

## **Hope and Despair in the Political Thought of David Walker<sup>1</sup>**

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For many undergraduates in the U.S., the summer of 2020 was marked by the massive wave of protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter in response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. The political energy channeled into the streets found its way, by the fall, into the classroom, with college instructors racing to incorporate material that spoke to students' anti-racist rage and the system of white supremacy against which this rage was directed-- all while, of course, also struggling to devise teaching modalities appropriate to the age of coronavirus. Columbia University's Contemporary Civilization Core Curriculum course, for instance, broke with its traditionally chronological syllabus to begin with a unit on "race and justice." For a time, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis, instead of Plato and Aristotle, introduced Columbia undergraduates to the canonical themes of western political thought.

I played a small role in advising on the revisions to Contemporary Civilization's syllabus, and gave some orienting remarks to graduate students instructors as they prepared to teach the material on race and justice. Speaking with colleagues as I prepared these remarks, I noticed that, mixed in with feelings of excitement about the syllabus change and a strong sense of commitment to teach the material well, there was also a sense of trepidation. While some feared encounters with students who refused to acknowledge the role of white supremacy in shaping American society, the more pervasive fear I encountered was about students who fully acknowledged the role that white supremacy has played, but who, especially as the political horizons of the summer began to narrow once again, would come to see it as an inevitable and

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unalterable force.

What my colleagues feared in the classroom was the potential for despair among their students, a sense that there was nothing to be done that could make a meaningful difference in dismantling white supremacist domination and the patterns of injustice that it has encoded into the foundations of our polity. As I reviewed the texts assigned for Contemporary Civilization's "race and justice" unit, I saw that such despair would be an attentive response not only to the present political situation in this country, but also to the course readings themselves. Walker, in *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, decries that "we, coloured People of these United States, are, the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" (Walker, 3). Douglass, in his famed 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", declares to his audience that "the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker than on this Fourth of July" (Douglass, 368). King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" condemns the toxic complacency of the white moderate (King, 97-103). Baldwin, in "A Talk to Teachers," observes that any Black person subject to the American education system "runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic" (Baldwin, 679). Angela Davis's "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation" traces the direct continuity of white supremacist violence from the plantation to the modern prison and police (Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*).<sup>2</sup>

Despair could not be avoided nor corrected in the classroom, I realized. This, of course, is not a novel observation. Many strands of Black American political thought and scholarship have recognized that despair is an integral element of the affective response to white supremacist domination.<sup>3</sup> Yet the fact that despair—the sense that there is nothing to be done—is a reasonable and perhaps inevitable response to white supremacist domination does not itself answer the question "what do we do with our despair?" (Loggins, "Who Decides What We Do

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Y. Davis, ed., *If They Come in the Morning ...: Voices of Resistance* (Verso Books, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For two recent examples of such scholarship analyzing 19<sup>th</sup> century Black American political thought, see (Johnson, *No Future in this Country*; Waters, *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*).

with Our Despair?”).

An insight contained within the 2020 Contemporary Civilization’s “race and justice” readings, which I sought to communicate to the course instructors (and now share with you), was that the question “what do we do with our despair” need not presume despair to be solely an obstacle to emancipatory politics. Coming to a shared sense that there is nothing to be done can itself be an expression of political agency that ultimately generates hope that together there is something we can do. The key philosophical point to this seemingly paradoxical relationship between despair and hope is a distinction between the *content* of despair (e.g. “white supremacy is so deeply entrenched that we cannot hope to shake its grip on our world”) from the *form* of despair as a political judgment. The act of judging that despair is apt, when performed in concert with others, is an exercise of political agency through which persons can recognize their collective power to reshape a broken world. Collectively despairing is a way of being in political community with others; the experience of being in political community generates hope that we together can make the world anew.<sup>4</sup>

This point is captured lucidly in David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829). In his pamphlet, Walker seeks to instill a sense of despair in his Black readers concerning the “wretchedness” of their condition under slavery and white supremacist domination. I argue that Walker seeks to channel this despair into hope by politicizing it— by having Black audiences engage with the text and their despair in concert with one another. Such engagement forges political community through a transformation from a shared sense that there

