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**“Read the History and See”:**

**David Walker’s Genealogies of Black Wretchedness & Freedom**

Brenton Boyd

Emory University

[brenton.boyd@emory.edu](mailto:brenton.boyd@emory.edu)

**Abstract**

David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* has been widely acclaimed by historians and rhetoricians as a masterpiece of early African American pamphleteering, but few have paid attention to its theoretical engagements with the ontology of blackness. *Appeal*’s titular invocation of the legal paradox “coloured citizens” not only hails the conventions of abolitionism, it forces a confrontation between America’s lexicon of freedom and ‘wretched’ noncitizens. This essay traces David Walker’s genealogies of black wretchedness and freedom, arguing that they index a larger debate on the ontological-cum-political status of blacks in the throes of the global plantocracy. From the sovereign shores of Haiti to the bare cartographies of the antebellum US South, blackness becomes a central cog in the machine that distinguishes subject from object, master from slave.

**Key words:** nineteenth-century studies; African American philosophy; existential phenomenology; print culture; Afro-pessimism; political theory



In the process of delimiting early African American writing as an object of intellectual inquiry, scholars have opened a Pandora's box unto epistemic turmoil. To begin at the outset, blackness in the American hemisphere retains its own set of detractors which send this black scholar into overdrive: How does blackness shift from the locus of abjection to an impetus for self-mastery when juxtaposed to 'literature' and 'philosophy' as humanistic enterprises?<sup>1</sup> Can there be a clear distinction between the ontological plight of Middle-Passage blacks and their emancipated descendants? David Walker's *Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (1829), stakes its foremost claim in the paradoxical enjambment of 'coloured' (the privation of political ontology; or black identity) and 'citizens' (the championed model of political ontology). Certainly, Walker was cognizant of this political disjunction as made manifest in his ardent embrace and its potential means of attainment: intellectual and material insurrection.

As many scholars have argued, neither David Walker's *Appeal* nor the dissemination of print materials for and by nineteenth-century African Americans can be reduced to purely aesthetic matrices. Rather, an appreciation of philosophical and rhetorical engagement should be at the crux of any thorough articulation of early African American print culture. This is not to say that such engagement cannot be appreciated aesthetically, but that an overemphasis on aesthetics elides the rigorous genealogical effort taking place amongst Africans Americans and their continental contemporaries during the antebellum period. Black antislavery pamphleteers were crucial to the dissemination of early black philosophy as a

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<sup>1</sup> I will write this signifier in lowercase (blackness) whenever discussing its lack of Being (or political ontology, for Walker). "African Americans" stands in as the porous cultural identity of African-descendant populations in the United States.



generative intellectual culture informed by the dialectic between (conservative) white readership and African American writers' transformative aspirations. From an historical perspective, *Appeal's* glaring paradox "colored citizens" reasserted the aspiration of a black polity into public discourse—a direct confrontation with America's racist architects—at a crucial moment in the plantocracy's history. Divided into a preamble and four articles—"Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery", "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance," "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of the Religion of Jesus Christ," and "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Colonizing Plan"—*Appeal* underscores the force behind the pamphlet in early African American print culture, more broadly, as a site of rigorous theoretical exchange. Thus, this essay argues, *Appeal* demands a reorientation of prevailing historical and literary analyses under the aegis of its philosophical (or genealogical) ventures into freedom and its underside, wretchedness.

Thinking through and against the Political,<sup>2</sup> David Walker's widely distributed pamphlet facilitated a national conversation on the legal, psychic and ontological status of blacks in the American plantocracy. I pursue as my orienting inquiry what Walker calls "our wretchedness" to beg the existential question of blackness and to explore his jeremiadic pathos. Two objectives considered in the first section of this essay are to censure (white) Americans' teleological defenses of slavery—what I term the metaphysics of antiblackness—and to implicate Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) specifically in the transmission of said metaphysics. For Walker, the plight of the "coloured citizens of the world" is material yet deeply genealogical, and Jefferson's magnum opus gives legibility to this genealogy. Arguably

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<sup>2</sup> I deploy the capitalized term "Political" to accompany its ontological referent "Being" and to signify its hegemonic faculties. It is the Political that generates the conditions for chattel slavery and makes whites (possessing rights-bearing citizenship and Being) the sole benefactors of its logics. The key difference between the Political and political philosophy is a matter of source (Jefferson or Walker) and intention (antiblackness or egalitarianism). Freedom, for instance, emerges as a theme in the political philosophy of *Notes* and *Appeal*, but it becomes Politics when compounded with the interests of landed white men.



