by focusing on the martyrizations of abolitionists like Elijah Lovejoy, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln. Though her tone is sometimes oddly caustic,[1] Wolf evocatively describes martyrdom's later proliferation in America via a community of orators and abolitionists who extolled those who suffered and died for slaves as ideal models and apotheosized proof of the righteousness of their cause. Furthermore, she proclaims that martyrdom as a popular concept spurred the Civil War by enervating the "abolition crusade" more than any other force in religion or politics (10). Her book is thus an early look at the American conceptualization of martyrdom as a potentially useful tool in the strategic kit of the antebellum left.

But while *On Freedom's Altar* argues that martyrdom permeates abolitionist thinking (and, to some extent, evaluates its political efficacy), Wolf fails to explain or even question the functional conceptualization of martyrdom as an assault on the institution of slavery. In other words, she doesn't parse the creation of martyrs or how they could be thought to bolster the abolitionist cause, but rather only describes its use by abolitionists and the American left before and after the war for better or worse. Early on, she goes as far as to give an American definition of martyrdom that she argues is built on analogies to Christian forefathers and Biblical exemplars:

---

[1] For example, she concludes her book with the following paragraph:

> "So with Abraham Lincoln's death the Radical Republicans claimed the martyr tradition for their own. In the years after 1865 they continued to remind the nation that the principles of the Republican party were those of the great American Martyr of Martyrs. By doing so they prostituted the martyr tradition to support postwar programs far removed from the American quest for either freedom, justice, or humanitarianism." (153)

Even in working to explicate abolitionists' reliance on martyrdom, then, she (and, as I will argue, most if not all writers and politicians) relies on its self-evident rhetorical power to ultimately chastise her opponents. I will argue later that this is due to martyrology's fundamentally tautological nature. Interestingly, however, Wolf here outsteps nearly fifty years of critics that followed her by elucidating martyrdom's vulnerability to use as a political weapon or ruler (what she calls being "prostituted").

By 1830 they expected martyrs to be men who, like St. Paul, were indifferent, prior to sudden conversion, to the truth of the cause for which they later suffered. Prospective martyrs, like St. Peter, led ascetic lives either before or immediately following their conversion. … Most characteristic of the martyr was his willingness, even his intense desire, to suffer persecution and death." (7)

These sentences are the most thoroughgoing analysis of the logic of martyrdom in Wolf's study. Though her emphasis on suffering and her analogies are appropriate enough, she makes no attempt to explain these connections further or suss out their assumptions. This is the rubric against which the rest of her study claims to measure well-known historical figures, and yet important questions are left wholly unanswered and even unaddressed: Why is indifference before conviction important in a martyr? What does asceticism before a conversion have to do with the conversion? How is it that suffering makes a martyr? Most importantly, how are any of these qualities, gathered under the umbrella of martyrdom and its logic, supposed to even indirectly contribute to the manumission of slaves and the ultimate abolition of slavery in America? To put it bluntly, Wolf can insist that American abolitionist martyrs "found spiritual significance in tar and feathers," but she cannot explain how or why they do so; neither does she assess the extent to which they imagined themselves successful in converting that significance into the abolition of slavery (8).

Almost without exception, the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century politicians and writers who, like Wolf, describe or appeal to martyrdom in the abolitionist movement allow the same omission by avoiding any discussion of the logic of martyrdom altogether. As Americans mostly writing for Americans, it is apparently understood that there will be no confusion as to what a martyr makes or what a martyr does – the problem is only

reading that status into someone's life and death, or maybe broadly assessing martyrdom's centrality to different American reform movements that spawned martyrs.[2] This could also be due to martyrdom's insistent self-evidence, which makes distinguishing it from other types of suffering – victimhood or self-sacrifice or whatever – a little tricky. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers no great help: after delimiting three formats for cataloguing and remembering martyrs, the definition's fourth entry briskly states that martyrology is "an *ethos* of martyrdom." Against this evidence, though, the concept was born under specific stars: its etymological root is the Greek word for "witness" and it proliferated with Christianity to designate those who witnessed the divinity of Christ and refused to renounce its truth as the word of God incarnate. Martyrs, then, are held by Christianity as models of Christian behavior and reminders of the godhood of Christ. The relevant entries in the *OED* all point to this basic Christian logic of martyrdom for the English-speaking world; it is a concept whose power within and without Christianity begins in its homology to the model of Jesus and his crucifixion. In other words, the martyr's self-sacrifice is meaningful and instructive insofar as Jesus Christ's crucifixion is meaningful and instructive.

"Martyrology" can thus refer either to a catalogue of the lives and deaths of religious martyrs (like the *Book of Martyrs* that was popular in early America) or to the logic that makes the analogy to Christ possible by transmogrifying a martyr's life and death into validation and instruction. This logic declares that the martyr's suffering unto death for an idea is the ultimate expression of his dedication to that idea, thereby validating its truth in the world. Just as the ultimate expression of God's love is that Jesus died for Christians' sins, so the ultimate

---

[2] See the introduction and first chapter of Eyal J. Naveh's *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.* for a representational example of this. See nearly any essay length study – nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first century – on John Brown to see "martyr" used without explanation. My epilogue is devoted to this trend specifically.

expression of a martyr's Christ-like righteousness is that he die for Jesus (that the son of God rose after death and proved himself the son of God might lend this formulation some of its manifest weight; that no martyr ever could is apparently not a problem). Accordingly, martyrdom purports to be the ultimate praxis of doxa, the end of devotion whose lesson is that the martyr and the thing for which he died are united like Jesus and the Godhead were after the crucifixion. This symbolic equation is important because it makes the thing for which the martyr suffers just as demonstrably true as the martyr's personal somatic reality qua suffering. Furthermore, it allows martyrology to insist that the suffering body of the martyr's self-sacrifice is actual proof of the credibility and legitimacy of divinity he witnessed and thus attests to the veracity of the martyr's cause. In short, the logic of martyrdom is a dual operation that both subjectifies and signifies by analogy to the Christian Church's Jesus Christ as the central model of individuation and cosmic meaning in the western world. In identifying certain abolitionists as martyrs, then, the predominantly Protestant rhetoric of abolitionism assumed that the analogy to Christ both made the ultimate abolitionist and validated abolitionism at large.

If we understand martyrology to be the textual and logical means by which a martyr's willingness to die for a cause becomes proof of the validity of that cause, the most paradigmatic and important martyrologies for the English-speaking world are found in sixteenth-century England. A look at critical work in the field of Early Modern martyrology thus provides a helpful schema for reading the martyrologies on nineteenth-century America. In *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England*, Susannah Monta investigates competing Catholic and Protestant martyrologies of this era to parse out their shared assumptions, beliefs, and anxieties. She argues that martyrology both creates an interpretive community of believers and must teach that community how to interpret martyrs' sacrifices. The right, martyrological reading can

address spiritual ambiguities "by modeling how answers might be found at moments of persecutory crisis and then by insisting that the processes which lead martyrs to their answer should be followed in readers' spiritual lives" (14). The result is a community of believers *qua* interpreters who are both fomented and relied upon by martyrologists to apply the right religious or ethical meaning to death and then behave with corresponding righteousness in their own lives. Importantly, however, Monta also argues that martyrdom is fundamentally tautological insofar as it rests on an "epistemological assumption" according to which its audience is required to always already be able to recognize and understand the miraculous - they must already possess the truth that is plied to persuade them (37). Whereas early modern readers considered martyrs and their stories persuasive proof of spiritual or religious legitimacy, Monta argues that this assumption makes martyrologies "mostly reflexive or circular confirmations of the causes readers are already inclined to endorse" (10). As such they cannot do or say anything new: "[t]his circularity of interpretation is both irrefutable ... and also potentially unpersuasive," especially outside martyrology's epistemic space (like in a secular, republican, slaveholding democracy, for example) (38).[3]

Like Monta, Mark Breitenberg looks at John Foxe's enormous *Actes and Monuments* to further elucidate the fundamentally tautological assumptions that hold the logic of martyrdom together. In "The Flesh Made Word: Foxe's 'Actes and Monuments,'" Breitenberg argues that the book's size and its formal convolution (i.e. its varying typographies, multiple editions, discursive marginalia, etc.) give it an "iconic" rather than literary presence that "shaped and solidified both individual and collective identities" (391). The text's prolixity and repetition

---

[3] However, Monta does "read martyrologies along three major axes of persuasive force: the persuasiveness of individual martyrs' claims to adhere to their consciences and inward convictions; the persuasiveness of communities of martyrs; and the persuasiveness of material, marvelous, or miraculous testimonies" (11). Without adopting her language, my project will be looking at the first two of these axes; the third seems to have considerable less bearing on 19th-century America.

coagulate like this until "the stories became 'conduct books' on how Protestants should live and die," proliferating martyrdom and martyrs in the process (401). According to Breitenberg, the profusion of material and forms in the *Actes and Monuments* functions to connect contemporary martyrs to the "original martyrdom of Christ" in a circular logic of mutual validation. John Foxe says as much in the "Preface" to the first edition of the *Actes and Monuments*: addressing Jesus Christ directly, Foxe writes, "even if no record of [your martyrs] were to exist here, those whose names have been inscribed in the book of your life could not fail to be most illustrious in every way." Here, Foxe contends that it is not his book that is illustrative, but martyrdom and martyrs themselves, thanks to Jesus, the ur-martyr. To put it broadly, the work of Monta and Breitenberg shows that martyrs are considered valuable insofar as they reveal Christ's own self-sacrifice; likewise, the model of Christ is the way we recognize and understand martyrdom in the first place – we know martyrs are good because they're like Christ, and we know Christ is good thanks to martyrs. By this tendentious logic, martyrdom individuates the martyr and his audience as it broadcasts the martyr's Christian righteousness into the world.[4]

Conspicuously, however, martyrology is incapable of explaining the tautology that these critics have diagnosed: the space between subjectivity and signifiance, between experience and meaning, is therefore not more than a lacuna of indeterminate, vague connection by equation. It thus bears more than passing resemblance to what Deleuze and Guattari call an "axiomatic," or a relational law that, despite its own ambitions, is not abstract enough to account for the real.[5] In other words, martyrdom is an axiom that insists upon the equation of self and meaning without reason; though it cannot account for the union, it gives meaning to selfhood and localizable

---

[4] My language here is influenced by the philosophical and theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, especially their *A Thousand Plateaus*. Breitenberg puts a similar idea it in different terms: "In its collation, printing, and dissemination, the *Actes and Monuments* is the catalytic force behind this mutually validating circularity between what I have termed 'action' and 'belief'" (400).

[5] Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus,* "the axiomatic deals with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified" (454).

reality to meaning. Incapable of imagining the transmogrification of God's Word from ideal into real, it rather puts these things on either side of an equal sign via the copious testimony of martyrs and martyrology. I think this is why it's difficult to pin down the logic of martyrdom and overlook it in the first place: because, in Deleuzian terms, it is the axiomatic (or perhaps one of many) that imbricates signifiance and signification into the semiotic mix of the English-speaking word from early modernity on, martyrdom is both foundational enough to be invisible to the critics discussed above and diffuse enough to undergird diverse manifestations. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari say of the capitalist axiomatic, the rubric of martyrdom both results in isomorphy and produces heterogeneity, thereby easily slipping into the bases of highly diverse domains.

Perhaps this begins to explain the sheer enormity of Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*: the book's huge number of variegated examples of martyrs across more than 2000 pages wants to develop a more profuse and therefore purportedly truer stronghold of martyrdom. Again, this "therefore" is only possible thanks to the (tauto)logic of martyrdom, which allows the union of signifiance and subjectification whereby the proliferation of examples validates the examples' isomorphy, which in turn proliferates examples, etc. The lesson and model of each martyr's testimony is predictable and redundant not despite the proliferation and diversity of martyrological examples, but rather because the text's discursive profusion is always "allow[ed] and even incite[d]" by its isomorphy (Deleuze 436). The *Actes and Monuments* is famously far from homogenous: critics have routinely wrestled with its enormous volume of different genres, typographies, voices, and sources, the preponderance of which, Breitenberg argues, "persuade[s] by leaving little space for an alternative" (391). The copious bricolage of the text creates what he calls a "dialogical structure" that "appears to extend beyond the textual boundaries to include the

large number of those who came in contact with the book" (390, 391). And yet, even as Foxe

relies on copious heterogeneity, Breitenberg shows that he also "does not think in pluralistic

terms" insofar as there is a magisterial, teleological unity to his diverse efforts (395). Thus, the

singularity of his Christian model is bolstered by the variety of support given for the model; that

is, because the axiomatic that subtends martyrology endorses the mutual validation of the

isomorphy of martyrdom and the heterogeneity of its manifestation, more of one makes more of

the other and a huge, discursive book can seem like nigh on irrefutable proof.

