

# Writ In Blood: John Brown's Charter of Humanity, The Tribunal of History, and the Thick Link of American Political Protest

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All the great charters of humanity have been writ in blood. I once hoped that American democracy would be engrossed in less costly ink.

—*Theodore Parker, 1859*

I leave it to an impartial tribunal to decide whether the world has been the worse or the better of my living and dying in it.

—*John Brown, 1859*

If General Tubman is the Mother of Our Country and Frederick Douglass the Father . . . then bloody old Shenandoah Brown . . . is some kind of Godfather. Blood may be thicker than water, but politics is thicker than either.

—*Terry Bisson, 1988*

## Sketching the Charter of Blood

[Brown] has struck the bottom line of the philosophy which underlies the abolition movement . . . Slavery is a system of brute force . . . It must be met with its own weapons.

—*Frederick Douglass, 1859*

If you commence, make sure work," advised David Walker in his protest pamphlet, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829). Addressing all blacks who might rebel, he continued: "Do not trifle, for they will not trifle with

you—they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed.” The pamphlet prophesied millennial violence if slavery was not abolished: “The Americans may be as vigilant as they please,” warned Walker, “but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out.” He called blacks to action, to “go to work and prepare the way of the Lord,” explaining: “There is a great work for you to do.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1848, John Brown helped republish Walker’s pamphlet (alongside an oration by the militant black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet). Two years after this republication, the Fugitive Slave Law passed. Black abolitionists advocated responses to the law ranging from nonviolent civil disobedience to violent resistance. One, Joshua B. Smith, circulated weapons at an abolitionist meeting, and another, William P. Newman, wrote to Frederick Douglass: “I am frank to declare that it is my fixed and changeless purpose to kill any so-called man who attempts to enslave me or mine, if possible . . . To do this . . . would be an act of the highest virtue, and white Americans must be real hypocrites if they say not to it—amen!” At a meeting in Philadelphia, on October 14, 1850, several hundred free blacks passed a resolution that concluded: “In full view of the unheard of atrociousness of the provisions of this infernal FUGITIVE SLAVE BILL, we solemnly declare before the Most High God, and the world, to resist to the death any attempt to enforce it upon our persons.” The following year, when fugitives fought slave catchers trying to re-enslave them in Pennsylvania, the black radical James McCune Smith proclaimed: “Our white brethren cannot understand us unless we speak to them in their own language; they recognize only force. They will never recognize our manhood until we knock them down a time or two; they will then hug us as men and brethren.” Echoing Smith, Mr. Culver in Martin Delaney’s *Blake: or, the Hut of America* (1859) tells the black rebel Blake: “If you want white man to love you, you must fight im!” Blake sets out to incite a slave rebellion, Culver’s words ringing in his ears: “Go on young man, go on!” John Brown’s soon-to-be infamous strategies of violent resistance had a bloodline, traceable through the history of black abolitionism from Walker to Blake.<sup>2</sup>

Brown himself responded to the Fugitive Slave Law by forming the League of Gileadites, a black self-defense unit named after the Biblical army tested by God before battle. He wrote a document entitled “Words of Advice,” and 44 black residents of Springfield, Massachusetts, signed an “Agreement” on January 15, 1851. Brown’s advice included a range of guerilla tactics: “A lasso might possibly be applied to a slave-catcher,” he suggested, or recommended

entering the homes of prominent white friends after effecting a rescue. This last tactic, Brown explained, would “effectually fasten upon them the suspicion of being connected with you [and] . . . compel them to make a common cause with you . . . This would leave them no choice in the matter.” In June 1854 William Wells Brown visited Springfield a few days after both federal and state military forces had been sent to Boston to return Anthony Burns to slavery. There, he perhaps recognized a bloodline that extended from 1776 to his own writing. The rebel slave character George in his novel *Clotel* (1853) had pointed to the horror of July 4: “You make merry on the 4th of July . . . Yet while these cannons are roaring and bells ringing, one-sixth of the people of this land are in chains and slavery.” Invoking the spirit of 1776, George had justified his rebellion: “You say your fathers fought for freedom—so did we . . . Had we succeeded, we would have been patriots too.”

