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"Awaken My Slumbering Brethren!" — David Walker and His *Appeal*

Austin Smith

In September of 1829, a young man named David Walker, who owned a second-hand clothing store in Boston, Massachusetts, published a seventy-six page pamphlet entitled *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America* at his own expense. This unprecedented document was a furious attack on American slavery and racism, and a call for Southern slaves to rise up in rebellion and overthrow their tyrannical masters (Ripley 42). Slaveholders were outraged by Walker's *Appeal*, and many antislavery leaders in the North were also disturbed by it. William Lloyd Garrison, while impressed with its author's utter hatred of slavery, thought the pamphlet too violent and provocative. The document sent shockwaves of alarm throughout the nation, stirring the glowing embers of the gradualist antislavery strategy of "moral suasion" into the firestorm of immediatism. Debates over the "peculiar institution" dominated the political arena, while animosity between white abolitionists who propounded peace and black abolitionists who wanted freedom for their oppressed brothers immediately reached new levels of intensity. Walker's *Appeal*, one of the most controversial antislavery writings ever published, repositioned the topic of slavery before the collective eye of the American people (Wilentz vii-viii).

Walker's transformation from young journeyman to respect-

able store owner to author of the most revolutionary document in antislavery black literature was fraught with hardship, but blessed with several fortunate windows of opportunity. David Walker was born in or near Wilmington, North Carolina in 1796 or 1797, although the exact place and date of his birth remain rather ambiguous. He was the son of a slave father and a free black mother. Hence, under the laws of slavery, he was as free as his mother upon birth. At an early age, Walker learned how to read and write, wandering across the country as a literate young man. During his travels, he witnessed many events representative of the cruel and demeaning characteristics of the institution of slavery. He came across many scenes of black suffering, both in slave and free communities, and decided that his race consisted of the most "degraded, wretched and abject" persons ever to have inhabited the earth (Walker 1).

Walker left Wilmington for good at a young age, mainly because opportunities for a black man in his early twenties were few in this wretched city where only a small portion of the black citizenry was free, and these forced into the most degrading occupations and the most strenuous modes of employment. The common status of the average black man in Wilmington left the educated Walker without many options, a situation he found moderately improved when he settled in Charleston, South Carolina. For a man of Walker's interests, already absorbed in issues of religion and rebellion, this hotbed of trouble was the perfect place to live. It was an exciting and dangerous city. In 1775, a slave conspiracy was detected and put down just days before it was scheduled to begin and,

in the summer of 1795, a band of runaway slaves under the command of a "General of the Swamp" terrorized the local white citizens before they were brought to justice. In the early 1820's, Charleston was a mecca for ambitious free blacks, and this atmosphere may have contributed to the already well-developed rebellious side of Walker's character (Wilentz ix).

Walker had first been exposed to religion as a young boy in Wilmington, where blacks attended the Methodist church every Sunday. In Charleston, he continued his religious growth as he associated himself with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He also became acquainted with a young black man named Denmark Vesey who, in July of 1822, would nearly carry out his plans of an uprising which authorities uncovered just days before it was to begin. Seven years after Vesey's failed attempt to cripple the strong arm of Southern slavery, it is completely possible that this young insurrectionary's actions were on Walker's mind as he schemed to construct an even more elaborate method of arousing the slave population (Wilentz xi).

By settling in Boston, Walker escaped the constricting environment of slavery, but could not elude the inevitable epidemic of racism. Despite the prejudice of the white working class, Walker managed to begin a successful second-hand clothing store of the "slop-shop" variety - a place where bartenders swapped the massive amount of sailor's gear they had acquired for drinks. In addition to getting his store on its feet, Walker immediately began gravitating toward the prominent black residents of Boston who were active in

the antislavery movement and the battle against racism. Gradually, a community of black citizens formed intent on achieving these goals, and Walker was a prominent member of this emerging group. In 1825, blacks made up less than 3% of Boston's overall population, and they were banned from holding office, serving as jurors, or acting as constables. There was unequal schooling for children and a drastic separation between white and black neighborhoods. Walker lived in the heart of the Beacon Hill black district, but his store moved around to several locations (Wiltse viii).