Other critics have continued the work of examining, analyzing, and deconstructing the

martyrologies of sixteenth-century England and their impact on theology, literature, and politics.

This work is important to the study of nineteenth-century American martyrdom not only because

early America inherited so much of English culture, but also because similar work has not been

explored extensively in American Studies, despite the prominence of martyrdom in antebellum

discourse especially. Of particular importance to this project is Thomas S. Freeman's exploration

of martyrdom's impact on politics in "'*Imitatio Christi* with a Vengeance': The Politicization of

Martyrdom in Early Modern England," which argues that the Christ-like martyr was

"particularly well suited to the English experience," as its focus on suffering and humiliation was

mutually venerated by Catholics and Protestants (59).[6] He avers that this paradigm "facilitated,

perhaps even made possible, the most important shift in early-modern martyrdom: the

politicisation of the martyr" and the ultimate "secularization of martyrdom" (57, 64). By glossing

this shift and the thinking that made it possible, Freeman persuasively contends that martyrdom

has become unmoored from the source of its original sense. Within the epistemic space of

---

[6] Freeman lists many types of martyrs that proliferated in the medieval era: *miles Christi* as the knight of God, the ascetic martyr, the contemplative martyr, the innocent victim of lethal violence, and the virgin martyr (52). He argues, however, that by the sixteenth century the Christ-like martyr, who suffers for Godly truth like Jesus did, gained prominence in England and eventually the entire "English-speaking world" (59).

Christian doctrine and belief, martyrdom is safely a matter of faith; that is, faith in the eschatological implications of Jesus Christ's resurrection can solve the problem of martyrdom's tautology and thereby speak to anxieties regarding right behavior and Calvinist election. However, by the nineteenth century (and certainly by the twentieth) in America and England, the logic of martyrdom begins to reach outside Christianity to influence the purportedly secular sphere of politics, where one cannot rely on the Gospel to make sense of it.[7]

Nineteenth-century American writers were often aware of martyrdom's provenance in medieval Europe and sixteenth-century England and in fact relied upon it to substantiate their arguments as potentially persuasive. For example, George B. Cheever's "The Martyr's Death and the Martyr's Triumph," delivered just two days after John Brown's hanging, suggests that "John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* being opened before us, you might almost think a score of pages had been taken from it to be rehearsed in Charleston" (Redpath 227). In this sermon for Brown, Cheever refers to the Old Man repeatedly as a "Christian hero" who "has thrown himself into this conflict a martyr even unto death" (Redpath 215). Here, it's clear that Cheever considers Brown's whole life to be meaningfully martyrological; accordingly, his death is just the apotheosis of a life's worth of experiential meaning. Cheever thinks that the whole thing literally comes from God, explaining that "God evidently prepared the man, by many years of discipline … for such a protest, for such a work," all according to His larger plan (218). And though Cheever makes of John Brown and the raid "a sublime and solitary instance in all modern history," he also starts his argument by connecting Brown's life to the lives of his forebears, namely the pilgrims who (according to Cheever) disobeyed England in the pursuit of justice and

---

[7] Freeman's contribution is vital and thoroughgoing, but he steps up to this problem without addressing it; in fact, despite the logical shortcomings of martyrology as he names them, Freeman seems to relish in the logic's power outside Christian discourse, ending the chapter by saying of political martyrs, "If you were willing to lose your life, you might gain the whole world thereby" (69). In this sense, Freeman is representative of American and English writers and politicians who point to or rely on the logic of martyrdom in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (at least) without exploring its conceptualization.

new land (213). Their lives were meaningful like Brown's, regardless of the latter's self-sacrificial death, because "Out of the righteous disobedience of unrighteous law grew that constitution of a righteous liberty" that became America (223, 213). Like Freeman, Cheever recognizes the connection between historical, Protestant martyrdom and nineteenth-century American abolitionism insofar as he assumes that they are a unitary historical force for justice. Spanning the gap between puritanism and abolitionism is the equal sign of Brown's biography. That is, Cheever's martyrological thinking equates Brown's life (including his Puritan history), his death (specifically in opposition to the state), and God's higher plan; the implication is that the union of these three things proves the righteousness of abolitionism.

In the sections that follow, I hope to show that not all nineteenth-century American martyrologists were so confident in martyrdom's potential. Rather, the negotiations and often strident redundancy of writers like John Brown (especially via his martyrologist, James Redpath) and Harriet Beecher Stowe belie an anxiety that seems to recognize the limits of martyrdom as social action, even as the use martyrdom to equate Christian righteousness with the abolition of slavery. Whereas the brilliant rhetorical strategies of Frederick Douglass also engage abolitionist martyrdom, he diverges from other martyrologists by relying on its logic not to persuade to convert his audience, but rather to provoke them.

CHAPTER 2

"WORTH INCONCEIVABLY MORE TO HANG THAN ANY OTHER PURPOSE:" JOHN
BROWN AND MARTYRDOM

John Brown was hanged on December 2nd, 1859 in Charleston, Virginia for leading a

violent assault on the federal armory at Harper's Ferry with a racially mixed band of freemen and

slaves. The Old Man had been a militant abolitionist since at least 1855, when he participated in

the Wakarusa War in Lawrence, Kansas; later, in 1856, he became a minor celebrity for leading

the violent abduction and murder of five purportedly pro-slavery Kansans.[8] In the last few years

of his life, in fact, Brown was consistently radical, though not consistently violent, in his

insistence on racial equality and his actions against slavery.[9] However, his failed raid in Virginia

and subsequent hanging quickly vaulted him into national public consciousness where he was

used to symbolize different things for different people. Opinions were had by all: Lincoln,

Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Victor Hugo, William D. Howells, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and

basically all the Beechers and all the Alcotts had something to say amidst the general public

outcry. Though their responses were formally varied (speeches, polemics, poems, paintings,

elegies, biographies, etc.), they largely argue from one of only two positions: John Brown is a

martyr and exemplar as well as a disconcerting portent of unnecessary violence borne of

America's inhumane treatment of blacks; or John Brown is a treasonous murderer as well as a

premonitory instance of unnecessary violence let loose by the federal government's indecision

on the slavery issue. This rigid dichotomy of interpretation ran along an already stratified

dialectic that pitted abolitionism against pro-slavery and whiteness against blackness; as such, it

---

[8] See Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist*, pp. 138-174, *passim.*
[9] Reynolds is at pains throughout *John Brown* to show that the Old Man was radical through much of his adulthood.
Accordingly, he makes extensive use of Brown's League of Gileadites, his replacement American Constitution, his
interest in American maroon, the eleven slaves he freed in 1857, and his family's residency in the black community
of North Elba.

intensified the already explosive geographical, political, cultural, economic, and racial binary oppositions of the day.

Importantly, however, David S. Reynolds's authoritative biography argues that the process of turning Brown into a biunivocal symbol took time and effort. Reynolds writes that, thanks to misinformation both deliberate and otherwise, the "earliest response to the takeover of Harper's Ferry was confusion," most of which was overwhelmingly negative both locally and nationally (335). Newspapers reported wildly divergent statistics regarding Brown's military force and the number of casualties on both sides; journalists' distortion and exaggeration of facts was exacerbated by the South's (and especially vengeful Virginia's) efforts to make Brown's raid emblematic of Northern abolitionist aggression at large. Before identifying him as a martyr, then, the North - including most of his backers, the so-called "Secret Six," as well as well-known abolitionist reformers like William Lloyd Garrison and Horace Greeley - was first interested in distancing their brand(s) of abolitionism from Brown's violent radicalism. Reynolds argues that this kind of stiff-arming would have buried Brown as a "curious anomaly of history" had it not been for the quick response of Transcendentalists, "who rescued him from infamy and possible oblivion" (344). Specifically, Reynolds credits Ralph Waldo Emerson, who gave the lecture "Courage" in Boston on November 8th, 1859, wherein argued that Brown was a "new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross" (qtd. in Reynolds 366). According to Reynolds, "When aired publicly by Emerson, the 'gallows glorious' phrase sped through newspapers North and South like a ricocheting bullet. It outraged Brown's opponents and inspired his supporters. It was the most polarizing statement made about John Brown" (367). Emerson's statements and those of others, whether in Brown's

favor or not, helped to adhere and congeal disparate movements for and against slavery in both the North and the South.

Of course, John Brown also martyrized himself by explicitly comparing himself to Christ in letters and in court.[10] Brown's spoken and written words, published by both pro- and anti-slavery newspapers, often aimed to console his family and supporters and encourage the abolitionist's crime. He said repeatedly and in various ways that he was "worth inconceivably more to hang than to any other purpose" and quoted sixteenth-century martyr John Rogers to his family. Such allusions to Christ and other martyrs suggests that Brown was thinking about the *Book of Martyrs* in composing his letters; the abridged version of John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* and its tradition likely also taught him to comport himself with a martyr's calm whereby he grew close with his jailer and accepted virtually all visitors except Southern priests and preachers who wanted Brown to repent. Reynolds echoes the sentiment of the Old Man's supporters when he writes, "Brown had lived to talk, to write, and to be hanged. It was for this reason more than any other that he influenced American history" (334). It is clear that Reynolds's conception and understanding of American history parallels Brown's insofar as they both recognize martyrdom and its logic to be a life vest able to save a martyr from obscurity, making it a (self-consciously) potent vehicle of social change.

Here, I should emphasize that John Brown's martyrologists could only proclaim him as a martyr by insisting that he died for his belief in abolitionism rather than his violent assault on the state, which, to put it bluntly, is not the case. Brown was tried and hanged by the state of Virginia for three offences (none of which were abolitionism as a cause): treason against Virginia (despite his lack of citizenship there), multiple charges of first-degree murder, and

---

[10] According to Thomas Freeman, self martyrization is typical of martyrs at large, for "The chief agents in comparing the martyrs to Christ were often the martyrs themselves" (48).

15

inciting a slave-rebellion. In text and at the pulpit, pro-Brown abolitionists engaged only the third charge and extrapolated it John Brown could be imaged as symbolizing abolitionism; they did so by martyrizing him to the cause, arguing that his willingness to die for the manumission of slaves proves the righteous validity of that cause. This is to say that the cost of martyrizing John Brown is the memory of his other offenses, or his strategic (if baffling and extreme) methods of transgressing against the state, including his revolt against the state's monopoly on violence, his highly unsymbolic hopes of victory by guerrilla warfare in the years leading up to the raid, and the extremism of his racial egalitarianism.[11] As Ted Smith argues in *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics*, "Brown and his contemporaries were writing his life into larger historical visions even before his death. The most triumphal narratives scarcely acknowledged his death at all" – this importantly includes the violence Brown brought upon others as well as that brought upon him by the state (163). Ultimately, and despite Reynolds' laudable efforts in *John Brown*, it would seem that the images of John Brown as a freedom fighter in life and John Brown as a martyr in death are mutually exclusive.