Similarly, Douglass’s rebel slave Madison Washington in his novella *The Heroic Slave* (1853) had justified his violence and claimed his freedom with the words: “We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they.” Douglass also believed that fugitive slaves “acted out the declaration of independence,” as he once put it, and during his famous fight with Covey felt that he and the slaveholder “stood as equals before the law”—the fight was his own declaration. For, beyond denouncing American history, Douglass and Wells Brown wanted to change it; their texts, and Brown’s “Words of Advice,” were words of action. Now visiting Springfield, Wells Brown observed that the League of Gileadites was more than ready to carry out Brown’s “Words of Advice.” When slave catchers came calling, “the authorities, foreseeing a serious outbreak, advised them to leave, and feeling alarmed for their personal safety, these disturbers of the peace had left in the evening train for New York,” he remembered. “No fugitive slave was ever afterwards disturbed at Springfield.”<sup>3</sup>

If Brown’s militant “charter” had the vertical depth of history, from 1776 through black abolitionists like Walker and Garnet, it also had the horizontal breadth of contemporaneous support. Beyond texts like *Clotel* and *The Heroic Slave*, Brown’s plans for armed resistance resonated with the platform of the Radical Political Abolitionists, who advocated violence as part of their divinely inspired role in ending slavery. On June 26, 1855, Brown arrived in Syracuse at the first day of their Inaugural Convention. He was on his way to Kansas. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill, passed on May 25, 1854, had placed the issue of slavery into the hands of those settling the new territories; a popular vote would decide whether Kansas would be “free” or “slave,” and both proslavery and antislavery Free Staters were pouring into the state. Brown wanted to raise money for arms

and seek encouragement from the Radical Political Abolitionists, including Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and James McCune Smith. In a speech to the convention, he quoted Hebrews 9:22, insisting that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin,” asked for money and arms, and then recommended to the other delegates that they help arm the free-state settlers in Kansas. There was some argument over whether the convention wanted to encourage violence, but eventually only one delegate dissented. Douglass recalled that “the collection was taken up with much spirit . . . for Capt. Brown was present and spoke for himself; and when he spoke men believed in the man.” By the end of the convention, the delegates had defined themselves as God’s disciples and declared slavery “a state of war.” They passed a resolution to resist any attempted return of fugitives to slavery. The following year, at their National Nominating Convention in Syracuse on May 28, 1856, one Radical Political Abolitionist characterized conditions in Kansas as a state “of *revolution!*,” and another called for immediate retaliation: “Slaveholders must be met at the point of the bayonet.” Douglass summarized the prevailing mood: liberty “must either cut the throat of slavery or slavery would cut the throat of liberty,” he declared, prompting vigorous applause. Meanwhile, Brown was turning Douglass’s rhetoric into action. Unbeknownst to Douglass, Brown and his men had cut the throats of five proslavery settlers four days earlier.<sup>4</sup>

That last week of May 1856 must have seemed bloody to Americans. Lawrence, Kansas, was burned and pillaged on May 21 by proslavery settlers, and in Washington on May 22, Preston Brooks bludgeoned Charles Sumner as retribution for Sumner’s speech “Crimes Against Kansas.” Then, late at night on May 24, Brown and seven others entered the proslavery settlement at Pottawatomie Creek and hacked to death five unarmed settlers. On June 8, the *New York Herald* described five bodies “cold and dead upon the ground, gashed, torn, hacked and disfigured to a degree at which even Indian barbarity would shudder,” and went on to characterize Brown and his men as “devils in human form . . . brutes [who] would disgrace the brutal Indian.” Brown’s self-fashioning, as the Indian warrior Osawatomie Brown, had seemingly gone too far. Retaliatory bloodshed ensued, and the murders shook the loyalty of even those closest to Brown, as his son Salmon explained in an account of that night: “[On May 25] Jason [Brown] . . . asked father if we killed those men. Father told them they had been killed and that he, John Brown Sr., was responsible for it. Jason replied, ‘Then you have committed a very wicked crime.’ Father said, ‘God is my judge.’ Jason started for Osawatomie to give himself up and was arrested with his brother John.” Though there is still some mystery surrounding the murders, caused in part by Brown’s failure to formally confess, the incident then remained the major sticking point

for most would-be admirers of Brown, who continue to find an awful irony in the fact that the victims had neither owned slaves nor participated in the sacking of Lawrence.<sup>5</sup>

