

Norbert Finzsch: David Walker and the Fight against Slavery, © 2014

David Walker and the Fight against Slavery

1. Introduction

In this paper I will try to focus on the importance of anti-slavery and abolitionist activities supported by free people of color before the Civil War. Whereas activities by white abolitionists have received wide attention both in popular discourses and in scholarly works since the 1960s and whereas the liberation struggle of slaves obtained increasing consideration in historical studies since the 1980s, the contribution of African American citizens who lived as free Blacks or as freedpeople in the North has been neglected to some extent. Within anti-slavery and abolitionist networks, free people of color served as an important link between enslaved brethren in the South and white supporters in the North. They worked as operatives of the Underground Railroad and helped in the proliferation of information from and to the South, using family connections and acquaintances.¹ More important, however, was their service as intellectuals of liberation, as legitimate voices of African American resistance and resilience, as theoreticians and practitioners of discursive modes of defiance against proslavery forces in the South. The proslavery forces fought back, defining elaborate justifications of slavery that were often based on a specific reading of the scripture.² It is therefore of utmost importance to understand that religious motives and theological foundations of discourses were a very important, if not the paramount thrust of

¹ In regard to resistance and resilience see Goodman, Paul. *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998. Mullin, Michael. *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*. Blacks in the New World. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992. Rucker, Walter C. *The River Flows on: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*. Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. Frey, Sylvia R. *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991. Berlin, Ira. *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

² Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth and Genovese, Eugene D. *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press; 2005.

Black thinking in antebellum America. I shall focus on one particular writer, David Walker, and his groundbreaking pamphlet *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* and compare it with other texts written by African Americans at the end of the 1820s and at the beginning of the 1830s.

2. David Walker and Free People of Color in Antebellum America

Freedom for African Americans during the era of slavery was a relative condition, a status between slavery and full citizenship. It was also precarious, especially in the South where it generally depended on the sufferance of white authority.³ There, in reaction to slave revolts and other perceived threats, advocating freedom for African Americans and organizing against slavery was progressively more difficult, and became dangerous during the nineteenth century. In the North where black freedom was more secure, African-American communities established the foundations for political action to broaden their own freedom and secure the liberty of southern slaves. By the 1820s, the increasing independence of African Americans aided protest organizing in northern black communities. More than seventy percent of Blacks in Philadelphia and over eighty percent in Boston lived in independent households by 1820.⁴ Both New York and Pennsylvania had programs of gradual emancipation, but New York finally freed all of its slaves on July 4th in 1827. African Americans celebrated with parades and festivals, and as the last slaves began to move out of the homes of former white masters, the number of independent black households grew.

With emancipation in the North, many black families torn apart by bondage were reunited, though poverty and the demand for live-in servants still meant that some Blacks lived in white households. Yet, in New York and other northern cities, the growing black communities of the early nineteenth century contained increasing numbers of black households and organizations committed to mutual support and the struggle for civil rights and black freedom. A lot of the community's stamina

³ Just before the Civil War the South Carolina legislature considered a provision that would have deprived all free blacks in the state of their freedom. See Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984).

⁴ Gary B. Nash, "Forging Freedom: The Emancipation Experience in the Northern Seaport Cities, 1775-1820," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, for the United States Capitol Historical Society, 1983): 3-48, 32-33. In light of the continuing existence of slavery in the country, however, African Americans refused to celebrate Independence Day and held their own celebrations of emancipation on July 5th instead.

stemmed from a Black re-interpretation of the Scripture, which focused on the Old Testament and on the promise of liberation given to the Israelites who were captives in Egypt and Babylon. One of the earliest critiques of the United States was a pamphlet by Robert Alexander Young, called "The Ethiopian Manifesto" which appeared in early 1829.⁵ It was a call for unity within the world-wide African community and an attempt to define African American identity in reference to a prophetic interpretation of the Scripture as a prelude to a Black Messiah.⁶ Young, a virtually unknown black New Yorker who in all likelihood served as a popular preacher among the Black working class, penned a sermon prophesying the coming of a messiah – a light mulatto, to all appearances white – who would be "ordained of God, to call together the black people as a nation in themselves." Young advised his fellows to bear their burdens patiently while waiting for this leader, while God was going to submit the slaveholders to his eternal judgment:

"Beware! know thyself [slaveholders] to be but mortal men, doomed to the good or evil, as your works shall merit from you. Pride ye not yourselves in the greatness of your worldly standing, since all things are but moth when contrasted with the invisible spirit, which in yourself maintains within you your course of action: That within you will, to the presence of your God, be at all times your sole accuser. Weigh well these my words in the balance of your consciencious [sic] reason, and abide the judgment thereof to your own standing, for we tell you of a surety, the decree hath already passed the judgment seat of an undeviating God, wherein he hath said, 'surely hath the cries of the black, a most persecuted people, ascended to my throne and craved my mercy; now, behold! I will stretch forth mine hand and gather them to the palm, that they become unto me a people, and I unto them their God.'"