Regardless, it's not surprising that the martyrization of John Brown is largely homologous to the martyrologies of sixteenth-century England insofar as they both overtly rely on the same type of copious tautology to insistently construct martrydom. Again, this martyrdom is not just the martyr's willingness to die for abolitionism, but the conceptualization that imagines the martyr's death as somehow (tautologically, as I have argued) validating their belief at large. After the initial farrago of praise and condemnation that exploded in October of 1859, earnest martyrization in the North started in November of 1859 and continued throughout 1860 as Transcendentalists, preachers, and politicians began to overtly define Brown as the paragon

---

[11] See Reynolds's chapter "The Plan" in *John Brown* for a circumspect defense of Brown's intentions, including his Constitution, his thorough research on guerrilla warfare, and his efforts to conscript allies financial and militant.

abolitionist martyr.[12] One of these writers was James Redpath, a Scottish immigrant, outspoken

Chartist, and correspondent for the *New-York Tribune*, who was close with the Brown family

(which included Brown's twenty children by two different wives), and may have been part of

Brown's crew in Bleeding Kansas. He looked forward to Brown's death so he could publish the

radical's first biography, which some critics think he may have even started while his friend was

still alive (Finkelman 45). Concurrently, Redpath was the first to anthologize pro-Brown

testimonies and sentiments in the collection *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, which includes nearly

one hundred speeches, sermons, letters, and poems about, to, and even by John Brown across

more than five hundred pages. Almost without exception, these pieces compare Brown to Christ

and credit him for following the higher law of God's will. If the individual units of *Echoes* often

make this comparison explicitly, the book's organization also does so implicitly, raising it nearly

to the level of typology: some of the titles of its sections include "Bunker Hill," "Mount Sinai,"

and, most provocatively, "Death of Samson."[13] It goes without saying, however, that this

comparison on both the book's larger organizational scale and the smaller scale of its individual

pieces is only valid insofar as Christ is made to be an abolitionist. Thus, if Brown is like Christ

because Christ is like Brown, *Echoes* operates within the same preponderance of circular logic

that critics like Monta and Breitenberg have diagnosed in sixteenth-century martyrologies.

This preponderance overwhelmingly consists of the details of Brown's life, or, more

accurately, whatever bits of his life can be easily shown to have been targeting slavery. Such

---

[12] Specifically, Reynolds argues, "November 18, 1859, may be identified as the day when the roiling attitudes toward Brown separated into two main streams, one leading toward a primarily negative view of him and the other toward a primarily positive one" insofar as the New York Vigilant Committee held an anti-Brown convention (pushing the "Brown-Republican" conspiracy) at the same time as a pro-Brown rally was held at Tremont Temple (pushing the image of Brown as a martyr) (367).

[13] In *Weird John Brown*, Ted Smith notices a trend in pro-Brown writings of comparing him to Samson, even mentioning that "Brown himself used the story to interpret the significance of his death" (164). He finds this preferable to the more straightforward martyrization by the likes of Thoreau and Emerson in that "The Samson story could … even acknowledge Brown's mistakes" as well as "a much stronger sense of the sovereignty of a personal God" (165).

biographical data is redundant and often dubious but can be found in everything from Redpath's encomiastic biography *John Brown* to the individual entries he collected in *Echoes*. Ralph Waldo Emerson's short eulogy of Brown is representative when it says, "I mean, in the few remarks I have to make, to cling to his history, or let him speak for himself," after which he proceeds to give yet another abridged biography of Brown (119). Even in the shortest responses to Brown's death, the story of his lived experience is presented as inseparable from the isomorphy of martyrdom that his life apparently obtains. Henry David Thoreau says early in his "A Plea for Captain John Brown" that the man was "old-fashioned … in his respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this Union. Slavery he deemed to be wholly opposed to these, and he was its determined foe" both in life and in death (Redpath 18). Like Emerson's, Cheever's, and others', Thoreau's response is largely a biography of Brown rather than a defense of his raid and its violence or an explication of his achievement.

Of course, this rhetorical maneuver has the definite advantage of avoiding the uncomfortable truth of Brown's extremism and its possible indefensibility, as briefly discussed above. This was especially important in that these writers and speakers martyrized Brown before an increasingly uneasy antebellum America that was probably squeamish about the violent catastrophe imminent in 1859. In any case, my point is that the adequation of life, death, and politico-religious cause is only possible within the logic that has experience mean self-evidently, which is to say it is only possible thanks to martyrology. In other words, abolitionist writers make John Brown's life and death - or, in their hands, his martyrdom - into an equal sign that unites Christianity and abolitionism, thereby mutually validating the righteousness of both. If their strident redundancy suggests that they recognize and want to overcome the rhetorical

18

limitations of this strategy, it also reveals their hope that its rhetorical use will convert readers to abolitionism, or at least a more intense abolitionist stance.

Redpath's writerly contribution to *Echoes* comes in the form of polemical introductions, wherein he overtly imagines Brown's martyrdom and its martyrology to have the power of persuasion. Accordingly, if surprisingly, the entirety of *Echoes* is dedicated to General Fabre Geffrard, the president of the "Republic of Hayti," because, according to Redpath, the pieces inside "mark the commencement of a new and more radically earnest crusade against the crime of the South, and the curse and disgrace of the Union," i.e. slavery (4). In this regard, *Echoes* first appears to be an abolitionist missive from Redpath to Geffrard whereby Redpath is equating his own literary contribution with Geffrard's military accomplishment in recently free Haiti (he even mentions that he suffered "no little labor" putting the volume together, implying that he maybe deserves a little bit of the martyrization that's going around) (8). However, Redpath goes on in his preface to state that his anthology exists, "first, to preserve, in a permanent form, the memorable words that have been spoken of Captain John Brown; and, second, to aid the families of the blacks and the men of color, who recently went to Heaven *via* Harper's Ferry" (5). In this sense, Redpath clearly imagines these two reasons as interdependent on one another: Brown's words are memorable because they aid black families who sacrificed themselves and thereby made Brown's words memorable, etc. One makes more of the other, the proliferation of which, according to Redpath and his martyrologic, will apparently have the power to persuade General Geffrard, though it's not clear what he thinks will be the result (besides, maybe, more abolitionist martyrdom). At the first stages of its development, then, Redpath imagines martyrdom and its logic as being not only indicative of commitment and validation of a righteous cause but also persuasive of conversion on behalf of that cause.

Perhaps paradoxically, but not at all unlike *Actes and Monuments*, Redpath's anthology is

a bricolage of formal variety and redundancy (including rampant plagiarism[14]) that doesn't argue

for John Brown's martyr status as validation of abolitionism so much as it assumes its

indisputability and self-evidence. A large part of the book is full of letters to and from John

Brown written during the forty days of his pre-execution imprisonment. These letters are the real

birthplace of John Brown's legacy – though he was already infamous before 1859, and though

the Associated Press and Redpath were responsible for disseminating the letters, critics agree that

it was largely John Brown who martyrized himself via his sympathizers' correspondence before

his death.[15] Like John Foxe's "Actes and Monuments," *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* presents

examples of pro-Brown support in a dialogical structure that invites readers into a community of

believers who always praise, thank, and compare Brown to Christ.[16] It accordingly imagines

itself as persuasive insofar as it invites readers into a martyrological, interpretive community; as

Redpath says, Brown's raid "has elicited from every free man an expression of his opinion on

American Slavery" presumably because it "induced thousands to investigate their duties to the

Union and the Slave" (4, 457). This expression is made univocally pro-Brown by Redpath's

anthology, which dedicates a whole section to letters to and from Brown. According to Redpath,

these letters are "interesting evidences" that may persuade General Fabre because they "indicate

---

[14] Paul Finkelman writes, "Redpath's description [of Brown's hanging] came, word for word, from the *Tribune* (but without attribution or quotation marks). … This was clearly fiction designed to create myth" (51). Furthermore, Redpath's "Appendix" is the reprinted "articles on the North and South, or the cost of the union," from the New-York *Tribune*, though he does properly cite his source in this case (458). I would add to Finkelman's assessment that Redpath was a professional writer who could have written the myth in his own words. What's more important is that he wanted to intensify an already proliferating myth by piling on heterogeneous iterations of its telling, so he zealously stole, borrowed, and modified every version he could find.

[15] See, for example, Eyal Naveh's "John Brown and the Legacy of Martyrdom" and Bertram Wyatt-Brown's "'A Volcano beneath a Mountain of Snow:' John Brown and the Problem of Interpretation."

[16] Indeed, the similarity between these otherwise very different martyrologies is strong enough that some of Breitenberg's conclusions seem to apply to both: for example, they seek "to produce and reproduce an extensive Protestant network by profusely reprinting letters, conversations, examinations, and orally transmitted narratives. This dialogical structure serves to incorporate readers and hearers of the book as members of an extensive Protestant community" (390).

more clearly the sentiment of the people than any other utterances that the old man's glorious act called forth," including Redpath's own (387). In Redpath's fantasy of persuasion, then, Brown's martyrdom and the responses it inspired are equated; the deed and its analysis are made to be equally important and thus a single whole. According to *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, John Brown's martyrdom is persuasive of conversion because it is not just his self-sacrifice, but the entire heterogeneous assemblage of his death, including the raid itself and the profusion of interpretation that gave it meaning.

Nearly every eulogy and celebration of Brown in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relies on this rhetorical maneuver by which select details of the martyr's life, not limited to the circumstances that lead to his death, contribute to the meaning writers make of the whole (it's probably the case that this is common to all eulogies, or to some degree fundamental to the form). Their tone is often sanctimonious and more than a little glozing, as if they know they are complicit in making something of Brown and his raid and that they're doing so by equating the Old Man's life with his death and with general Christian morality *qua* abolitionism. In fact, Redpath says as much in the introduction to *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*: "The Beechers of our age [i.e., politicians and speechmakers] are only useful in proportion as they prepare the way for the John Browns [i.e., actors and martyrs]" (6). In other words, it is both the martyr and his community of believers cum analysts that make martyrdom effective in equating subjectivity and signifiance. And while Brown's self-sacrifice is made to be the ultimate expression of his dedication to abolition, it is specifically the dialogical structure of Brown-themed speeches, sermons, and letters that reach out from the particularity of his life and death, inviting readers and witnesses to learn from his devotion. The logic here says that a witness can be a martyr because martyrdom unto death is different from more common experience not in kind but only in

degree. And the lesson is always the same: the end of devotion may be death, but less than death isn't nothing and all experience has or is meaning.

It is by this martyrologic that Brown could imagine that he was "worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose." That is, the interpretive community fomented by his martyrdom can be imagined to be more effective than paramilitary aggression precisely because it reveals, models, and even encourages a type of abolitionist participation for the audience left in Brown's wake. This particular strategy is not one of egalitarianism, anarchy, violence, or insurrection, but rather of empathic suffering that will somehow engender more anti-slavery sentiment while intensifying that which already exists. Accordingly, I will argue in the next section that the martyrization of John Brown has much in common with the sentimental abolitionism of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although the violent radicalism of Brown's martyrdom has discouraged critics from comparing it to Stowe's social action of domesticity and feeling, a look at the conceptualization of martyrdom in the nineteenth century's most successful novel shows that Stowe relies on the same strategies used by Foxe, Brown, and Redpath to reap successful abolitionism from the deaths of Eva and Tom.

CHAPTER 3

"I CAN DIE!:" ABOLITIONIST MARTYRDOM IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Martyrdom is the heart of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which tries to imagine the end of slavery

by a process of suffering and empathy that includes its audience. Many of the plots and

characters of the novel follow a path from empathy to abolitionist martyrdom whereby the

individual suffering of martyrs ultimately leads to the manumission of slaves. Stowe's narrator

calls this "the victory without the battle,--the crown without the conflict" and clearly imagines

martyrdom as a surefire if still complicated solution to both slavery and the imminent sectarian

violence of antebellum America (429). Perhaps more importantly, though, the drama of *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin develops according to this logic (including "The Martyr," a chapter wherein the

narrative voice is dedicated to ensuring the martyrological status of its eponymous character)

without ever overtly recognizing its limits. The novel's narrative voice insists that martyrdom

makes for effective abolitionism insofar as it is the most christic option, but does not explain

how this can be the case; in other words, despite the novel's didacticism, it simply does not

explain how "right feeling" unto death can manumit black slaves without violence or conflict.

Rather, its famous sentimentalism relies on the logic of martyrdom to assume that "Christ-

like[ness]" can impact the eschatological condition of America, if not humanity at large.