the first black writer to confront *Notes* head-on, Walker pens, “those who know and feel, that we are MEN as well as other people; to them I say, that unless we try to refute Mr. Jefferson's arguments respecting us, we will only establish them.” (26) Walker’s *Appeal* pivots on these conceptual and ideological axes in order to suggest that a deconstruction of Jefferson’s argument is a prerequisite to attaining freedom, potentially, through insurrection. This is evident in both Walker’s prose and in his innovative use of typography. Accentuating its pronouncements with exclamation marks and appropriating the manicule symbol (☞) to identify propagators of the metaphysical scheme, *Appeal* also captures how early African American pamphleteers used expressive culture (e.g. spectacle, orality, tone) to radicalize the typographical conventions of the mainstream pamphlet, even as an “appeal” through masculinist writing presupposes that the tools of the master can be used to challenge him.<sup>3</sup>

Turning from early African American writers’ strategy to present their art as a case for black being, Walker cites Politics in the ontological assail of the wretched. The second portion of this paper focuses on Walker’s alternative to Politics, what I identify as black republicanism—the paradoxical incorporation of African Americans into the ontological fold of the citizenship—and black transnationalism—the geographical breadth of those “coloured citizens of the world” and their cartographies of freedom. With colonial Liberia and post-revolution Haiti, respectively, in his transnational frame, Walker’s genealogies reinforce and undermine the grammar of Politics. Incorporation into the ontological fold of “man” (as rights-bearing citizen) combats the *a priori* exclusion of the black (woman) from it; and yet, it is here that he articulates black freedom. This “black freedom” operates on two registers: The first register (freedom-1) articulates emancipation from chattel slavery, that which explains Walker’s existence sans Being and the contemporary legal status of blacks, but not necessarily the grammar of political ontology. Utter liberation

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<sup>3</sup> Figure 1.



from the metaphysics of antiblackness is our second register of black freedom (freedom 2), which cannot be secured without the obliteration of Eurocentric legal structures and the de-formalization of what Charles Mills calls “philosophy *simpliciter*” (10). Ultimately, this essay complicates Walker’s *Appeal in Four Articles* by engaging black wretchedness and freedom as coeval within the phenomenological burden of black suffering, such that it becomes inextricable from the larger experience of racialized being-in-the-world.

### **I. Notes on the State of the Wretched: David Walker’s Philosophy of Antiblackness**

“I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment. For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead.”

My first objective is to show how the metaphysical apparatuses of antiblackness inform Walker’s *Appeal* and unfix his historical moment. Currently taking center stage in black studies and intersectional activism, theories of antiblackness have proven incisive for articulating the epistemological, psychic and physiological violences inflicted in the plantocracy and its afterlife. Nihilistic strains of black philosophy in particular rely on the explanatory power of antiblackness, which is inherent in Western schematizations of Being and reality. For Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, one such text that co-necessitates the historian’s trade and the toolkit of black philosophy, the plantation system depended on the master’s location at the helm of Being, codified by the same legal institutions that distinguished citizen from property. The plentifully documented performances of and mobilization toward (liberal) freedom for blacks, which antislavery pamphleteers like David Walker often imagined through the Political, testify to



the arresting presence of white metaphysics from which blacks have attempted to abscond.<sup>4</sup> In a plantocratic world—which is always already an antiblack world—blackness is the necessary rupture of Political ontology for the ascendancy of the citizen-self and his adjacent socio-political institutions. David Walker and Saidiya Hartman might agree, therefore, that antiblackness underwrites our dialectic between self-mastery (freedom) and self-abdication (wretchedness).

Hartman writes on the subject of black freedom under the weight of an intellectual burden: “[These] acts of redress are undertaken with the acknowledgment that conditions will most likely remain the same. This acknowledgment implies neither resignation nor fatalism but a recognition of the enormity of the breach instituted by slavery and the magnitude of domination.” (51) Antiblackness is precisely this breach, this disjunction of time and reason, in which Politics (as state violence, sexual violence, forced labor) negates any claims of ontology or freedom for blacks in its world. Such is the terror of Walker’s alarming passage: “I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment. For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead.” (70) So long as Politics prescribes the nation-state, the metaphysics of antiblackness (the law of father-cum-master) will keep its wretched in a state of injury. Black resistance, in spite of wretchedness, poses a disorienting question to this metaphysics’ faulty rationality and shores up the paradoxical notion of black freedom as a form of unlogic. Walker’s genealogy mobilizes this tension in a simultaneous attempt to curtail the former and propel the latter.

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<sup>4</sup> To be specific, I am attempting to work out of a post-Heideggerian framework by rethinking metaphysics as the arresting presence of antiblackness. Where Heidegger turns away from metaphysics, I investigate the manner of Being that Jefferson (as a metonym for the Political, nation-state and “American”) enjoys and must defend through the dialectical logics of antiblackness, the production of noncitizens to whom anything can be done. These noncitizens, if we follow Heidegger’s project of Being, are “ready-to-hand”: tools according to which the Being establishes itself as such. (I am also reducing Heidegger to a footnote, so as to give precedence to Walker’s own ontological thought.)



