**David Walker and the Political Theology of Slave Resistance**

*“But why are the Americans so very fearfully terrified respecting my Book? . . . perhaps the Americans do their very best to keep my Brethren from receiving and reading my ‘Appeal’ for fear they will find in it an extract which I made from their Declaration of Independence, which says, ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’”*

– David Walker, 1829[[1]](#footnote-1)

Upon contemplating the paradoxes posed by the existence of chattel slavery in a purportedly democratic society, Thomas Jefferson, writing in his *Notes on the State of Virginia,* famously paused in fear before the thought of divine judgment: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,” he wrote. And as if he were prophesying the oncoming slave rebellions that would foment into full scale revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue only a few years later, he went on, writing, “God’s justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events.” By ‘an exchange of situation’ Jefferson of course meant a reversal in relationship between master and slave: the very real possibility that the violence that underpinned the institution of slavery might be unleashed upon those who benefitted from it at the hands of those subject to its sovereign terror. Such possible events, Jefferson added, “may become probable by supernatural interference.” As Jefferson observed, the inalienable rights enumerated in the *Declaration of Independence* found their only firm basis in the “conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God” and thus that “they are not to be violated but with his wrath.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That slavery constituted a scandalous violation of natural rights was not in dispute for Jefferson, and thus, in his mind, it’s perpetuation likely spelled doom for the still young nation.

Jefferson’s remark about trembling before God’s justice renders palpable the fear of slave revolt that was so prevalent among antebellum white elites.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was a fear, as Jefferson’s comment evinces, that was both political and theological in nature. Politically speaking, slavery was acknowledged to be a form of despotism. Even if in the eyes of most planters the institution of racial slavery was taken to be a benevolent despotism, it was a variety of despotism nonetheless, and the knowing perpetuation of despotism in a society that simultaneously extolled liberty and equality to be political values of the first-order posed irresolvable normative contradictions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, as Jefferson’s remarks suggest, these normative contradictions were commonly believed to herald deeper, and more tangible, political and institutional problems – instability, social crisis, and, perhaps ultimately, armed conflict. But beyond these concrete political dilemmas posed by the so-called ‘peculiar institution,’ slavery also posed a distinct theological problem: the practice of human enslavement was widely understood to be a sin that warranted divine retribution.

For these reasons, a distinct brand of apocalypticism pervaded the imaginations of both the proponents and enemies of slave revolt. For it’s enemies, among whose ranks Jefferson can be counted, the prospect of slave revolt betokened certain death and likely damnation. In Jefferson’s mind, the existence of slavery on American shores signaled the prospective end to all that the revolution against Britain had been fought for only a few years earlier. Writing anxiously on the implications of the still unfolding revolution in Haiti for his own country, Jefferson warned, “But if something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children… the revolutionary storm, now sweeping the globe, will be upon us.”[[5]](#footnote-5) For it’s proponents, by contrast, slave revolution was, to borrow a phrase from Fanon-by-way-of-Scripture, conceived to be the realization of the phrase “the last shall be the first.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The overthrow of slave society meant not only the final achievement of African-American self-determination and a new ordering of basic social relations but also the instantiation of divine justice on earth – the arrival of the Last Judgment. It is for this reason that Nat Turner, in his confessions to the Southampton court that ultimately put him to death, framed his insurrectionary actions to be not just motivated by a desire for emancipation, but as an attempt at seeking after the ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’[[7]](#footnote-7) In slave revolt, political self-determination and a transcendent conception of justice were thought to properly and finally align. And in the words and actions of men like Nat Turner and John Brown, the only justice that could properly correct for the sin of slavery was a distinctly *retributive* one. Violence was believed to be necessary not only for the instrumental purposes of overthrowing slavery; it was also thought to be the only worldly means of realizing redemption.

In the course of his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World,* David Walker, like Jefferson and no doubt with Jefferson in mind, also paused to contemplate the justice of his Creator. Upon doing so, Walker noted feeling not fear, as Jefferson did, but a humble rush of enthusiasm: “But when I reflect that God is just, and that millions of my wretched brethren would meet death with glory—yea, more, would plunge into the very mouths of cannons and be torn into particles as minute as the atoms which compose the elements of the earth, in preference to a mean submission to the lash of tyrants, I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The affective distance between Walker and Jefferson’s opposed responses to the idea of a just God is no doubt reflective of the social distance that separated Walker’s standing from that of the republic’s third president. But more precisely, and as the argument of this essay hopes to make clear, Walker’s humble enthusiasm might be better understood as the obverse of Jefferson’s fear – as at the same time its cause and consequence.

