Blackwell’s Critical Readers series presents a collection of linked perspectives on continental philosophers, and social and cultural theorists. Edited and introduced by acknowledged experts and written by representatives of different schools and positions, the series embodies debate, dissent, and a committed heterodoxy. From Foucault to Derrida, from Heidegger to Nietzsche, Critical Readers also address figures whose work requires elucidation by a variety of perspectives. Volumes in the series include both primary and secondary bibliographies.

Althusser: A Critical Reader
Edited by Gregory Elliott

Bataille: A Critical Reader
Edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson

Baudrillard: A Critical Reader
Edited by Douglas Kellner

Deleuze: A Critical Reader
Edited by Paul Patton

Derrida: A Critical Reader
Edited by David Wood

Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader
Edited by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland

Fanon: A Critical Reader
Edited by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White

Foucault: A Critical Reader
Edited by David Hoy

Heidegger: A Critical Reader
Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall

Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader
Edited by Jonathan Ree and Jane Chamberlain

Nietzsche: A Critical Reader
Edited by Peter Sedgwick
Honor and Insurrection
or
A Short Story about why
John Brown (with David
Walker’s Spirit) was Right
and Frederick Douglass (with
Benjamin Banneker’s Spirit)
was Wrong

Leonard Harris

I argue for honoring the character traits that enlivened David Walker’s
Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very
Expressly, to Those of the United States of America (1829). Walker’s
pamphlet influenced insurrectionists in Virginia, South Carolina, North
Carolina, and Maryland. He eloquently appealed for slaves to defend
themselves, escape from slavery, and initiate insurrection. Supporting
insurrection against race-based slavery was for Walker a Christian, and
especially Protestant, morally compelling responsibility. The character
traits exhibited by David Walker, such as tenacity, irreverence, passion,
enmity – and the associated actions of insurrection – are due esteem.
Insurrectionists, with their absolute belligerence and disdain for slavery’s
authorities, were magnanimous in ways different from abolitionists that
relied on moral suasion to change civil and government behavior.

It is David Walker’s spirit that, according to legend, inhabited John
Brown, the famous insurrectionist that commandeered Harpers Ferry,
W. Virginia, in 1859. That spirit, it is said, was inherited by Walker
from slave insurrections in 1521 Hispaniola; from 1526 insurrectionists in the Spanish colony of South Carolina, under the explorer Aylton; from the insurrectionists of Gloucester County, Virginia, in 1663; from the 1712 Coramantean Indians, Paw Paw Negroes, Africans, whites, mestizos, Spanish, and Portuguese insurrections in New York – from stalwart souls engaged in killing the entrepreneurs of the vicious trade, sacking neighborhoods of slave supporters, and destroying ill-gotten assets. Imagine that Blacks, marooning, just like slaves, serfs, and indentured servants leaving Europe for America; killing overseers and soldiers much like patriots breaking British law and killing supporters and soldiers of the British crown, then burying their bodies head down, their anuses pointing toward heaven so that their souls would go quickly to hell. But I am getting ahead of the story. Back to the dramaturgical potential of moral suasion.

Douglass was a moral suasion abolitionist. Moral suasionists believed that the power of moral argument, particularly arguments that emphasized Christian moral requirements, could persuade persons to radically change their behavior. Either directly, or through general social pressure, it was often believed that the profit, personal power over others, and privileges gained by whites from slavery might be relinquished with the aid of moral persuasion. In addition, suasionists believed that if they, or members of the enslaved racial/ethnic type, demonstrated enviable character traits the demonstration would help convince government and civil authorities of the humanity or potential humanity of the slave community. The demonstration would have such persuasive influence because it would be irrefutable evidence that there were esteemable contributions of which the slave type was capable. The demonstration would presumably then be useful in motivating authorities to end slavery. African-American suasionists practiced a politics of “representation” by which they saw themselves as representing what slaves could become. The virtues of benevolence, piety, temperance, restraint, serenity, and compassion were usually considered commanded by Christianity, nature, or reason. Suasionists, if they were not absolute pacifists, often encouraged the use of government and direct military or economic force to end slavery. Neither the theology nor moral psychology of suasionists included a stringent responsibility to engage in highly risky insurrection against racial slavery. The evaluation of what strategies would be instrumentally successful to either end, or help end, slavery usually did not include insurrection as a wise or prudential option. Thus, suasionists did not believe that there were compelling moral grounds for insurrection and/or that insurrection as an instrumental or practical tool was likely to be successful or sufficiently valuable for ending slavery.