Wretchedness, for Walker, is a central cog in the American machine, necessary for the enactment of Politics. Read his preamble to *Appeal* and see:

[Having], in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more... And as the inhuman system of slavery, is the source from which most of our miseries proceed, I shall begin with that curse to nations, which has spread terror and devastation (8-9).

Where Walker coheres with Hartman, and where I tread the course of this section, is a thorough engagement with wretchedness as a paradigm for distinguishing Being from existence. By traversing the grounds of the plantocracy, he comes to see “things as they exist” but marks the critical difference as he turns to black being. David Walker’s abolitionist project stands in a privileged relation to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, which interpellates the struggle for political ontology and the dispossession of ego, but we might also turn to Fanon’s “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The Martinican philosopher writes, “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man.” (82). Underlying Fanon’s (and Walker’s) masculinist language is a thought-experiment with the limits of expressing the necessary manifestation of blackness in a white world. Put differently, for Walker, blackness is the perversion of ethics, the want for Political ontology, and the absence of individual autonomy. When Walker prays to God that “none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more” (8), there is a clear sense that blackness does more than name the



circumstance of enslavement: it incarnates the underside of (white) freedom in Politics over which time, as metaphysics synecdochized, asserts domain.<sup>5</sup>

In “Theory in Black,” Lewis Gordon deploys a lexis whetted by the cutlass of Being: “Blackness, in all its metaphors and historical submergence, reaches out to theory, then, as theory split from itself. It is the dark side of theory, which, in the end, is none other than theory itself, understood as self-reflective, outside itself” (198). Taken in the context of *Appeal*, “coloured citizens” live in a state of constantly reaching for theory (as Political ontology) and constantly missing its standards, even while their wretchedness maintains and defines the condition of freedom for whites (American citizens). David Walker repeatedly curses the Americans for this metaphysics but surrenders his existence to a higher power: “[God’s ears are] continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed... I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done” (10, 33).<sup>6</sup> Not the “God” of white enslavers, Walker’s theodicy acts as a balm for the wretched to appreciate providence in the will of God and reject antiblack claims about the racialization of the soul. Yet, because this God has “Being,” his theodicy ought not be understood as fully outside the white theology forced upon him. *Appeal*, as I have argued, reinforces and undermines this hegemonic script. But what is this

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Best’s recent book *None Like Us* employs black philosophy, Muñozian queer theory and aesthetic theory to argue that negation—albeit controversial for black humanists and pragmatists—is the material that precipitates blackness. Thinking with David Walker’s prayer, Best presses the question of black aesthetics and sociality as entangled with the hydraulics of death and nonbeing. This text, which breaks new ground in black studies, cultivates a new historicism in which blackness can be experienced and aestheticized as “self-eclipse”.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that David Walker’s *Appeal* expressly rejects the Christian American theology that was used to justify the metaphysics of antiblackness in the legal status of slavehood. His third article “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of the Religion of Jesus Christ” further exemplifies this point, albeit Walker explicitly contests antiblack teleologies in his own practice.





*nothingness* of which Walker speaks? Is it a pre-Heideggerian articulation of being's impure element, the 'nothing'? Or, perhaps more imaginatively, does it predicate contemporary theorist Fred Moten's black mysticism, wherein no/thingness confers the potential for sociality outside transcendental phenomenology's ontogenetic standpoint? In any case, Walker reinforces Western metaphysical and theological forms even as he undermines them from the vantage point of the oppressed. We might say, therefore, that Walker's "shrinking back" is an ineffable and paradoxical appearance of his jeremiadic theodicy.

Even though blackness here names the psychopathology of wretchedness—the crushing into nothingness that confers Fanon's 'racial-epidermal schema' without Being—we must not ignore how Walker attempts to challenge the metaphysics of antiblackness. His jeremiadic philosophy of blackness galvanized abolitionist sentiments in its readers and abandons a rehearsal of the abject-to-freedom archetype. This is to say that, for Walker, the genealogies of black wretchedness and freedom are dynamic, and that he embraces a different ontology of the African American writer than did his contemporaries. Walker believes that his *Appeal* does not merely perform humanity for white readers, but rather upends respectable forms of black being to which they were accustomed by radicalizing his typography and rhetorical tone. I do not mean to call this optimism; nonetheless, he questions the utility of proclaiming a pure arrival at freedom-2 via his own positionality as a free black. Championing the exigency of black nihilism, Calvin Warren historicizes the metaphysical quandary of the antebellum "free black" as a paradoxical enjambment of freedom (being) and blackness (the pathology of nonbeing/nonfreedom), giving way to degrees of freedom. Unenslaved African Americans, for Warren, live as historical and philosophical allegories: The condition of emancipation that explains David Walker and modern blacks characterizes the ontological struggle between master and slave. This combat is reinstated in both Walker's enjambment of "coloured citizens" and contemporary assertions of "Black ontology" as affronts to the mandates of Politics



whose ability to retaliate in state violence goes unchecked. Walker bemoans the unknowability of utter liberation (freedom-2), making use of affective typography: “I am full!!! I can hardly move my pen!!! and as I expect some will try to put me to death, to strike terror into others, and to obliterate from their minds the notion of freedom, so as to keep my brethren the more secure in wretchedness, where they will be permitted to stay but a short time” (27). *Appeal*’s rhetorical appeal, as such, might be located in its refusal to wilfully collapse into wretchedness and its brazen condemnation of those who propagate its metaphysics. David Walker’s fiery diatribe against Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* best illustrates the nature of his writerly ontology.