As Eva nears her death, she says to Uncle Tom, "I would be glad to die, if my dying

would stop all this misery. I would die for [the slaves], Tom, if I could" (401). Of course, Eva

unambiguously gets what she wants in that she does die less than thirty pages later. However, her

success in "stopping all this misery" remains ambiguous insofar as Eva's death seems to cause

quite a bit of misery at St. Clare's plantation. Additionally, Eva's use of the subjunctive case in

this passage ("If I could") seems to belie some anxiety as to the real abolitionist potential of

death. The novel attempts to mitigate this concern by grafting a well-worn lesson onto Eva: it compares her life and death to that of Jesus Christ so that both the narrator and Eva herself can appeal to the theology of resurrection and atonement that grants freedom in eternal life for all good Christians. Eva says to Tom that she "can understand why Jesus *wanted* to die for us" because "[she has] felt so, too," implying that she would put her death towards abolitionism if it would mean commanding the divine power by which Jesus's death had an impact on the eschatological condition of human beings (400). In other words, just as Christ's death freed Christians from original sin, Eva would have her death free black slaves from chattel slavery. In this regard, Harriet Beecher Stowe is performing as a novelistic martyrologist who makes Eva into a "contemplative martyr," or one whose martyrdom is "compassionate suffering with Christ" (Piroyansky 71). Furthermore, she does so in order to reap abolitionism from the young girl's otherwise insipidly meaningless death.

It goes without saying that this comparison of Eva St. Clare to Jesus of Nazareth ignores the many ways that these two figures widely differ (in gender, race, age, era, region, religion, language, socioeconomic status, divinity, etc.) so as to emphasize the one thing they do have in common: they both empathically suffer for others, especially the lowly. When Miss Ophelia says that Eva is "so loving! … she's no more than Christ-like," she is referring to this shared suffering even as she restricts it to an emotional state that effaces the singular life and bodily suffering Jesus experienced according to the Gospel (411). This is characteristic of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s larger project, which is obsessed with emotional feeling; the novel famously insists that its readers need to "feel right" because "the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race" (624). Christ-likeness is then explicitly underwritten as Stowe moves from this adjuration of right feeling

immediately to the model of Jesus to ask her readers, "Are [your sympathies] in harmony with the sympathies of Christ?" (624). The right feeling, then, is a "Christ-like" feeling, which is to say empathic suffering that somehow begets abolition.[17]

"Christ-like" Eva is the model for this type of emotional abolitionism. She moves into this position from her deathbed, which Fisher argues is the site at which sentimentalism privileges emotion and passivity, or where "Tears become more important than escapes or rescues" (110). From this powerfully sentimental position, Eva becomes a gently pedantic leader of her family's "people," imploring them to live more Christian lives. Eva's reasoning here is convoluted: because she empathically suffers for the vicissitudes of slavery (here meaning specifically the slaves' dependence, poverty, and especially the illiteracy that prevents them from reading the Bible), she loves the slaves and they love her in return; because they love one another, they want to be together in eternal life; finally, good Christian living on both their parts is the only guarantor of eternal life and the unity that the church promises.[18] The slaves respond powerfully to Eva, falling "on their knees" as if to worship her (she is their model just as Christ is her model) and praying "after the manner of their susceptible race" (419). Immediately thereafter, Miss Ophelia clears the room and the novel follows Tom away from the St. Clares', but, judging by Topsy's and even Augustine's subsequent conversions (or desire for conversion, in the latter's case), it is apparent that Eva's empathic suffering lends her the powerful status of a

---

[17] This is different and more specific than what the novel thinks of being Christian, which can mean a great number of things: being trustworthy (to Tom), trusting in God (to St. Clare), obeying a master (to Eliza, at least early in the novel), helping dependents (to Mrs. Shelby), abolitionism (to Mrs. Bird), and not living an "idle, careless, thoughtless" life (to Eva), inter alia. My point here is that while Christianity and being Christian are expansive, multivalent, and complicated in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (too much so, at least, for the space of this paper), being "Christ-like" is relatively simple and univocal in its equation with empathic suffering.

[18] Thus, she basically performs what Fisher describes: "deathbed loss is the only common experience that the white reader has that Stowe can use to comprehend slavery as separation, as the loss of members of a family who, like Uncle Tom, expect or hope for reunion just as the Christian reader does for his loved ones in heaven" (109). What Fisher calls sentimental here I want to say is even more fundamentally martyrological.

martyr, which in turn grants her moral centrality and sway over a formerly uncontrollable and "shiftless" cohort.

The consequences of the girl's death at the St. Clare compound are symptomatic of her larger-scale success: namely, Eva martyrologically combats slavery by building a community of anti-slavery sentiment whose bonds are tied by empathic feeling. Her life and death are like an addendum to St. Clare's diagnosis of the problem with fighting slavery: though it may be the case that "[o]ne man can do nothing, against the whole action of a community," Eva shows that it is also the case that one man (or one little girl) can empathize with the victims of slavery in order to foment a community that is antithetical to the pro-slavery community in its Christ-likeness, which is somehow the only quality equal to the task (394).[19] Eva's martyrdom transforms St. Clare's slaves from a "shambling, loose, [and] untaught" mob into a purposeful community that recognizes the evil that is slavery and who fights it by suffering (316).[20] It is thus martyrdom and, more precisely, the logic of martyrdom that allows Stowe's sentimentalism to imagine effecting change on a political or national (if not eschatological) level.

Chapter forty of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "The Martyr," is conspicuously if unsurprisingly similar in structure to Eva's plot in that it demonstrates martyrology's salvific potential in Tom's death. This chapter describes Legree's decision to torture information from Tom regarding the escape of Cassy and Emmeline or else kill him in the process (which is ultimately what he wants to do and what he does). Of course, Tom does not reveal what he knows and instead protects the

---

[19] The novel simply assumes that this is the case but Jane Tompkins explains in "*Sentimental Power:* Uncle Tom's Cabin *and the Politics of Literary History*" that the Stowe's book was popular because of a "relationship of these scenes to a pervasive cultural myth which invests the suffering and death of an innocent victim with just the kind of power that critics deny Stowe's novel: the power to work in, and change, the world" (130). I would add that this is possible thanks to the social and cultural capital of martyrdom in the English-speaking world, the influence of which is explored in Thomas Freeman's "'*Imitatio Christi* with a Vengeance': The Politicization of Martyrdom in Early Modern England."

[20] There are many communities in Uncle Tom's Cabin (the North, St. Clare's slaves, pro-slavery Americans, and others are described as different communities), but only those constituted by strong empathic suffering provide a glimpse of a positive post-slavery future.

fleeing women with his body, which is violently abused throughout the chapter. When Tom says to Legree, "I can't tell anything. *I can die!*," he concurs with Eva (and Stowe) in insisting that he can martyrize himself in order to manumit slaves: he adequates death with liberty for himself and the free slaves he protects. Still more, it quickly becomes apparent that he can also die for Legree: "if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give 'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me" (582).[21] This explicit self-comparison to Christ only almost works on Legree, who apparently can't be saved, but Tom's piteous martyrological and somatic condition successfully converts the "imbruted" Quimbo and Sambo, who begin to feel for Tom's suffering and regret their part in it.[22] Like Eva, Tom's likeness to Christ is reduced here to his emotional and spiritual condition, despite the fact that (unlike Eva's) Tom's tortured body bears quite a bit of similarity with Christ's as he died on the cross. Once again, then, Stowe's sentimentalism is martyrological and martyrdom is abolitionist in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* insofar as they produce specifically empathic Christian communities that can loosen slavery's hold on the nation by imitating the martyr that inspired them.

From its sentimentalism to its waxing didactic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seems to hope that it can build similar bonds between itself and its readership, thereby extrapolating Eva's success and further intensifying abolitionism and right feeling. Accordingly, Ophelia's description of Eva as "no more than Christ-like," in addition to being one of similitude as discussed above, can conversely be read as a recognition of Eva's eschatological impotence, her being nothing more than *like* Christ but not actually christic. By this reading, Ophelia is not so much judging Eva as

---

[21] After this, the text makes explicit what was implicit in Eva's story, i.e. Christ's centrality as model and analogy for these characters' success: "But, of old, there was One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life; and, where His spirit is, neither degrading stripes, nor blood, nor insults, can make the Christian's last struggle less than glorious" (583).

[22] As Danna Piroyansky explains in "'Thus May a Man be a Martyr:' The Notion, Language, and Experience of Martyrdom in Late Medieval England," "By imitating Christ's suffering, or experiencing it with him or for him, these writers expose their love, so that 'the distance between oneself and the suffering Christ' could diminish" (73).

she is veiling the girl's Christian morality in a simple righteousness akin to common sense, as if

martyrdom were easily accessible not just to Eva but to any good Christian with empathy.

Ophelia thus minimizes Eva's achievement in suffering but does so without attenuating the

potential of her abolitionist influence on the St. Clare plantation. On the contrary, in

conceptualizing Eva's Christ-likeness into common decency, Stowe dilates the scope of Eva's

impact by making abolitionist martyrdom possible for any empathic Christian. This gesture

makes abolitionism accessible to all Christian readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In other words, the

lesson pushed by John Brown's martyrization is identical to that pushed by Stowe's

martyrological sentimentalism: if empathic suffering is all it takes to be as righteous a

revolutionary as Jesus Christ, then successful abolitionism in antebellum America only requires

Stowe's audience (synecdochal for America at large) to feel right.[23]

Insofar as martyrology is the logic that can imagine suffering as able to effect political

and social change, it also apparently fundamental to the political and literary project of

nineteenth-century American sentimentalism. Indeed, Philip Fisher sounds a lot like a good critic

of martyrology when he argues in the seminal *Hard Facts* that "sentimentality" is radically

democratic because it relies on empathy to extend humanity to a class that "achieves, or rather

earns, the right to human regard by means of the reality of their suffering" (99). For Fisher,

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* implies that suffering itself can liberate slaves by

humanizing them and consequently inspiring the unenslaved to unshackle the slaves' chains. If

this is the case, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is participating in the martyrological tradition wherein the

lives and suffering deaths of martyrs are made to attest to the righteous veracity of the martyr's

---

[23] Or, as Tompkins puts it, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "reaches out into the reader's world and colonizes it for its own eschatology: that is, it not only incorporates the homely particulars of 'Life among the Lowly' into its universal scheme, but it gives them a power and a centrality in that scheme, thereby turning the socio-political order upside down" and raising the quotidian and domestic lives of readers to the level of revolutionary politics (139). All of this is to say that Stowe's sentimentalism, and probably sentimentalism at large, follows the logic of martyrdom.

cause (abolitionism, in Stowe's case) as they meanwhile model and encourage righteous behavior for their audience. The rhetorical success of this maneuver and Stowe's novel at large thus relies at least in part on whether or not martyrdom can actually do anything positive for slaves. Insofar as Eva's martyrological demise and Tom's self-conscious martyrdom are central to *Uncle Stowe's Cabin*'s project, then, critical work on the rhetorical strategies of sixteenth-century martyrologies as described above can help us determine the degree to which Stowe's rhetorical use of martyrdom can do anything for abolitionism.

Here, the work on sixteenth-century martyrologies discussed above also helps to elucidate the rhetorical limitations of martyrological abolitionism. It is common to state that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* intensified and expanded abolitionism in antebellum America, if it didn't actually instigate the Civil War, as Lincoln implied. However, that conception of Stowe's martyrological project, along with similar conceptions of the nature of sentimentalism or the novel at large, conflates the political power of the martyr to do (to fight, persuade, resist, destroy, create, etc.) with its semiotic power to intensify (concepts of veracity, revolution, Christ-likeness, etc.). Even Fisher's essential analysis recognizes this limitation ("The feeling of suffering becomes [in sentimentalism] more important than action against suffering") only to pass it by for the sake of grandiose praise all the same ("The paradox that follows from this modest theory is that Stowe's novel is perhaps the single most effective political work of art in the history of literature") (110, 182). My point is that any argument which posits *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as superlatively effective as an abolitionist assault is an overestimation wherein the martyr's power to make anything happen is confused with the martyrologist's power to push meaning - this applies to Tom and Eva as well as it applies to Harriet Beecher Stowe herself.