In an early version of the suasionist tradition, Francis Hutcheson’s *A System of Moral Philosophy* argued against the idea that slavery was justified as the right of conquest, a reflection of unavoidable conquests resulting from the state of war between competing groups, or an entitlement held by owners from just transactions. Rational human beings should never, for Hutcheson, be made to suffer. Rather, for Hutcheson, we should be motivated by a natural sense of benevolence and pity to eradicate suffering. Moreover, “All men have strong desires of liberty and property, have notions of right, and strong natural impulses to marriage, families, and offspring, and earnest desires for their safety. We must therefore conclude, that no endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume powers over others, without their consent.” Slavery denies the inherent humanity of slaves and was therefore always unjust. There is presumably a vital, if hidden, “cruel impulse of the soul to desire the gravest happiness and perfection.” In some versions of suasionism, a vitalist impulse is replaced by appeals to reason or nature as the font of such desires. In later versions of benevolent ethics, evolution is treated as inherently inclined to create or make manifest such desires. The character traits most often associated with suasionists were considered best instilled by abolitionists through mental discipline, moral education, and industrial training. Moral suasionists envisioned future communities as having a fair degree of equanimity of opinion, congenial associations, pastoral surroundings, and industrial cooperation. Morally suasive abolitionists, for example, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, greatly respected Walker, but considered his works dangerous and incendiary.

Walker was born in 1785 in North Carolina of a slave father and a free mother. He inherited the status of his mother. However, by the time he was a man, racial slavery was the norm. Free blacks were considered inferior and as a class themselves always under danger of being enslaved. Walker, an owner of a second-hand clothing business, became a pamphleteer, distributing his *Appeal* throughout America beginning in September 1829 from Boston with the help of seamen and stewards. Walker published the third and last edition of the *Appeal* in June 1830; on June 28th of that year Walker was found dead near his clothing shop.

Walker provided a Christian-inspired justification and legitimization for insurrection. He eloquently advocated slave insurrection and the rights of slaves to revolt, escape, and kill overseers, masters, and those that stood in the way of a slaves freedom. The character traits he
soul could not be the traits associated with Hegel's slaves — subservience, docility or vicarious living through the will of the other. Nor were they the traits moral suasionists considered intrinsically admirable and instrumental for the purposes of ending slavery, e.g., restraint, compassion or "representing" an acceptable kind.

The actual death of Jim and Jane Crow were not losses to be lamented for Walker; rather, the emphasis was on the entitlement of those seeking to end slavery and slaves seeking manumission. One of those entitlements included the use of deadly force to defend themselves and some principles of human worth, e.g., that persons, regardless of race, creed, or color, are full human beings. The virtues of tenacity, reverence, passion, and enmity were features of full human persons and they could be instrumental in ending slavery. These virtues were most instilled by independent entrepreneurship, moral living, and competition. The insurrectionist tradition envisioned future communities as primarily identical to the communities within which they lived — excluding slavery. There were very few slave insurrectionists that envision structural changes in future communities, even if they did envision special religious communities. Walker envisioned communities with a fair degree of contending beliefs, conflicting associations, chaotic intertwining, cross-fertilizing cultures, and competition over resources. That is, he envisioned a future world like the one he inhabited, but without the degrading reality of slavery. Envious traits such as frugality or self-confidence and hierarchically arranged social statuses such as farmer or wheeler, for example, would be due deference in future communities envisioned by Walker.