A pamphlet of nearly thirty-thousand words, Walker’s *Appeal* dedicates numerous pages to *Notes*’ ontoepistemic violence. As has been stated, the pamphlet’s project is simultaneously to uplift blacks in a state of wretchedness and to implicate certain entities in the transmission of antiblackness. Literary scholars’ fetishization of the “abject prodigy” in figures like Phillis Wheatley (whom Jefferson repeatedly belittled) has obscured the relationship between political enterprises and cultural forms in the Black radical tradition. *Appeal*’s 1829 attempt to confront the Political head-on through the metonym of Jefferson represents much more than a foray into the art of pamphleteering: It demonstrates the relative intellectual agency of the wretched and Walker’s prescient knowledge of political philosophy. He writes of Jefferson’s antiblackness:

[*Notes*’] very verse, brethren, having emanated from Mr. Jefferson, a much greater philosopher the world never afforded, has in truth injured us more, and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as anything that has ever been advanced against us. I hope you will not let it pass unnoticed. (31)

A clear call of action to emancipated and enslaved blacks, this passage demonstrates two specific tactics. First, as I have argued, it draws a parallel between the abstract and the material by invoking Jefferson's writing in the propagation of antiblack violence. Not cut off from the socio-political imagination of America, *Notes* was widely circulated amongst the (white) reading public and became a seminal text for Southern plantocrats. Walker avers as such, "Mr. Jefferson's remarks respecting us, have sunk deep into the hearts of millions of the whites, and never will be removed this side of eternity." (32) Indeed, the quasi-anthropological and scientific assertions of Jefferson's manuscript sanctioned the illogic and unethical treatment of blacks long after the Founding Father's death.

In reproach of Jeffersonian philosophy, David Walker not only belies *Notes*' assumptions in the very act of writing, he brazenly censures its depiction of blackness, supporting instead a redistribution of social and economic capital to bring about freedom-1. Walker's second tactic is to depict a radical historiographical shift in the locus of agency—as hegemonically figured through the magnanimous intervention of nation-states—to blacks in their capacities for (epistemological) insurrection: "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" (25). Put differently, Walker would like to recast the wretched as agents rather than objects of philosophy. Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in vogue with his early national imaginary, romanticized the Politics of ancient Roman society and its white slaves who "excelled too in science, insomuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master's children." His distinction between Roman and the African slaves, furthermore, is not "condition" but "nature" (Walker 26). This naturalist teleology for the preservation of black wretchedness takes Walker to the brink of anger: "Have not the Americans



instituted laws to hinder us from obtaining our freedom?... Now, Mr. Jefferson tells us, that our condition is not so hard, as the slaves were under the Romans!!!!!!” (32) Even here, in “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery,” *Appeal* does more than invoke the sympathy of its white abolitionist readers. Pointing out an historical flaw in Jefferson’s magnum opus, Walker notes that the Roman slave, whose European ancestry potentialized upward mobility, could take the helm of Being and “rise to the greatest eminence in the State.” Not to mention, Roman slaves had the political autonomy to purchase their own freedom (20). Intellectual confrontations such as this one can be identified throughout *Appeal*, a text which refuses to accept black wretchedness as presented in *Politics*. Instead, Walker carves out a space for early black philosophy by incriminating the propagators of antiblackness and reworking hegemonic conceptions of freedom. While lack a grammar for utter freedom from white metaphysics, Walker appropriates the problematic leitmotiv of national citizenship to imagine black freedom,.

## II. Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Being: David Walker’s Cartographies of Freedom

Throughout his first two articles, Walker not only revises Jefferson’s metaphysics of antiblackness, he charts new cartographies of freedom as imagined otherwise. Given Jefferson’s own investment in recolonization—sending blacks to a “proper” location, far away from the (white) Americans and their homestead (Jefferson 144)—it is unsurprising that Walker turns to the American Colonization Society in his sprawling fourth article, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Colonizing Plan.” The society’s mission was to resolve the moral dilemma of slavery (as presaged by Jefferson) and the growing presence of insurrectionary blacks by financing their exportation to West Africa. Until the American Civil War, colonization remained an acceptable alternative to emancipation in its restaging of the Middle Passage (Dorsey 77). For Walker, recolonization stands as the ultimate dispersion of wretchedness across physical/psychic space—a foil to the balm of freedom against (yet within) the dominant system. He