Seemingly undeterred, Brown told his friend and future biographer Franklin Sanborn a few months after the murders, in January 1857: "I have always been delighted with the doctrine that all men are created equal; and to my mind it is like the Saviour's command, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;' for how can we do that unless our neighbor is equal to ourself? That is the doctrine, sir; and rather than have that fail in the world, or in these States, 't would be better for a whole generation to die a violent death." Then, at Douglass's home in Rochester, New York, the following January, Brown wrote his "provisional constitution" and declared that "whole generation" *already* at war. Echoing the Radical Political Abolitionists' definition of slavery in his constitution's "preamble," he argued it was "none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable *war* of one portion of its citizens upon another portion." Justifying armed resistance to end the war and preserve peace, he prepared the Harpers Ferry raid. On October 16, 1859, with a band of 16 whites and 5 blacks, Brown captured the town and its federal arsenal, intending that blacks arm themselves and rise up to claim their freedom. His men seized a sword from Colonel Lewis W. Washington, given to his grand uncle, George Washington, by Frederick the Great. Brown—connecting his actions to 1776, like Douglass's Madison Washington and William Wells Brown's George—brandished the sword until he fell. The band was overpowered early in the morning on October 18. Of the 21 men who fought beside him, ten died in the battle, six escaped, and five were later hung.<sup>6</sup>

On the morning of his own execution, on December 2, 1859, Brown handed a letter to one of the prison guards. Resoundingly, it read: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land*: *will* never be purged *away*; but with Blood. I had as *I now think*; *vainly* flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed; it might be done." Again, Brown's "charter" was written across pages other than his own: he unknowingly echoed a letter from the dying Theodore Parker to Francis Jackson, written on November 24. "A few years ago, it did not seem difficult first to check slavery, and then to end it, without any bloodshed," wrote Parker. "I think this cannot be done now, nor ever in the future. All the great charters of humanity have been writ in blood. I once hoped that American democracy would be engrossed in less costly ink; but it is plain now that our pilgrimage must lead through a Red sea, wherein many a Pharaoh will go under and perish." John Brown's body lay amoldering in the grave, and more than 600,000 more bodies would soon "go under."<sup>7</sup>

## Deciphering the Charter of Blood

The explanation of [Brown's] conduct is perfectly natural and simple on its face.

—Frederick Douglass, 1859

“The great bulk of mankind estimate each other’s actions *and motives* by the measure of success or *otherwise* that attends them through life,” observed Brown in a prison letter written on November 28, just a few days before his death. “By that rule I have been one of the *worst* and one of the *best* of men.” Looking to the future, he added: “I *do* not claim to have been one of the latter; and I leave it to an impartial tribunal to decide whether the world has been the *worse* or the better of my *living* and *dying* in it.” That “tribunal,” of course, was far from “impartial.” Immediate responses to the raid and execution ranged from John Wilkes Booth’s admiration for Brown’s pluck, daring, and theatricality at Harpers Ferry (“John Brown was a man inspired, the grandest character of the century,” insisted Booth), to Abraham Lincoln’s statement that although Brown “agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong,” this could not “excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason.” For while Lincoln agreed with Brown’s ends and disliked his means, Booth enjoyed Brown’s *means* and disliked his *ends*, observing in a draft of a December 1860 speech that Brown was executed for attempting “in another way” what Lincoln and the Republican Party were now doing, and that Brown’s method of “open force” was “holier than” the “hidden craft” of the Republicans; the lion “more noble than the fox.” Others, like John A. Andrew, separated actions and man, rather than ends and means: “Whether the enterprise of John Brown and his associates in Virginia was wise or foolish, right or wrong . . . John Brown himself is right,” declared Andrew at a Boston gathering to aid Brown’s family on November 19, 1859.<sup>8</sup>