The historian Herbert Aptheker has described David Walker’s Appeal as “the first sustained written assault upon slavery and racism to come from a black man in the United States.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This paper will investigate Walker’s *Appeal* as an early American elaboration of both the theory and praxis of slave revolution. In part, this means to interpret Walker as an exemplary member of a distinct tradition of African-American religiously inspired resistance to slavery and white supremacy. In doing so, I will be following the work of a number of influential scholars who have already helpfully situated Walker within the intellectual constellation of antebellum Black political and religious thought.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, in order to fully grasp the radical vision at the core of Walker’s political thought, I also intend to interpret him as a democratic revolutionary in the grandest sense of the term. To situate Walker as a revolutionary is to read him, following Stephen Marshall’s suggestion, as a ‘lawgiver,’ that is, as a political thinker and actor “who destroys old laws and legislates new ones to found a new people.”[[11]](#footnote-11) I therefore take up the *Appeal* as a political action aimed at undermining what Walker understood to be the basic structures of slave society – that is, as an act of resistance to white supremacy. But I also view it as a document that struggles to call a new democratic collectivity into existence. Thus, Walker’s *Appeal* should be understood as tasked not only with confronting the many barriers erected by white supremacy to shutter any hopes for Black emancipation – most notably, as Walker documents, internalized feelings of inferiority, ignorance, and servility among African-Americans. The *Appeal* additionally aspired to lay the groundwork for a new collective subject capable of founding the American polity anew on fair and racially inclusive terms. It is this task – the task of the lawgiver – that has generated interest in Walker’s *Appeal* as a founding document of Black Nationalism.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, as my argument will highlight, interpretations of the *Appeal* that emphasize one of these aims to the exclusion of the other systematically fail to grasp the full political implications of Walker’s text.[[13]](#footnote-13) By contrast, I contend that Walker combines the two tasks in linking the subjective psychological transformations so important to overcoming the obstacles posed by white supremacy to the conditions he saw to be necessary for politically transformative collective action.

**Antebellum White Supremacy as a Mode of Domination**

I will in this section briefly recount Walker’s description of the structures of domination that define antebellum society in order to make clear, in the subsequent parts of the paper, the strategies of resistance that the *Appeal* suggests.

The situation that free Blacks faced in 1829, the year of the *Appeal’s* publication, was dire. Despite the democratic expansion that white men enjoyed as part of the Jacksonian era, the late 1820’s were overall a time of profound retrenchment for African-Americans. The American Colonization Society (ACS) – a major vehicle for white supremacist ideology and a prime target of Walker’s polemics in the *Appeal* – was reaching the height of its powers while most states, including key northern states such as New York, imposed new legal restrictions on African-Americans’ basic civil and political liberties, severely limiting Black access to the right to vote, to testify in court or to serve on juries, or to migrate across state lines. As the historian Peter Hinks puts the point, the conviction motivating this new regime of legal control was that “the natural condition for blacks in America was as slaves with a master to administer them; if they were allowed to step out of that state, special laws were necessary to replace the master.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Given this context, and Walker’s personal familiarity with the frequent incursions that so-called ‘free’ African-Americans experienced, the *Appeal* took aim not only at racial slavery and its negative consequences, but, as I will show, at the entire apparatus of white supremacy.

Each of the four articles that comprise Walker’s *Appeal* address themselves to unpacking different causes of what he describes as African-Americans’ contemporary ‘wretchedness’ – that is, to quote the text, the varied “sources from which our miseries are derived.”[[15]](#footnote-15) These are, in turn, (1) the institution of racial slavery; (2) the political problem of ignorance; (3) the manipulation of the teachings of the Bible by white Europeans and their descendants to justify African enslavement and white rule; and (4) the plan to expatriate freed American Blacks to a foreign territory (at that time known as the ‘colonizing’ plan). It would be false to claim that each of these causes originates and operates independently of the others. Indeed, Walker makes this point quite explicitly in his ‘Preamble,’ and it is later reinforced throughout the text of the *Appeal* as he repeatedly indicates how each obstacle to Black emancipation interpenetrates and overlaps with the others.