A semantic analysis of Young's short text reveals a heavy emphasis on religious motives. Most prominent among the lexemes used in the Ethiopian manifesto are the words "god", "judgment", "Ethiopian", which is the equivalent for Black or African American and the word "rights".⁷ We shall see that Young's pamphlet and

⁵ Young, Robert Alexander. The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defence of the Blackman's Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom. New York, 1829, printed in Aptheker, Herbert. A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States. New York: Citadel Press, 1973, vol.1, pp. 90-93.

⁶ Poole, Thomas G. "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny." The Journal of Religion 72.4 (1992): 533-548, p.535. Rael, Patrick. "Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North." The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History 3.2 (2000): 1-24, p. 8.

⁷ Concordance analysis conducted on Dec. 31, 2008, using the software "Concordance"

David Walker's lengthier text, published but six months later, have a strong resemblance and some striking differences.

In 1826, African Americans in Boston joined to form the Massachusetts General Colored Association, one of the first specifically antislavery black organizations. One of the group's founding members was David Walker, a free black man who came to Boston from North Carolina in the mid-1820s. Walker had never been a slave, but his life and travels in the South had made him intimately familiar with slavery's inhumanity. He had seen a slave owner force a son to whip his own mother to death and another force a husband to beat his pregnant wife until she aborted their child. In Boston, Walker became a community activist working for abolition and racial justice. In 1827 when two New Yorkers gave black Americans a public voice by founding Freedom's Journal, the nation's first African-American newspaper, Walker became its Boston agent. Freedom's Journal was launched in New York City on March 16, 1827 by two free-born African Americans, Samuel E. Cornish, pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church in New York, and John B. Russwurm, a graduate of Bowdoin College.⁸

The next year, in a militant speech before the Massachusetts General Colored Association, Walker called for the formation of black organizations to "protect, aid and assist each other to the utmost of our power," and advocated the use of "every scheme we think will have a tendency to facilitate our salvation [...]"⁹ In 1829 Walker expanded this message with his publication of David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, even sending it into the slave South. Historians have speculated how it had been possible that such inflammatory language could reach the Deep South despite attempts by pro-slavery forces to control the mail

and a metafile "Ethiopins.txt" which was generated from Aptheker, Herbert. A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States. New York: Citadel Press, 1973, vol.1, pp. 90-93.

⁸ Bell, Howard H. "Free Negroes of the North 1830-1835: A Study in National Cooperation." The Journal of Negro Education 26.4 (1957): 447-455, p. 447. Starting in September 1827, Russwurm was the only editor, after Cornish resigned from his post. Freedom's Journal was distributed all over the North and in parts of the South, but also had agents in Haiti, England, and Canada. From the beginning, the newspaper was plagued with financial problems, plus Russwurm received severe criticism for his editing style. Two years after its founding, Freedom's Journal saw its last issue appearing on March 28, 1829. Bacon, Jacqueline. The History of Freedom's Journal: A Study in Empowerment and Community. The Journal of African American History. 2003 Winter; 88(1):1-20, p. 1. Freedom's Journal, March 16, 1827.

⁹ Freedom's Journal, March 16, 1827.

and the dissemination of abolitionist literature.¹⁰ It must be noted though, that aggressive abolitionism was still a novel phenomenon in 1829 and state laws, limiting the access to incendiary literature, were not yet in place. When the pamphlet reached the South, however, it quickly became clear that it represented one of the slave owner's greatest fears: African Americans writing and reading about abolition. Consequently, Southern states reacted swiftly to Walker's Appeal. South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina and Louisiana passed severe laws without delay, some requiring the death penalty for the possession or distribution of the Appeal, or similar materials.¹¹

David Walker had able and courageous agents in the South, people like white sympathizers of the abolitionist cause or black clergymen. Walker's Appeal for instance surfaced in Georgia in December of 1829. Walker had shipped the pamphlet secretly on a ship heading south. While the ship was docked in the harbor of Savannah "a white steward" reportedly gave a package of sixty copies "to a Negro minister for distribution."¹² In Charleston, South Carolina, Edward Smith was arrested on the charge of "seditious libel" for the possession and distribution of Walker's Appeal. Edward Smith, a white steward on the Columbo of Boston, confessed and was tried before a Grand Jury. He was convicted to serve a prison term of one year and he was fined 1.000 Dollars.¹³ Clement Eaton pointed out that in Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, Louisiana and South Carolina anyone – be it slave, free-black or white – who was caught with the pamphlet was tried and usually found guilty of inciting insurrection.¹⁴ Eaton also noted that Walker was in contact with a slave in Wilmington, North Carolina, acting as his agent in the distribution of the pamphlets.¹⁵ This man, one Jacob Cowan, was arrested by Wilmington authorities and put on the slave market in Charleston, South Carolina to be sold "down the river" to Mobile, Alabama, as a punishment for his antislavery activities.¹⁶

¹⁰ Savage, W. Sherman. Abolitionist Literature in the Mails:1835-1836. *The Journal of Negro History*. 1928 Apr; 13(2):150-184;

¹¹ Crockett, Hasan. The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's Appeal in Georgia. *The Journal of Negro History*. 2001; 86(3):305-318, p. 305.