In a short note written for James Redpath’s *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* (1860), the poet and abolitionist Richard Realf tried to advance the debate about ends and means, action and character, deciphering Brown’s “charter” as a kind of treaty to prevent aggression: “He believed that unless the interference of some third party should anticipate and thus prevent the interference of slaves themselves, these latter would, one day, overthrow the institution by a bloody war of extermination against their masters,” he explained; “it was to prevent havoc and carnage which, as he conceived, threatened the South, that he entered upon his ill-fated movement.” Similarly deciphering Brown’s raid against a backdrop of *worse* violence, the *Anglo-African Magazine* published an article titled “Brown and Nat Turner,” on December 31, 1859. The article asked: “Which

of the two modes of emancipation shall take place? The method of Nat Turner, or the method of John Brown?" In 1831 Turner had led 70 slaves in a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. The rampage left dead 60 whites and 100 blacks, and the *Anglo-African Magazine* article now condemned Turner's "terrible logic" that "could only see the enfranchisement of one race compassed by the extirpation of the other," instead praising Brown's belief that "the freedom of the enthralled could only be effected by placing them on an equality with the enslavers." Brown, "unable in the very effort at emancipation to tyrannize himself, is moved with compassion for tyrants, as well as slaves, and seeks to extirpate this formidable cancer," continued the article. "Had the order of events been reversed—had Nat Turner been in John Brown's place at the head of these twenty-one men, governed by his inexorable logic and cool daring, the soil of Virginia and Maryland and the far South would by this time be drenched in the blood and the wild and sanguinary course of these men, no earthly power could stay." Brown had therefore presented slaveholders with a "fearful choice," which the article summed up: "Choose ye which method of emancipation you prefer—Nat Turner's or John Brown's?"<sup>9</sup>

Other members of history's "tribunal," self-appointed to decipher Brown's "charter," simply judged that slavery was too deeply rooted to be pulled up by passive resistance. Even the high priest of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau, had asked in his famous "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849): "But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?" Then in 1854, when Massachusetts "restored an innocent man Anthony Burns to slavery," Thoreau realized that if "we would save our lives we must fight for them." He added in this journal entry of June 16, 1854: "My thoughts are murder to the State." In response to Brown's armed assault on Harpers Ferry, Thoreau now proclaimed: "I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable," and said of Brown: "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense [Brown] was the most American of us all."<sup>10</sup>

Also deciphering Brown's "charter," Osborne Anderson placed it in an even longer tradition. A freed black, Anderson had met Brown whilst working as a printer in Chatham, Canada. The only man left alive who was at Harpers Ferry throughout the whole raid, Anderson sat as a kind of participant-observer on history's "tribunal," publishing *A Voice From Harpers Ferry* in 1861. "The idea underlying the outbreak at Harpers Ferry is not peculiar to that movement, but dates back to a period very far beyond the memory of the 'oldest inhabitant,'"

he explained. Brown was not only “the most American of us all,” as Thoreau had put it; in fact, his ideas were “universal,” the language he spoke “understood by the haters of tyranny.” Brown’s bloodline was unbroken: “There is an unbroken chain of sentiment and purpose from Moses of the Jews to John Brown of America,” Anderson wrote, “from Kossuth, and the liberators of France and Italy, to the untutored Gabriel, and the Denmark Vesseys, Nat Turners and Madison Washingtons of the Southern American States.” Anderson continued to set Brown’s violent resistance in a venerable tradition, referencing Oliver Cromwell and adding that Brown’s bloodline made him Lafayette’s “brother”: “the exponent of French honor and political integrity, and John Brown, foremost among the men of the New World in high moral and religious principle and magnanimous bravery, embrace as brothers of the same mother, in harmony upon the grand mission of liberty.”<sup>11</sup>

Anderson’s “voice from Harpers Ferry” was one of numerous defenses of Brown by African Americans—many of whom deciphered Brown’s “charter” as truly one of “humanity” (to quote Parker). On November 29, 1859, before Brown’s execution, the black congregation at the Wylie street A.M.E. Church, in Pittsburgh met and resolved that: “John Brown, in taking up arms to liberate the slaves, only acted upon the maxim that ‘resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.’” Then, on the eve of Brown’s execution, on December 2, 1859, the Reverend J. S. Martin set out to further decipher Brown’s “charter.” In a speech in Boston, the black minister countered Brown’s violence with vivid descriptions of slavery’s violent horrors and, using an extended metaphor that echoed the *Anglo-African Magazine* article’s description of a “formidable cancer,” explained: “I do not believe the dagger should be drawn, until there is in the system to be assailed such terrible evidences of its corruption, that it becomes the dernier resort. And my friends, we are not to blame the application of the instrument, we are to blame the disease itself. When a physician for the use of the knife; but the impure blood, the obstructed veins, the disordered system, that have caused the cancer, and rendered the use of the instrument necessary. The physician has but chosen the least of two evils. So John Brown chose the least of two evils. To save the country, he went down to cut off the Virginia cancer.” Shedding blood as the nation’s physician, Brown had pursued the least worst option (as in the scenarios laid out by Realf and the *Anglo-African Magazine*). After applause, Martin added: “I say, that I am prepared to endorse John Brown’s course fully,” then posited that the failure of slaves to rise up and join Brown demonstrated an understanding that unless there was “a perfect demonstration that the white man is their friend—a demonstration bathed in blood—it were foolishness to cooperate with them”; that blacks had