The foundational claim of Walker’s *Appeal* is that the ‘colored people of these United States’ are “the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began.”[[16]](#footnote-16) It may at first seem counterintuitive to inaugurate a treatise principally concerned with inspiring resistance to slavery with a statement about the unprecedented and comprehensive nature of the oppression generated by it, given that such a claim might implicitly shore up the institution’s apparent strength and durability, and thereby risk arousing despair rather than an inspired call to arms. However, Walker’s claim is intended to serve the important function of dislodging the widely held view – propagated by Jefferson,[[17]](#footnote-17) among others, – that American slavery was ultimately a benevolent variety of despotism and that American Blacks were, by comparison, much better off than other historically oppressed peoples.[[18]](#footnote-18) The unprecedented evil of American slavery – that which distinguishes it from its predecessors – is, according to Walker, its dependence upon the ideology and practice of anti-Black racism. Unlike prior systems of oppression, American slavery was discursively legitimated by appeal to the natural and essentially inferior status of a group of people – namely Africans and their American descendants – set apart from the ruling class of European-descended settlers by an arbitrary set of ascriptive characteristics. This ideology is exemplified in the claim, made by Walker (here ventriloquizing antebellum racism), that Black people “are brutes!! and of course are, and *ought to be* SLAVES to the American people and their children forever!!”[[19]](#footnote-19) According to Walker, the dehumanization so critical to American racism on the one hand had the effect of naturalizing white supremacy as a system of caste rule, thereby occluding its constructed and essentially political character, and on the other hand degraded the moral dignity of non-whites, at times leading to a psychological internalization of their inferior status. This produced social consequences that extended far beyond slavery as an institution, affecting relations in every segment of society, and ultimately underpinning what the historian George Frederickson refers to as ‘societal racism,’ but which I will simply call white supremacy: a social structure in which “the highest black” was relegated “to a status below that of the lowest member of the dominant race.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Antebellum white supremacy, on Walker’s account, is composed of three primary features: (1) a social structure in which whites held nearly undivided control over property and basic institutions, most notably political and educational institutions; (2) a legitimating ideology of anti-Black racism which construed people of African descent to be by nature inferior to whites, often portraying them as below or outside of humanity, and thereby bound to occupy a subservient social position and in many instances requiring special mechanisms of paternalistic social control[[21]](#footnote-21); together, these first two conditions jointly produced (3) a range of negative psychological affects that afflicted non-whites, inhibiting their proper flourishing – most notably feelings of inferiority, ignorance, and servility. Furthermore, these components of white supremacy interacted in ways that were mutually reinforcing. The negative psychological consequences that followed from the first two conditions served as a confirmation of the epistemic validity of racist ideology (item two) that in turn legitimated white control (item one), recursively perpetuating the existence of white supremacy as a social system. As Walker put the point, pleading to his Black audience, “have we, in consequence of oppression, nearly lost the spirit of man, and, in no very trifling degree, adopted that of brutes?”[[22]](#footnote-22) Walker’s concern is that the inhuman conditions of slave oppression induced a set of habits and affects among the enslaved that occupied a register below that of ordinary human dignity, thus inadvertently lending support to the racist myth of Black inferiority.

For Walker – and, indeed, many scholars of American racism – the myth of Black inferiority finds its arch-philosopher in Jefferson. In the chapter on ‘Laws’ in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in the course of discussing prospective plans for the emancipation and repatriation of Virginia’s slaves, Jefferson descends into a lengthy description of what he takes to be the most fundamental differences between the races. And though the account of racial difference therein advanced is chastened by Jefferson’s explicit commitment to empiricism (hence his cautioning that “to justify a general conclusion, requires many observations”),[[23]](#footnote-23) the preliminary descriptions and judgments he puts forth are quite evidently the result of a profound racial bigotry; these include judgments on the inferior beauty, ‘disagreeable odor,’ and substandard mental capacities of Africans and their descendants in North America. In conclusion Jefferson ultimately suggests that “the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind,” and that “this unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Walker, in response, dedicates several pages of his *Appeal* to elaborating on and engaging Jefferson’s claims. This is in part due to Jefferson’s towering authority within American political culture; because, as Walker writes, “Mr. Jefferson’s remarks respecting us, have sunk deep into the hearts of millions of the whites,” and have “been as great a barrier to our emancipation as any thing that has ever been advanced against us.”[[25]](#footnote-25) For Walker, Jefferson was distinguished as the grandest representative of the vicious legitimating ideology of white supremacy. To refute Jefferson would be to refute white supremacy. And this refutation must come not via inquiry and observation, as Jefferson’s empiricism suggested, but through political action: addressing his Black audience, Walker wrote, “For you will either have to contradict or confirm him [Jefferson] by your own actions.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

However, Jefferson loomed large in Walker’s mind not only due to his influence on white Americans but also because of his profound contributions to American democracy. Throughout the *Appeal,* Walker evinces an indisputable respect and reverence for Jefferson – and for the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy – at the same time that he is repulsed by Jefferson’s racism and feels compelled to condemn him for it.[[27]](#footnote-27) Indeed, Walker concludes his *Appeal* by quoting the most revolutionary passages from the *Declaration of Independence* and challenging his white readers to see how these ideas provide a rationale for slave emancipation. As the historian Herbert Aptheker remarks, Walker selected Jefferson as his chief interlocutor because Jefferson symbolized “the contradictions consuming the Republic.”[[28]](#footnote-28) He was at one and the same time a slaveholder and a democratic revolutionary, an ideologue on behalf of white supremacy and the author of the egalitarian words of the *Declaration*. And these contradictions were not merely intellectual; nor did they exclusively belong to Jefferson. They were mirrored in the social structures of antebellum America. Antebellum racism helped to accommodate an aspiring democratic society to the institution of human enslavement.