Walker described the character of the slaves as degraded, wretched, servile, ignorant, deceitful, and abject. Blacks, according to Walker, were forced into a mean, low, and abject condition. The condition of forced servitude made the character traits of willed servility possible. Overseers, drivers, and slave-owners were considered by Walker as avaricious, greedy, usurpers, sordid, wicked, tyrannical, unmerciful wretches, and murderers. They practiced hellish cruelties, butcheries, debaucheries, and degradations. Walker argued that the system of racial slavery practiced in America was the worse form of slavery in human history. Barbarian, heathen, and uncivilized nations according to Walker were never so cruel as the white American Christians. Two reasons Walker provides for describing American race-based slavery in this way are particularly striking: first, no other nation of so vast, advanced, and importance made a whole class of people irredeemably, collectively, and individually condemned across generations to servitude. Secondly, race, as a criterion for the complete exclusion from any role of divine grace, spiritual embodiment, and membership in the human family, was if not completely unique to American race-based slavery, certainly historically a form involving more persons than any other. American slavery was thus preeminently sinful. It was sinful, on my reading of Walker, not because America practiced slavery. Walker seems to think that other slave systems were benevolent. As Walker puts it, "I call upon the professing Christians, I call upon the philanthropist, I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family." It is, for Walker, heaping insult upon injury "having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet" to then insult by exclusion. It was sinful because it made slaves, their progeny, and every one of their kind spiritually irredeemable. They could never be full Christians and they could never be free. Individuals of the kind and the kind itself were condemned. American slavery was sinful also because it used race as a criterion of distinction:

I ask you then, in the name of the Lord, of what kind can your religion be? Can it be that which was preached by our Lord Jesus Christ from Heaven? I believe you cannot be so wicked as to tell him that his Gospel was that of distinction. What can the American preachers and people take God to be? Did not God make us all, as it seemed best to himself? What right, then, has one of us, to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his colour, which none, but the God who made it can alter? Can there be a greater absurdity in nature, and particularly in a free republican country? . . . O Americans! Americans!!! I call God — I call angels — I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT.

Destruction would be imminent, for Walker, if there were no general repentance, either through the hand of God or the agency of the enslaved. Walker was not so romantic as to believe that Americans would change peaceably. Moreover, he entitled the slave to the same sort of worth as the free; thus, self-defense and pursuit of freedom were well worth the effort.

Even Henry D. Thoreau, in 1859, arguing against the romantic idea that humanitarian sentiments would soon be diffused in the Americas, thus leading to the rapid end of slavery through moral indignation, recognized that:
The slave ship is on her way crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches, and yet the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained is by "the quickest diffusion of the sentiments of humanity without any outbreak." As if the sentiments of humanity were ever found unaccompanied by its deeds, and you could disperse them all finished to order, the pure article, as easily as water with a watering pot, and so lay the dust. What is that I hear cast overboard? The bodies of the dead that have found deliverance. This is the way we are "diffusing" humanity and its sentiments with it.10

It would take a civil war before slavery in America came to a progressive end.

Characteristic of most persons of his time, Walker understood the world in terms of collective entities. Walker's representative heuristics—the way individuals define themselves as representing collective entities—are the representative heuristics of complex identities. Walker argues against the plans of colonization societies—societies designed to encourage blacks, particularly free blacks, to return to Africa. Colonization societies tended to believe that blacks and whites could never live together in America and free Christian blacks were needed in Africa to "uplift" the heathens and create a worthy civilization. Especially for blacks in favor of colonization plans, however, a civilized and empowered Africa would stand as material evidence of black equality.

