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The Other Side of the Struggle: Freeborn Abolitionists, Communication, Perseverance, and Brotherhood

Sarah Ahearn

On the eve of the Civil War, John Mercer Langston, born a free man in Virginia, addressed a tremendous crowd in Cleveland, Ohio. Langston, who went on to become one of the first African-Americans elected to public office in Ohio and the first African-American elected to Congress in Virginia, was an vivid political activist, lawyer, and abolitionist. In his lecture, entitled “The World’s Anti-Slavery Movement; Its Heroes and Its Triumphs,” Langston highlighted some of the most important contributions that Northerners had made to the abolitionist effort. Dubbing the people of the North the movement’s “living orators,” Langston stressed the importance of movements crafted at the hands of freeborn black men and women (Langston 62). “Our anti-slavery books... are not only read by all classes, in every section of this country, but are read and admired by the common people... The influence... is silent, yet potential, well-nigh omnipotent” (61–62). There existed a fire that was brought about by a people who chose to remain in our nation and to work within that nation’s Constitution in order to change their world. This idea is best articulated in Langston’s own words:

Animated by the same spirit of liberty that nerved their fathers, who fought in the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, to free this land from British tyranny, they are inveterate and uncompromising enemies of oppression, and are willing to sacrifice all that they have, both life and prosperity, to secure its overthrow... To have brought the means of education and development to such a people, a people possessing such a spirit, is certainly one of the more desirable and valuable achievements of the American anti-slavery movement (63–4).

Langston was not alone in the fight for freedom. What has been sorely lacking in the study of the abolitionist movement of the North is the experience of the black men and women who had been born free, and the role that they took in freeing their race in the South. Those men and women lived in a time where it was a simple matter of chance that they themselves had not been condemned into a life of slavery; it was purely a matter of location that had spared them their lives. It is this particular circumstance that cultivated this group of people who were publicly connected to the abolition movement decades before Civil War erupted in America. The

experiences of freeborn blacks in the North help to fill in the holes of the history of abolition. Aside from being historically momentous, this movement is an intriguing story of perseverance and unity—one that is characteristic of the American drive for freedom that we today pride ourselves on. Their methods of protest set an important precedent for future civil rights struggles both within and beyond the black community.

There was not one singular opinion among northern blacks concerning slavery and the actions to be taken thereabout in the time period before the Civil War. In reality, there was significant stratification of beliefs. For example, there was a movement based on the idea that mass immigration to Liberia was the only way to establish a land of free blacks. That idea and its subscribers, however, did not change the course of history. The others, those who believed in remaining in America, the land of their birth, and working within the country to change unjust policies, did. David Walker, black abolitionist, wondered of those “colonizationists,” “Do they think to drive us from our country and homes, after having enriched it with our blood and tears...?” (Walker 77). Walker, along with so many others, sought to change America rather than escape it. A monumental achievement of freeborn black abolition was development of a public celebration of black American history. Though the common plea was for a complete separation of North and South, many freeborn blacks felt the same sense of belonging to America as whites did. They asserted themselves as a pertinent part of their country, celebrated their own past, and looked confidently and boldly into the future. It was those individuals who rebelled against the unjust policies of the government by promoting violence and civil disobedience, unity through celebration, and pride in the black race. The celebration of the accomplishments of the abolitionist movement and of the overall role that blacks had played in American history, be it through literature, action, or speech, were thus vital to the motivation and success of the freeborn blacks of the North.

One of the means by which Northern blacks began to promote abolition was by communicating ideas across the nation through literature. In the mid-nineteenth century, a culture of reform in response to various social problems emerged, and began for the first time to use the print media to communicate their messages. Under this umbrella of social reform, an abundance of abolitionist newspapers came into existence. This fledgling social change facilitated the growth of the freeborn anti-slavery movement by providing an important outlet to spread awareness: the press. Revolutionary David Walker provides an example of an early utilization of print media and the effects that it can have on public opinion. *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 was a pamphlet that was first published in 1829. Walker's pamphlet expresses his distaste with the institution of slavery and shocked many with its violent suggestions. *Walker's Appeal* brutally chastises not only slaveholders, but all white Americans. Walker boldly calls for the slaves to rise up against their masters, darkly predicting that white Americans "will yet curse the day that [they] were ever born" (Walker 82). As one of the earliest examples of black activism via the print media, Walker's pamphlet marked the beginning of a long period of change in the United States.¹

