

Violence as an Option for Free Blacks in Nineteenth-Century America

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Introduction

In August 1846, twelve Blacks from the states of Ohio, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Tennessee assembled in St. Louis, Missouri to launch a revolutionary organization dedicated to the violent overthrow of slavery. Called the Twelve Knights of Tabor, the members were sworn to secrecy, and they dedicated their lives to the bloody and violent overthrow of slavery (Dickson 19). The group has been described as “one of the strongest and most secret of any organization ever formed by men,” and it remained secret until 1891 (Aptheker 378). Then one of its founding members, the Rev. Moses Dickson of St. Louis, decided to immortalize memories of the founders by publishing a manual detailing its origins and structure (378). A minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Dickson hailed originally from Ohio, where he immersed himself in civil rights efforts and in post-Civil War politics. He was also a founding member of the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri (now Lincoln University). In 1856, according to Dickson, the movement changed its name to the *Order of Twelve*. By this time it boasted a membership of about 47,000 “knights of liberty” all dedicated to, “aiding in breaking the bonds of our slavery.” The Order also became very active in the Underground Railroad, helping spirit slaves to freedom, while, at the same time, preparing for the ultimate assault against slavery (378–9).

Although driven by deep-seated hatred of slavery, the knights did not immediately launch their revolutionary attack. Instead, they

invoked divine intervention, believing, "That the lord God was on the side of right and justice, our faith and trust was in him, and that he would help us in our needy time" (379) . In the meantime, they stockpiled arms and ammunitions, and held periodic drills. The various divisions and their respective leaders stood in readiness, waiting for the ultimate call expected from the Commander-in-Chief. Once summoned, they were to converge in Atlanta from where the assault on slavery would begin. The call finally came in July 1857. By this time, the army had grown to "at least 150,000 well-armed men" (Aptheker 379). However, as the army prepared to spread death and destruction through the South, something extraordinary happened; "the Chief . . . paused and scanned the signs that were gathering over the Union. The North and South were having a terrible struggle for mastery on the slave question. The Chief called a halt and notified the knights that it was plainly demonstrated to him that a higher power was preparing to take a part in the contest between the North and South" (Aptheker 380). Thus, what would have been the bloodiest insurrection by free Blacks in American history was aborted by the specter of divine intervention.

The formation of the knights represented perhaps the only recorded effort by a group of free Blacks in the nineteenth-century United States to unleash violent assaults against slavery. With the exception of vigilante committees and organizations that evolved in the 1840s and 1850s in New York, Philadelphia and other northern cities, free Blacks generally only talked and theorized about violence, demonstrating little inclination to translate violent rhetoric into violent insurrection. The knights appear to have gone further than any previous group, in their meticulous planning and seeming determination to unleash violence, regardless of its chances. Yet they hesitated, and despite their anger and frustrations, the knights would not embark upon any violent attacks without the guidance and helping hand of a "higher power." In 1857, some three years before the outbreak of the Civil War, this "higher power" prevailed upon the knights to abandon their violent schemes and place their faith in divine intervention. In this respect, the knights reflect the ambivalence toward violence as an instrument of change that was characteristic of free Blacks in antebellum America.

The early nineteenth century was indeed a violent era. Northern free Blacks discovered that the North was not a safe haven. In fact, the 'Mecca' of the Black struggle, Pennsylvania, was also one of the

most violent and inhospitable environments (Geffen 381–408). All over the North, free Blacks quickly realized that though slavery had become sectional, racism was national. Many whites in the North viewed the self-help and cooperative efforts of Blacks as uppity, and as a threat to the racial status quo. Instead of being appreciated, industrious and hardworking Blacks were often hunted down and violently persecuted. Private and public property, including institutional symbols of Black cooperation and industry such as churches, fraternal and cooperative societies, became targets of anti-Black riots and violence, meant to instill in Blacks an awareness and acceptance of their subordinate status in American society. Riots took place in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York (Simmons 30–57). The climax occurred in 1829 in Cincinnati. Alarmed by increase in the free Black population, the city decided to activate and enforce a provision of the dreaded Ohio Black Laws of 1807, requiring Black residents of the state to post a \$500.00 bond as a guarantee of self-sufficiency. Those unable to demonstrate self-sufficiency were required to leave the city. Riots ensued leading to deaths and destruction in the Black community. Many Blacks fled Cincinnati (Wright 136). The riots and violence provoked widespread indignation and outrage among Blacks across the nation. In response, Hezekiah Grice, a free Black from Baltimore, corresponded with prominent northern Blacks, including Rev. Richard Allen, Rev. Peter Williams, Peter Vogelsand, and Thomas Jennings, on the expediency of a meeting to discuss appropriate strategies of responding to the challenges confronting Blacks. His initiative led to a meeting in Philadelphia in September 1830, and the inauguration of the Negro Convention Movement, the framework for what later became organized Black abolitionism (Bell 10–5).