It was perceptive of Walker to see that the variables of national identity and rootedness in material culture (i.e., how blacks produced, what property they worked to own, what physical neighborhoods they felt a sense of historical continuity with, where their loved one's lived and died, etc.) were far more salient than ethnic and racial bonds. Explanations and programs dependent on Negroes or Africans bonding with one another by virtue of common racial oppression were explanations and programs with little hope of predicting the future or achieving civilization missions. Moreover, the African American for Walker had as much entitlement to America as any other ethnic group and as much entitlement to have an American identity. Blacks, as individuals and as racialized Africans, created America in cooperation with other individuals of various backgrounds—all, ultimately, subordinating their original ethnic identities to a broader American identity and republican governance. There is thus no expectation in Walker that each black person represents, stands for, or functions as an individual leader for the creation of a civilization for all Africans when this means rejecting their American entitlements. Moreover, the collective entity or social categories of "Negro" or "African" are not stable racial or ethnic essences. Rather, they are variegated, multiple, and transforming categories through which representative heuristics operate. This view of Walker's perception of identity, I believe, helps us understand why his commitments are for republican principles, equality, individual liberty, and religion.

Walker believed in providential determinism. Providence, for Walker, worked ultimately on behalf of the oppressed; oppression was motivated by wicked, vile, and immoral free-willed persons. God, for Walker, was on the side of the enslaved and thereby redemption and salvation from servitude for enslaved groups were assured. Slavery for Walker was a humanly created institution. In time, cruel, mean, wicked, and brutal persons would be punished in this life or the next; the abject, beaten, and innocent would be redeemed in this life or the next. For Walker, cruel nations would be punished, bad preachers condemned, and good Christians eventually rewarded. Responsibility for deviations from the Gospel rest with men and women, and the enslaved are required to take responsibility for their own redemption. For Walker ancient civilizations consisted of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians; the ethnic geography consisted of Europeans, Africans, Jews, Indians, and numerous subgroups of the period. Walker, however, does not envision entitlements as group-based goods, nor the future as a world of alienated group identities. Walker does not envision persons as representatives of racial, national, or religious inalienable or natural kinds. Yet, he is deeply committed to representative heuristics; he sees himself as representative of Christianity, of humanity, and of the Negro. Moreover, these were for Walker ontological entities and categories, yet variegated, diversified, and beset with internally conflicting subgroups.

The idea that injustice does not pay, i.e., that the rewards of injustice are not forthcoming to its agents, was a myth deeply held by Walker. The emotionally comfortable romantic belief that those who are avaricious and greedy are, in this life, likely to face due hardships was also held by Walker. He was, in addition, committed to the myth that those who suffer will, at least in the afterlife, be especially accommodated.

Bernard Boxill is right and Socrates is most definitely wrong— injustice pays.11 Similarly, Sissela Bok in Lying is right in arguing that lying, or at least withholding vital information in order to gain an advantage, can be very profitable.12 Martha C. Nussbaum argues successfully in The fragility of goodness that accident and luck make goodness
fundamentally a tragic goal even if it is earnestly sought, regardless of whether one believes that goodness exists.

There is abundant empirical evidence that injustice often pays. It is beneficial to quite a few individuals and many nation-states with long histories of slavery, indentured servitude, and serfdom. We also know that those who practiced well-directed butchery in the service of primitive or corporate capital accumulation in America’s history of slavery more often than not lived longer, healthier, and happier lives than those they enslaved. Moreover, they died having received the services of modern medical care and with the good companionship of their thriving families, more often than those they oppressed did. In addition, persons that remained agnostic about slavery, or at least were not often engaged in contestation to end slavery, lived far more comfortably than those in the eye of the storm.

Walker’s noble, but completely romantic notions of the instrumentality and wily ways of justice, avarice, and greed may not be neatly separated from his more realistic notions of honor and respect. Moreover, it is arguable that Walker did not have a defensible theory of oppression, because he was so deeply dependent on romantic notions of God’s authority in the world on the behalf of good. Walker did have, however, a clear idea of what was unacceptable. As Walker put it:

Yet those men tell us that we are the seed of Cain, and that God put a dark stain upon us, that we might be known as their slaves!!!