This is not to agree with Ann Douglas, however, who oversimplifies the case when she writes in "The Legacy of American Victorianism: The Meaning of Little Eva" that the girl's death is "essentially decorative" and accordingly "doesn't actually convert anyone. Her sainthood is there to precipitate our nostalgia and our narcissism" (2). For Douglas, Eva's death makes nothing happen specifically because it is sentimental, which Douglas famously argues is a passive "rationalization of the economic order" of nineteenth-century American conspicuous consumption; as such, sentimentalism functions in nineteenth-century America to undercut the more rigorous, Puritanical mode of intellectual work that preceded it without offering comparable social criticism in return. Since 1977, critics such as Jane Tompkins, Philip Fisher, Gillian Brown, and many others have persuasively contravened Douglas to show that Stowe's sentimentalism was far more than cloyingly decorative and may have been powerfully political and capable of moving an audience - it's at least too complicated to be just decorative. It's now easy to agree with Tompkins, for example, when she argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the "*summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story to tell itself - the story of salvation by mother love" (125). I would add that even Tompkins's famous assessment flirts with the logic of martyrdom without recognizing its importance.

And yet I agree with Douglas that Stowe's formulation of "Little Eva's beautiful death, which Stowe presents as part of the protest against slavery, in no way hinders the working of that system" (2). I think this is the case because, as critics like Monta and Breitenberg have shown, the nature of martyrological communities, which Stowe's novel hopes to build against slavery, is that they are not reliably persuasive; their tautological nature can only intensify abolitionism that already exists. In fact, it might be worse than that: Douglas points out that "[l]ike her

30

descendants [in sentimental fiction], [Eva] flatters the possibilities of her audience; she does not quicken their aspirations" (3). This is because sentimentalism at large (and Stowe's in particular) is martyrological and hence invites its audience to participate only empathically rather than actively. If the martyrologist's doctrine continues to be *non poena sed causa* - that is, the cause, and not the death, makes the martyr - then Christians can participate in the martyr's righteousness by simply empathizing with their cause instead of acting on its behalf; in antebellum America, then, they could live for abolitionism rather than die for it.

This same logic allowed Frederick Douglass a few years later to claim that John Brown was an even more dedicated abolitionist than himself, insisting, "I could live for the slave, but he could die for him" ("Was John Brown Wrong?" 12). Although Douglass martyrized Brown and appealed to sentiment with the best of them, I will argue in the next section that he also stepped outside the martyological tradition to imagine Brown not as validation of abolitionism, but as a transformative force and rhetorical weapon for terrorizing slaveholders.

CHAPTER 4

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE "JOHN BROWN WAY"

In his writings and speeches, Frederick Douglass often apologized for Brown and his extremism, claiming him as a national hero and exemplar of patriotism. Part and parcel of this apology was an overt martyrization that named Brown the topmost, paragon abolitionist; in other words, martyrdom was one rhetorical strategy by which Douglass followed, encouraged, and even provoked his audience towards abolitionism in speech, article, and autobiography. Unlike the narrator of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the other martyrologists in James Redpath's *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, however, Douglass not only sought to validate his own cause or establish a behavioral model by martyrdom's logic; he also found in Brown's life and death the inauguration of a new, more aggressive abolitionism, which he dubbed "the John Brown way." For Douglass, Brown did not validate the slow-moving abolitionism(s) that were already common in the North, but rather transformed the abolitionist stance into one of provocation and fear mongering. In this latter use of martyrdom, then, Douglass was able to step outside of the martyrological tradition in America, solving the problem of its tautology by applying the image of John Brown directly to slaveholders in addition to his fellow abolitionists.

Douglass was involved enough with Brown in the years leading up to the raid on Harper's Ferry that there may have been a $2,500 bounty put on his head in October 1859 (if true, this would be more than any other of Brown's co-conspirators, besides the equally sought William Seward) and the *New York Herald* put out a call for his arrest (Reynolds 359, 341). When he famously ran to Canada and then Europe in response to Brown's hanging, he was criticized by pro- and anti-slavery forces as a coward and wrote insistently throughout the rest of his career as public intellectual that he had nothing to do with Brown's radical violence, which

he did in fact refuse to assist (though he encouraged Shields Green to go).[24] However, in the

years after Brown's hanging, Douglass arguably did more for Brown's legacy than any American

intellectual besides the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, even praising Reconstruction

as a continuation of Brown's work.[25] Rather than distancing himself from the Old Man's image,

he actively defended and even extolled Brown as a sane and uncompromisingly righteous

abolitionist as well as a patriotic American. In fact, he mentions Brown in all four of his

autobiographies and many of the huge number of smaller pieces he wrote and delivered after

1859.

As early as 1873,[26] Frederick Douglass was regularly delivering a speech called "Was

John Brown Wrong?" (hereafter "John Brown") which is probably the most thorough and overt

example of Douglass's martyrizing the Old Man. It should come as no surprise that the answer to

the question of his title is no; just as predictably, a large part of his argument runs homologous to

the arguments described above in Redpath's *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Namely, Douglass does not shy away from formulaically martyrizing his friend to the

abolitionist cause, and instead follows something like a *non poena sed causa* color-by-number

that redundantly draws on Brown's biography and the history of the Civil War to stage an attack

on racial injustice before and after the war. Douglass insists that Brown was a "martyr and a

hero" because he gave his life for the lives of slaves and therefore "was a thousand times more

---

[24] James H. Cook argues that Douglass never stopped engaging with Brown's story, both as a way of pushing abolitionism and as a way of defining his own antislavery position: specifically, "Brown's ultimate sacrifice became the means by which Douglass deflected criticism levied against him by leading African Americans," who were consistently his greatest critics (130).
On a different note, little is known of Brown's response to Douglass's rejection because he said nothing of it publically between the raid and his hanging - however, he might not have been so pleased. According to David Reynolds's *John Brown Abolitionist*, one Mrs. Thomas Russell breached the topic with him in jail: "Of Frederick Douglass, who, he said, had ruined a great opportunity, he declared, '"*That* we owe to the famous Mr. Frederick Douglass!" and he shut his mouth in a way he had when he thought no good'" (387).
[25] Interestingly enough, "the John Brown Party," where leading Bostonian Transcendentalists celebrated the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass even led the crowd in Brown's favorite hymn, implying a causal link between the two historical events (4).
[26] This is according to Gerald W. Fulkerson in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One, Volume 5*.

effective as a preacher than as a warrior" (13, 23). Following the martyrological tradition, "John Brown" argues that the Old Man's weird life and abolitionist cause subsume his death, both of which "marched on" according to Douglass precisely because the Virginian government "could kill him, but they couldn't answer him" (23). Douglass states throughout this speech that Brown surpasses him precisely because he epitomizes abolitionism by obtaining martyr status, which Douglass understands to be the ultimate indication of his confident commitment to abolition and his apparently extraordinary "hatred to oppression."[27]

More than just outright proclaiming Brown's success in obtaining the status of a martyr, though, Douglass also relies on the logic of martyrdom to subtend and unite the otherwise disparate interests of "John Brown." Accordingly, the address's first sentence, which is nearly two hundred words, ends with a positive proclamation of his threefold objective:

> to pay a just debt long due, to vindicate in some degree a great historical character
> of our own time and country, one with whom I was myself well acquainted, and
> whose friendship and confidence it was my good fortune to share, and to give you
> such recollections, impressions and facts, as I can, of a grand, brave and good old
> man, and especially to promote a better understanding of the raid upon Harper's
> Ferry of which he was the chief, is the object of this address. (8)

Under the catchall "just debt long due," Douglass here explains that his objectives are: (1) to reclaim John Brown as an important historical figure, (2) to describe his personal experience of Brown, and (3) "especially" to clarify and interpret Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. The first and third of these are similar, though distinct in that they describe different types of historiography (i.e., the reclamation of a historical figure versus the retelling of an event). His second objective,

---

[27] Cook argues that Douglass's conception of Brown reveals that Douglass "embraced the notion of a hierarchy of commitment among abolitionists," topmost of which was Brown (Cook 143). According to Douglas himself, this conception is to some extent martyrological.

alternatively, is a type of personal testimony that is generically at odds with the larger-scale

historicizing of the other objectives (which are more purposive and didactic than the narrative

mode of testimony). Nevertheless, in Douglass's hands, it is testimony that makes historical

arguments possible by providing evidence for their larger claims. That is, Douglass's personal

account of his relationship with Brown - and not, more predictably, a defense of radical violence

or antinomianism, for example - is made to somehow bear evidence upon his defense of Brown

as an historical figure and successful abolitionist. This is to say that Douglass is able to imagine

and present these three objectives as one argument thanks to a logic by which personal

experience can somehow verify a larger cause - as I have argued above, it is the logic of

martyrdom that (tautologically) unites the self and meaning in this way. My point is that "Was

John Brown Wrong?" doesn't just martyrize Brown by reshaping the narrative of his life and

death (which it does[28]), but, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Cheever's "The Martyr's Death and the

Martyr's Triumph," is in fact rhetorically possible only by the logic of martyrdom.[29]

Douglass is thus able to move directly from an overt appeal for Brown's martyrdom into

an analysis of the Old Man's life with the common-sensical air of self-evidence that martyrologic

provides him: "With John Brown, as with every other man fit to die for a cause, the hour of his

physical weakness was the hour of his moral strength … In studying the character and works of a

great man, it is always desirable to learn in what he is distinguished from others, and what have

been the causes of this difference" (23). As it does for Harriet Beecher Stowe and James Redpath

---

[28] For example, Douglass includes apocryphal biographical information that was considered accurate even through the 20th century. More importantly, Douglass smooths over Brown's many business and domestic failures in order to inaccurately describe an "even-tempered," independent man without prejudice. This is important because it reveals Douglass's efforts to mold Brown into his conception of a "self-made man" as he does himself in his own autobiographies.

[29] This is how Douglass can insist that he is not philosophizing or politicking with this address, but only humbly remembering a friend: "Mine is the word of grateful memory to an old friend; to tell you what I know of him ... of what he did and what he attempted, and thus if possible to make the mainspring of his actions manifest and thereby give you a clearer view of his character and services" (11). If this is true, despite Douglass's polemical tone throughout, not to mention the didacticism of his conclusion, it is thanks to his appeal to martyrologic.

elsewhere, the martyrologic of this passage enables Douglass to read Brown's abolitionism, the character of his life, and the history of his death as if they were one indistinct phenomenon and likewise connect two otherwise unrelated sentences with a dubious and not even stated "therefore." He can now proceed to highlight those aspects of Brown's biography that make him the paragon abolitionist according to his own rubric, which he establishes shortly thereafter: "a man of commanding mold, towering high and alone above the millions, free from all conventional fetters, true to his own moral convictions, a 'law unto himself,' ready to suffer misconstruction, ignoring torture and death for what he believes to be right" (12).[30] Importantly, the last bit of this definition distinguishes the paragon and the run-of-the-mill abolitionist by the former's martyrdom, his willingness to "suffer … for what he believes to be right." Thus, at this stage in his argument, Douglass has caught himself in the same martyrological tautology that limits the rhetoric of abolitionists like Stowe, Cheever, and even John Foxe; that is, he both implies and outright declares that abolitionists can know John Brown is a successful abolitionist because he was a martyr, and they can know he was a real martyr because he was a successful abolitionist.

As a 19th-century American abolitionist, and former Garrisonian at that, Douglass was obviously indebted to the white Christian discourse that dominated his era for this kind of language. Critics have made much of the paradox and problem of Douglass's rhetorical mastery,

---

[30] This is an archetype that bears significant kinship to Douglas's "self-made man," which he describes first in 1872, the year before "Was John Brown Wrong?" first appeared. In his address "Self-Made Men," Douglass describes in his characteristically polemical tone his theory of the self-made man who strives himself out of societal bonds and into success despite hardship and regardless of luck (he admonishes his captive audience, "WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!!"). Indeed, Douglass's description of the self-made man and John Brown are nearly identical: "Self-made men are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character. ... They are in a peculiar sense, indebted to themselves for themselves." I think this is important because it shows that Douglass is repurposing the details of Brown's life and character to fit an abolitionist paradigm Douglass has already been at work propagating. For more on Douglass's repurposing pre-established history and rhetoric for his own purposes, see Eric Ashley Hairston's "The Virtuous Voice of Frederick Douglass" in *The Ebony Column.*

the first book-length study of which was probably Frederick May Holland's 1891 *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator.* More recently, in his chapter "The Virtuous Voice of Frederick Douglass" from *The Ebony Column*, Eric Ashley Hairston admirably parses Douglass's rhetorical influences both classical and Christian, starting with *The Columbian Orator*, which Douglass mentions in his autobiographies. Other critics focus on what they consider the insuperable limitations of Douglass's position as an educated former slave orating expertly to whites who have little direct experience of slavery.[31] Joseph Fichtelberg and Richard A. Yarborough, for example, seem to agree that Douglass, in Fichtelberg's terms, "succeeded only in reproducing the clichés of his oppressors" (120). In a larger sense, Yarborough wonders, "whether the tools of the master can ever be used to achieve the complete liberation of the slave" (178). Without putting it in the same lofty terms, critics like Peter Walker and James J. Cook are more optimistic in their implication that the master's tools can be used to free the slave. Walker, for instance, argues compellingly that "Douglass diverted autobiography from its basic mode of revealing the writer, subordinated a conception of self to an ideology, and turned an art form into a tract" (213). I can't pretend to solve this debate, especially because I think it is largely misguided in its attempt to diagnose the degree of Douglass's liberty, rhetorical and otherwise. Additionally, as these latter critics and others have argued, it is simply undeniable that, as a trained and highly skilled rhetorician, Douglass took advantage of certain traditions and logics of the dominant culture of his time. My point, however, is that the logic of martyrdom should be recognized as chief among these logics that Douglass utilized for abolitionism and racial justice.