learnt not to “trust the white man, even when he comes to deliver them.” Brown’s bloodshed, Martin concluded, had not been bloody enough.<sup>12</sup>

Echoing the Reverend Martin and the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Douglass was another who imagined Brown’s bloodshed as the byproduct of a necessary surgery: “The amputation of a limb is a severe trial to feeling, but necessity is a full justification of it to reason,” he observed. Douglass explained even Brown’s actions at Pottawatomie as “a terrible remedy for a terrible malady” and an attempt to meet “persecution with persecution, war with war, strategy with strategy, assassination and house-burning with signal and terrible retaliation, till even the blood-thirsty propagandists of slavery were compelled to cry for quarter.” While the incident, and the “horrors wrought by [Brown’s] iron hand,” could not be “contemplated without a shudder,” as Douglass acknowledged, this was “the shudder which one feels at the execution of a murderer.” But Douglass’s deciphering of Brown’s “charter” was a particularly complex and drawn-out process. Originally, he had suggested a tactic of moral suasion, proposing in 1847 that they might “convert the slaveholders” instead of trying to free the slaves by force. But, as Douglass recalled of this conversation, Brown “became much excited, and said that could never be, ‘he knew their proud hearts and that they would never be induced to give up their slaves, until they felt a big stick about their heads.’” Slowly Douglass did move closer to embracing Brown’s “charter” of blood, continuing to “write and speak against slavery,” as he explained, but becoming “all the same less hopeful of its peaceful abolition.” Douglass’s “utterances became more and more tinged by the color of [Brown’s] strong impressions,” until there came a turning point: “Speaking at an anti-slavery convention in Salem, Ohio, I expressed the apprehension that slavery could only be destroyed by blood-shed,” Douglass remembered. “I was suddenly and sharply interrupted by my good old friend Sojourner Truth with the question, ‘Frederick, is God dead?’ ‘No,’ I answered, ‘and because God is not dead, slavery can only end in blood.’” This blood, however, would not be Douglass’s own. He warned Brown that the Harpers Ferry raid was a “perfect steel-trap,” and after the raid vehemently denied any part in its planning or execution—insisting in October 1859: “My wisdom, or my cowardice, has not only kept me from Harpers Ferry, but has equally kept me from making any promise to go there. I desire to be quite emphatic here . . . My field of labor for the abolition of Slavery has not extended to an attack upon the United States Arsenal.” Still equivocal about what he called Brown’s “tools,” especially in regard to his *own* potential use of them, he further explained his decision to “not join John Brown” in his third autobiography: “The tools to those who can use them!,” wrote Douglass. “Let

every man work for the abolition of slavery in his own way. I would help all and hinder none.”<sup>13</sup>

In part, Douglass’s after-the-fact ambivalence about Brown’s raid reflected the very real possibility of arrest and execution in its wake. But Douglass also believed that Brown’s “charter” was generally indecipherable—at least to the “tribunal” of history composed of Brown’s contemporaries. “It is an effeminate and cowardly age, which calls a man a lunatic because he rises to such self-forgetful heroism,” he protested in November 1859, looking instead to “[p]osterity” and “each coming generation” for the “thanks” owed to Brown. “This age is too gross and sensual to appreciate his deeds, and so calls him mad,” Douglass insisted; “the future will write his epitaph upon the hearts of a people freed from slavery, because he struck the first effectual blow.” Later, looking back upon the immediate aftermath of Brown’s life and death, Douglass wondered if slavery “had so benumbed the moral sense of the nation [that] . . . it was difficult for Captain Brown to get himself taken for what he really was.” And as late as 1881, Douglass was still wondering if Brown’s “charter” had been deciphered: “We yet stand too near the days of slavery and the life and times of John Brown, to see clearly the true martyr and hero that he was and rightly to estimate the value of the man and his works,” he deduced. “Like the great and good of all ages, the men born in advance of their times, the men whose bleeding footprints attest the immense cost of reform, and show us the long and dreary spaces, between the luminous points in the progress of mankind, this our noblest American hero must wait the polishing wheels of after-coming centuries to make his glory more manifest, and his worth more generally acknowledged.” Douglass’s own wheels of judgment had turned several times to accommodate his various attitudes towards Brown. Now, he concluded, only the future’s polishing wheels would fully decipher Brown’s “charter.”<sup>14</sup>