Now, I ask those avaricious and ignorant wretches, who act more like the seed of Cain, by murdering the whites or the blacks? How many vessel loads of human beings, have the blacks thrown into the seas? How many thousand souls have the blacks murdered in cold blood, to make them work in wretchedness and ignorance, to support them and their families? [How many millions souls of the human family have the blacks beat nearly to death, to keep them from learning to read the Word of God, and from writing. And telling lies about them, by holding them up to the world as a tribe of TALKING APES, void of INTELLECT!!!! incapable of LEARNING, &] However, let us be the seed of Cain, Harry, Dick, or Tom!!! God will show the whites what we are, yet.13

Representative heuristics are never, for Walker, of greater weight than entitlements a person has by being a member of the human family and therefore a member of a properly formed moral community. By a “moral community” I mean membership in a society in which persons grant, primate facie, trust, empathy, admiration, and obedience to persons that are otherwise strangers. Persons can imagine themselves as interchanged with others, feel a sense of sameness, and feel as if they can reasonably predict the behavior of others. Race-based slavery completely excluded a population from being understood as having the embedded character traits and moral psychology necessary for membership in vast spheres of social existence, for example, banking, trade in precious metals and jewels, production and sale of weapons, authors of medical technologies and regard as physicians.

One way to see the importance of Walkerian character traits is to see why Walkerian traits are essential to honor and self-respect. Honor is a social good.14 That is, the possibility of an individual or group being honored is always dependent on the “whole” social entity understood as worthy. Slaves, eunuchs, and the poor, for example, are never considered honorific social entities. Aristocrats, soldiers, or elected officials can be considered bearers of honor. “Honorableness — in the sense of being worthy of honor — is a true personal quality; what I have suggested is that you may have honor without being honorable, and that you may be honorable without having honor.”15 My examples of these seemingly paradoxical features of honor are: slave-owners had honor as a function of their status, but any given slave-owner need not be honorable. A slave could be honorable, and recognized as such, but could never, by virtue of her status, attain honor, i.e., attain the position of being understood as a representative and embodiment of honor. My concern is not with whether honor is a consequence of social relations, conscience, precedence, or power. What is crucial here is that honor is contingent on individuals having the possibility of representing a social entity considered worthy of being exalted. Put another way, honor for individuals is contingent on the subtle and nuanced ways that men, women, daughter, soldier, scholar, worker, African, and European are necessarily perceived as embodiments of kinds due regard.

Far more than many of his contemporaries, Walker was clear on his disdain for the exclusion of slaves from the possibility of honor as a category of persons because they were considered inferior beings. This exclusion, as well as others, was among racial slavery’s most damaging — it made redemption impossible and thereby made the possibility of honor, for individuals and for the group, impossible. This is the insult that justifies emnity, if not vengeance, as a natural response. It is natural responses that racial slavery systematically denies to slaves. The obviousness of the humanity of slaves is irrelevant in such systems. Slavery tries to hide, destroy, and prevent natural responses. It must, like any system that hopes to exclude whole categories, demean, insult, and exclude the group from membership in the moral community. Prima
Torture, burning, and starvation were some of the practices used in the process of creating and reinforcing the exclusion of slaves. The denial of agnate bonds of family, for example, were some of the most common. Slaves were denied control of their children and denied the authority to make decisions about the lives of themselves or their mates. Such forms of authority were always considered, not rights or entitlements by virtue of their sentiments and commitments, but goods granted by those to whom allegiance was due.

Possibly overstated, but nonetheless important, it has been argued that “It was threat of honor lost, no less than slavery that led them [southern American states] to secession and war.” A noted description of lynching, a practice customized in slavery and carried on long after its ending, is described in the Vicksburg, Mississippi, Evening Post, 1904:

When the two Negros were captured, they were tied to trees and while the funeral pyres were being prepared they were forced to suffer the most fiendish tortures. The blacks were forced to hold out their hands while one finger at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs. The ears of the murderers were cut off. Holbert was beaten severely, his skull was fractured, and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a shred from the socket... The most excruciating form of punishment consisted in the use of a large corkscrew in the hands of some of the mob. This instrument was bored into the flesh of the man and woman, in the arms, legs and body, and then pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh every time it was withdrawn.