Unlike some other strategies by which he appealed to the reason and Christian sympathy of his audience, however, Douglass's martyrological strategy was designed to provoke his

---

[31] See, for example, the short section on Douglass in Donald Pease's "From the Camp to the Commons: Biopolitical Alter-Geographies in Douglass and Melville."

Northern audience and terrorize the South. Such aggression is characteristic of Douglass who, despite his contention that "every possible way known in opposition to slavery is my way," clearly preferred strident provocation over Garrisonian moderation, especially in the time approaching and during the Civil War ("John Brown's Contribution to Abolition" 413).[32] Indeed, Douglass himself insisted, "I believe in agitation" (416).[33] Accordingly, Douglass attempts to move away from this circular trap by insisting that Brown has done more than only validate or epitomize abolitionism - he has also transformed it. Douglass avers that Brown is important because he changed abolitionism from a matter of politics and sentiment to a matter of war: that is, if he "did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery" (35). Making war on slavery was Brown's intention by Douglass's estimation, meaning that Brown did not fail but actually succeeded in abolishing slavery by instigating the fear and violence that led to the Civil War and the manumission of slaves.[34] Hence, Douglass considers his third objective to be "especially" important because it intends to show how Brown's work fits within a larger project of provocation rather than traditional military success or merely symbolic

---

[32] For more on Douglass's storied relationship to violence in speech and in act see James H. Cook's "Fighting with Breath, Not Blows: Frederick Douglass and Antislavery Violence" in *Antislavery Violence*, and Richard Yarborough's "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave'" in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. Leslie Friedman Goldstein's "Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)" convincingly argues that Douglass was always comfortable with antislavery violence and was never a total nonresistant but rather preached and accepted nonresistance as an occasionally appropriate "tactical" and situational advantage rather than a moral imperative.

[33] This is a position that Douglass pushes fiercely in other writings as well. For example, the November 1859 issue of his *Douglass' Monthly* is largely dedicated to the raid on Harper's Ferry, including Douglass's own "Capt. John Brown Not Insane." This short defense of Brown is the first in the issue and, like the 1881 address, relies on Douglass's own experience in conjunction with Brown's reported behavior in jail (he wouldn't be hanged for another month from the time of this article's publication) to respond to accusations that Brown was either motivated by petty revenge or flat out insane. More specifically, Douglass admits that he is not surprised by Brown's enemies who level the insanity charge, but rather by Brown's professed allies, who, following the Old Man's first lawyer Lawson Botts, tried to establish Brown's hereditary insanity so as to keep him from the gallows. Like other martyrologists of Brown, Douglass declares Brown's martyrdom without arguing for it as if his martyr status is self-evident or at least indisputable. Unlike other martyrologists, however, Douglass imputes more than just symbolic status to Brown's violence in that "he has struck the bottom line of the philosophy that underlies the abolition movement" (459). Again, according to Douglass, Brown's martyrdom doesn't only verify his abolitionist cause, but actually transforms and intensifies it.

[34] This is also David Reynolds's thesis in *John Brown: Abolitionist.*

victory. Accordingly, Douglass explains, "[Brown] believed this movement [at Harper's Ferry] would weaken slavery in two ways - first by making slave property insecure, it would become undesirable; and secondly it would keep the anti-slavery agitation alive and public attention fixed on it, and thus lead to the adoption of measures to abolish the evil altogether" (29). Martyrdom for Douglass is thus not an end, but an especially provocative means of promulgating a more radical, terrorizing kind of abolitionism, or what Douglass calls "the John Brown way."[35]

In "John Brown," Douglass is fairly specific in his theory of terror's impact on slaveholders and, more important, the economy of slaveholding. He explains this theory as if it was Brown's, first averring that, like Locke, Brown considered slavery to be a state of war that underwrote any self-defensive action, violent or otherwise. Consequently, on the local scale, slaves "had a right to anything necessary to their peace and freedom," though Brown himself sought to "shed no blood" and "avoid a fight" (29). Because the nation had grown callous to the horrific iniquities of slavery, however, "something startling" like Nat Turner's rebellion was necessary to unsettle the institution. It would do so economically: Douglass argues that John Brown's raid and his martyrdom were effective in "making slave property insecure" by using terror to make it "undesirable" (29). Douglass makes this argument, thinly veiled here as Brown's, more explicitly in his 1860 speech "John Brown's Contributions to the Abolition Movement." There, in Boston, on the one year anniversary of Brown's hanging, Douglass insists that abolitionists "must reach the slaveholder's conscience through his fear of personal danger" (417). This doesn't necessitate murder, so long as the emotionally and physically wounded return to the South as "living epistles of the free gospel" whose personal fear begets an aversion to

---

[35] What exactly the John Brown way is remains an open question, both in terms of Brown's intentions (discussed briefly in the second section of this paper) and Douglass's own thinking. Critics continue to debate the extent of Douglass's radicalism. See, for example, Nicholas Buccola's *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, Waldo E. Martin, Jr.'s *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, and Goldstein's article.

potentially dangerous slaves and slaveholding. In both these speeches and others, then, Douglass martyrizes Brown so as to promulgate his own loose program of abolition as economic disruption by way of terrorism.

Douglass's book-length autobiographical work relies on this same logic; that is, the martyrdom developed in Douglass's autobiographies *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* is designed not to portray Douglass as a christic figure who can validate abolitionism at large, but rather to underscore the value of violence and terror in weakening the slaveholder's otherwise unqualified power over the slave. This is most obvious in Douglass's relationship with Edward Covey and especially their famous physical altercation, which Douglass calls a "resurrection" in both autobiographies. Douglass responds to Covey's first onslaught by going to Thomas Auld, hoping that his abused appearance (which is conspicuously reminiscent of the passion) will stir his master to humanitarian aid. Importantly, sentimental empathy fails because Auld successfully "repressed his feelings and became cold as iron" (*MBMF*, 174). When Douglass finally returns to St. Michael's, he and Covey fight for two hours, but not at first - the altercation is held off until after the Sabbath, meaning that three days (one at Auld's, one in the woods, and Sunday at St. Michael's) pass between Douglass's horrific beating and his defeat of Covey. His victory here is not dependent on Covey's death, but only on the fear the proceeds to "prevent [Covey's] injuring" Douglass for the next six months (186). Thus, martyrdom in Douglass's first two autobiographies doesn't prove or signify anything, as it does for Stowe and Brown, but rather intensifies Douglass's successful use of terror and violence in gaining freedom.

Which is to say that the style of Douglass's investment in martyrologic in "John Brown" and elsewhere lands him outside the standard martyrological tradition described in my

introduction. His conception and use of martyrdom show little interest in assuaging anxieties, buttressing beliefs, or guiding upright behavior; nor does it work to persuade its audience by reason or sentiment. Douglass does not resort to martyrdom exclusively for semiotics, semantics, or ethics - not for meaning, that is - but as a flare that shines directly on the issue of slavery, elucidating its abjection for both slaveholders and abolitionists so as to provoke them towards recognizing and remembering its gross iniquities. Unlike the overdetermination of death and suffering in more standard martyrologies, death and suffering for Douglass are asemiotic insofar as they are not to be believed but rather obeyed (though they are probably preferable to slavery). Ultimately, martyrdom's consistent appearance in Douglass's autobiographies and speeches follows the trend that Cook has observed, namely "the level of physical confrontation within Douglass's daily life declined at the very time that he turned to embrace the rhetoric of violence" (130). I would add that this rhetoric of violence is often delivered by the logic of martyrdom. In other words, if Stowe and Brown used martyrology to foment an abolitionist community and verify abolitionist righteousness, Douglass used martyrology expressly to provoke the abolitionist community and terrorize the slaveholding community.

If this is the case (that is, if we can take Douglass at his word when he says he believes the raid on Harper's Ferry "is not a story to increase our sense of social safety and security, but to fill the imagination with wild and troubled fancies of doubt and danger"), it is conspicuous that he gave the "Was John Brown Right?" address at Harper's Ferry in 1881. In fact, the proceeds of the event's publication went towards the establishment of a John Brown Professorship at the new Storer College in that town. Appropriately, he starts his address with a long sentence whose first handful of dependent clauses proclaim otherwise, negatively defining his objective in conspicuously thorough detail:

Not to fan the flame of sectional animosity now happily in the process of rapid

and I hope permanent extinction, not to revive and keep alive a sense of shame

and remorse for a great national crime, which has brought its own punishment, in

loss of treasure, tears and blood, not to recount the long list of wrongs, inflicted

on my race during more than two hundred years of merciless bondage; nor yet to

draw, from the labyrinths of far-off centuries, incidents and achievements

wherewith to rouse your passions, and enkindle your enthusiasm. (7)

The dependent clause on which this nearly hundred word quotation relies is deferred for nearly

another hundred words; meanwhile, Douglass's repeated negations ("not" three times and "nor"

once) are buried or overwhelmed by his catalogue of the long and terrible violence of the slavery

era. His tone is suspiciously aggressive for an ex-slave who claims to only be interested in

moving on: "shame and remorse," "loss of treasure, tears and blood," "two hundred years of

merciless bondage," and "labyrinths of far-off centuries" are all agonistic phrases that are too

descriptive to be cast off regardless of Douglass's qualifications (especially considering that

these are the first images of the address). In fact, in the next paragraph, Douglass concedes

outright, "there is no subject which in its interest and importance will be remembered longer, or

will form a more thrilling chapter in American history than this strange, wild, bloody and

mournful drama" (8).

And yet, Douglass finds it necessary to describe that drama at length throughout his

speech; in so descriptively and lengthily cataloguing the "sectional animosity" he claims to be

avoiding, Douglass is pointing his audience to former conflict by ostentatiously putting it aside.

Thus, this feign at the very start of his address allows Douglass to covertly do what he overtly

says he will not do: underscore the horrors and injustices of slavery before and after the war by

martyrizing John Brown for a Southern audience at the site of the martyr's crime and punishment. In this case, he did so to raise funds that would continue to preserve Brown's legacy as fearfully extremist and violent. Even twenty years after the start of the war, then, Douglass continued to rely on martyrdom and its logic not to validate Brown's cause but to highlight injustices, both historical and contemporaneous, while instigating a response that is economic and legal, and therefore more than martyrological.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE

Although his popularity has undoubtedly decreased since Douglass's time, John Brown continues to be thoroughly analyzed by scholars and used as a symbolic weapon by political radicals in the battle for racial equality in America. Such interpretations of his life and death, as well as the body of literature that envelopes him, continue to intensify the racial and political dialectic of his era by either lauding the nineteenth-century radical as their kind of guy or dismissing him as insane. Like his contemporaries, many of these writers look to Brown as a just(ified) race traitor and an exemplar of the abolition of whiteness, though they usually balk at or ignore altogether his violent means. Spanning 150 years, their common logic implies: that John Brown died in his extreme aversion to slavery and consequent efforts to free black slaves attests to both the enormous depth and the ultimate validity of his beliefs.