Although violence led to the formation of the Black abolitionist movement, ironically, the dominant ideology that shaped the movement for its first two decades, and indeed for much of the nineteenth century, was essentially conservative and pacifist. The Black leaders who assembled in Philadelphia responded to the violence of the Black experience with a philosophy that upheld and prioritized non-violence (Adeleke 127–40). Why did Blacks propose a peaceful, non-violent solution to a problem that was created, sustained, and exacerbated by the trauma and anguish of violence? Historians have underscored the overwhelming nature of white/state power. Confronted by this reality, Blacks had no choice but to jettison violence. In its place, they invoked a philosophy that combined an

appeal to both the moral conscience of whites and providential determinism. Still, Black abolitionist leaders did not completely disavow violence. Aware of Blacks' powerlessness, they sought to remove the initiative for violence from humans, insisting that God alone had the capacity to use violence against whites. Instead of violence, these leaders offered Blacks philosophical and religious constructions of non-violence. This rationalization of non-violence in what was essentially a violent context and struggle remains one of the truly remarkable, but neglected chapters in Black American history.

Brought together by the exigencies of anti-Black violence, Black leaders sought philosophical sustenance and hope in the prevailing tradition of non-violence and moral suasion abolitionism associated with the leading white abolitionists of the early nineteenth century—William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and the Quakers (Mabee 7–26). It is important to understand the broader context of the pacifist character of early nineteenth-century Black abolitionism. Although the convention movement took the form of concerted efforts by Blacks to strategize and become more proactively involved in the abolitionist crusade, many of the key leaders of the Black abolitionist movement were members of the larger white abolitionist movement. This broader national context of white abolitionism that many Blacks tapped into was heavily infused with pacifist ideas and philosophies. Although leading white abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s belonged to different organizations, most of them seemed to share an abiding faith in pacifism (Mabee 27–88). Several of the Black leaders who assembled in Philadelphia were indeed one-time followers of Garrison, and his New England-based anti-slavery movement, which emphasized moral suasion and non-violence. As the Black abolitionist movement matured, the leaders adopted these principles as a guiding philosophy.

Moral suasion and non-violence, therefore, became a central pre-occupation of the leading proponents of the Black abolitionist crusade. From the onset, the free Black leaders who gathered in Philadelphia in 1830, and in subsequent Negro National and State conventions, decided to shift the focus of their struggles away from the classic American revolutionary precedent and the tradition that acknowledged the legitimacy of revolt against tyranny. They chose instead to situate their struggles within another classic American ideal: effecting peaceful change through cultivation of

the Protestant work ethic. Thus they advanced moral suasionist ideology that emphasized industry, economy, Christian character and education. They seemed to be responding, at least in part, to the implications of the Ohio bond issue that had required free Blacks desirous of residing in the state to demonstrate proof of solvency. These Blacks felt a compelling need to demonstrate a capacity for industry, self-sufficiency, and self-improvement. For leading Black abolitionists, the pursuit and achievement of economic elevation, rather than violence, became the most effective strategy for change. This, they hoped, would present a positive image of Blacks as hardworking and economically viable members of society. And given this conviction and preoccupation, Black abolitionists de-emphasized the revolutionary tradition of violent resistance to tyranny. The solvency issue—and pro-slavery ideology in general—suggested a certain economic/materialist, as opposed to racial, hermeneutics of Black subordination. According to this perception, Blacks were enslaved and discriminated against largely because of their wretched condition, itself an indication of inherent inferiority. Responding to this argument, Black leaders downplayed racism, and affirmed condition instead (i.e., material and moral deficiencies) as the critical explanation for Black subordination. They advocated and embraced strategies that, they hoped, would improve the Black condition and thus convince whites that Blacks were not inherently inferior and therefore deserved full citizenship and equality (Bell 10–68).

Black abolitionist leaders envisioned America as a nation of one people temporarily fractured by moral failures and corruptions, resulting partly from the deficiencies of the Black condition. The success of moral suasion, therefore, would bridge this racial gap. For free Black leaders, the choice was clear and simple: it was between the revolutionary tradition of violence and the moral approach of reassuring American whites of the capacity of Blacks for economic solvency. It is within this context, therefore, that the leaders in Philadelphia, and at subsequent conventions, unambiguously proclaimed their faith in America and solidarity with whites, and pledged to pursue peaceful self-improvement efforts, designed to address the national moral failure.

Although, as an abolitionist philosophy, moral suasion has received some scholarly attention, its non-violent component and essence remains largely ignored (Bell; McCormick). Yet, the two constitute opposite sides of a single coin, and are therefore inseparable. For

moral suasion to succeed, advocates had to negate the appeal of violence as a reform strategy. This task fell upon William Whipper and the Rev. Lewis Woodson, two of the leading philosophical gurus of the early Black abolitionist crusade who spearheaded the debate and discourse on moral suasion and non-violence. What is striking about these individuals was the manner in which they espoused non-violence by situating it within a providential deterministic philosophy of violence. Their ideas on moral suasion and non-violence influenced the Black movement for much of the 1830s and 1840s. Indeed, they shaped discourses on strategies and means for future generations of Black leaders.