However, – in spite of my use of the language of contradiction – it would also be wrong to assume that anti-Black racism was entirely extrinsic to the ideology and practices of Jeffersonian democracy (or, for Walker’s context, Jacksonian democracy). The positive correlate of racism is racial solidarity – the feelings of unity and equality with members of one’s racial group engendered by the oppositional logic of racism – and this solidarity served as an important social supplement to the democratic institutions of antebellum America, particularly in the old South. “To the degree that blacks were regarded as nonpeople and rigidly excluded from the community of citizens or potential citizens, a kind of in-group or *herrenvolk* democracy could be encouraged by the sense of social status accorded by the color line to *all* whites,”[[29]](#footnote-29) argues George Frederickson. Democratic inclusion was given a greater depth and significance by virtue of racial exclusion. As Judith Shklar formulated the point in her seminal essay on American citizenship, “black chattel slavery stood at the opposite social pole from full citizenship and so defined it…. The value of citizenship was derived primarily from its denial to slaves, to some white men, and to all women.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This is not to say that there is anything intrinsic to the ideal of democracy as self-rule that requires such profound forms of exclusion and oppression. Rather, my intention here is to illuminate some of the key challenges that Walker faced in confronting slavery and white supremacy: he had to mobilize the resources of the American democratic tradition against its contemporary instantiations. Abolishing slavery and overcoming racism involved not simply correcting for a set of historical missteps, but required a profound transformation of American democracy at its most fundamental levels.[[31]](#footnote-31)

**Ignorance, Dignity, and the Duty to Resist**

Although Walker speaks of a number of different psychological injuries that afflict the Black community as a result of slavery and racism, none poses such a severe political problem as that of ignorance, the subject of Article II of the *Appeal*. By use of the concept of ‘ignorance’ Walker hopes to explain how it is that Blacks have come to behave in ways, both mundane and extraordinary, that are complicit with the norms of slave society.[[32]](#footnote-32) Ignorance is a concept that thus plays an important analytical role in explaining how, in the United States and other slave societies, so few white slaveholders can rule over so many slaves – a crucial puzzle that Walker believes is in need of urgent address. “Why is it,” Walker writes, “that those few weak, good-for-nothing whites, are able to keep so many able men, one of whom, can put to flight a dozen whites, in wretchedness and misery?”[[33]](#footnote-33) Walker introductorily describes ignorance as “a mist, low down into the very dark and almost impenetrable abyss in which, our fathers for many centuries have been plunged.”[[34]](#footnote-34) On Stephen Marshall’s reading, to which mine is indebted, ignorance involves African-Americans systematically misrecognizing their own interests, on both an individual and collective level.[[35]](#footnote-35) Individually, African-Americans afflicted by ignorance might proclaim to be, and in fact actually feel, content with or desirous of the basic conditions of their oppression.[[36]](#footnote-36) For this reason, ignorance is cited to be the basis for attitudes and practices that exhibit deference and servility to white supremacy. Walker’s criticisms of ignorance are hence aimed at, “our *glorying* and being *happy* in such low employments,” because he worries that African-Americans’ contentment with subservient social positions will end up legitimating racism and thereby stifle Black political solidarity and social progress. On the collective level, ignorance manifests itself in the form of injuries, deceptions and betrayals aimed at other African-Americans. For instance, African-Americans that sell their fellows into slavery for a profit; or enslaved fathers who, at the command of their slaveholders, unleash violence on their “sons, mothers their daughters, and children their parents, all to pacify the passions of unrelenting tyrants.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Ignorance thus characterizes a whole range of practices, habits, and behaviors among African-Americans – both free and enslaved – that aid the perpetuation of slavery and white.

For Walker, ignorance poses distinct moral and epistemic challenges to Black emancipation. On the moral register, ignorance effaces African-Americans’ sense of dignity. By dignity I mean both a sense of moral self-worth and of collective agency. Thus, ridding the Black community of the curse of ignorance in part involves a turn inwards, an effort to affirm African-Americans’ moral dignity and political agency in the context of a society whose institutions systematically require its denial.[[38]](#footnote-38) In this way, the seemingly simple gesture of affirming Black dignity and moral worth – as Walker’s *Appeal* aspires to do by means of critical education and religious inspiration – takes on a profound and radical political significance. The assertion of African-American dignity serves as an affront to white supremacy. This is true in part because it involves a repudiation of the basic premise of its dehumanizing ideology. Hence Walker’s frequent refrain of rhetorically asking his Black audience, “Are we MEN!!—I ask you, O my brethren! Are we MEN?”[[39]](#footnote-39) But, as Walker’s text reveals, affirming one’s dignity in a society whose mode of production and basic political institutions are founded on its denial also entails a duty to political action. This is why the rhetorical refrain of asking his Black audience to affirm their dignity – or, in his gendered language, to affirm their *manhood* – most commonly prefaces an exhortation to take action in assertion of this dignity.