expounds upon this point in cutting diction, imagery and typographical performance: “They keep us three or four hundred feet underground working in their mines, night and day to dig up gold and silver to enrich them and their children.—They keep us in the most death-like ignorance by keeping us from all source of information, and call us, who are free men and next to the Angels of God, their property!!!!!!” (Walker 74) American’s colonial project in Liberia only perpetuates Politics because it endorses blacks’ want of Political ontology and justifies their assimilation into capitalist machinations. This “death-like ignorance,” evoking Achille’s work on necropower, is the driving force that keeps blacks under the scourge of Politics and away from the knowledge of self-mastery (or emancipation) as made manifest in various forms of insurrection. In order to fully flesh out Walker’s genealogy of black freedom, in this section, we will attend to its interpellation of the politics of black freedom and its transnational scope, specifically in Walker’s appropriation of the Toussaint Louverture figure as the subject of insurrection.

Not cut off from Jefferson’s speculation that blacks had no capacity for Reason, *Appeal* lodges an argument for social consciousness as a corequisite to self-mastery. David Walker’s use of the manicule (☞) to identify propagators of the metaphysical scheme stands in a privileged relation to his emancipatory argument. For Walker, ‘colored’ names both the condition of and potential remedy to Middle-Passage blackness. In this state of legal, physical and psychic abjection (wretchedness), there is still the motivating force of transnational fraternity from which blacks might wrest intersubjectivity. Returning to Fanon, however, since ontology leaves existence by the wayside, the question of Being must be held against the logics of the state. Without integration into the ontological fold of citizenry through emancipation, according to Walker, blacks miss the freedom-1: “[We] ask them for nothing but the rights of man, for them to set us free, and treat us like men, and there will be no danger, for we will love and respect them, and protect our country—but cannot conscientiously do these things until they treat us like men.” (74-75) This



allusion to Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* centers early national articulations of legal personhood in *Appeal*'s insurrectionary call, establishing an ontological framework that is dependent upon Politics and dialectical struggle for the enactment of self-mastery. Self-mastery, then, assumes explicitly gendered and republican valences that cohere *Appeal*'s genealogy of black freedom to a philosophical anthropology that also sustains hegemonic whiteness. My third term for Walker's philosophy, *black republicanism*, is a synthesis of Walker's dialectical schema that relocates Blacks within the ontological fold in order to prove their commensurability to whites in all respects except phenotype. Unlike Charles Mills' 'black liberalism', the grounds for black republicanism hinged on America's obsession with nativism: citizenship defined by nativity and mutual investment in the nation-state. Furthermore, because the 'Founding Fathers' prescribed and codified the Politics of freedom under the auspices of whiteness and maleness, there is an obvious tension between Walker's abolitionist rhetoric and the resolution of white metaphysics. Indeed, Walker's freedom-1 arguably preserves the institution of Politics by championing its categorical model, thus assimilating into its violent processes.

Pacifism, a conjoint philosophy amongst many black republicans, often gave way to insurgency. Although Walker romanticizes the inclusion of blacks into national family, he does not shy away from critique of American republicanism as it exists during his contemporary moment. He warns at one point that "the Americans [will] see the fearful terror they labour under for fear that my brethren will get my Book and read it—and tell me if their declaration is true—viz, if the United States of America is a Republican Government?" (82) Even Frederick Douglass, whose pacifism might be better understood as a performance for white readers, confessed in his third autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* that when the rhetorical appeal of black republicanism failed, he became more open to the insurrectionary logos of John Brown and later to slavery's calamitous end in the Civil War (Blight). For many emancipated and enslaved blacks in the United States, the idea of insurrection became an impetus for



collective Black identity, forged through the principles of resistance and cultural memory. Post-revolutionary Haiti in particular was as a spiritual-cum-geopolitical paragon of transnational fraternity and a meeting ground for numerous African American abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. David Walker's brief reference to Haiti indexes both registers of black freedom:

O my suffering brethren!... Read the history particularly of Hayti, and see how they were butchered by the whites, and do you take warning. The person whom God shall give you, 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. (23)<sup>7</sup>

In this rich declaration, I locate a radical icon of black freedom—a trans-historical coming-into-being for the wretched—that often travels in David Walker's radicalism: the Louverture figure. More specifically, the historian will remind us that perhaps the most popular icon of transnational fraternity and insurrection amongst African Americans was Toussaint Louverture. In her article "The Franco-Haitian Grammar of Transnational African American Writing," Marlene Daut examines how representations of Haiti in early African American literature impacted discourses on liberation and, in turn, placed Black identity in a transnational context. Juxtaposing abolitionist writers like Brown and Douglass, Daut argues that the common "grammar" of solidarity between Franco-Haitian and US abolitionist rhetoric played a central role in the formation of African American literary culture. William Wells Brown, for example, lifted much of his writing on the US plantocracy from the British abolitionist John Beard's *The Life of Toussaint*

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<sup>7</sup> WEB Du Bois, whose father was of Haitian descent, highlights this passage in his personal copy of *Appeal*, now located in Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Library. (See figure 2)



*L'Ouverture* (1853), and drafted his 1854 speech-turned-pamphlet, “St. Domingo, its Revolutions and its Patriots” with passages from *Clotel*, suggesting an interminable link between the abolition of slavery in the United States and the overthrow of slavery in Haiti. Diaspora, Daut argues, is not moored to physical location but to imaginative spaces of meaning and spatial identity in which blacks could mobilize global efforts and challenge structural disenfranchisement.