William Whipper: Universalism and Reason:

Relatively little is known about William Whipper's background. He was born on 22 February 1804, in Little Britain, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. By 1828, he had settled in Philadelphia and became actively involved in the burgeoning Black struggle. He seemed to have excelled in business, becoming one of the wealthiest Blacks in the state. Whipper's relative economic success seemed to have instilled in him an optimistic outlook, and the conviction that the obstacles confronting Blacks were not insurmountable. He espoused a universalistic philosophy that diminished the role of race and implored Blacks to unite with whites in a common struggle for the improvement of humanity. Due to his faith in the universal brotherhood of humanity and his desire to instil in Blacks a strong consciousness of affinity with whites, Whipper had to address the prevailing and disturbing spectre of violence. His underlying objective was to discourage Blacks from resorting to violence. He developed a philosophical theory that defined non-violence as a divinely mandated strategy.

In Whipper's judgment, ameliorating a condition, however inhumane and unjust, should not "cost misery, pain, sweat, blood, tears and treasures" ("Address" 1). To apply violence as a solution to Black problems would cause all of the above. Whipper's philosophy of non-violence rested on two existentially derived premises. First, to be non-violent reflected humanity's divine essence and connection, since God, whose defining character was pacifism, created humankind in his image (1). Second, as he put it, "man's superiority over the beast" consisted only in his reasoning powers and rationality of mind (1). Violence is a manifestation of the erosion of human reasoning, thus reducing humans to the level of

the beast. He reminded Blacks that to be violent was to deface their divine essence and likeness. Non-violence became the central defining character of God in Whipperian ethics. God and his creatures (humans), therefore, shared a pacifist bond. The central element in Whipper's philosophy of non-violence was the concept *Reason*: the rational mind of human beings (1). This God-given feature, if properly utilized, would at all times steer humans away from the path of violent confrontation. To be violent, retaliatory, and vindictive was to disobey God. Indeed, according to Whipper, violence eroded the divine essence of humans and effectively dislodged them from the Godly connection (1). He characterized evil and its manifestations (slavery and racism) as the result of the failure on the part of human beings to exercise reason and thus to live up to God's will—a failure to reflect the divine essence (1). In his judgment, Blacks could not undermine the evils of slavery and racism through violence. Violence would further distance them from God, who alone was able to free them. The only approach was to utilize their reason and embrace moral suasion. The kind of change that Blacks sought would only occur through a moral appeal that would prove the irrationality of slavery and racism and, ultimately, the irrationality of divisions among humans (1).

For Whipper, moral suasion became the ultimate manifestation of the supreme reign of reason among humans. In his judgment, violence had a tendency to provoke counter-violence and could never solve Blacks' problems. As he maintained, "There is scarcely a single fact more worthy of indelible record, than the utter inefficiency of human punishments to cure human evils" (1). He characterized violence as a product of "the rude passion" that animated human beings, denying them peace and stability (1). He implored Blacks to jettison this "rude passion," claiming that the exercise of reason alone can aid in banishing it. The process, however, entailed willingness and determination by Blacks to overlook the offenses and wrongs done to them. Blacks had to transcend the passion for vengeance, seek "protection" in something "higher than human power, and "place their faith in Him who is able to protect them from danger" (1).

Whipper defined violence as the manifestation and result of "human passion" which itself is "the hallucination of a dystempered mind" (1). Such a mind is restless and devoid of "order" "which is nature's first law" (1). Whipper thus emphasized the destabilizing effect of violence and its contravention of God's

natural order. This projection of God's "natural order" was not indicative of its perfection. In fact, Whipper acknowledged the imperfections of the natural order. His main concern was to demonstrate that the application of violence by Blacks would further undermine, rather than advance, the prospect for reform. It is useful to situate his philosophy of non-violence within the broader context of the anti-Black violence that had inspired the convention movement. There were "radical" elements within the Black struggle that counselled immediate violent response or the systematic adoption of violence in guerilla-like fashion. Whipper sought to counteract this "radical" disposition by enlightening Blacks on the divine and ennobling character of patience and non-violence. To strengthen the providential character of non-violence, and solidify his ideas among Blacks, Whipper invoked Biblical authority. As he reminded Blacks, the Messiah "commands us to love our enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you" (1). Whipper referenced scriptural precepts to prove that resistance to physical aggression was a diversion from the "moral and divine law" (1).