The most reasonable and emotionally coherent response to insult is a tenacious, irreverent, passionate response of enmity. Such responses are one way that slaves, or agents understanding themselves as advocates for slaves, see themselves as authorial voices. Such responses take the slave to be full persons due membership in a moral community of persons. It is a response due praise and exalted regard, i.e., honor.

At the National Hall in Philadelphia, Douglass lectured on “Self-Made Men,” the same day that John Brown raided Harpers Ferry – October 17, 1859.

Douglass used Benjamin Banneker, the stalwart architect and almanac author praised by Thomas Jefferson as an example of a self-made man. Moreover, Banneker was seen as exemplar of the Negro race and Jefferson’s opinion of him as a goal to be achieved, because Jefferson took Banneker’s work as indicative of why doubts about the humanity of Negroes were misguided. “This was the impression upon the father of American Democracy, in the earlier and better years of the Republic. I wish that it were possible to make a similar impression upon the children of the American Democracy of this generation. Jefferson was not ashamed to call the black man his brother and to address him as a gentleman.”

Douglass, as we know, was wrong in his opinion of the slave-owning Jefferson. Jefferson was a paternalist toward blacks, including his slave mistress and his interracial children that he maintained as slaves until they reached adulthood. Moreover, Jefferson never supported or engaged in warfare to end slavery, but he was most active as a commander-in-chief to protect whites and government institutions, all of which were supportive of the innocuous institution of brutal force.

Douglass discussed Brown’s plans on more than one occasion. As early as 1847, Brown and Douglass discussed the feasibility of an insurrectionary force to maintain itself in the Allegheny Mountains at Douglass’s home in Rochester, New York. Douglass rejected the plan because slave-owners might sell their slaves farther south rather than risk any contact with insurrectionists in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia. In addition, it would be difficult to maintain supplies in the mountains and generate public sympathy for insurrectionists in such a remote area. On February 1, 1858, Brown visited Douglass’s home again in Rochester, New York and Brown explained in detail his plans for a stronghold in the Allegheny Mountains. Shields Green, an escaped slave residing at the Douglass home, was recruited by Brown as a co-conspirator. Douglass remained informed, although not directly involved in, Brown’s continued efforts to establish an insurrectionary force.

On the night of August 20, 1859, in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in an old quarry, Douglass learned from Brown of his plan to seize Harpers Ferry. Brown tried to recruit Douglass, but to no avail. Brown promised to defend Douglass with his life. After three days of discussions, Douglass declined to join Brown. Turning to Shields Green, Douglass asked Green about his intentions, and Green’s famous reply was that he would go with the “old man.”

Douglass believed that Brown’s plan would not succeed. He thus did not feel warranted to risk his life and die in Virginia. Brown’s plans were considered gallant, but not wise. They were not wise for Douglass. I believe, given his important and well-deserved position as a moral suasionist leader. But was it wise from the standpoint of what counts as
Insurrection is never instrumentally wise. It is never certain that the insurrectionists will survive or that they will effect any substantive consequences. Neither uncertainty, however, is sufficient reason to refrain from insurrection. The women of the second Seminole War, for example, had every reason to support and fight against the colonizing and enslaving whites—nothing awaited them but rape, torture, loss of land, starvation, subordination of their agnates, and further erosion of their ability to increase their assets. They could not know for certain, any more than the women that supported the law-breaking militia of the American Revolution, that they would win or lose. If high probability of success were a precondition for insurrectionist actions, one would find it very difficult to justify the American revolution, non-violent direct action protests, anti-lynching pamphlets by black and white women, or membership in any of the insurrectionary forces that fought against colonialism, apartheid, or the Third Reich.