David Walker’s model of black republicanism must be taken alongside his cartographies of freedom in the “history particularly of Hayti.” Specifically, by glorifying the Louverture figure, he embraces the notion of a masculine subject of insurrection who galvanizes his people for freedom in/as this ontological facticity called self-mastery. With ‘citizen’ as the chosen model of Political ontology in the US plantocracy, to become a master of oneself is also to master the logics that make ‘self’ legible within the grammar of white metaphysics. (The bondsman is mastered by the legible self of the property-owning citizen, a Hegelian adaptation.) Returning to an earlier excerpt—“I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment. For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead”—it is now evident that black freedom cannot be reduced to an imitation of the master, although it often appears as such in the invocation of Political freedom. Walker’s black freedom, furthermore, might necessitate a reenactment of Politics for the success of its abolitionist objectives. Not a self-identified abolitionist, British writer Marcus Rainsford goes to great lengths in his *Historical Account of the Black Empire of Haiti* (1805) to describe Toussaint Louverture’s character and appearance as conducive to Political aesthetics: “In person, [he] was of a manly form, above the middle stature, with a countenance bold and striking, yet full of the most prepossessing suavity—terrible to an enemy, but inviting to the objects of his friendship... his





principles were as pure and legitimate as those which actuated the great founders of liberty in any former age or clime” (252). A virile subject capable of organizing military forces and fitting the propriety of a monarch—or a Founding Father—Rainsford’s Louverture was well attended by white readers and early African American writers alike. The widely circulated *Black Empire* inspired divergent sentiments on the Haitian Revolution, both provoking the codification of stricter slave codes and reinforcing claims of (black) self-mastery. Walker’s *Appeal* clearly fashions itself after Rainford’s account. However, we must address the pitfalls of the Louverture figure as they emerge in a subsequent version of his image and go largely unexamined in the pamphlet.

An 1832 lithograph portrait by Nicolas Eustache Maurin depicts Louverture through the racist imaginary, wearing an ornate French military garb with exaggerated facial features and body turned away from the onlooker.<sup>8</sup> First printed in *Iconographie des contemporains* (1838), the portrait embraced racist depictions of blacks and was quickly absorbed into the collective imaginary of colonial France. Although it is alleged that Maurin’s piece was modelled after Louverture’s own lost portrait, most historians agree that Maurin openly pandered to colonial/patriarchal enterprises: It was common for women in nineteenth-century portraiture to look away from the onlooker, as convention had it that only men were honourable enough break the fourth wall (“European Attitudes”). Turned away from the onlooker, Louverture assumes a feminine posture that, when taken alongside his exaggerated mouth and nose, is meant to ironize his adornment in French vestments and strip him of his honour. Honour here might be understood as ontological facticity in the sense that it counters the status of the wretched (who lacks Being and the honour that accompanies it in a plantocratic society). Maurin emasculates Louverture—a stark contrast to Rainsford—in a larger attempt to court the (French) Political imaginary as it visualizes a fissure in its metaphysics: the

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<sup>8</sup> Figure 3



success of the Haitian Revolution. There is still a sense, nonetheless, that Maurin's visual account of the Louverture figure speaks to David Walker's own predisposition towards self-mastery as an imbrication of masculinist and legal power. Specifically, I read Louverture's stripped honor as self-mastery's aesthetic economy in Political freedom, which inevitably maintains the irresolution of black being.

David Walker's masculinist language tests the limits of expressing the necessary manifestation of blackness in an antiblack world. Black freedom is embattled by wretchedness, the arresting presence of metaphysics, which threatens to strip emancipation at any moment with gratuitous violence or reenslavement. Freedom-2 eviscerates this ontological dilemma from which the wretched want to abscond and are met with the force of Politics. Whereas the Louverture figure must rise to the occasion in his phallic power and declare Being, *Appeal* dynamizes the strategy of black republicanism to challenge the metaphysics of antiblackness. Walker meditates on coming-into-being (or ontogenesis) for the black recurrently through the term "MAN"—signifying citizen-subject or Being—as typified in an excerpt that ought to be given further consideration:

Man, in all ages and all nations of the earth, is the same. Man is a peculiar creature—he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth...[We] ask them for nothing but the rights of man, for them to set us free, and treat us like men, and there will be no danger, for we will love and respect them, and protect our country—but cannot conscientiously do these things until they treat us like men (69, 74-75).