In objecting to non-violence some Blacks advanced "self-defence" as the first law of nature. Whipper agreed that in principle, "it is the unbounded duty of every individual to defend himself against both the vulgar and false aspersions of a wicked world" (1). However, the weapon of reason, he insisted, and not of violence, should affect this defence. Since God has given humans the "power of speech, and ability to reason," to use violence is to degrade oneself by invoking "passion and physical conflict" that were sure to generate turmoil (1). Furthermore, violence would only further alienate whites. In contrast, non-violence was the most appropriate means of "convincing" whites of the justness of the Black cause.

Whipper's non-violent convictions were no doubt inspired by the prevailing abolitionist traditions of the Garrisonians and Quakers, whose moral suasionist and non-violent philosophy dominated and shaped the wider abolitionist movement of the early nineteenth century. He greatly admired Garrison, whom he credited with inspiring his universalistic convictions (1). Besides Garrison, Whipper applauded white abolitionists in general for their moral suasionist stand and for exhibiting both the essential goodness of human beings and the potential for the eventual triumph of reason. In his view, white abolitionist adherence to non-violence, and willingness to suffer without retaliation guaranteed their survival

and consequently their ability to sustain the struggle. Had they invoked violence, and passion, Whipper suggested, they would definitely have been annihilated by the equally determined and violent passion of their opponents.

It is worth remembering that Jacksonian America was a particularly violent epoch for abolitionists, especially whites. The anti-Black riots and violence of 1829 in Cincinnati that became the precipitating factor for organized Black abolitionism were not an isolated event, but a part and reflection of a broader national intolerance against free Blacks and the abolitionist movement (Geffen 381–408; Simmons 30–57; Richards 20–130). Witnessing the violent treatment of white abolitionists by anti-abolitionist mobs, many Black abolitionists reached the logical and reasonable conclusion that violence was not a viable option. Convinced that a resort to violence was doomed to failure, Black abolitionists advanced reason and moral truths as guaranteed to yield positive results since, according to Whipper, “they are based on Christian principle” (“An Address” 1). Violence would only expose the inherent weakness and failure of the human reasoning ability. Whipper urged Blacks to seek solution through the power of reason, which he described as, “The noblest gift of heaven to man,” because it “assimilates man to his Maker” (Whipper 4). As Blacks improved their minds through the exercise of reason, their actions “would bear the imprints of the Deity.”

Lewis Woodson and the Survivalist Ethics:

A fugitive from Virginia, Woodson came to own several barber shops in Philadelphia. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the city’s Black leaders. Like Whipper, he fervently embraced moral suasion. Racism and other restrictions notwithstanding, he believed that opportunities existed elsewhere for Blacks to improve themselves and, eventually, to appeal successfully to the moral conscience of whites. Perhaps Woodson’s most compelling contribution to a philosophy of non-violence was his growing concern over the rejection of colonization by Blacks. From its inception, Blacks overwhelmingly objected to colonization, a disposition that seemed to intensify. This almost pathological hatred of colonization had, in Woodson’s view, become detrimental to Blacks, as it blinded them to the possibility of achieving their goal through relocation. He saw no justification for Blacks to remain defiantly in a society that was clearly inimical to their well being. This was, in

his estimation, an unreasonably confrontational choice, given the possibilities of peacefully achieving change through voluntary repatriation (Woodson, "Death" 2). He deplored what he saw as a fatalistic decision by Blacks to risk death rather than emigrate to safer environments where survival would enable them to pursue productive efforts that could eventually win concessions from whites (2). As one of the early success stories of the Black community, Woodson believed that every Black person was capable of economic and social improvement. For this to occur, Blacks had to jettison this stubborn, fatalistic decision to remain in an oppressive and circumscribed environment. He wrote extensively on the opportunities awaiting Blacks in the "West" which he defined as including Illinois, Wisconsin, Oklahoma and Nebraska. There, he believed, free Blacks would find relative safety, and immense opportunities to elevate themselves.¹

Woodson's concern for the safety and security of the free Black class—a group whose survival he deemed critical to the freedom of slaves and to the future of the entire Black race—shaped his expatriation or repatriation philosophy. Bondage seemed to have circumscribed and undermined the slaves' capacity for self-determination. Consequently, in Woodson's judgment, the free Black class became the only available avenue and catalyst for change. This class was thus entrusted with a historical responsibility of immense magnitude that should not be compromised through reckless experimentation with violence. A true believer in the doctrine of "self-preservation as the first law of nature," Woodson urged free Blacks to seek existential triumph in emigration. In advocating emigration, or what he earlier termed "expatriation" Woodson was not asking Blacks to mortgage their rights to America or to deny their right to self-defence. He also strongly affirmed the right of individuals to self-defence, especially when attacked. Although personally opposed to it, he had tremendous respect for the courage of those driven by what he called the "expediency of a determination to die by the hands of violence, rather than to submit to an involuntary expatriation." Woodson acknowledged the right of Blacks "to an unmolested residence in the land of [their] birth." This right was both natural and inherent and any attempt at its violation "is always met by revulsion insuperable, even to death." In principle, therefore, Woodson conceded the inherent right of everyone to self-defence, particularly the defence of one's citizenship rights. Yet, for Blacks, these citizenship rights had not been fully acknowledged. Consequently, in