The exact extent to which David Walker's pamphlet influenced public opinion is difficult to estimate. It was distributed across the nation, gaining success in some areas and becoming banned in others. What is apparent, however, is that Walker's words did not fall upon deaf ears. Reaching whites and blacks across the North and even into the Deep South, *Walker's Appeal* enraged and inspired an audience far more vast than Walker himself could have foreseen. Despite being chastised for its violent implications, Walker's opinions remained in the public discourse for quite some time, bringing the idea of abolition and violence further into the national spotlight. Credited with radicalizing the abolitionist movement, the repercussions of Walker's pamphlet are often connected with events such as the infamous Nat Turner rebellion of 1831. Word had spread throughout the South of Walker's ideas, creating a tense, fearful environment in slaveholding communities as the threat of insurrection loomed overhead. Though the two men never actually conversed, Walker's ideas reached and inspired Turner. The resonance of the written word shook America to its core as the only way of life many of its citizens knew began to change (Risley, 26–27; Harding 75–100).

The fear of a slave insurrection that ran rampant through the South was solidified on October 16, 1859, when John Brown led an army of men into Harpers Ferry in order to raid its military arsenal and to arm slaves, so that they could forcibly overthrow their masters. Fear spread throughout the nation following the bloody seizure, as newspapers such as the *New York Herald* reported an "Extensive Negro Conspiracy"² in the South. In regards to the action that the *Richmond Enquirer* dubbed one that had "advanced the cause of Disunion, more than any other

¹ John C. Inscoe, "David Walker, 1785–1830," Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/bio.html> (accessed November 19, 2011).

² "Harper's Ferry," *New York Herald*, October 18, 1859. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1538b.html> (accessed November 21, 2011).

event that has happened since the formation of the Government,”³ Thomas Hamilton, journalist for the *Weekly Anglo-African*, published an article justifying the use of violence. Hamilton joined the chorus of voices who chastised the enslavement of human beings and the practice of regarding blacks as property: he justified the actions of Brown and his men by pointing out that humans are not property, and therefore any attempts to “restore stolen chattels to their proper owners—to restore the slave to himself” are morally justified (Hamilton 41–42). It is words such as these that exemplify the fledgling sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that drove the stories of these abolitionists. While most newspapers in the country were focusing on the terror and the fear that John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry had brought upon the South, freeborn black men such as Hamilton spoke for the cause, for the abolitionists. From Walker to Turner to Brown, the movement began to swell, fueled by years of injustice that could only be combated by an unyielding unified force.

Violence was naturally not the only form of disobedience that drove abolitionists. There has been a longstanding tradition of civil disobedience in America, especially in the struggle for black civil rights, which saw its beginnings during the era of the abolitionists. Abolitionists who chose to be lawfully acknowledged carried the theme of civil disobedience from international slave discourses into America. In 1849, philosopher Henry David Thoreau published his infamous discourse on civil disobedience. Thoreau’s reverberating declaration for “not...no government, but at once a better government,” to be obtained by letting “every man make known what kind of government would command his respect,” which will “be one step toward obtaining it,” was embraced by the next wave of freeborn blacks (Thoreau 2).

When the Ohio Supreme Court decreed that mulattoes or any voter of African descent did not have the right to vote, the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society fought back. William J. Whipper was one of the many who attempted to vote in town elections on April 4, 1859. He recounted his actions in a letter to the editor of the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, which was then published on April 23. Drawing upon the state’s legislature regarding voting, Whipper detailed his belief that the law accommodated his right to vote by not expressly prohibiting it. In a few passionate lines, Whipper summed up his determination to the cause of abolition and the establishment of basic human rights, as well as his disdain for the Supreme Court of Ohio:

³ “The Harper’s Ferry Invasion as Party Capital,” *Richmond Enquirer*, October 25, 1859. <http://history.furman.edu/editorials> (accessed November 21, 2011).

I guess they will conquer, but conquer who? not the Mexicans, nor the Brighamite Mormons. Well, then, who is it? A colored man in Charlestown, Portage County, Ohio, who stands armed with the statute of Ohio, and a determination to insist upon his rights, notwithstanding the established custom of past years. So come on with your forces, for being quiet is no part of my mission (15–17).