Walker’s Christian theology, like Martin L. King’s, held a stringent requirement for moral action against obvious evil. Assured success for any given action, or type of action, was hardly sufficient reason to reject a type of action. Theologically defined responsibilities and conceptions of meritorious character traits justify radical risks. Unlike a phenomenologist, existentialist, nominalist, rationalist, empiricist or utilitarian, a condition of being a person as well as a Christian for Walker was that persons necessarily had responsibilities to act in certain ways. That is, personal experiences, reasoned judgments or instrumental calculations of how best to secure one’s self-interest do not provide the rationale for compelling responsibilities. There is an a priori, apodictically knowable, structure of personhood that should be mirrored in each person’s life. Self-ownership of one’s labor, family bonds, and the ability to transfer assets across generations, for example, are definitive of full personhood for Walker whether a person is a Muslim or Christian. Walker’s rigid ahistorical standards of self-respect is what makes submissive slaves wreaked and the conditions that maintain self-loathing persons, abject. A Christian inspired insurrectionist method, not a hermeneutic method, is foundational and offers timeless truth claims about the nature of persons. Actual revolutionaries and insurrectionists, rather than status-seeking pundits, academicians, popular intellectuals, or ministers without callings to radically liberate the poor, are driven by a sense of deep-seated responsibility to take unfathomable and unrewarded risks. Thus Douglass in “The Heroic Slave” and Harriet B. Stowe’s Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp could support maroons and insurrectionists as literary gestures, but neither had any beliefs that required a responsibility to be a maroon or insurrectionist. The difference between observers and activists, like the difference between Douglass and Brown, is unbridgeable.

Douglass was fraternal with Brown and highly regarded his desire for slave insurrections. He placed himself in great peril by being associated with Brown. He allowed Brown to visit and reside at his home and supported Brown in small but important ways. Douglass did not lack in courage. After Brown’s failed raid, Douglass was immediately suspected and was forced to flee the country. Nonetheless, Douglass applauded Brown. He recognized that Brown and his co-conspirators demonstrated more courage (or more properly, a form of courage due high esteem), that he did not demonstrate. “To have been acquainted with John Brown, shared his counsels, enjoyed his confidence, and sympathized with the great objects of his life and death, I esteem as among the highest privileges of my life. We do but honor to ourselves in doing honor to him, for it implies the possession of qualities akin to his.”

The difference between Douglass and Brown, however, does not turn on their different forms of magnificent courage, but on different conceptions of honorable character traits and warranted forms of representation.

Brown’s plan to attack Harpers Ferry was not supported by Douglass for a reason of particular note not mentioned above—Harpers Ferry was a federal government installation. An attack on such an installation would occasion a response by the federal government. Moreover, the attack would be directed at the national government, not at an organ of civil society, i.e., individual entrepreneurs or their agents involved in slavery, religious groups, auction houses that sold slaves, pro-slavery apologists such as scholars or newspapers. The attack would directly seek destruction and usurpation of a storage facility and production site. The basic materials needed to sustain slavery were located at Harpers Ferry—weapons, a system of production, a system for the distribution of weapons, and a community of persons in which normal life meant sustaining the means to support cargo in persons. Harpers Ferry was such a community.

Douglass was right in his perception that an attack on Harpers Ferry would occasion a response by the federal government and right about the unlikelihood of its success. He was wrong if he thought that Brown should not attack the fundamental agent of slavery, its principal supporter, and a primary institution profiting from the taxes and largess of slavery; he was wrong if he thought that strategically Brown’s raid, or raids of Brown’s type, were any less capable of successfully hastening
slavery's end than attacks on strictly civil or state-managed targets. Because there is no record that Douglass ever participated in, or supported, an insurrection any more directly than Brown's, there is no reason to suppose that Douglass would have participated in, or directly supported, insurrection as a normal feature of his protests.