As I have tried to argue, this formulation sounds unsurprisingly like martyrdom, (re)instating Brown as the paragon abolitionist or, by analogy to the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century, the paragon civil rights leader. In other words, just as nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators martyrized Brown abolitionism, twentieth- and twenty-first-century commentators martyrize Brown for social justice and racial equality. I want to argue that this is problematic insofar as it is not politically cogent, or insofar as it is preaching to the choir at best (even if it's a pretty radical choir). In this paper, I have tried to show that martyrdom is axiomatic and tautological enough that it cannot create or effect the substantive change it targets in America culture, but rather can only intensify pre-existing, stratified oppositions. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, martyrdom does not make an abolitionist of St. Clare but only catalyzes him (too late) in convictions he expressed long before Eva's death; in other words,

martyrdom does not convert him, just as it is incapable of converting Legree, despite Tom's

protestations. Regardless of the conversion fantasy propagated by believers from Foxe to

Redpath, martyrdom cannot persuade anyone outside its already willing audience: if it was ever

capable of being surprising or subversive, that time has long passed. And though critics are often

caught up in the same dialectics of John Brown and his jury, his use by abolitionists of whiteness

and other radicals today attests to how compelling he could be, and that martyrdom remains an

important stratum in assemblages of the media, politics, and entertainment in America.

Admittedly, however, and regardless of all this blowing, there is a very real sense in

which none of this is a problem. In fact, the mechanics and strata of martyrdom are often a

noticeable asset to Brown criticism. Modern critical response to Brown and the body of literature

attached to him knowingly rely on martyrologic's tautology to argue that Brown's image was

borne of both the *copia* of his circumstances and literary representations *and* Brown's own

personal acceptance of the title.[36] Precisely insofar as they are not burdened with saying anything

new, they can be confident of Brown's righteousness and their own in turn so that this logic

lends them a magisterial, insistent tone as well as an enthusiastic, willing audience. In this sense,

my diagnosis is hardly damning for martyrdom and martyrology, but rather just a statement of

the case. More than that, though, it's not as if anyone but martyrologists extols martyrdom and

its logic as anything other than preaching to the choir – my point that a martyr never made a

---

[36] See Charles Joyner's "'Guilty of the Holiest Crime:' The Passion of John Brown" and Bertram Wyatt-Brown's "'A Volcano beneath a Mountain of Snow:' John Brown and the Problem of Interpretation.'" For a more specific example, Paul Finkelman's "Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's Raid" argues, "Brown's image as a martyr was shaped by the apparent unfairness of his trial, his letters from jail, his stoic behavior at gallows, and the efforts of antislavery activists to exploit his execution for the greater cause. This was, of course, what Brown had expected. It is why he understood that he was more valuable to the cause of antislavery as a dead martyr than as a living fugitive or a jailed convict" (46). In other words, John Brown is a martyr because of his (heterogeneous) circumstances, which proliferated because he allowed himself to be a martyr, which caused the proliferation his image as a martyr, etc. Finkelman is clearly not denying the tautology here. Also, to be fair, Brown was probably right: the indisputable weight of martyrdom probably was more useful to the already rolling mechanisms of the abolition movement than the ambivalence that plain violent radicalism would have been.

convert is hardly news. Thus, Foxe may hope persuade by leaving little alternative, but his book can only do so for those who enter their iconic presence to begin with, i.e. the inside of a church, and it does not pretend to address non-believers. Similarly, Redpath's book was only popular in the North, where abolitionism was already flourishing, and he sent to Haiti, which obviously did not need convincing of the evils of slavery. In other words, as argued above, only those who are already interested in what John Brown means have any interest in arguing about his meaning – despite critics' tendency to exaggerate, he's hardly thought of outside circles of Americanists and radicals (and especially where those spheres overlap). The very nature of tautology at the heart of martyrology means that martyrdom is self-reliant and truly self-evident to those already within its circular logic, and so in this regard at least it obviously succeeds in spades, regardless of my complaining.

Accordingly, following the specter of John Brown from the nineteenth century into contemporary scholarship – where he is most popular on the far left – bears out how inbent the appeal to the Old Man has to be. For instance, Redpath devoted his book to General Geffrard because he knew full well that the latter was of mixed heritage and already sympathized with blacks in the United States. Additionally, both his *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* and *A John Brown Reader*, the two most important martyrologies of John Brown, lean towards abolitionism and civil rights, professedly using Brown to further their political agendas. Works by W.E.B. Dubois (*John Brown*) and Pulitzer Prize winner John Vincent Benet (*John Brown's Body*), among others, continued this ardent tradition in the name of racial equality, though to varying degrees of ambivalence. Indeed, in his biography of Brown, W.E.B. Dubois makes no bones about his interest in the Old Man actually being an interest in the souls of black folks and their fair

treatment in America then and always.[37] In the decades since Brown's historical moment, it's as if critics and scholars like to see themselves as part of the liberal community of his martyrdom, crusading against injustice and intensifying his martyr status, which they erroneously take as validation of their own cause.

Louis Ruchames's *A John Brown Reader*, published in 1959 on the one-hundredth anniversary of the Raid on Harper's Ferry, is largely a reproduction of Redpath's in that it republishes many of the same pieces with similarly expressed intentions. It assumes that Brown's actions can be a lesson for those who sympathize and thereby engender more action and self-sacrifice towards combatting a similar enemy one hundred years later.[38] Even when anthologized writers in these martyrologies criticize Brown or admit that his violent means only hardly justified his ends, they ultimately praise the raid at Harper's Ferry for catalyzing the Civil War or bringing America closer to racial justice. On the other hand, some (usually Southern) critics demonize the radical as a madman and a terrorist, as in, for example, the behavioral studies that divest Brown of agency and sanity so as to evacuate his use as a symbol of any meaning.[39] This maneuver relies on the same logic as the martyrdom it combats, as if they are flip sides of the same coin, but it hopes to undercut the meaning of Brown's life and death by relegating it to insanity rather than extolling it.

Whether lauding him or divesting him of value, then, the critical response to Brown tends to only rehash and intensify the dialectics of his day rather than attending to the particularities of

---

[37] His preface overtly racializes Brown's martyrdom: "But even in the absence of special material the broad truths are clear, and this book is at once a record of and a tribute to the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk" (7).

[38] The introduction announces, "This anthology, by presenting the John Brown tradition, seeks to contribute to a firmer understanding of one of the vital aspects of American history, as well as to help our own generation, in a small way, toward a greater appreciation of those very ideals which motivated Brown and his friends" (15). That Ruchames calls it the "John Brown tradition" points, I think, to martyrology's dialogical structure, its community and subjectivity formulation, as well as his anthology's willing role in its formation.

[39] See Kenneth R. Carroll's "A Psychological Examination of John Brown" or William Keeney's "Hero, Martyr, Madman: Representations of John Brown in the Poetry of the John Brown Year, 1859-1860."

his weird life and death: it always amounts to North vs South, pro- vs anti- slavery, white vs black, etc. Oddly enough, though, most critical studies of Brown's legacy, of book or article length, tend to start by reviewing this dichotomous audience as if to mark territory and declare allegiance to the tradition of one side or the other. This is to say that the only people interested in looking to John Brown's life for meaning are those that have already decided on its meaning. They use his life and legacy to make a larger argument with the aim of a pre-decided end to which Brown is relied upon to contribute positively or negatively. Even the pieces that aim to complicate these binaries often only succeed in recognizing and describing them, thereby amping up their intensity.[40] Regardless of their goal, and parallel to the strategy used by Redpath and other martyrologists, this usually includes regurgitating the same information within largely the same logic, though the focus may vary from piece to piece. In other words, the problem with most Brown history and criticism is that it is preaching to the choir at best and uselessly repetitive at worst – that is, Brown criticism is fundamentally martyrological even as (or precisely because) it seeks to analyze a martyr.[41]

That said, it's not alone: the same kind of rhetorical and critical redundancy can also be seen in the criticism of John Foxe's book. In "The End of Reading: The Practice and Possibility

[40] See *Terrible Swift Sword* and *His Soul Goes Marching On* for abundant examples of this. In fact, the section headings of the former collection read "Contemporaries and Supporters of John Brown," "John Brown Defined," and "Behavioral Analyses of John Brown," as if critics can only possibly agree or disagree with Brown. In Redpath's and Ruchames's anthologies, it's even more explicit, of course.

[41] In Deleuzian terms, martyrdom may be the most easily reterritorialized form of political action or subversion, only relatively deterritorialized to begin with, and thus more effective as a black hole of subjectivity and a white wall of significance than anything else. Furthermore, because martyrology will always graft retrograde purposivity onto heterogeneous examples of experience, self-sacrifice, and suffering, and because its conclusions are always isomorphic and thus redundantly the same, martyrs and the logic of martyrdom can never say anything new, but can rather only prophesy a future their audience already knows in the present and already knew in the past. My point is that martyrdom is thus a defunct vehicle for social or political change, fundamentally conservative and far from radical, despite its reputation. Perhaps more importantly, though, it seems that any endeavor to hitch meaning to subjectivity, to announce after the fact the meaning of a life (or a thing, for that matter) must follow in martyrology's enormous shadow. Consequently, it can only persuade by preponderance and not by reason precisely because it cannot account for the union of subjectification and significance – that is to say, martyrology is not abstract enough to account for both the virtual and the real, but it still works prodigiously to announce the meaning of things. In this sense, any analysis that endeavors to say what a thing means must go through the motions that martyrology blazed and is therefore beholden to its strict and pre-established limitations.

of Reading Foxe's "'Actes and Monuments,'" Ryan Netzley argues that "Foxe criticism reproduces Foxe's polemical aims" when it endeavors to explain what his book means, as if that meaning is lacking and must be provided by critics (187). Consequently, "if the example of Foxe criticism teaches us anything about critical procedure in general, it is that the protocols of rigorous, respectable literary scholarship may, in fact, load the hermeneutic dice in Protestantism's favor" (196). The reason for this goes back to Breitenberg's estimation that the "Actes and Monuments" is an "iconic" text more than a rhetorical one and therefore doesn't need to be accessible or even readable. According to Netzley, what Foxe's book "aims to do, or avows to aim to do, is coterminous with what it does, which may be gleaned, obviously, from its iconic presence" rather than from actually reading it (205). The end of reading, in this sense, is not reading itself or even the experience therein, but rather the purpose to which the "Actes and Monuments" is put, that is the teleological goal that reading and also analysis take on before they even start. The result is a critical apparatus that only repeats the very motions and conclusions of Foxe's book to an audience that already knows and invests those motions and conclusions with legitimacy and value.

I agree with Netzley, here, but, in light of the parallel martyrology that I've traced in Brown, Redpath, Stowe, and Douglass, I want to expand his argument by suggesting that the tendency he describes is not endemic to Foxe's book alone or even "protocols of rigorous, respectable literary scholarship" in general; rather, it is the result of the tyranny of martyrology's analytical demands and conspicuous limits. Martyrdom's tautological foundation makes it nothing but preaching to the choir par excellence, self-evident exactly insofar as it is evident at all. It is consequently more a Derridean shibboleth – granting membership to the choir and cordoning off identities of its members – than it is a persuasive rhetorical or political gesture,

49

despite the fantasy of conversion that is evident from Foxe to Redpath to Ruchames. This means that it is not just Foxe's book but martyrdom in general that "tends to deny not only reading's usefulness but also perhaps its possibility as conventionally conceived" insofar as it doesn't need to be read but rather only proliferate in order to intensify (Netzley 209). Likewise, in "John Brown and the Legacy of Martyrdom," Eyal Naveh argues that "The significance of the paradigm [of martyrdom] derives above all from its ability to articulate binary contrasts: that the essence of a situation is the opposite of what it appears; … that the villain of the story turns into a revered saint and martyr; that the forces of law and order ultimately prove to be villains. … It is these binary contrasts that give rhetorical form and meaning to the narratives of martyred heroes" (81). While I agree that this is certainly what makes martyrdom so rhetorically powerful, I would add that this "ability to articulate binary contrasts" makes the logic of martyrdom woefully dialectical and hopelessly stuck that way. As Deleuze argues in *The Logic of Sense*, this is a problem insofar as "it is the profession and mission of the dialectician to establish antitheses everywhere where there are more delicate evaluations to be made, coordinations to be interpreted" (15). In the case of John Brown, nearly every critic is guilty of being a dialectician in this crudely reductive sense. I am not arguing that this is a symptom of critical ineptitude, but rather a limitation set on criticism by the logic of martyrdom.