Woodson's view, the most critical challenge for Blacks was not in risking their lives to protect a citizenship that had not been realized but in perfecting the means of realizing that citizenship. This could only be guaranteed through the survival of the free Black population. As he emphasized, "I can do more good by living than by dying; especially in our cause. Suppose all the free people of color of the U. S. were exterminated, what, to all human appearance, would become the hope of the slave?"² Woodson thus tied the ultimate fate of the Black struggle to the collective responsibility, historical role, and survival of the free Black class. In actualizing this collective historical responsibility, free Blacks must avoid violence or any situation that could compromise their safety and survival. He offered free Black two options: *non-violence*, if they chose to remain among their oppressors or *expatriation* to a safer environment. He chose expatriation, for it guaranteed not only survival but also opportunities for improvement ('Augustine' "Death").

To make his case for non-violence, Woodson, like Whipper, sought scriptural corroboration. He posed a critical existential question: "As Christians . . . have we morally the right to allow ourselves to be deprived of life, rather than suffer the infliction of a physical wrong?" (2) By physical wrongs, he meant slavery and racism. Should Blacks sacrifice their lives over these wrongs? Invoking scriptural authority, Woodson answered, "we are morally bound by the sacred scriptures, to answer in the negative. The scriptures nowhere inculcate the idea that a man may deprive himself, or suffer others to deprive him, of life, in order to escape the infliction of physical evil" (2). Furthermore, he continued, "Christ directed his disciples when persecuted in one place to seek refuge in another" (2). He also invoked Solomonic wisdom, for King Solomon said, "the prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself, or *gets out of the way of it*, but the thoughtless pass on and are punished" (2).

For Woodson, escape from violent and perilous situations was consistent with the divine order. His ideas provoked strong reaction from "radical elements" who, while not exactly calling for the adoption of violence, objected to both the universalistic thrust of Whipper's anti-violent ethos and the optimistic disposition of Woodson's philosophy. The "radicals" preferred a clearly demarcated, racially distinct struggle. A racially constructed struggle, however, contradicted Whipper's universalism. Furthermore, it had the potential to divide, alienate, and ignite racial conflict,

thus undermining the "brotherhood of humanity" at the heart of his philosophy. The "radicals" also embraced a much more confrontational strategy that struck at the heart of Woodson's existential question. Samuel Cornish, editor of the *Colored American*, a mouthpiece of the "radical" New York elements, deemed Woodson's question seriously flawed. The decisive factor, he contended, should not be "a matter of suffering personal pains or penalties," but what he called the, "essential general principle" (2). He offered a much more critical counter-existential question: "As Christians, have we a right to hazard life in the maintenance of PRINCIPLE?"(2) Shifting the focus away from the individual's need to survive, which Woodson prioritized in his question, Cornish advanced *principle* as the more crucial consideration. Free Blacks should not focus on personal needs but rather on the larger cause of the Black struggle. He rephrased the existential question to read: "May we expose ourselves, as a small minority of individuals, to death, or even lay down our lives for the inalienable right to moral and physical good of the mass of the people?"(2)

There was thus a critical contest among Black leaders over which strategy best advanced the interest of the masses: escape/survival or resistance and sacrifice of life, if need be. One side prioritized the survival of the free Black class as critical, believing that the inevitable death and annihilation of this class through violence would jeopardize the prospect of freedom for those still in bondage. As its most ardent defender, Woodson asked, "strike from the list of the living the freedmen of this land, and what becomes of the hope of the slave?" ('Augustine' "Death") Emphasizing the critical role of free Blacks, he wrote, "It had ever been my constant and unwavering belief that the most powerful and legitimate agents in affecting the entire physical and mental emancipation of the slaves, are their brethren who are free" (2). The other side conceived repatriation as escapist and cowardly, and chose to remain and risk death on behalf of the masses. The issue was not personal survival, but *principle*; the willingness to sacrifice one's "life for the inalienable right to moral and physical good of the masses" ('Augustine' "Death"). In the opinion of the esteemed editor of the *Colored American*, the underlying consideration should not be the relative safety and security of the few but the condition of the masses (2). He urged, "We should always act not in reference to the advantages and safety of a few, but in reference to the good of the mass. The removal of a few from the county for the sake of their

comforts, or merely to save their own lives, would be selfish and ignoble" (2).