¹² Crockett, The Incendiary Pamphlet, p. 309. Crockett quotes Aptheker, Herbert. *One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830, Its Setting & Its Meaning, Together With the Full Text of the Third, and Last, Edition of the Appeal*. New York: Humanities Press, 1965, p. 37.

¹³ Pease, William H., and Jane Pease. "Walker's Appeal Comes to Charleston: A Note and Documents." *The Journal of Negro History* 59.3 (1974): 287-292, p. 288.

¹⁴ Clement Eaton, "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History*, 2(3)(1936): 323-334.

¹⁵ Eaton, *Dangerous Pamphlet*, p. 330.

¹⁶ Rachleff, Marshall. "David Walker's Southern Agent." *The Journal of Negro History* 62.1

On top of legal procedures directed against the dissemination of pamphlets like the one by David Walker there were mob actions by enraged Southerners against anti-slavery and abolitionist agents.¹⁷ Although the South had a been violence-prone section long before the Civil War, with a code of honor that led to increased numbers of duels and acts of individual violence, the surge in extralegal violence, directed against abolitionists was remarkable. The program of the Garrisonian abolitionists -- immediate abolition of slavery without compensation for the slave-owners -- would have laid the axe at the “peculiar institution” and at the economic structure of the South as such. In 1835 Henry Lloyd Garrison felt proslavery's wrath when anti-abolitionist forces in Boston attacked him, seized and dragged him through the streets at the end of a rope. The city's Blacks saved him in a daring wagon rescue and city authorities placed him in protective custody. After the British Emancipation Act of 1833, southern plantation owners had watched in awe, as Jamaica's plantation system went down in decay. Deeper than the fear of economic decline, however, lay the fear of the social effects of abolition, the destruction of racial control over African Americans.¹⁸

3. Walker's Appeal: Its Importance and Meaning

The impact of David Walker's Appeal in this context cannot be appreciated enough. The Appeal was a burning denunciation of slavery and hypocrisy; its anger, indeed, is the quality that has always evoked the strongest replies, full across the range of readerly sympathies. In its refutative relation to the major texts and personages of white America, Walker's Appeal represents a highlight in textual militancy and a precursor to authors like Frantz Fanon and Huey P. Newton.

“The whites have always been an unjust, jealous unmerciful, avaricious and blood thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority.—We view them all over the confederacy of Greece, where they were first known to be any thing, (in consequence of education) we see them there, cutting each other's throats—trying to subject each other to wretchedness and misery, to effect which they used all kinds of deceitful, unfair and unmerciful means. We view them next in Rome, where the spirit of tyranny and deceit raged still higher.—We view them in Gaul, Spain and in Britain—in fine, we view them all over Europe, together with what

(1977): 100-103, p. 100.

¹⁷ Eaton, Clement. "Mob Violence in the Old South." The Mississippi Valley Historical Review 29.3 (1942): 351-70.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 354.

were scattered about in Asia and Africa, as heathens, and we see them acting more like devils than accountable men. But some may ask, did not the Blacks of Africa, and the mulattoes of Asia, go on in the same way as did the whites of Europe. I answer no—they never were half so avaricious, deceitful and unmerciful as the whites, according to their knowledge.”¹⁹

Refuting Jefferson's comments on race in Notes on the State of Virginia, satirizing the Constitution, invoking the spirit of Thomas Paine, arguing with Henry Clay, and quoting the Declaration of Independence at length, David Walker talks back as few others had done, and none in print. In reference to the Declaration of Independence, Walker roars:

“See your declaration, Americans!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4, 1776—[...]”

And then Walker proceeds to quote lengthily from the Declaration of Independence: ‘We hold these truths to be self evident—that **ALL MEN are created EQUAL!** *that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*”

Falling back into his denunciatory tone, Walker exclaims:

“Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers on ourselves on our fathers and on us, men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!! [...] Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you? Some of you, no doubt, believe that we will never throw off your murderous government, and ‘provide new guards for our future security.’”²⁰

Walker’s Appeal is a syllogism, born of the contradictory propositions of theoretical liberty and actual tyranny. Yet Walker also levels sharp criticisms against what he sees as black weakness in the face of oppression, weakness tantamount to complicity. He therefore calls for Blacks to unite and demands that they work for their own liberation; as indicated by the title, Walker takes a global view of the

¹⁹ Walker, David; Garnet, Henry Highland. *Walker's Appeal with a Brief Sketch of His Life*. New-York: Printed by J. H. Tobitt; 1848, p. 27 f. URL <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/16516>.