Whipper's passion for the abolitionist movement and drive to spread awareness and unity is evident in his choice to publish his story. His disobedience represents one instance of many, where freeborn blacks used the law to defend themselves against the tyranny of oppression. These men who believed in fighting for civil rights in the North as well as the South saw that the introduction of black voters would inevitably aid the cause of abolition. They understood that unity in the face of adversity would change their world. The struggle for abolition among freeborn blacks may not have encompassed one form of disobedience, or purely civil disobedience for that matter, but did draw upon the same moral framework. Every article that resembled Whipper's sent shock waves through the country. The movement was dynamic, growing with each action, threatening to irrevocably alter American society.

At the very core of the movement stood the all-encompassing moral elevation of the black race. The betterment and unity of the black race as a whole would lead ideally to the freedom of those enslaved in the South. In 1860, John S. Rock, a black lawyer and anti-slavery activist, spoke before a large audience in Boston, Massachusetts, addressing such ideals. William C. Nell, another freeborn black abolitionist, had organized the rally for the purpose of celebrating black involvement in American history, particularly recalling the memory of Crispus Attucks. Attucks's death in the Boston Massacre symbolized black involvement in revolutionary history to these men and women who gathered annually to honor his memory.

Speaking to a crowd much larger than the traditional town hall meetings encountered previously in American history, John S. Rock sought not only to commemorate Attucks, but also to connect that black revolutionary spirit to the present day. In lieu of the Dred Scott decision, Rock called for further activism and perseverance. He stated, "I believe in insurrections—and especially those of the pen and of the sword" (Rock 73). Rock believed John Brown to be something of a second coming of Crispus Attucks, as both were men who had started a revolution. It was the revolutionary spirit of Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry that represents Rock's "sword." Anti-slavery publications and written discourse, the "pen," symbolize the other leg of Rock's belief. Organizations and celebrations such as the one organized by Nell instilled unity and pride in the members of the black community who were among the most important

figures in the fight against slavery. It was morally just and sound that the colored men and women of America fight back against the oppression cast upon them by the slaveholders of the South and the government; it was only by presenting a united front that the black race would emerge prosperous (58–66).

Thomas Hamilton joined Rock and the many others in the call for black unity. In an 1860 publication of the *Weekly Anglo-African*, he demanded the betterment of the black race and for the education of the masses in the ways of politics and abolition. “We must rely on ourselves,” he stated (Hamilton 73). Hamilton, as previously discussed, advocated for violence in the years prior. His later article is not reflective of his separation from radical ideas, but rather it is representative of the all-encompassing nature of black pride and solidarity. The push for the celebration of black memory throughout history and the unity of the black race in the face of adversity were two of the most common themes in the freeborn black abolitionist discourse. It was the theme that united the push for violence and civil disobedience and that mended the split in ideologies. Encompassing moral and political elevation, the unity of the black abolitionists and the spreading of their message to the masses through speech and print culture are strongly intertwined with the success of the abolitionist movement in America.

The passion and the diligence that drove the freeborn anti-slavery movement is one that is characteristic of the American spirit. The effects of freeborn black activism led to a widespread awareness of the condition of blacks in the South, thus ultimately fueling America’s descent into Civil War. Their activism spread education among blacks in both the North and the South, uniting the race and fueling rebellion. The means by which these protests and stories of activism reached such a broad audience is through the conscious effort on the part of the abolitionists to record, publicize, and preach their message. John Mercer Langston said of the anti-slavery movement: “[I]t has brought the subject of slavery itself distinctly and prominently before the public mind” (Langston 59). The spreading of awareness of the struggles endured by both slaves and free men fighting for abolition was a large contributing factor in the dissolution of North and South. Without acting as they had, freeborn abolitionists may not have had such a tremendous effect on the fate of the United States.

The study of freeborn black activism in the United States opens the door to many other areas of research. The men and women who contributed to this cause were passionate and determined. They evoked various methods of protest that one can see reflected in the struggle for black civil rights throughout American history. Racial pride and solidarity have proven to be

successful and powerful tools in the face of adversity. They bridge the gap between violent rebellion and civil disobedience; they mend the cracks between those who fight and those who are oppressed. Their demands were met with bloody civil warfare and begun the long struggle for equality in America. Their collective story is largely untold, as they were simply one part of a larger machine. However, the personal and ideological movement that was freeborn black activism is deserving of recognition; it is imperative to understand the other side of the struggle.

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