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<sup>4</sup> It might seem odd to prioritize, in a discussion of the role of affect in emancipatory struggle, *political* hope (i.e. hope about what we can do together) over other forms of hope that we might term existential, moral, or religious: a sense of hope grounded in one’s inherent dignity, that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, or that the divine is on the side of the oppressed. One might think that these latter forms of hope are necessary in order for political hope to matter— for us to think that what we can do together is worthwhile. But we can, I suggest, plausibly think of political hope as generating these other forms of hope: I can gain a sense of my own inherent dignity, or the divine’s commitment to the oppressed, precisely through sharing in a sense of what we can do together. Workers in union campaigns and participants in social movements often describe themselves as gaining a sense of dignity through their participation in these struggles, rather than as a precondition of their participation. For this reason, I think it is reasonable to focus on political hope in this analysis. I think Dwayne Tunstall for helpful discussion on this point.

is nothing to be done to to a collective sense of a *we* that can act to change the world.

David Walker was born in 1796 or 1797 in North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> His father, who died before his birth, was enslaved, but his mother was free, which meant that Walker himself was free. Leaving Charleston, South Carolina in the wake of the Denmark Vesey affair to settle in Massachusetts, Walker made a living as a clothing merchant, which gave him access to shipping routes, and thereby news and information, on the US east coast (Hinks, 62-63). Walker was strongly devoted to abolition throughout his life. He served as the Boston agent of the first Black American owned and operated newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, for the duration of its publication (1827-1829) before writing the *Appeal* in 1829.<sup>6</sup> Walker died in 1830 at the age of 33. At the time of his death, there was speculation that Walker had been assassinated by poison in response to the publication of the *Appeal*, but the general historical consensus today is that he died from tuberculosis.<sup>7</sup>

As indicated by the full title of the *Appeal* ("Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and expressly, to those of the United States of America"), Walker's primary audience is nominally free and enslaved Black people in the US, whom he addresses in the preamble as "My dearly beloved Brethren and Fellow Citizens" (3).<sup>8</sup> In preparatory remarks to the third (and final) edition of the pamphlet, Walker imputes to this audience a responsibility to obtain, read, and share his pamphlet with one another:

It is expected that all coloured men, women and children, of every nation, language, and

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<sup>5</sup> In his 1848 reprint of the *Appeal*, Black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet attributed a 1785 birthdate to Walker. For Garnet's biographical sketch of Walker, see (Aptheker and Walker, 40-44). The case for the later birthdate is made compellingly in (Hinks, 10-12).

<sup>6</sup> On the history of *Freedom's Journal*, see (Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper*)

<sup>7</sup> Garnet notes the speculation that Walker was poisoned in the biographical sketch to his reprint of the *Appeal* (Aptheker and Walker, 43). As he does for Walker's birthdate, Hinks makes the decisive case for his cause of death (Hinks 269-71).

<sup>8</sup> Walker does, throughout the *Appeal*, address white Americans as well. For a rich analysis of the *Appeal* and this secondary audience, see (Pelletier, David Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Logic of Sentimental Terror").

tongue under heaven, will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get some one to read it to them, for it is designed more particularly for them (2).<sup>9</sup>

Walker imagines communities of Black Americans coming together through the dissemination, consumption, and analysis of his writing. Walker, as Chris Apap has argued, understood “the development of black community as the necessary first step in the radical transformation of the United States” (Apap, “Let No Man Budge One Step”). And Walker was actively committed to the realization of this vision, using his shipping connections as a merchant to distribute the *Appeal* along the US east coast. Southern state governments worked actively to suppress dissemination of the pamphlet, arresting both Black and white distribution agents (who frequently, and implausibly, disavowed knowledge of the pamphlet they were distributing) in South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Kentucky. Nevertheless, by the early 1830s—after Walker’s untimely death—the *Appeal* achieved wide distribution across the US (Aptheker and Walker, 45-53; Hinks, 116-72; Fraser, “Distributed Agency”).