Insisting upon the metaphysical structure that separates Man from other (or master from slave) troubles *Appeal* and its insurrectionary call precisely because it preserves the offending structure as both "man" and "slave" are inculcated in white masculinist discourse. Walker envisages an America without fear of



violence, without plantocratic machinations, wherein citizenship is oriented toward the defense of the nation-state rather than precedent racist orders. Maurin's portrait of Louverture represents the limit of that argument, however, as a naïve redress of metaphysics' attritional violence: Louverture wears the vestments of Politics (his elite French attire) but remains obscured by Maurin's racist portrayal of African features, symbolizing Politics' *a priori* exclusion of the black from the category of "MAN". When animated by ontological logics, the Louverture figure accomplishes little beyond freedom-1, even though its conceptual foundations expand the geographical reach of blackness. Indeed nonideal, Walker's genealogies of black freedom have the capacity to simultaneously defy and uphold the structure of violence.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Early Black Philosophy & the Weight of Social Consciousness**

David Walker's *Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* helped lay the larger ideological foundations for what would become "black philosophy"—a transgressive, consciousness-building intellectual tradition that grew out of the American plantocracy and its afterlife. An incredibly prescient document, *Appeal* illumines modern-day philosophies of black freedom that cling to the (black) phallus and even to rights-bearing humanism as organizing principles for social progressivism. To reduce Walker's masculinist language to a product of his time is to flatten Political violence at its core: antiblackness, heteropatriarchy, and epistemic power synergize to arraign any possibility of collective black freedom in their despotic co-necessitation. This paper has charted *Appeal*'s genealogies of wretchedness and freedom in a dialectical fashion, but what have yet to be thoroughly investigated are their implications for rethinking early black philosophy—as well as early black pamphleteering—as tasks of great psycho-affective or phenomenological difficulty.



Walker repeatedly acknowledges that the weight of social consciousness, bound up with the exigency of black abolitionism as a consciousness-building effort, often resulted in a general mood of anguish. The weight of social consciousness lies, expressly in *Appeal*, in the knowledge of structural dominance, the ignorance of utter freedom, and the ongoing irresolution of black being: “Ignorance, my brethren, is a mist, low down into the very dark and almost impenetrable abyss in which our fathers for many centuries have been plunged.” (22) Frederick Douglass writes in a similar vein: “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason...and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.” (45) It perhaps need not be said that the lives of these two black abolitionists took notably different turns: Our philosopher, David Walker, met a tragic end shortly after publishing his widely read *Appeal*. A mortality draped in scandal; the historical record is still unclear as to the true nature of Walker’s demise. Tuberculosis was notarized as the cause of death; however, in finding Walker’s corpse prostrate outside his front door, black Bostonians overwhelmingly believed that he was likely poisoned by a proslavery assassin (Shelby 2). Historical accuracy aside, that even in death David Walker is haunted by white metaphysics testifies to the terror of the offending structure and its iterative schemes. This is a *longue durée* that, as I have argued elsewhere, reiterates, at the phenomenological and genealogical level, the ‘event’ of capture. Sharing in antiblackness’s *longue durée* and the nonevent of freedom-2, emancipated blacks carry weight into the twenty-first century.

Where Walker and Douglass remind us of the terror of Being at their historical threshold, contemporary readers must question their assumption of masculinist lexis in the work of black freedom. Wretchedness, as has been discussed, operates squarely within patriarchal gestures towards political ontology (white male citizenship) in its necessary manifestation of impurity. The path to black freedom, therefore, cannot be cleared with the ontological tools of the master. Julietta Singh’s *Unthinking Mastery*



begins with the assertion that European hegemony will not end until the destruction of mastery. Mastery, according to the decolonialist, is the very essence of power, and therefore all forms of mastery—abolitionist (self-)mastery, humanism and state-building—reenact the original violence. Reading how such theorists as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire espouse discourses of mastery in order to reject political ontology, Singh brilliantly argues for an honest deconstruction of decolonial logics and intimates that true freedom can only be found beyond the master-slave dialectic. Relying on this dialectic to advance his antislavery argument, David Walker presages the epistemological trap in which we find ourselves when animated by Western metaphysics and hegemonic masculinity. Singh’s text thusly poses the question that Walker does not fully answer: Can there be black sociality without self-mastery? Such a question must be entertained if we, following *Appeal*, seek to uplift the “coloured citizens of the world.”