## Revising the Charter of Blood

[My zeal] was bounded by time, [Brown’s] stretched away to the boundless shores of eternity.

—Frederick Douglass, 1881

Sure enough, history’s “polishing wheels,” as Douglass put it, did their work. Brown’s “charter” of blood was not only deciphered for its strategy and meaning by history’s “tribunal,” but also *revised*, both in the immediate aftermath of Harpers Ferry (as supporters sought to translate his execution into a martyrdom) and during an era of reconciliation and reconstruction (as the country



FIGURE 1. *John Brown Meeting the Slave Mother and Her Child on the Steps of Charleston Jail on His Way to Execution*, Currier and Ives lithograph, 1863, from Louis Ransom painting, 1860. (Courtesy, Library of Congress)

sought a usable past). Some sought to downplay Brown's violence and introduce a new angle: gentleness and compassion. A story sprang up, initially reported by the *New York Tribune* on December 5, 1859 and then reprinted in other newspapers, that Brown had stopped on his way to the gallows to kiss the child of a slave woman. The pacifist Quaker and gradualist abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier wrote the poem "Brown of Ossawatimie," which features the kiss at its center. That kiss, Whittier had proclaimed, "from all its guilty means / Redeemed the good intent." As the legend spread, Thoreau wondered: "Who placed the slave woman and her child, whom he stooped to kiss for a symbol, between his prison and the gallows?" And in his eulogy at Brown's funeral, the abolitionist Wendell Phillips exclaimed: "We . . . see him stoop on his way to the scaffold and kiss that negro child—and this iron heart

seems all tenderness.” Continuing to visualize the scene, Phillips described “the serene brow of that calm old man, as he stoops to kiss the child of a forlorn race,” and emphasized that “matchless courage seems the least of [Brown’s] merits. How gentleness graced it!” In 1865 Lydia Maria Child published the poem “John Brown and the Colored Child,” and in 1881 Douglass concluded that no man who, “when on his way to meet an ignominious death, could so forget himself as to stop and kiss a little child, one of the hated race for whom he was about to die, could by any possibility fail.” As late as 1942, Brown was summoned as a gentle old man—here the inspiration for a lullaby, in Countee Cullen’s poem “A Negro Mother’s Lullaby,” published in *Opportunity*: “Hushaby, hushaby, dark one at my knee, / Slumber you softly, nor pucker, nor frown; / Though some may be bonded, you shall be free, / Thanks to a man, Osawatomie Brown.”<sup>15</sup>

Louis Ransom in 1860, Thomas Satterwhite Noble in 1867, and Thomas Hovenden in 1884, all painted the scene. Ransom’s painting, *John Brown Meeting the Slave Mother and Her Child on the Steps of Charleston Jail on His Way to Execution*, drew a favorable review from *Harper’s Weekly*: “It is one of the incidents that history will always fondly record and art delineate,” wrote a reviewer on June 13, 1863. “The fierce and bitter judgment of the moment upon the old man is already tempered. Despised and forsaken in his own day, the heart of another generation may treat him as he treated the little outcast child.” Harsh judgments “already tempered,” Brown’s translation for a new generation was on its way. In 1870 Currier and Ives issued a version of the print and captioned it: “regarding them with a look of compassion” [Figure 1].