²⁰ David Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 85 f.

plight of African-descended peoples, a view that positions him as a black nationalist as well as a militant. Intended as a spark to fire the tinder of black consciousness, the Appeal in more visible fashion ignited white paranoia about servile insurrection and provoked repressive measures across the South.

He condemned the hypocrisy of all those, especially Christians, who professed to love liberty yet supported slavery. He challenged the Jeffersonian thinking which called for freedom while profiting from human bondage and contending that Blacks were intellectually inferior, and he asserted that slaves inflamed by the same thirst for liberty that had moved American Revolutionary patriots would be justified in revolting against their owners.²¹

“There is a great work for you to do, as trifling as some of you may think of it. You have to prove to the Americans and the world, that we are men, and not *brutes* as we have been represented, and by millions treated. Remember, to let the aim of your labours among your brethren, and particularly the youths, be the dissemination of education and religion.”²²

Walker saw education as a means to racial defense and uplift, believing it would produce revolutionaries. Education, however, had also a specific meaning for him:

“Most of the coloured people, when they speak of the education of one among us who can write a neat hand, and who perhaps knows nothing but to scribble and puff pretty fair on a small scrap of paper, immaterial whether his words are grammatical, or spelt correctly, or not; if it only looks beautiful, they say he has as good an education as any white man—he can write as well as any white man, etc.”²³ [...] I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning.”²⁴

The substance of learning, for David Walker, was an understanding of the very basis of suppression:

“Do you suppose one man of good sense and learning would submit himself, his father, mother, wife and children, to be slaves to a wretched man like himself, who,

²¹ Herbert Aptheker, One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830, Its Setting and Its Meaning, (NY: Humanities Press, 1965), 137 and 137n.

²² David Walker, Appeal, p. 42.

²³ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁴ Ibid.

instead of compensating him for his labours [sic], chains, handcuffs and beats him and family almost to death, leaving life enough in them, however, to work for, and call him master? No! no! he would cut his devilish throat from ear to ear, and well do slaveholders know it."²⁵

Southern slaveholders had vivid memories of the Denmark Vessey plot in Charleston, South Carolina, the Gabriel conspiracy in Richmond, Virginia and the especially terrifying slave revolt in Haiti in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Walker's Appeal exacerbated their fears of interracial violence. It is obvious that Walker's Appeal and its dissemination in the South contributed to Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831. David Walker has correctly been portrayed as the first African American nationalist, as a supporter of a violent revolution against the system of slavery and as the forefather of the slogan Black Power. He is also seen as one of the first African American Writers of importance.²⁶

4. David Walker and Religion

David Walker certainly was an African American separatist and a propagandist of a violent upheaval against the horrors of slavery, but his writing was to a large extent influenced by an abolitionist interpretation of the bible and a Methodist interpretation of Christianity, as I will try to show in the remaining minutes of my presentation. Like Robert A. Young before him, Walker decried the savage, unchristian conduct Blacks suffered in the United States in glowing and personal terms and predicted the coming of a Black messiah. Unlike Young, who trusted in God's judgment and told the black community to be patient, Walker challenged

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Scholarly work on David Walker is insubstantial. Monographs and collections of essays include Andrews, William L. The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Burrow, Rufus. God and Human Responsibility: David Walker and Ethical Prophecy. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003. Finzsch, Ian Frederick. Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008. Hinks, Peter P. To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. Levine, Robert S. Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Peters, James S. The Spirit of David Walker, the Obscure Hero. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002. Scriven, Darryl. A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations With David Walker. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. Trotman, C. James. Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

African Americans to organize themselves and cast off this oppression that, as he proclaimed, God found an intolerable provocation and sinful for them to endure any longer.²⁷ It is my contention, therefore, that by not addressing the religious and philosophical foundations of Walker's Appeal, one fails to grasp its driving motivation and the extent to which it was able to raise the awareness of both enslaved African Americans in the south and of white people in the North. It is exactly the religious underpinning that gave the Appeal its allure and its critical power. "The Appeal issued from a well-established tradition of black antislavery and religious oratory. Many of the themes and issues touched on by Walker in his work had already been addressed by an array of prominent black orators. Walker followed in the footsteps of a number of powerful black ministers and community leaders [...]", people like Jupiter Hammon,²⁸ Prince Saunders²⁹ and Joseph Sidney, who had emphasized the necessity of education for the Black liberation process before 1809.³⁰

David Walker was also not the first one to address the issue of a vengeful God who would eventually liberate his people. In the period of the American Revolution, calls for liberty were joined with evangelical appeals by both black and white orators.³¹ Othello, an anonymous black essayist writing in 1788, had warned his readers, that slavery was "an outrage to providence and an affront offered to divine Majesty, who has given to man his own peculiar image"³² Following the

²⁷ Randall M. Miller, John R. McKivigan, and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds., *The Moment of Decision: Biographical Essays on American Character and Regional Identity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) p. 100. Young, despite his call for patience, warned against any cohabitation of the races and advised enslaved Blacks to use abortion as a means to fight against slavery. "Death shall he prefer to a continuance of his race:-being doomed to thy vile servitude, no cohabitation shall be known between the sexes, while suffering under thy slavery; but should ungovernable passion attain over the untaught mind an ascendancy, abortion shall destroy the birth. We command it, the voice of imperative justice, though however harsh, must be obeyed." Young, *Ethiopian Manifesto*.