Walker soon joined the May Street black Methodist church and became secretary of the prestigious African Lodge. By the end of the year 1828, he had gotten married, fathered a daughter, and emerged as the most important black antislavery propagandist in the city of Boston. Walker achieved prominence through his work in conjunction with two free black agitators from New York City named John Russwurm and Reverend Samuel Cornish. These two men had launched the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in March of 1827, and Walker served as one of the paper's Boston agents. The *Journal* focused on the Colonization movement which had recently been gaining steam and which most blacks were vehemently opposed to. In the editorials of the *Journal* and in the parlor of Walker's home where he held meetings of black agitators, the Colonization plan was attacked unrelentingly (Wilentz xii).

In late 1828, Walker became even more well-known throughout the North. He gave his most important public address in December of that year when he spoke of the evils of slavery in a

speech to the Massachusetts General Colored Association. This organization had been established in 1826 in order to hasten the abolition of slavery and improve the racial conditions of the black community (www.nps.gov). His speech was a supporting one, intended to reaffirm the goals of the General Colored Association. During his lecture, Walker said that only by joining together as one could "free blacks" who, to him, were only about two-thirds free, improve their lives, their children's lives, and the lives of their enslaved brothers. He praised white antislavery men, but urged the black community to alter its current status of neutrality and directly join in a fight which principally concerned them. This speech did not encourage insurrection, and was given at a time when most antislavery arguments were peaceful and philosophical, but plans were already brewing in Walker's mind. He became impatient around this time with the strategy of "moral suasion" propounded by men like Garrison, a method of attacking slavery which had been given birth years before by the Quakers who protested black bondage. Walker gradually came to the conclusion that no slaves were ever going to be liberated unless blacks took it on themselves to rise up in rebellion and escape the cruel clutch of their masters (Foner www.pbs.org).

Walker came up with a plan. He wanted to put antislavery documents into the hands of Southern blacks, but there wasn't much material to send other than sermons by black preachers and copies of *Freedom's Journal*. Walker wanted to provide them with something more representative of the true nature of slavery. He was influenced by a young black writer named Robert Alexander Young who, in

February of 1829, had published a pamphlet in New York he entitled, *The Ethiopian Manifesto*, which prophesied an apocalyptic end to slavery and prejudice, and called for a unification of blacks of all nations. Over the summer of 1829, Walker began working on his own piece and published it by himself in September of that year. He immediately began sending copies of his *Appeal* south, and followed the first edition with two revised editions over the next nine months (Wilentz xv).

Walker's profession aided him greatly in distributing his pamphlet. Sailors came in often to buy used clothes from Walker, who would sew his *Appeal* and other printed materials into the linings of the clothing. These sympathetic seamen would carry the writings, in their clothes, to Charleston, Wilmington, Savanna and New Orleans. Via this method, the *Appeal* and the inflammatory message it contained spread like wildfire throughout the South (Wiltse ix).

Walker's main goal in writing his *Appeal* was to instill in the hearts of black Americans a sense of hope and pride. He was disappointed with the trend toward fatalism evident in the black community. Many free blacks thought slavery to be the fault of their race, as well as the fault of the white oppressors. Walker wanted blacks to know they were the most degraded people in the history of the world, and he sought to show his brethren the reasons why they were degraded in order that they would be inspired to fight back. He knew that, in writing this piece, he would be attacked and vilified by many. In the Preamble to the *Appeal*, he wrote: "I expect to be held up to the public as an ignorant, impudent and restless disturber of the public peace, by such avaricious creatures, as well as a mover of insubordination – and perhaps

put in prison or to death" (Walker 2). But Walker was willing to risk everything in order to improve the condition of his race.