Obviously, it would be absurd for me to argue that most Brown critics are simply blind to the pre-established willingness of their audience, or that they're kicking in open doors – W.E.B. Dubois probably didn't intend his biography of Brown to persuade anyone but likely knew instead that it would strengthen the commitments of the already committed. In the twenty-first century, this legacy has opened into divergent social and political fields that usually lean towards liberalism or libertarianism. In an especially academic example, many critics within Whiteness

50

Studies use Brown to make adjurations of social change in its analyses of race and racism in America. These theorists rigorously take up the mantle of racial equality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, arguing with a more conservative American cohort for the unwarranted basis of the white race towards eradication of whiteness as a racialized concept; they may occasionally mention Brown, but, as if recognizing his limitations, they choose not to make elaborate use of his martyrdom. For instance, David Roediger's important texts *The Wages of Whiteness* and *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness*, as well as Alexander Saxton's *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, dedicate almost no time to Brown, while Theodore Allen's *Invention of the White Race* only mentions him in passing as an exemplar of race relations.[42] Clearly, Whiteness Studies recognizes that Brown is a weak rhetorical tool for making connections or bridging the gap between its definition of social justice and the current reality.

So, if in one sense everything here is as it should be, there is no problem, in another very real sense it is not so simple. The weighty self-evidence of martyrology is perhaps similar to what Deleuze and Guattari understand the state form gives to thought, namely "a gravity it would never have on its own, a center that makes everything … appear to exist by its own efficacy or on its own sanction" (375). The problem is that, far from being challenged or subverted by this gravity, the state also gains "a whole census" from the arrangement that raises the State to the "level of de jure universality" and unimpeachable authority (375). This is to say that although martyrs are often touted as great transgressors who subvert an oppressive hegemony in a gesture

---

[42] Roediger's *How Race Survived US History* says virtually the same thing as *The Wages of Whiteness*, using Brown only to describe the radicalism of "the machinist and theorist Ira Steward" (103). Paying Brown slightly more attention, Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* argues for the radicalism of "some Southern whites who were ready to make common cause with the black population to establish a society there based on racial equality of constitutional rights" by briefly comparing them to Brown: "They dared, and some died as John Brown had done, struggling side by side with African –American freedom fighters for their common cause, the end of racial oppression" (150). The latter relies exclusively on W.E.B. Dubois's *John Brown* to make this point, in a move that seems to be more about gesturing to the dialogical structure of the John Brown choir than it is about making a cogent argument for racial justice.

towards something other and better than the State, they actually can only contribute to the state's

de jure universality, its rigid striation and dominance. This is because insofar as martyrdom is

incapable of making connections even between its own fundamental parts, it is also incapable of

making connections outside its own organization. It therefore has no recourse to anything but

itself in tautology; in other words, it cannot access "outside thought," the term Deleuze and

Guattari borrow from Foucault to designate thinking in smooth space that is extricated from the

rigidity of the state model. Thought that grapples with the exterior is in some ways the opposite

of state thinking because it "does not think in conformity with what the State wants" (376).

Insofar as martyrdom is incapable of grappling with its outside, it is incapable of challenging the

State or moving away from what the State wants.[43]

In short, the problem arises when a martyrologist assumes that irrefutable proof inside the

logic of martyrdom is equally irrefutable outside that logical organization; in such an

assumption, he/she overreaches to make an argument that can only fall on deaf ears. Once again,

I would argue that (at least of the writers and thinkers in this paper) Frederick Douglass stepped

outside the martyrological tradition in his praise of Brown precisely because he suspected the

impotence of martyrdom. In his *Narrative*, Douglass compares his suffering to that of Christ in

describing his appearance, which, "From the crown of my head to my feet," largely resembles

standard images of the passion. *My Bondage and My Freedom* recycles much of the language of

the *Narrative* in this episode, as it does elsewhere, but the changes here elucidate Douglass's

increased engagement with a Christian discourse and specifically the martyrdom he shows to be

---

[43] In *Weird John Brown*, Ted Smith notices something similar about Brown, though he puts it in the terms of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Smith argues that praise of Brown as a "freedom fighter" does not pit Brown against the state's oppressive normativity, but rather conscripts him into the state's legitimization: "Because it was continuous with violent means used by the state to seek the same end, the violence of John Brown … can be grafted in to the legitimacy that supports state violence. … In a nation dedicated to freedom, a freedom fighter can be incorporated in to the political body. This incorporation, more than any ethical calculations of means and ends, connects the violence of the freedom fighter with the deepest sources of legitimacy behind and within the state" (34).

ineffective. In the *Narrative*, he says, "I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master. *In My Bondage and My Freedom*, however, Douglass writes, "Had I escaped from a den of tigers, I could not have looked worse than I did on reaching St. Michael's. In this unhappy plight, I appeared before my professedly Christian master." It could be the case that "den of tigers" is a subtle reference to Daniel and the increased naming of St. Michael's is an ironic reminder of Christianity's collusion with American slavery. In any case, Douglass's emphasized qualification of his master Thomas Auld as "Christian" points to his failure in recognizing Douglass's Christ-like suffering and thus the limits of sentiment's empathic suffering, as well as limit of the martyr to create change or conversion.

I have tried to argue that this is the limitation variously negotiated by abolitionist martyrologies like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Echoes of Harper's Ferry.* In the twenty-first century, this also means that when Ignatiev's radical journal *Race Traitor* uses Brown as a mascot for the abolition of whiteness, it does nothing for the development and progression of the racial justice, despite their avowals.[44] And yet, if relying on martyrdom to solve racism is demonstrably misguided, perhaps the diagnoses of racial inequality leveled by these radically liberal political groups, all singers in John Brown's choir, remain valid. Perhaps martyrdom is capturing an energetic flow that would do better outside its strictures. Ultimately, it would seem that Douglass

---

[44] They publish in print and online "because they think that publishing … will help build a community of readers." However, the language of their website belies their inefficacy in communicating with anyone outside what community already exists and believers: "If the task of the nineteenth century was to overthrow slavery, and the task of the twentieth century was to end legal segregation, the key to solving this country's problems in the twenty-first century is to abolish the white race as a social category - in other words, eradicate white supremacy entirely. John Brown represents the abolitionist cause. Nominally white, he made war against slavery, working closely with black people. … For those who suffer directly from white supremacy, John Brown is a high point in a centuries-long history of resistance; for so-called whites he is the hope that they can step outside of their color and take part in building a new human community." This is the problem with martyrdom.

had it right: it is his "John Brown way" and his version of Brown's martyrdom that should be both further studied and more often remembered.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Theodore. *The Invention of the White Race: Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control*. New York: Verso, 1994. Print.

Benét, Stephen Vincent. *John Brown's Body*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968. Print.

Breitenberg, Mark. "The Flesh Made Word: Foxe's 'Acts and Monuments.'" *Renaissance and Reformation* 13.4 (1989): 381-407. Print.

Cook, James H. "Fighting with Breath, Not Blows: Frederick Douglass and Antislavery Violence." *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America.* Edited by John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, Knoxville: University Of Tennessee Press, 1999. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis*: University Of Minnesota Press, 2005, 1987. Print.

Douglas, Ann. "The Legacy of American Victorianism: The Meaning of Little Eva." *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Avon Books, 1977. Print.

Douglass, Frederick. "John Brown's Contribution to Abolition."

---. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co., 1970. Print.

Douglass, Frederick. McDowell, Deborah E. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

---. "Self-Made Men."

---. *"Was John Brown Wrong?"*

DuBois, W. E. B. *John Brown*. New York: International Publishers, 1962. Print.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Remarks: At a Meeting for the Relief of the Family of John Brown, at
 Tremont Temple, Boston, November 18th, 1859." *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo
 Emerson, Vol. 11.* Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903. Print.

Finkelman, Paul. "Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's
 Raid." *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry
 Raid.* Ed. Paul Finkelman. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995. 41-66.
 Print.

---, ed. *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses To John Brown And The Harpers Ferry Raid.*
 Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995. Print.

Fisher, Philip. *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel.* New York: Oxford
 University Press, 1987, print.

Foxe, John. "Preface." *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online.* Trans. John Wade. HRI
 Online Publications, 2011. Web. 10 April 2016.

Freeman, Thomas. "'*Imitatio Christi* with a Vengeance:' The Politicization of Martyrdom in
 Early Modern England.

Goldstein, Leslie Friedman. "Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of
 Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 61, no. 1, 1976, pp.
 61–72., www.jstor.org/stable/3031533.

Hairston, Eric Ashley. "The Virtuous Voice of Frederick Douglass," in *The Ebony Column.*

Holland, Frederic May. *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator.* New York: Haskell House
 Publishers, 1969. Print.

Ignatiev, Noel, John Garvey, eds. *Race Traitor.* Race Traitor. Web. 5 May 2016.

Joyner, Charles. "'Guilty of the Holiest Crime:' The Passion of John Brown." *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid.* Ed. Paul Finkelman. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995. 296-334. Print.

Mackey, Philip English. "Reverend George Barrell Cheever: Yankee Reformer as Champion of the Gallows." *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 82.2 (1972): 323-342. Print.

"martyr, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 4 April 2016.

"martyrology, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 5 April 2016.

Monta, Susannah Brietz. *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.

Naveh, Eyal J. *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: New York University Press, 1990. Print.

---. "John Brown and the Legacy of Martyrdom." *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown.* Eds. Russo, Peggy A, Paul Finkelman. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. 77-90. Print.

Netzley, Ryan. "The End of Reading: The Practice and Possibility of Reading Foxe's 'Actes and Monuments.'" *ELH* 73.1 (2006): 187–214. Web. 15 April 2016.

Pease, Donald E. "From the Camp to the Commons: Biopolitical Alter-Geographies in Douglass and Melville." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1-23. EBSCO*host*, login.proxy.lib.siu.edu/login? url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2016383432&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Piroyansky, Danna. "'Thus May a Man be a Martyr:' The Notion, Language, and Experience of

    Martyrdom in Late Medieval England."

Redpath, James. *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*. Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press 1970.

    Print.

Reynolds, David S. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked The Civil*

    War, And Seeded Civil Rights. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 2005. Print.

Roediger, David R. *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement And Slavery To The*

    Obama Phenomenon. London: Verso, 2008. Print.

---. *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History*.

    London: Verso, 1994. Print.

---. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London:

    Verso, 1999. Print.

Ruchames, Louis. *A John Brown Reader: The Story of John Brown in His Own Words, In the*

    Words of Those Who Knew Him, And In the Poetry and Prose of the Literary Heritage.

    London: Abelard-Schuman 1959. Print.

Russo, Peggy A., Paul Finkelman, eds. *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*.

    Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. Print.

Saldanha, Arun, Jason Michael Adams, eds. *Deleuze and Race*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh

    University Press, 2013. Print.

Samuels, Shirley. Edited by Shirley Samuels. "Introduction." *The Culture Of Sentiment: Race,*

    Gender, And Sentimentality in Nineteenth-century America. New York: Oxford

    University Press, 1992. Print.

Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise And Fall Of The White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture In Nineteenth-century America*. London: Verso, 1990. Print.

Smith, Ted A. *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Print.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Douglas, Ann. *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or, Life among the Lowly*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.

Tompkins, Jane P. "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.

Wexler, Laura. Edited by Shirley Samuels. "Tender Violence." *The Culture Of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

Wolf, Hazel Catherine. *On Freedom's Altar: The Martyr Complex in the Abolition Movement*. Madison: University Of Wisconsin Press, 1952. Print.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertrand. "'A Volcano beneath a Mountain of Snow:' John Brown and the Problem of Interpretation." *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid.* Ed. Paul Finkelman. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995. 10-38. Print.

Yarborough. "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave.'" *Haunted Bodies: Race and Southern Texts*.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Maximilian U. Martini

max.u.martini@gmail.com

Loyola University Chicago
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2011

Loyola University Chicago
Bachelor of Science, Education, 2011

Thesis Paper Title:
    Abolitionism and the Logic of Martyrdom: Death as an Argument for John Brown,
    Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass

Major Professor: Joseph Shapiro