²⁸ Jupiter Hammon (1711 – 1806?) was an African American poet who became the first published Black writer in America when a poem of his appeared in print in 1760. His death date is not definite, but was definitely alive in 1790 and definitely dead by 1806. He was a devout Christian. He is considered one of the founders of Black literature.

²⁹ Prince Saunders (1775–1839) was an African American author, diplomat, and scholar probably born in Connecticut.

³⁰ Hinks, Peter P. *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press; 1997, p. 173.

³¹ Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, p. 174.

³² Othello *American Museum*, IV, 412-415. Baltimore, May 10, 1788, printed as "What the

argumentation of the spirit of his age, the same Othello continues: “Slavery, unquestionably, should be abolished, particularly in this country; because it is inconsistent with the declared principles of the American Revolution.”³³

There is a notable and sharp difference between Othello and David Walker, however, consisting of Othello’s rhetorically veiling the fact that he is black himself by assuming the role of a slave-owner or a complacent by-stander: “Either we should set our slaves at liberty, immediately, and colonize them in the western territories; or we should immediately take measures for the gradual abolition of it [...] This is the least we can do in order to evince our sense of the irreparable outrage we have committed [...]”³⁴ Walker instead speaks through an auctorial Eye (“I”) to his readers which is constantly present. Never once is the reader left unaware that it is David Walker who is speaking. Thus his text assumed both the role of a sermon and a jeremiad.

In its original meaning, the jeremiad denotes a literary text in prose, in which the author laments the state of society in a serious tone of sustained invective and predicts society's imminent downfall. The tradition of the jeremiad goes back to Puritan settlement of North America, with preachers and politicians like John Winthrop warning against the sinfulness of American society.³⁵ The Black jeremiad is characterized by its longevity and its prominence in African American rhetoric. Its life spans from David Walker and his predecessors to WEB Du Bois to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, whose speeches can also be analyzed as jeremiads. According to Wilson Moses, the Black jeremiad is the earliest expression of Black Nationalism, “the constant warnings issued by Blacks to Whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery.”³⁶ In Walker’s Appeal this judgment is not an abstract verdict, but is brought about by a black Messiah, thus combining the impetus for social reform with the hope for a black liberator. “But I tell you Americans! That unless you speedily alter your course, *you* and your

Negro Was Thinking during the Eighteenth Century” in: The Journal of Negro History, 1(1):1916, p. 49-68, p. 50.

³³ What the Negro Was Thinking, p. 53.

³⁴ What the Negro Was Thinking, p. 53.

³⁵ Howard-Pitney, David. The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; 2005, p. 6.

³⁶ Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press; 1982, p. 29. Quoted in both in Stewart, Maria W. Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1987, p. 17 and in Howard-Pitney, David. The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; 2005, p. 10.

Country are gone!!! For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!!!³⁷ In another chapter, Walker made very clear how the destruction of white America would be achieved:

“ [...A]s true as [god] sits on his throne in heaven, and as true as our Saviour died to redeem the world, will give you a Hannibal, and when the Lord shall have raised him up, and given him to you for your possession [...] give him your support and let him go his length, and behold in him the salvation of your God. God will indeed, deliver you through him from your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America. I charge you this day before my God to lay no obstacle in his way, but let him go.”³⁸

A concordance analysis of Walker's Appeal reveals the highly accusatory style of this Jeremiad and confirms most of the findings of other scholars. After eliminating the most recurrent parts of speech such as conjunctions, articles, prepositions and interjections from the list of frequencies, the most frequent words are brethren (83 times) and *Americans* (with 77 instances). Next to this expression we find *children*, which refers as a rule to African American *children* (66 instances), *whites* (72 instances) and *slaves* (58 instances, 10 times as *slave*).³⁹ With these expressions Walker circumscribes the field of his interest: It is a text, in which the juxtaposition of Blacks (as children, slaves, brethren, colored) and Whites (Americans, Whites, Christians) prevails, Walker presents a Manichean world view that does not so much attack slaveholders as all white Americans. Over Blacks and Whites alike resides the almighty God as a judge. He is invoked more than 300 times.⁴⁰ The sin

³⁷ David Walker, *The Appeal in Four Articles*, in: Moses, Wilson Jeremiah (ed). *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. New York: New York University Press; 1996, p. 68-89, p. 85.

³⁸ David Walker, *Appeal*, p. 30.