One of Walker’s primary aims in the *Appeal* is to communicate his analysis of the forms of racist oppression to which Black Americans are subjected. This analysis:

demonstrates. . . . that the Coloured People of these United States are, the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that [ever] lived since the world began down to the present day, and, that, the white Christians of America, who hold us in slavery (or, more properly speaking, pretenders to Christianity,) treat us more cruel and barbarous than any Heathen nation did any people whom it had subjected, or reduced to the same condition (2).

Over the course of four articles, Walker lays out the four factors that he takes as the cause of Black Americans’ ‘wretchedness:’ slavery, ignorance, “the preachers of the religion of Jesus Christ,” and “the colonizing plan.”

The violence and cruelty of slavery are, as one would expect, central to Walker’s analysis

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<sup>9</sup> On revisions to the *Appeal* over the course of its three editions, see Hinks’ editorial notes in (Walker, xlv-li).

of the oppression of Black people in the US. White slaveholders, Walker observes in Article One, claim that they are justified in subjecting Black people to slavery because they are “brutes,” and so Walker observes, “ought to be slaves to the American people and their children forever!!” (9).<sup>10</sup> But, Walker argues, it is precisely the cruelty and violence of slavery that furnish the evidence that whites use to justify slavery in this way. Enslaved Black people are, in Walker’s words, “wretched,” because of the historically unprecedented oppression enacted by chattel slavery.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Walker thinks that several other factors are involved in an adequate explanation of Black Americans’ ‘wretchedness.’ In Article Two, Walker argues that enslaved and nominally free Black people in the US lack an adequate understanding of their history, and have not fully cultivated the capacities of a flourishing human life. Article One’s analysis clearly implies that the primary cause of this ignorance is the cruelty and violence of chattel slavery. But Walker does think that combating racist oppression is both a matter of dismantling slavery and white supremacy, and of Black people educating and elevating one another. For Walker, resistance against white supremacy is both a matter of working on the system and working on oneself. Article Three condemns the ways in which Christianity has been used, in spite of its professed egalitarian and emancipatory values, to justify the enslavement of Black people since the outset of colonization of the Americas. Article Four argues that those whites who claim to act in the interest of Black Americans by advocating for colonization projects— which aimed to send Black people in the U.S. to Africa— in fact express the same attitude towards enslaved and free Black people as that of slaveholders: “Methinks colonizationists think they have a set of brutes to deal with, sure enough” (71).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Walker frequently uses multiple punctuation marks for emphasis in the *Appeal*. On the *Appeal*’s distinctive typography, see (Dinius, “Look!! Look!!! At This!!!!”)

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between Walker’s analysis and Thomas Jefferson’s assertions of Black inferiority in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, see (Jarrett, “To Refute Mr. Jefferson’s Arguments Respecting Us”)

<sup>12</sup> For a particularly helpful overview of the *Appeal*’s main arguments, see (Shelby: “David Walker, *Appeal in Four Articles*”)

In its content, Walker's *Appeal* explicates the interlocking aspects of racist oppression of Black people in the US: the cruelty and violence of chattel slavery, the ways in which enslaved and nominally free Black people need to more fully cultivate the capacities of a flourishing life, the betrayal of Christian values, and the paternalism of white colonizationists. A full accounting of the structure of white supremacist domination generates, Walker acknowledges, a sense of despair: "Can our condition be any worse?— Can it be more mean and abject?" (4). The depth and interlocking nature of white supremacist domination leaves a reasonable reader with the sense that there is nothing that can be done to change the condition of Black Americans.

Yet, Walker describes the goal of his analysis of white supremacist domination to be "to awaken in the breast of my afflicted, degraded, and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!*" (5). While the content of Walker's analysis generates despair, the mode of its presentation— an *appeal* to enslaved and nominally free Black audiences— is designed to generate hope around a collective sense of political agency, transforming a sense that there is nothing to be done into a sense of what we can do together.

In "David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal," Melvin Rogers provides a compelling interpretation of what it means for Walker's pamphlet to function as an appeal to Black audiences. In issuing his analysis of racist oppression in the US as an appeal to free and enslaved Black people—who, Walker asserts, have a responsibility to obtain and read his pamphlet— Walker implies that this primary audience has the authority to render judgment in response to his argument. When I appeal to (or petition) someone, I treat her as an authority with the power to address my appeal/petition. As Rogers puts the point:

[T]o petition or appeal means seeking redress from an authority regarding one's grievances.