Broader Context

The moral suasionist ideas and non-violent philosophies of Whipper and Woodson eventually triumphed and shaped the Black abolitionist crusade for its first two decades. As they met at conventions, the overriding concern of Black leaders was not to initiate or adopt violence, but to look inward. They advised other Blacks to embrace self-improvement strategies of hard work, thrift, education, and Christian character. These, they felt, would appeal favourably to the moral conscience and reason of whites. At their national and state conventions from the 1830s to the early 1840s, Blacks discussed these ideas and experimented with varying strategies for self-improvement. By the late 1840s, however, some disillusioned and frustrated Blacks began to advocate violent confrontation. But even then violence was a minority option; the vast majority of the conventions of the 1850s, did not totally jettison moral suasion, even as they espoused political and immediatist strategies. Nowhere was violence adopted as a strategy. However frustrated Blacks were, violence was never a viable option. Attempts by "radical" elements to inject "race" into the struggle failed to win popular allegiance. In the judgment of leading Blacks, such a policy would have exacerbated an already tenuous racial relationship between Blacks and whites and, most importantly would have provoked retaliatory violence.

Whipper's injunctions against violence embodied both moral and practical considerations. As he emphatically argued, violence would provoke further violence, resulting in widespread destruction, rather than the resolution of the problem. Furthermore, he considered violence unethical, largely because it intimidated and alienated people. Thus he highlighted two key objections to violence: practical and ethical. Many Blacks believed that, as a strategy, violence was bound to fail because Blacks lacked the capacity to ensure its success. It seemed suicidal and unreasonable for Blacks to embark upon a violent upheaval that was bound to consume them in its aftermath. However, did the lack of a capacity to launch a successful violent revolt condemn Blacks to perpetual subordination? Was the situation hopeless? Most Black leaders did not see the situation as hopeless. This was why they sought reassurance in providential determinism. Black leaders were convinced that only

God could initiate a successful, violent revolt. The providential theory of violence, therefore, assured many Blacks of the probability and potency of violence. It seems reassuring to those who needed it, to know that Blacks were not totally at the mercy of whites.

A certain survivalist and transcendental ethos informed Black subscription to non-violence in the nineteenth century. In fact, many known Black advocates of non-violence insisted they were not inherently opposed to violence, but only deeply apprehensive about its chances. If there were guarantees of success, many Black advocates of non-violence would have embraced violence. Josiah Henson, the famous "Uncle Tom," affirmed this in his reaction to a call for violence made by Charles Lenox Remond of New England, at the Massachusetts Colored Convention of 1858. Remond urged the convention to prepare an address to the slaves inciting them to "rise with bowie-knife and revolver and muskets" (Foner and Walker 104). He insisted that Blacks, "would gain nothing by twiddling and temporizing. They were strong enough to defy American slavery." He urged Blacks to "stand up for, and by themselves" (97). The issue of violence was, according to a delegate, "by far the most spirited discussion of the convention" (105). Objecting to the incendiary and violent tone of this proposal, Henson retorted, "I didn't want to see three or four thousand men hung before their time, if such proposal were carried out, everything would be lost" (104). Henson thus underscored the practical side to non-violence. But he was no coward. "When I fight," he quickly added, "I want to whip somebody," suggesting he was not irrevocably anti-violent (104). Another delegate, Capt. Henry Johnson captured the dynamics of non-violence among Blacks with the observation, "If we were equal in numbers, then there might be some reason in the proposition" (104). The proposal was put to vote and lost by a wide margin.

Nineteenth-century Black abolitionists were ambivalent toward violence as a strategy. While acknowledging the necessity of violence, they refused, or were reluctant to endorse it. Due to the overwhelming nature of white power, Black leaders considered violent confrontation irresponsible and unwise, regardless of its justifiability. Thus, the only violence worthy of experimenting with, the only kind that guaranteed victory, was the one conceived within a providential deterministic framework. The subsuming of violence within providential determinism thus became a pervasive feature

of early nineteenth-century Black leadership response to violence as a reform strategy. This was a conscious attempt to situate violence outside the orbit of human determinism. The process entailed a curiously ambivalent formulation that combined acknowledgment of the theoretical relevance of violence, and the location of violence outside of the realm of human causation. What this philosophical acrobatic underscored, was that although theoretically the Black experience called for a violent response, violence was both impracticable and unethical for Blacks.

David Walker and Henry Garnet, two acclaimed Black militants, underscored this point in their thoughts. Theoretically, both conceded that the frustrations of Blacks justified violent response. But they offered an equally strong and compelling discussion of the potency and possibility of divine intervention. Walker's powerful book, *Appeal*, provoked angry reactions from the South, and among pro-slavery advocates nationwide. Walker denounced America in violent terms (Wiltse 7–18). Some critics have interpreted this to mean that Walker advocated the violent overthrow of slavery. Yet, nowhere in the book did he explicitly call for violence against slavery. In several passages, Walker utilized a Biblical sermonic style in his denunciation of America, envisioning divine retribution, and punishments of whites, in the event of a refusal to change their ways. Walker made it clear that it was not Blacks', but God's responsibility to wreak vengeance and punishment on whites. However angry and militant Walker sounded, he did not call upon Blacks to engage in violent attacks against the pro-slavery establishment. Blacks were incapable of initiating and successfully executing violence without divine intervention. The same was true of Garnet, whose *Address* has equally been hailed as a violent document (Ofari 144–53). Yes, Garnet urged slaves to adopt as their motto, "Resistance! Resistance!! Resistance!!!" However, as Harry Reed long ago observed, the violent rhetoric in Garnet's *Address* is conceived within a providential determinist framework (186–92). As he observed, "The most militant assertions of Garnet were quickly followed by disclaimers of the expediency of an armed revolt." (Reed 190) Although, Garnet insisted that, "No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance," he did not suggest violence as a strategy. He left the very nature and timing of this resistance open, telling Blacks; "What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of *expediency*" (emphasis added). Then, he implored them to "Trust