One course of action entailed by the affirmation of Black dignity involves practices of collective consciousness-raising, intended to foster a sense of political solidarity. Writing to his Black audience, Walker writes, “I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—*go to work and enlighten your brethren!*—Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Walker no doubt intended the *Appeal* itself to in part provoke such enlightenment. This is evident in many aspects of the *Appeal’s* content: in its critical diagnosis of the prevailing structures of racial oppression; in its revisionist reconstruction of the history of human oppression that culminates in placing the unprecedented brutality of American racial slavery front-and-center; in its consistent reaffirmation of the humanity, intelligence, and moral worth of the Black people; in its religiously inspired language of prophecy and redemption; and in the request that African-Americans ‘of sense’ read the *Appeal* aloud to their illiterate compatriots. But it is also evident in the history of the document itself. Walker and other antislavery activists undertook great efforts to circulate the *Appeal* in the American South, where it was met with overwhelming alarm and hostility by slaveholders and public officials alike.[[41]](#footnote-41) The *Appeal*’s arrival in Savannah, Georgia is reported to have provoked a particularly remarkable bout of hysteria that began with police seizing sixty copies of the document and culminated in the Mayor of Savannah and the Governor of Georgia each sending written requests to the Mayor of Boston to intervene to halt the printing of the pamphlet.[[42]](#footnote-42) Soon after the *Appeal’*s appearance in Savannah, new laws were put in place “for the quarantining of all black sailors entering Georgia ports, punishing with serious penalties the introduction of seditious literature into the state and tightening laws against slave education.”[[43]](#footnote-43) That the *Appeal* might have been an effective instrument in inspiring the formation of bonds of solidarity amongst the Black population—both free and enslaved—is evidenced by such attempts at limiting its distribution.

Ignorance also poses a distinct epistemic challenge to the cause of Black emancipation by deforming African-Americans’ abilities to properly perceive certain facts of their social reality and their location in it. Most notably, according to Walker, ignorance commonly inhibits African-Americans’ ability to see the essentially political character of their peculiar circumstances. As Walker claims, white Americans “have kept us in so much ignorance, that many of us know no better than to fight against ourselves, and by that means strengthen the hands of our natural enemies, to rivet their infernal chains of slavery upon us and our children.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Ignorance, as already mentioned, has led to a splintered sense of identity among African-Americans, but in doing so it has shattered what should be a unity of interest in overcoming white supremacy, which has ultimately led many African-Americans to envy, collaborate, and even identify with those who they ought to properly recognize to be their political enemies. Though Walker uses the phrase ‘natural enemies’ repeatedly throughout the *Appeal* he is quick to point out that there is nothing natural or essential about the present antagonism between whites and Blacks. Interestingly, he even gestures toward the possibility of reconciliation, were whites willing to cede the undue power they hold over Blacks and repent for past injustice. The enmity that Walker describes as persisting between the races is purely the artifact of Atlantic slavery and white supremacy,[[45]](#footnote-45) and in this sense it is more properly understood to be a political construct than a fact of nature, at least as we would use the terms today.

A key component of Walker’s message in the *Appeal,* to both his white and Black audiences, involves articulating – in the neo-Gramscian sense – this division between political friends and enemies. And though it may at first appear to be a division that maps neatly on to distinct racial groups, Walker is by no means an advocate of race war. Rather, the lines he draws between the political friends of the oppressed and their enemies is oriented entirely by the project of full emancipation; whites enjoy just as much of an opportunity to be counted among the friends of Walker’s struggle as Blacks may be counted among enemies. The purpose of articulating this distinction is to explicitly politicize the field of struggle over slavery. Sharply drawing a distinction between those aligned with the cause of emancipation (friends) and those complicit with oppression (enemies) has the effect of eliminating the space for moderation and inducing a situation of open political crisis. As Joel Olson has argued of the strategic rhetoric of abolitionism, the enemy is understood to be “the primary agent responsible for the oppression, but the moderate is culpable in her own way because her desire to trim between the opposing camps leads her to tacitly sanction at least some of the oppressive practices of the enemy.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The moderate thus faces a stark choice: renounce complicity with oppression and join the ranks of those fighting for emancipation or face the fearful consequences that will be brought to bear upon the enemy. Any attempt to steer a middle course *de facto* classes one as an antagonist of emancipation.