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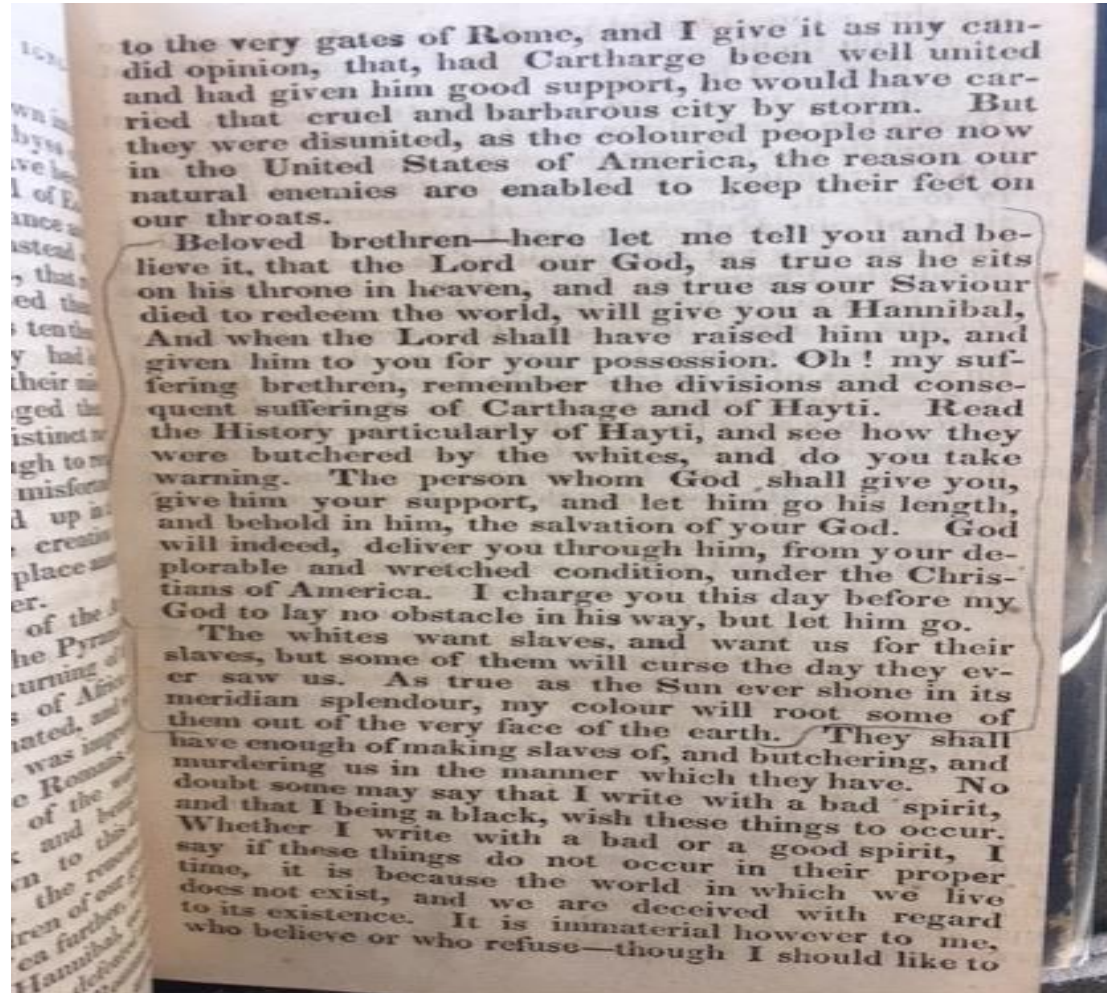


Figure 1



\* For instance in the two States of Georgia, and South Carolina, there are, perhaps, not much short of six or seven hundred thousand persons of colour; and if I was a gambling character, I would not be afraid to stake down upon the board **FIVE CENTS** against **TEN**, that there are in the single State of Virginia, five or six hundred thousand Coloured persons. Four hundred and fifty thousand of whom (let them be well equipt for war) I would put against every white person on the whole continent of America. (Why? why because I know that the Blacks, once they get involved in a war, had rather die than to live, they either kill or be killed.) The whites know this too, which make them quake and tremble. To show the world further, how servile the coloured people are, I will only hold up to view, the one Island of Jamaica, as a specimen of our meanness.

In that Island, there are three hundred and fifty thousand souls—of whom fifteen thousand are whites, the remainder, three hundred and thirty-five thousand are coloured people! and this Island is ruled by the white people!!!!!!! (15,000) ruling and tyrannizing over 335,000 persons!!!!!!!—O! coloured men!! O! coloured men!!! O! coloured men!!!! Look!! look!!! at this!!!! and, tell me if we are not abject and servile enough, how long, O! how long my colour shall we be dupes and dogs to the cruel whites?—I only passed Jamaica, and its inhabitants, in review as a specimen to show the world, the condition of the Blacks at this time, now coloured people of the whole world, I beg you to look at the

Figure 2

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Figure 3

### Biography

Brenton Boyd is a PhD candidate in English and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Emory University. His research is located at the intersections of African diaspora studies, performance studies, and Caribbean philosophy. Brenton has been generously supported by the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, the Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers, UNCF, and institutional grants/scholarships.



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