in the living God" (Ofari 153). In fact, Garnet's *Address* to the slaves was put to vote at the 1843 Negro National Convention in Buffalo, New York, and lost by one vote, a margin that, some suggest, reflected increasing support for violence. Nothing was further from the truth. The vote, however, was not whether or not to adopt violence as a strategy, but simply whether to include the speech as part of the conference documentations (*Minutes of National* 3–39). Had the delegates been asked to vote on the adoption of violence as a strategy, the margin of rejection would have been much wider. Even as Blacks in Pennsylvania, and other parts of the North experienced increased anti-Black violence, they did not completely abandon moral suasion for violence. Rather, they chose to emphasize political and immediatist strategies. Thus Walker and Garnet reflected something both Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany underscored in their equally ambivalent responses to John Brown's proposal for a violent overthrow of slavery. While both, on different occasions, applauded Brown's violent proposal as timely, and agreed with his grim analysis of the situation, neither was willing to embrace what was also a glaringly suicidal scheme. Each encouraged Brown only to a certain point. Once Brown reached the point of violent confrontation, both affected a *volte-face* (Goldstein 81–72; Rollin 83–95).

The debates on the efficacy of violence among Black leaders, therefore, underscored both the centrality of violence, and its problematic status as a strategy. Few nineteenth-century Blacks more perfectly reflected this ambivalence towards violence than did Martin Delany. As a student of the Woodson-Whipper school of moral suasion, Delany began his anti-slavery career a staunch moral suasionist, and very early, took the moral suasion crusade to free Black communities in the North (Adeleke 127–42). He attained intellectual maturity in Philadelphia under the tutelage of Woodson and entered the abolitionist movement a convinced and dedicated moral suasionist, whose ideas bore striking imprints of those of Woodson and Whipper. It should be understood from the outset that Delany was no stranger to violence. He had been born and raised in the slaveholding and violent Jeffersonian Virginia. Freedom did not immunize Delany against the violence of the epoch; neither did it prevent him from witnessing the violence and atrocities that daily defined the lives of his parents. Perhaps, Delany's baptism of fire came in 1848 during his moral suasionist crusade through the small Ohio town of Marseilles. There, in the company of fellow abolitionist, John Mercer Langston,

Delany almost got tarred and feathered by an angry mob of anti-abolitionists who shouted; "Burn them down, kill the niggers! They shall never leave this place . . ." They only narrowly escaped.³

Delany's philosophy of non-violence embodied three distinct elements. First, he recognized the individual's right to self-defence. He publicly proclaimed this conviction in his reaction to the Fugitive Slave Law before a gathering of citizens of Allegheny County, where he vowed to resist and kill whoever crossed the threshold of his house in search of fugitive. No one was excluded, not even a Supreme Court judge, not even the President, "surrounded by his cabinet as his body-guard, with the Declaration of Independence waving above his head as his banner, and the constitution of this country upon his breast as his shield." (Rollin 76) Second, he rejected organized violent attacks against slavery as suicidal because of what he termed the "numerical feebleness" of Blacks. Despite this fiery declaration of violence in the case of encroachment upon his personal security, Delany would not support organized violent outbursts that had little chance of success. Third, he believed that "self-preservation" was consistent with the first law of nature. Delany's authorized biographer, Frank [Frances] Rollin confirmed his self-preservationist disposition when she wrote that, "Nature marked [Delany] for combat and victory, and not for martyrdom." (300) In this, Delany reflected Woodsonian survivalist ethics. And, indeed as an advocate of Woodsonian emigration, the survival of free Blacks in a foreign land was, in Delany's judgment, the best guarantee for the development of a powerful, economically, and politically stable Black state that would establish the moral authority that would in turn create the condition for the eventual freedom of the enslaved.