To petition tacitly reflects a normative attitude about oneself [i.e. as in need of an authority's help], but also about one's social and political world—that is, as being capable of responding appropriately to the claims being advanced (218).

One of the central provocative moves in Walker's *Appeal* is that he treats enslaved and free Black people as a collective political entity capable of responding to his analysis and grievances. By structuring his appeal in this way, Walker—implicitly, but unambiguously—acknowledges nominally free and enslaved Black people as possessors of political agency: as possessing the capacity to collectively analyze a situation and decide how to act in concert with one another. The *Appeal* is an invitation to exercise this collective capacity.

For Walker, it is precisely through analysis of anti-Black oppression—which includes an affective relationship of despair in response to the depth of this oppression—that enslaved and nominally free Black people in the US gain a sense of their potential for collective action. While the content of the judgment that the *Appeal* invites Black audiences to make might take the form 'there is nothing to be done,' the fact that this judgment is made through collective "inquiry and investigation,"— by fulfilling the responsibility Walker imputes to his Black readers— means that the process of coming to despair generates a sense of political community among Black Americans. Walker's goal is not to make individual readers despair, but to forge a people through this politicization of despair. It is precisely in reading and responding to the text— activity that Walker himself was deeply invested in instigating through covert distribution of the *Appeal*— that Walker's primary audience come to see themselves as possessing the collective power to resist the very conditions of oppression about which the *Appeal* despairs.

This is why Walker observes in Article 1:

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; for we must remember that what the whites have written respecting this subject, is other men's labors, and did not emanate from the blacks (17).

The task of abolition, in Walker's view, is not only a matter of evaluating and disproving arguments made in defense of these oppressive institutions; the task is fundamentally a matter of acknowledging and organizing the collective political agency of the oppressed. The struggle against injustice is at the same time a struggle to forge new forms of political community. Despairing together, Walker shows, is one means of generating such community.

I have argued that David Walker connects a political affect of despair to a political affect of hope by distinguishing between the content and form of despair. While the content of despair—a sense that there is nothing to be done—might seem to foreclose, much less generate, the possibility of hope—a sense that we can act together to change things—Walker shows in the *Appeal* how the activity of despairing together is a way of forging political community. Walker envisioned the dissemination of the *Appeal* as a means of bringing Black Americans to collectively confront their 'wretchedness' as a consequence of white supremacist domination, and in so doing channel a shared sense of despair into a sense of peoplehood and collective agency.

It would be an overstatement of my thesis to say that despair poses no problem for emancipatory politics. But Walker's analysis of the potentially generative interplay between despair and hope also helps to articulate the political dangers posed by despair. One can have a sense that there is nothing to be done in isolation from others; indeed, the feeling of despair itself can drive one into isolation. This is why Walker is at pains, in his prefatory remarks in the *Appeal*, to impute a responsibility to Black audiences to engage with his pamphlet in concert

with one another. The emancipatory potential of despair, on Walker's account, depends upon despair being shared. While, Walker shows, there is nothing that precludes us from despairing together, this politicization of despair is a project whose success is not automatic, and which must confront the atomizing pressure that despair exerts on individuals.

This is precisely where I locate the role of educators, like the Core Curriculum instructors to whom I initially directed these remarks, in relation to their students' despair. Whereas the organizer, like Walker himself, aims to channel the sense of community generated by collective despair into a more or less concrete course of action (in Walker's case, insurrection), the educator helps her students recognize the potential to despair not in isolation from, but in community with, one another. The educator can do this both by showing how political thinkers like Walker have sought to channel despair into hope through projects like the *Appeal*, spurring students to think with one another about the emancipatory potential of despairing together. Such humanistic study affords opportunities for civic education not in the sense of instilling expertise about institutions and policies, but in offering us a richer sense of our own political agency by seeing it refracted in the ways texts operate upon their historical audiences, and upon us.

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