Thus, a critical component of overcoming the ‘mist’ of ignorance involves seeing clearly the polarized field of struggle that exists between political friends and enemies in the fight against slavery and white supremacy. In this hostile context, Walker argues that the sense of collective dignity and solidarity mentioned above grounds a duty incumbent upon every self-respecting and morally conscientious individual: a duty to disobey, resist, and, when opportune, openly rebel against the twin evils of slavery and white supremacy.[[47]](#footnote-47) Walker does not carefully specify all of the moral imperatives that this duty implies, but he explicitly counsels his Black audience that they should not attempt undertaking open rebellion “until you see your way clear.”[[48]](#footnote-48) And as the above discussion proposes, it was one of the evident goals—if not *the* goal—of the *Appeal* to inaugurate this work of aiding his Black audience to ‘see their way clear.’ Once this path is illuminated – that is, once the epistemic and moral distortions of ignorance are lifted – Blacks will see that it is properly in their interest to resist white supremacy at every turn, even unto death. Walker introduces this claim in stating his own inclination to sooner pursue death than to submit to the oppressions of slavery: “Yea, would I meet death with avidity far! far!! in preference to such *servile submission* to the murderous hands of tyrants.”[[49]](#footnote-49) But this is a claim that he holds to be true of all Blacks—and for that matter, all people[[50]](#footnote-50)— once they are freed of the cognitive shackles of ignorance and are subsequently able to grasp their political fate. A willingness to kill and to die is the only credential for the agents of emancipation: “the blacks, once you get them started, they glory in death… 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? ... Believe this, that 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; in fact, the man who will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel, and, if he has common sense, ought not to be pitied.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

Walker’s suggestion that dignified Black citizens ought to prefer death to enslavement seems as though it *could* have been a direct response to what was then a common justification for slavery: the argument, canonically modeled in texts by Locke and Hegel (among others), that slavery occurs when one of two parties engaged in a state of war submits out of fear of violent death, with the conqueror then assuming the role of master and the captive that of the slave. Slavery, on this account, is a condition of death deferred. Thus, in demonstrating a willingness to die for one’s freedom, one transcends the foundational indignity of slavery. It is likely that Walker would have been aware of this type of argument, given his wide-ranging knowledge of the global history of slavery, but his intimate knowledge of the violence that undergirded American slavery probably would have been sufficient for most of the declarations he makes to African-Americans encouraging them to risk death in confronting their oppressors. Anticipating the work of Orlando Patterson by more than 150 years, Walker antagonized his oppressors in light of his dire situation and with good knowledge of his perpetually vulnerable status in white society, stating, “For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

**Fear and Fearlessness in the Struggle Over Slavery**

The duty to resist slavery, which always involves the risk of death, thus depends upon the cultivation of an ethos of fearlessness for its actualization. One source of inspiration for this ethos evidently lies in the prophetic vision that Walker lays out in the *Appeal*. The *Appeal* has frequently been read in the tradition of the American Jeremiad, and its prophetic character has been well explored by a number of scholars.[[53]](#footnote-53) In Walker’s eyes, the curse of slavery would inevitably destroy white America unless it repented for past wrongdoing and reconstructed itself on fair and racially inclusive terms. In support of this idea, Walker looked backwards across human history at the ineluctable and tumultuous decline of the world’s great civilizations – the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines, – each of which tragically undermined their own aspirations to greatness by oppressing other peoples in the course of their ascents.[[54]](#footnote-54) As Wilson Moses suggests, Walker implicitly relied upon a philosophy of history in the *Appeal* in which a “series of chosen peoples, most recently the Americans, had abused their covenantal responsibilities” and precipitated their own undoing by unfairly subjugating a people who would, by the will of God, eventually rise against their oppressors.[[55]](#footnote-55) The experience of suffering injustice is thus the hallmark of the agent of Walker’s philosophy of history; God bestows special blessings upon those who endure the sufferings of oppression. For this reason, Walker communicates to his African-American readers that they are the bearers of a special mission to realize God’s will on earth. Thus, divine sanction of Blacks’ worldly mission to bring racial slavery to an end is meant to give them the courage and confidence to overcome their fear of death: “when the hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ… will surely go before you.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Walker’s prophetic voice is not confined to operating within this distinctly Christian philosophy of history, however. He also makes special reference to the ways in which white supremacy has undermined the promises of the American democratic tradition.[[57]](#footnote-57) Racial slavery has not only served as an affront to America’s divine-covenantal responsibilities as represented by Winthrop’s ‘City Upon a Hill’; it has also undermined America’s political obligations to itself—that is, to its people—as captured in the *Declaration of Independence*.[[58]](#footnote-58) Walker dedicates a few of the final pages of the *Appeal* to quoting, in bulk, key passages from the *Declaration*’s ‘Introduction’ and ‘Preamble.’ Indeed, he quotes the famous passage about the ‘self-evident’ truth that “all men are created equal” twice on the same page, and, after its second appearance, pleads with his white readers to, “Compare your own language above, extracted from your *Declaration of Independence*, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!!!”[[59]](#footnote-59) He thereafter repeats the sentence regarding the right and duty of an oppressed people “to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security” – perhaps the most revolutionary sentence in the document, – in order to draw on the authority of the *Declaration* to justify the insurrection that he hopes the *Appeal* will foment.[[60]](#footnote-60) In doing so, Walker’s appropriation of the language of the *Declaration* to authorize claims against his white audience positions him at once outside and inside of the American polity; he is excluded by virtue of his race but included by virtue of his rhetorical invocation of the authority of the revolution.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Discussion of the *Declaration* returns us to Jefferson. It is among the many unintended and unforeseeable consequences of Jefferson’s actions that the claims he advanced in the *Declaration* would be so effectively used by an African-American born to an enslaved father – a man we must imagine to be not unlike the several hundred slaves Jefferson owned during his lifetime; and these same claims would be used to authorize a cause—namely, slave revolution—that Jefferson roundly condemned and, indeed, feared. In this light, Jefferson’s statement—with the then-unfolding Haitian revolution in mind—that a ‘revolutionary storm’ was sweeping the globe which he thought was likely, in due time, to reach the American continent and culminate in the murdering of ‘our children’ reaches an altogether new level of irony. This revolutionary storm not only already had a presence on the American continent; it was also Jefferson’s child in more ways than he acknowledged at the time. First, we know Jefferson to have fathered a number of children born into slavery, so the prospect of slave insurrection might literally have involved Jefferson’s descendants engaged in combat against his other, whiter, descendants. But second, and more substantively, Jefferson himself was a democratic revolutionary, and the author of a document—the *Declaration*—whose language could be effectively adopted by any member of the oppressed, disempowered, and excluded classes to stage claims to equal standing in the polity. And if these claims go unheeded, as the *Declaration* instructs, it is the right and duty of the oppressed to “to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them.”