"Were I a slave, I would not live to live a slave, but boldly STRIKE for LIBERTY, for FREEDOM or a martyr's grave" (2), Martin Delany wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in 1852. He was reacting to Garrison's review of his book, *The Condition*, in which he accused Delany of fomenting caste consciousness (Garrison, "New Publications"). Were Delany a slave, he possibly would have resisted violently! But he was never a slave. Yet, we can gauge the depth of his commitment to violence from his response to the one opportunity he had to utilize violence as a weapon of change. When John Brown approached him in Canada for assistance in

putting together a revolutionary army that would carry out his violent scheme, Delany encouraged Brown, but only up to a certain point, and rather ambiguously. Ultimately, he backed away from Brown's violent scheme. Although Delany often acknowledged the need for violence, he vehemently opposed the use of violence by Blacks because of its certainty of failure. He held strongly to the non-violent ethos of his mentor—Woodson—who impressed on him the wisdom of survival as the first law of nature. This was a lesson he retained throughout his career. The individual, according to Delany, must first guarantee and secure his physical survival in order to be in the position to struggle on behalf of other Blacks. Such survival came from strategies that do not endanger life. This explains Delany's ambivalent response to John Brown. The only violence Delany endorsed was collective violence; it had the chance of succeeding and was therefore sanctioned by God. This was his perception of the Civil War. Here, Blacks were neither alone, nor was the battle line neatly drawn along racial lines. Moreover, everything seemed to suggest that the War bore the imprints of divine intervention.

Like most free Blacks of his generation, therefore, it seemed easy for Delany to publicly proclaim his bravery. Paradoxically, this bravery conspicuously excluded violence, despite the fact that his freedom was still very much circumscribed by the persistence of slavery. These "brave" free Blacks were most reluctant, even with the latitude of freedom, to initiate violent overthrow of slavery and oppression. Two critical questions beg for consideration. First, why the reluctance and refusal by free Blacks to embrace violence as a reform strategy? Second, how did free Blacks view the utility of violence? The answer to the first is fairly obvious, and has been addressed by many free Blacks. Frederick Douglass made it clear in his response to John Brown in *Life and Times*. Douglass considered the individual's right to self-defence inviolable, and thus acknowledged the legitimacy and necessity of self-defence. Yet he was reluctant to endorse collective acts of violence by Blacks, which he regarded as not only impracticable but also suicidal. In his fight with the infamous slave-breaker Edward Covey, Douglass affirmed his right to self-defence. He also agreed in principle with Brown that violence against slavery was called for. Yet he would not go along with Brown because of the strong probability of failure. In the event of failure, Blacks would be hardest hit by the reprisals (Blight 71–94; Douglass 271–91).

Woodson and Whipper both manifested faith in the perfectibility of the American order. This led them to embrace moral suasion, and their faith in moral suasion in turn convinced them of the futility of violence. To sell and popularize moral suasion, they had to de-legitimize considerations that tended to favour violence. They combined contradictory approaches: acknowledgment of the necessity of violence and its rejection as a viable weapon of change. Other Black leaders shared and manifested this contradiction. This was a pervasive disposition among Black leaders. The violence of the pro-slavery establishment led some Blacks to acknowledge the need for violence and the legitimacy of retaliation. The overwhelming power of whites, however, convinced many of the impracticability and immorality of violence. Hence Blacks demonstrated a certain ambivalent attitude toward violence as a weapon of change. Douglass, Delany, Walker, and Garnet, all clearly exhibited this ambivalence. While Blacks were angry and seemed favourably disposed toward violence, the predominance of white power was enough to convince many to channel their impulse for violence in other peaceful directions, and many situated this within the jurisdiction of the divine, thus giving the *when* and *how* of violence to God.

The Civil War constituted a watershed for antebellum free Blacks. This collective national violence against slavery (as they perceived it) united Delany, Douglass, Garnet, and other Black leaders behind a common platform that called for military service in support of the Union cause. This was violence that all Blacks had to embrace, and not a suicidal option to be avoided. They had nothing to fear. It was not a war in which Blacks confronted the formidable power of the nation, but one that afforded the opportunity to contribute, from a position of strength, to the destruction of slavery. This war bore all the imprints of the divine. Little wonder that the call that resonated among free Blacks was one of active participation. God had finally provided the *when* and *how*! Delany expressed this conviction when in the aftermath of the war he enjoined Black leaders; "Do not forget God. Think, O think how wonderfully he made himself manifest during the war." (Rollin 282)

Notes

- 1 'Augustine.' "The West." *Colored American* 16 Feb. 1839; 2 Mar. 1839; 16 Mar. 1839; 15 June 1839; 31 Aug. 1839. Also "Going West." *Colored American* 15 July 1839.

- 2 'Augustine.' "To the Editor." *Colored American* 22 Sept. 1838. Also his "Death vs. Expatriation (no. 2)," *Colored American* 27 Oct. 1838: 2.
- 3 *The North Star*, 14 June, 1848

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- . "Going West." *Colored American* 15 July 1839.
- . "Death vs. Expatriation." *Colored American* 15 July 1839; 27 Oct. 1838; 6 Oct. 1838.
- . "To the Editor." *Colored American* 22 Sept. 1838
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