But, again, I have moved far too afield of one of my objectives – to tell David Walker's story and consider the dramaturgical potential of insurrection. As Alice in Alice in Wonderland came to understand, it is the story that matters, especially so if the central character of the story is to be reincarnated, metaphorically or actually.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, not so very long ago at all, David Walker's spirit migrated, or so the story of this legendary figure goes. It is not known whether Walker's spirit ever migrated into the body of a moral suasionist. His soul, so they say, avoids bodies and webs of belief that would not be agents of insurrection, incendiary pamphlets, and persons who kill their masters and mistresses to get free.

Walker was himself the beneficiary of spirits from earlier generations: "In 1754, C. Croft, Esq., of Charleston, South Carolina, had his buildings burned by his female slaves, for which crime two of them were burned alive." Or again, "In 1755, Charleston, a Mr John Cadman had made provision for the liberation of his slaves, Mark and Phillis, at his death. The slaves learned of this and murdered their master hoping to hasten matters along. Mark was hanged and Phillis was burned alive." Unsung heroes and sheroes.

Walker was in Richmond, Virginia, in January of 1830 to meet with other insurrectionists and distribute his pamphlet; shortly thereafter, but not personally organized by Walker, Nat Turner's insurrection occurred. Journalists were writing in North Carolina in 1831 about the need to control distribution of the notorious "Walker Pamphlet." In Washington City, North Carolina, the incendiary pamphlet was freely distributed. By 1859, John Brown caught the fever. Shields Green's liberation, and his goal of liberating his wife, was the ideal goal and persona for emulation.

This is why legend has it that David Walker's spirit migrated into the body of John Brown. We know he directly influenced Maria W. Stewart, the first major black woman political essayist for women's rights. Some say he lived in Paul Murray, an insurrectionist.

There should be plaques, awards, statues, monuments, honoraria, schools, churches, and children named after insurrectionists.

Maroons in Florida, South Carolina, New Mexico, and Canada were successful insurrectionists, either in the sense of having achieved freedom through attacking civil supports of slavery or through organized resistance and escape. This is now Walker's spirit,方向盘 to new lives.

Possibly modern insurrectionists and maroons will not hold the misguided belief that the virtues of benevolence, piety, temperance, restraint, serenity, and compassion are iminal to sustaining oppression or that tenacity, irreverence, passion, and enmity are iminal to the cause of authoritarianism and oppression. Possibly they will pursue assets and take control of their lives, using the same means as every individual or group in human history, including subterfuge, guile, disdain, and belligerence toward maniaca1 and malicious authorities.

Maybe, with a few conjuring tricks, the insurrectionist spirit will more frequently find its way into the lives of those viciously abused by modern Christians, rapacious entrepreneurs, sex exploiters, and racists amassing ill-gotten wealth.

Notes

I am indebted to students Daphne Thompson and Daryl Scriven for interesting discussions in Independent Study courses that I taught which included works on David Walker; to J. Everet Green for critical comments; and to discussions at my lecture "Revolutionary Pragmatism," Dotter Lecturer, Pennsylvania State University, March 1996.

1 I use here the original title of Walker's book. However, all quotes from the book will be taken from David Walker, Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, ed, Charles M. Wiltsie (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

See, for the history of David Walker and early insurrectionists, Peter P. Hicks, Awaken My Afflicted Brethren (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).


See, for interesting discussions of the traits of patience, sympathy, sentiment, temperance, and belief in God the redeemer – despite the obvious fact that slaves lived miserable lives, were raped, beaten, worked without due compensation, robbed of their inheritance, striped of assets, and died while their oppressors lived longer and happier lives – Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

4 Hutcheson, System of Moral Philosophy, p. 299.

5 Ibid. p. 10.


8 Ibid., p. 10.

9 Ibid., pp. 42–3.


14 I argue for this view in my “The Horror of Tradition or How to Burn Babylon and Build Benin While Reading A Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note?,” *Philosophical Forum*, 24 (1–3), Fall–Spring 1992–3, pp. 94–119.


16 Ibid., p. 10.


19 Ibid., pp. 88–92.