The capacity of the oppressed and the excluded to appropriate the authority of the *Declaration* against the political society the document inaugurated was due precisely to the *Declaration’s* own in-built paradoxes regarding democratic authorization. It was a document that at once depicted the American people as an already-established, independent political entity and as a revolutionary aspiration, as both constituted and constituent power.[[62]](#footnote-62) Walker’s *Appeal,* like subsequent radical appropriations of the *Declaration* in American history, was sensitive to this ambivalence internal to the document, and his use of its language effectively tilted it in the direction of democratic aspiration. If Jefferson trembled at the thought of the oncoming revolutionary storm that he then witnessed to be upending Haiti, it was nevertheless a storm that he had a hand in creating. Jefferson’s fear, like the apocalyptic fears of the slaveholding class in general, can in this light best be understood as a fear of the contagion of popular sovereignty. This was a fear that Walker was only too aware of, being at the same time a student of Jefferson’s as well as his self-proclaimed ‘natural enemy.’ If the *Appeal* has a message for its white audience, it is, put simply: be afraid. As Sterling Stuckey has put the point, “the burden of the *Appeal* is essentially one of doom for whites.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Fear lay behind the motivational force of the *Appeal* as a speech-act addressed to white readers because, for Walker, fear of death and damnation was the only mechanism of coercion that might lead whites to capitulate. Perhaps, he might have hoped, this fear would open up a path to redemption without the need for retribution.