³⁹ I used the text file of David Walker's Appeal as provided by Project Gutenberg and the software "Concordance". I stripped the Gutenberg edition of its introduction and the text passages that were not written by Walker himself, but kept the footnotes that he added to the text.

⁴⁰ 160 times as God, 92 times as Lord, 26 times as Jesus, 22 times as Jesus Christ, 13 times as Creator, 24 times as Master. Walker never uses *Master* in order to denote slave owners, except indirectly when he quotes Thomas Jefferson or John Randolph of Roanoke who both used *master* in that sense. Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 25, 26, 66. "The whites knowing this, they do not know what to do; they are afraid that we, being men, and not brutes, will retaliate, and woe will be to them; therefore, that dreadful fear, together with an avaricious spirit, and the natural love in them to be called masters, [...] bring them to the resolve that they will keep us in ignorance and wretchedness, as long as they possibly can[...]" Walker, *Appeal*, p. 73.

that is causing God's wrath is slavery (32 times) which is the cause for the wretchedness of both Whites and Blacks (46 times as wretchedness, 24 times as wretched). Although Walker's text has been labeled as one early African nationalist pamphlet, reference to Africa is relatively scant (22 times) and it is amazing to see, that Africa is not always a cipher for positive enunciations but that slavery, for instance, committed by Africans in Africa, receives Walker's disdain and ire.⁴¹

5. David Walker: John the Baptist for the Messiah Nat Turner?

In the fall of the year 1831, Virginia lawyer and slave owner Thomas R. Gray published "The Confessions of Nat Turner", a brief text of less than 25 pages about the slave insurrection led by Nat Turner, a deeply religious man, who had led a handful of disciples into the Virginia backcountry, where they killed 57 Whites before the revolt was ended by military might. Makungu Akinyela posited that the spread of Christianity among slaves hastened the development of a common ethnic identity among ethnically diverse peoples who were the first generations of enslaved Africans on American shores. He maintained that Black religion was a primary source of the logic of Black resistance/resilience and a spiritual source for the development of a collective Black consciousness. He further argued that resistance developed as a consequence of an African American theology as exemplified in Nat Turner's confessions.⁴² Akinyela assumed that the African-Christian hybrid cosmology seen in the "Confessions" is an example of the worldview of enslaved Africans generally in the 19th century. This Africanized Christianity forms the basis for the common ethnic identity, with its motivating cultural value (self-determination) and central organizing theme (resistance/resilience) seen in the ethos of Africans in America today. The question I wish to raise is another one, however. In how far were David Walker and the members of his network successful in transferring the message of the Appeal to the slaves in the South, making their version of revolutionary Christian theory a tool for the revolutionary practise of a slave revolt? Nat Turner's text "Confessions" does not mention David Walker at all. Despite its apocryphical provenance, Turner

⁴¹ Walker, Appeal, p. 33.

⁴² Akinyela, Makungu M. "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos." Journal of Black Studies 33.3 (2003): 255-280. Thus, he treats the Confessions as an authentic work of Black Literature, despite its apocryphical provenance. The same could be said about Inscoe, John C. "Slave Rebellion in the First Person: The Literary "Confessions" of Nat Turner and Dessa Rose." The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 97.4 (1989): 419-436. Inscoe, too, treats Gray's work as an expression of Black consciousness.

comes across as a person with a deep religious commitment to the violent abolition of slavery.⁴³

Lawyer Daniel Fabricant reaches the conclusion that Nat Turner's alleged Confessions were no legitimate and accurate historical record of Nat Turner's legal prosecution.⁴⁴ Gray was a professional man of his time and maintained a keen interest in the preservation of the Southern social order. His work, therefore, has to be viewed critically.⁴⁵ Therefore it is impossible to draw any conclusions concerning David Walker's influence on Nat Turner from an analysis of the Confessions. The fact however remains that Gray, the author of the Confessions and an obvious supporter of slavery, thought it plausible that Nat Turner acted on a godly impulse when he decided to overthrow the slave regime in the South.⁴⁶ Nat Turner, according to Gray, had a divine revelation that demanded of him to "[...] seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you." And Nat Turner, according to Gray, interpreted this revelation as the assurance "[...] that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty."⁴⁷ Nat Turner's confession à la Gray continues in this direction: "After this revelation in the year 1825, and the knowledge of the elements being made known to me, I sought more than ever to obtain true holiness before the great day of judgment [sic] should appear, and then I began to receive the true knowledge of faith. And from the first steps of righteousness until the last, was I made perfect."⁴⁸ In Gray's representation, Nat Turner was a religious perfectionist, someone who could not sin, because he had been saved, thus putting him in the tradition of Wesleyan Methodist Christianity. Gray established the missing link between Nat Turner and David Walker through reference to the common theological roots of both Turner and Walker. Methodism was a valuable target for proslavery apologetics, since

⁴³ Fabricant, Daniel S. "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, A Critical Look at the 1831 Confessions of Nat Turner." The American Journal of Legal History 37.3 (1993): 332-361.