The *Appeal* is composed of four articles, the first dealing with slavery and its evil consequences, the second with black education, the third with the Christian ministry, and the fourth with the Colonization movement (www.nps.gov). Walker used "an Old Testament liberation theology mixed with the natural rights tradition of the Declaration of Independence." In particular, he drew upon moments in the Bible when God enters history on the side of the oppressed and Jefferson's language about the right of revolution. In a literary form, the document is very much an "American Jeremiad," almost a warning to the country to change its ways before a just God enters the conflict and destroys the nation (Blight pbs.org). Walker sincerely believed God was on the side of the black race, evidenced by this passage: "Why should we be afraid, when God is, and will continue (if we continue humble) to be on our side?" As condemnatory of slaveholders as Walker was, he was even more so of black men who wouldn't fight for emancipation and equal rights, claiming that anyone who wasn't willing to join in this struggle "ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his cruel enemies" (Walker 12).

In his *Appeal*, Walker sometimes wrote as if he were not an American. He seems to equate whites and Americans, attempting to debase everything about their society. Rarely, if ever, does Walker have anything positive to write about whites (except for when he praises Jefferson as a great man, only to go on to attack the hypocritical character of this Founding Father who fought so valiantly to free his

countrymen from British rule while owning slaves himself). According to Walker, "every dog must have its day, [and] the American's [was] coming to an end" (Walker 15).

Walker's piece became so notorious not for its attacks on the Christian religion, nor for its assaults on basic Republican principles. Rather, Walker and his pamphlet became famous and infamous for the violent nature of the document. He wrote:

> The whites want slaves, and want us for slaves, but some of them will curse the day they ever saw us...Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?...it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty (Walker 20 and 25).

He pleaded for blacks to take an active role in the fight for their freedom, urging better schooling, an alternative Christianity in which God was a God of justice for all and an end to the hypocrisy of a nation conceived in liberty but undeniably dependent on bondage. "It is a notorious fact," wrote Walker, "that the major part of the white Americans, have, ever since we have been among them, tried to keep us ignorant, and make us believe that God made us and our children to be slaves to them and theirs. *Oh! my God, have mercy on Christian Americans!!!*" (Walker 33).

In the end, Walker hoped whites would realize their faults, become ashamed and seek true Christian redemption and racial reconciliation. But, after the horror and cruelty he had witnessed his whole life,

Walker couldn't imagine whites taking the first step and he believed blacks would have to begin the change through violence. His prophecy of the impending doom of slavery after a period of bloody warfare was what terrified the South and turned many Northern abolitionists against him. Walker ended up alienating himself through his radicalism. Unsettling to many were his eerie premonitions of whites rising up "one against another...with sword in hand," a prediction made true thirty years later with the onset of the Civil War. More often, throughout the text, he envisioned a black uprising or series of uprisings which would "root out" the white oppressors (Walker 2).

Despite the prevalence of apocalyptic predictions, Walker never explained how this war was to be waged. However, he did describe a scene in which God sends a mighty general down from the Heavens to liberate the enslaved (he may have had Vesey in mind as he was writing this). Walker saw himself as a messenger from God, whose task was to slice through the thick fog of submissiveness he had recognized in the characters of blacks during his travels and teach his fellow brothers to be proud of their African heritage. He sought to evangelize among the lower class and fix their eyes upon the prize of freedom and the word of God (Wilentz xii).

The *Appeal* was extremely effective, as it combined in a concise form political arguments, theories on race, historical reflection and black Christianity. What resulted from its publication was a complete uproar in the North and in the South. Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina passed legislation making it illegal to teach slaves to read or write, and most southern states passed laws banning antislavery works

like Walker's. As a direct result of the *Appeal*, the South began to limit civil liberties in a major way, basically eliminating freedom of press, freedom of speech and petitions involving the slavery issue in Congress. A reward of $3,000 was put up for the murder of Walker, and a reward of $10,000 awaited anyone who could bring him to the South alive (Scarborough www.pbs.org).

Reactions to Walker's work in the North weren't as vehement, but they were equally negative. In the second issue of Garrison's anti-slavery paper, *The Liberator*, its editor denounced Walker's document and spoke for most white abolitionists when he wrote, "Believing, as we do, that a good end does not justify a wicked means...we deprecate the spirit and tendency of this *Appeal*" (www.pbs.org). Garrison's fellow abolitionists agreed. Benjamin Lundy claimed that the document would injure the abolitionist cause, and Samuel May was concerned about the Southern reaction to the pamphlet. Throughout North and South, Walker was vilified for his emotional work (www.nps.gov).