1. David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* ed. Peter Hinks, University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 2000, page 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, New York, NY: Literary Classics of the US, 1984. page 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for e.g., Herbert Aptheker, “The Fear of Rebellion,” *American Negro Slave Revolts*, New York, NY: International Publishers, 1974, pages 18-52*;* Douglas R. Egerton, “The Scenes Which Are Acted in St. Domingo: The Legacy of Revolutionary Violence in Early National Virginia,” *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America,* eds. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, Knoxville: The University of Tennesse Press, 1999, pages 41-64; Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For instance, the remark by Jefferson that “permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the *amor patrie* of the other,” *Writings,* page 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to St. George Tucker,” *Political Writings,* Cambride, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, page 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Richard Philcox, New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004, page 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents,* ed. Kenneth S Greenberg, Boston, MA: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996, pages 45-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Herbert Aptheker, “Its Setting and Its Meaning,” in *One Continual Cry: David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829-1830),* New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1965, page 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eddie Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America,* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000; Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America,* New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1983; Wilson Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 1993; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics,* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011,page 175. Marshall leaves this remark as a mere suggestion in the conclusion to his book; my goal is to explore its full implications. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972; Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sterling Stuckey, for instance, decries the fact that Walker’s status as a theorist of violence and revolt has too often occluded his import to the history of Black Nationalism. Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism,* page 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance,* University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 1997, page 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, page 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for instance, Jefferson’s remark, “We know that among the Romans… the condition of their slaves was much more deplorable than that of the black on the continent of America” in *Writings,* page 268 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is Walker’s own reiteration of the basic claim he intends to refute: “Now I appeal to heaven and to earth, and particularly to the American people themselves, who cease not to declare that our condition is not *hard*, and that we are comparatively satisfied to rest in wretchedness and misery, under them and their children,” in *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, page 7. Note how the descriptive claim that people of color are ‘brutes’ leads into the normative claim that they therefore ‘ought to be’ slaves. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. George Frederickson, “Social Origins of American Racism,” in *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality,* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988, page 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Frederickson refers to this set of beliefs as ‘explicit racism’: “a public ideology based on the doctrinaire conception of the black man as a natural underling,” in *The Arrogance of Race,* page 204, which he argues appeared at a later historical moment than ‘societal racism.’ Explicit racism appeared as a legitimating ideology only once societal racism faced deliberate political challenges. Like Walker, Frederickson mentions Jefferson as perhaps the first ideologist of explicit racism. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jefferson, Writings, page 270 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Id. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 30, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, page 30. See also his remark, “For let no one of us suppose that the refutations which have been written by our white friends are enough – they are whites – we are blacks. We, and the world wish to see the charges of Mr. Jefferson refuted by the blacks *themselves,* according to their chance,” ibid, page 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. There are many remarks that provide evidence for this claim. See, for e.g., Walker’s comment, “Do you know that Mr. Jefferson was one of as great characters as ever lived among the whites? See his writings for the world, and public labours for the United States of America,” ibid, page 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Aptheker, *One Continual Cry,* Page 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. George Frederickson, “Aristocracy and Democracy in the Southern Tradition,” in *The Arrogance of Race,* page 138. Frederickson refers to this as ‘democratic racism.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, page 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This point is echoed by Melvin Rogers in his claim that “Walker’s *Appeal* is about being open to becoming a new self and nation for which there is no historical precedent,” Melvin Rogers, “David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal,” *Political Theory* (2014)*,* 0090591714523623,page 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In this way the concept bares a compelling resemblance to the Marxist notion of ‘ideology.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, page 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Stephen Marshall, *The City on the Hill From Below*, pages 40, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Walker tells the story of a shoe-shiner he met who proclaimed of his station, “I am completely happy!!! I never want to live any better or happier than when I can get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean!!!,” in *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ibid, page 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The discussion of dignity in this paper has been inspired by the work of Nicholas Brommel, *The Time is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid, page 30. See also, “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 labors among your brethren, and particularly the youths, be the dissemination of education and religion,” page 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Peter Hinks’ discussion of the *Appeal*’s circulation in “Getting the Good Word Out: Circulating Walker’s *Appeal*,” in *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, pages 116-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Herbert Aptheker, “The *Appeal*’s Immediate Impact,” in *One Continual Cry,* page 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren,* page 119. Hinks remarks elsewhere that “North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and other Southern slave states had passed stern laws against educating slaves, and, in a panic when the *Appeal* appeared in their towns in late 1829 and 1830, those laws were reinforced,” Hinks, “Editors Notes to Walker’s *Appeal,”* in *Appeal to the Coloured Citizen’s of the World,* page 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, page 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For instance, his remark that “I say, from the beginning, I do not think we were natural enemies to each other” and that “they, themselves, (and not us) render themselves our natural enemies by treating us so cruel,” in *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* pages 63, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Joel Olson, “The Freshness of Fanaticism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 04 (2007): 685-701, page 689 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. A number of scholars have taken note of the appearance of this duty in Walker’s text. Eddie Glaude writes, for instance, that, “Walker believed it was the duty of every black Christian to fight (even if it meant death) against the scourge of slavery and racial discrimination because submission to such evils was tantamount to a sin against God” in *Exodus!*,page 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. It should be noted that African-Americans are not the only people afflicted by epistemic and moral distortions, according to Walker; whites, too are said to commonly misrecognize their social world and moral obligations, which Walker frequently cites to be the consequence of *avarice*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid, 27-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid, page 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Glaude, *Exodus!;* Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below;* Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms;* Andrew Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Wilson Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms,* page 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid, page 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* pages 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. “And I am awfully afraid that pride, prejudice, avarice and blood, will, before long prove the final ruin of this happy republic, or land of *liberty*!!!” Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Rogers, “David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal,” pages 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* pages 78-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. It is telling that Walker refers to the revolution of 1776 as America’s ‘first revolution,’ Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,* page 18. Reading him gives one the impression that he believed America’s second to be just around the corner. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. As Jason Frank has put the point in his reading of Douglass’s Fourth of July speech, Walker, like Douglass, “both spoke from outside the people to whom his speech was addressed and claimed to speak in their higher name.” Walker can thus be read as a predecessor of extra-parliamentary agitators who would adopt the *Declaration* to authorize claims on behalf of Blacks (such as the aforementioned Frederick Douglass) and women (such as Elizabeth Cady-Stanton) excluded from the conventional scope of juridical concern. See Jason Frank, “Staging Dissensus,” *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, pages 209-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. On the ‘descriptive’ and ‘aspirational’ uses of the concept of the people in democratic theory see, Melvin Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review*, 106, no. 01 (2012): 188-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Stuckey, *Slave Culture,* 131 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)