⁴⁴ Fabricant, Critical Look, p. 360.

⁴⁵ Fabricant, Critical Look, p. 334.

⁴⁶ Turner, Nat, and Thomas R Gray. The Confessions of Nat Turner the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, in the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to Be Such When Read Before the Court of Southampton: With the Certificate, Under Seal of the Court Convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for His Trial. Also, an Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection, With Lists of the Whites Who Were Murdered, and of the Negroes Brought Before the Court of Southampton, and There Sentenced, &c. Richmond, VA T. R. Gray, 1832. URL <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15333/15333-h/15333-h.htm>.

⁴⁷ Turner; Gray, The Confessions, p.9.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p.10.

Methodism not only tended to question slavery, but also because Methodists maintained traditional contacts with British i.e. Non-American radical coreligionists, who were the backbone of British abolitionism.⁴⁹

American Methodists, the largest of the evangelical denominations, had a problem with the anti-slavery position of the Wesleyan Methodists after 1785 and increasingly reverted to a compromise, the "mission of the slaves" in the South.⁵⁰ In the North, however, abolitionism and Methodism formed a close alliance. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Methodism regularly attacked slavery as great evil, barred slaveholders from preaching the gospel, expelled slave traders and encouraged slave literacy through Bible-reading.⁵¹ It is no surprise then, that proslavery apologetics attacked the Wesleyan variety of the Methodist church whenever possible and tried to erect a wall of separation between the British and the Southern brands of the Methodist denomination.⁵² Moreover, African American Methodists like David Walker, used the enthusiastic rhetoric device of "taking heaven by storm" that had endeared early Methodism to so many Black Christians.⁵³

6. Conclusion

I come to my concluding remarks: Free people of color and their fight against slavery took not always place in a purely political arena. Especially before the formation of anti-slavery political parties like the Liberty Party, the Freesoil Party and the Republican Party, the mobilization against slavery often took on a religious

⁴⁹ Maclear, J. F. "The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade." The Huntington Library Quarterly 42.2 (1979): 141-164, p. 147. American Methodism, however, was held in contempt by apologetics of slavery. Viz. Buckingham, Goodsell. The Bible Vindicated From the Charge of Sustaining Slavery. Columbus, OH: Temperance Advocate Office, 1837. Richard Cawardine on the other hand emphasizes the non-partisan alignment of Methodists in ante-bellum America. Carwardine, Richard. "Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War." Church History 69.3 (2000): 578-609.

⁵⁰ Leland J. Bellot. "Evangelicals and the Defense of Slavery in Britain's Old Colonial Empire." The Journal of Southern History 37.1 (1971): 19-40, p. 36.

⁵¹ Reilly, Timothy F. "The Louisiana Colonization Society and the Protestant Missionary, 1830-1860." Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 43.4 (2002): 433-477, p. 462.

⁵² Bascom, H. B. Methodism and Slavery: With Other Matters in Controversy Between the North and the South. Frankfort, KY: Hodges, Todd & Pruett, printers, 1845, p. 22, 127, 132, 156.

⁵³ Wigger, John H. "Taking Heaven by Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770-1820." Journal of the Early Republic 14.2 (1994): 167-194, p.185-187.

form, using the ancient form of the jeremiad with its predictions of redemption for the slaves and damnation of the white sinners. David Walker's text is unique in its insistence on violent means for redemption, stepping away from a submissive waiting for a messiah, calling Blacks to unite globally and to put an end to domination by Whites generally. In its own way, Walker's jeremiad foreshadows the "Coming of the Glory of the Lord" as predicted in the Battle Hymn of the Republic in the shape of the Civil War and the violent destruction of slavery as a social and economic system.

References:

Akinyela, Makungu M. "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 255-80.

Andrews, William L. *The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

[Anonymous]. "What the Negro Was Thinking During the Eighteenth Century." *The Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 1 (1916): 49-68.

Aptheker, Herbert. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. New York: Citadel Press, 1951.

———, (ed.). *One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830, Its Setting & Its Meaning, Together With the Full Text of the Third, and Last, Edition of the Appeal*. New York: Humanities Press, 1965.

Bacon, Jacqueline. "The History of Freedom's Journal: A Study in Empowerment and Community." *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 1 (2003): 1-20.

Bascom, H. B. *Methodism and Slavery With Other Matters in Controversy Between the North and the South*. Frankfort, KY: Hodges, Todd & Pruett, printers, 1845.

Bell, Howard H. "Expressions of Negro Militancy in the North, 1840-1860 ." *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 1 (1960): 11-20.