With the publication of his *Appeal*, Walker gained more than attention – he gained many enemies. With rewards out for his head, his friends pleaded for him to flea to Canada, but he responded that he would stand his ground. "Somebody must die in this cause," he said. "I may be doomed to the stake and the fire, or to the scaffold tree, but it is not for me to falter if I can promote the work of emancipation" (www.pbs.org). Walker's bravery, or stubbornness, may have resulted in his death. In August of 1830, his daughter died of lung fever and, when Walker's body was found outside his shop on August 27, 1830, it was initially believed that he died of the same ailment which had af-

flicted his daughter. However, it has been generally accepted since then that David Walker was poisoned to death (Wiltse xi).

While Walker's vision of rebellion never became reality, his *Appeal* was not without effect. There is evidence that the document reached many Southern blacks, including a few small conspiratorial groups in North Carolina and New Orleans, members of which, when arrested, were found to be carrying copies of Walker's document. On September 28, 1830, the *Boston Evening Transcript* commented on these incidents: "It is evident they have read this pamphlet, nay, we **know** that the larger portion of them have read it, or **heard** it read, and that they glory in its principles, as if it were a star in the east, guiding them to freedom and emancipation" (Hinks 116). In addition to contributing to general slave unrest, Walker's document factored into the emergence of a unified, white Southern nationalism and, at the same time, stiffened Northern antislavery resistance. While Garrison and Lundy criticized the pamphlet for its menacing tone, they praised it for its power and intent. Walker's bluntness convinced some Northerners, like Garrison, that a step was needed, and the *Appeal* marked a transition from the gradualist strategy of "moral suasion" of the 1820's to the immediatist strategy of the 1830's. Despite Garrison's earlier disapproval, he published the *Appeal* in full after Walker's death (Wilentz xx).

In the political arena, the *Appeal* prompted a series of sectional attacks and counterattacks as Southerners attempted to stem the rising tide of abolitionism threatening to break over their heads. In 1848, the Free Soil party was formed which signaled the final advancement of the

slavery issue to the forefront of the national scene. In 1861, Walker's prophecy of civil war became reality when that hotbed of revolution, Charleston, fell under the collective eye of the nation during the siege of Fort Sumpter. Yet, despite all that Walker's *Appeal* started and correctly predicted, its author's ultimate hope that racism would be eradicated remained unfulfilled – long after emancipation, prejudice endured. Hence, Walker's words are imbued with a sense of timelessness and have always had special significance for successive black writers. The *Appeal* influenced Frederick Douglass, and many issues the pamphlet addresses have preoccupied the minds of black leaders since its time (Wilentz xxi).

After the turn of the century, Walker's words continued to inspire African-American writers. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois took up Walker's urgings for better education and learning which would, according to Walker, result in spiritual uplift. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, Malcolm X resembled Walker with his anger at black submissiveness, apocalyptic passages, hopes for black unity and contempt of whites. Martin Luther King, Jr. included Walker's emphasis on Christian beliefs, hopes of redemption, pleas for practical alliances with whites and plans for revolutionized American democratic ideals in his speeches and thoughts (Wilentz xxii). Even today, Walker's document helps us to understand the concerns and arguments central to the antislavery campaign, and his life allows us a tragic glimpse at the evils of racism which took their toll on everyone involved in the struggle.

While Walker was being persecuted for his views, watching

his friends become enemies and meeting his final demise at the hands of those terrified by his flaming rhetoric, he was also making immense contributions to the fight against slavery and prejudice. His *Appeal* marked a turning point in Northern thinking regarding these issues, resulted in an intensification of this battle and an entrance on the part of many abolitionists into the arena of immediatism. David Walker decided he was not going to remain idle while hundreds of thousands of his brethren strained under the great weight of bondage. He bravely proposed what many had been thinking but few had written. While his efforts resulted in his death, they also helped hasten the death of the deplorable institution he had sacrificed everything to cripple.

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