- Bell, Howard H. "Free Negroes of the North 1830-1835: A Study in National Cooperation." *The Journal of Negro Education* 26, no. 4 (1957): 447-55.
- Bellot, Leland J. "Evangelicals and the Defense of Slavery in Britain's Old Colonial Empire." *The Journal of Southern History* 37, no. 1 (1971): 19-40.
- Berlin, Ira. *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Berlin, Ira, and Ronald Hoffman. *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*. Perspectives on the American Revolution. Charlottesville, VA: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1983.
- Buckingham, Goodsell. *The Bible Vindicated From the Charge of Sustaining Slavery*. Columbus, OH: Temperance Advocate Office, 1837.
- Burrow, Rufus. *God and Human Responsibility: David Walker and Ethical Prophecy*. Voices of the African Diaspora. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003.
- Carwardine, Richard. "Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War." *Church History* 69, no. 3 (2000): 578-609.
- Crockett, Hasan. "The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's Appeal in Georgia." *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (2001): 305-18.
- Eaton, Clement. "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South." *The Journal of Southern History* 2, no. 3 (1936): 323-34.
- . "The Freedom of the Press in the Upper South." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (1932): 479-99.
- . "Mob Violence in the Old South." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 29, no. 3 (1942): 351-70.
- Fabricant, Daniel S. "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, A Critical Look at the 1831 Confessions of Nat Turner." *The American Journal of Legal History* 37, no. 3 (1993): 332-61.
- Finseth, Ian. "David Walker, Nature's Nation and Early African-American Separatism." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (2001): 337-62.

- Finseth, Ian Frederick. *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth, and Eugene D Genovese. *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Frey, Sylvia R. *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Gomez, Michael A. "Of Du Bois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African American Studies." *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 175-94.
- Goodman, Paul. *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.
- Gravely, William B. "The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863." *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 4 (1982): 302-17.
- Gray, Thomas R. *The Confessions of Nat Turner the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, in the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him to Be Such When Read Before the Court of Southampton: With the Certificate, Under Seal of the Court Convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for His Trial. Also, an Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection, With Lists of the Whites Who Were Murdered, and of the Negroes Brought Before the Court of Southampton, and There Sentenced, &c.* Richmond, VA: T. R. Gray, 1832.
- Greenberg, Kenneth S. *Nat Turner a Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Hinks, Peter P. *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
- Horton, James Oliver. "Generations of Protest: Black Families and Social Reform in Ante-Bellum Boston ." *The New England Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1976): 242-56.

- Howard-Pitney, David. *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005.
- Howard-Pitney, David. "The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, From Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1841-1919 ." *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 481-92.
- Inscoe, John C. "Slave Rebellion in the First Person: The Literary "Confessions" of Nat Turner and Dessa Rose ." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 4 (1989): 419-36.
- Johnson, Michael P, and James L Roark. *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South*. New York: Norton, 1984.
- Levine, Robert S. *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Maclear, J. F. "The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade." *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1979): 141-64.
- Miller, Randall M, and John R McKivigan. *The Moment of Decision: Biographical Essays on American Character and Regional Identity*. Contributions in American History, no. 156. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982.
- . *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Mullin, Michael. *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*. Blacks in the New World. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992.
- Pease, William H., and Jane Pease. "Walker's Appeal Comes to Charleston: A Note and Documents." *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 3 (1974): 287-92.
- Peters, James S. *The Spirit of David Walker, the Obscure Hero*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002.

- Poole, Thomas G. "What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation's Birth and Destiny ." *The Journal of Religion* 72, no. 4 (1992): 533-48.
- Rachleff, Marshall. " David Walker's Southern Agent." *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 1 (1977): 100-103.
- Rael, Patrick. "Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North." *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History* 3, no. 2 (2000): 1-24.
- Reilly, Timothy F. "The Louisiana Colonization Society and the Protestant Missionary, 1830-1860." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 43, no. 4 (2002): 433-77.
- Richardson, Marilyn, (ed.). *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Blacks in the Diaspora. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Rucker, Walter C. *The River Flows on: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*. Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006.
- Savage, W. Sherman. "Abolitionist Literature in the Mails. 1835-1836." *The Journal of Negro History* 13, no. 2 (1928): 150-184.
- Scriven, Darryl. *A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations With David Walker*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007.
- Shiffrin, Steven H. " The Rhetoric of Black Violence in the Antebellum Period: Henry Highland Garnet." *Journal of Black Studies* 1, no. 2 (1971): 45-56.
- Simms, Rupe. "Christ Is Black With a Capital "B": African-American Christianity and the Black Studies Project." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 2 (2000): 100-111.
- Trotman, C. James. *Multiculturalism Roots and Realities*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002.
- Walker, David, and Henry Highland Garnet. *Walker's Appeal With a Brief Sketch of His Life*. New York: Printed by J. H. Tobitt, 1848.

Wigger, John H. "Taking Heaven by Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770-1820." *Journal of the Early Republic* 14, no. 2 (1994): 167-94.

Young, Robert Alexander. *The Ethiopian Manifesto, Issued in Defence of the Blackman's Rights, in the Scale of Universal Freedom*. New York: 1829.