This image featured a majestic Brown, six inches taller than he had been in life, with head framed by the yellow flag of Virginia, so forming a halo above him. A Madonna-like slave woman holds up a child in the likeness of Christ, and the only man looking at Brown has a glow around his eyes, as though he has looked upon something holy. A statue of Justice in the corner has the same pose as Brown (arms cut off, right leg forward, and eyes hidden). Equally “tempering” was Noble’s painting, *John Brown’s Blessing*, in which Brown looks like an honorable old patriarch of the church. Rather than kiss the child, he simply places a priestly hand on its head. As late as the 1930s and 1940s, artists continued to focus on the fictional kiss: Eitaro Ishigaki included the mother and child pair in his 1937 mural for the Harlem Courthouse, and in William H. Johnson’s painting, *John Brown’s Legend* (1945), the kiss is at the very center of Brown’s life. Family and friends, life at North Elba, raid at Harpers Ferry, trial, and execution are all peripheral to that moment of gentleness.

The kissing scene offered one route to what *Harper's* called "tempered" judgment, or what Franklin Sanborn called "pardoned" faults: "[Brown] was one of those rare types, easily passing into the mythical," claimed Sanborn in 1909. "In heroes, faults are pardoned, crimes forgotten, exploits magnified—their life becomes a poem or a scripture—they enter on an enviable earthly immortality." Beyond the kissing scene, artists and commentators found further ways to achieve "immortality" and the "mythical" on Brown's behalf. Thoreau had helped begin the process of immortalizing the mortal, claiming in October 1859 that Brown had a "spark of divinity," that his life was a "sublime spectacle," and in 1860 that Brown had "earned mortality." Phillip had also helped, making Brown an immortal emblem as early as his funeral service: "As time passes, and these hours float back into history, men will see against the clear December sky [those] gallows," eulogized Phillips on December 8, 1859; "Thank God for our emblem." Lincoln's hand might tremble when it came time to sign *his* charter, the Emancipation Proclamation, but Brown, ever iron-fisted, seemed to have boldly scrawled a symbol across the sky. Echoing these early immortalizations of Brown, an *Atlantic Monthly* article of 1886 then elevated Brown to a level beyond humanity, observing that he walks "far apart from the usual ways of men," and had achieved "apotheosis"—"elevated above the customary and familiar plane of humanity." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., in his 1882 poem "The World's Homage," even claimed Brown was a character as unreal—or real—as Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, his soul marching on: "All through the conflict, up and down / Marched Uncle Tom and Old John Brown, / One ghost, one form ideal; / And which was false and which was true, / And which was the mightier of the two, / The wisest sibyl never knew, / For both alike were real."<sup>16</sup>

Thus refashioned as the work of a gentle saint, an immortal god, an abstraction, and a fictional character, Brown's violence—the broadsword at Pottawatomie and pikes at Harpers Ferry—could be smoothed over. Equally, Brown's refashioning meant his fragile humanity—the old man who requested a delay during his trial due to a "severe wound in the back" and impaired hearing "*in* consequence of wounds"—could be forgotten. Even the human compassion potentially implicit in the kissing scene had been represented as saintliness, after all. Rare have been judgments like that of the abolitionist George Gill, who noted in a letter of 1893 that an "intimate acquaintance" revealed Brown "was very human," with "angel wings . . . so dim and shadowy as to be almost unseen." Ironically, what Parker called a "charter of humanity" was in Brown's case often refashioned as *far* from human.<sup>17</sup>

With the same result, some took a different approach, and contained his violence within images of natural force, again tempering its horror. In 1860

Thoreau called Brown's career "meteor-like, flashing through the darkness in which we live . . . miraculous" (even Brown's coffin shot "like a meteor . . . toward the North"), and even the Reverend Martin proclaimed that from "the firmament of Providence . . . a meteor has fallen . . . upon the volcano of American sympathies." Then, in 1866, Herman Melville called Brown the "meteor of the war," and while Walt Whitman did acknowledge Brown's humanity—describing an "old man . . . trembling / with age and your unheal'd wounds"—he went on in the same 1881 poem to call the year of Brown's raid a "[y]ear of meteors." In 1891 James Schouler reiterated that Brown was a meteor, explaining that he (and Charlotte Corday) had flashed "upon the world's attention like new meteors." The metaphor had the effect of setting Brown beyond the trajectory of comprehensible, historical action, as Henry Ward Beecher explained (while using the metaphor himself): "If a fragment of an exploding aerolite had fallen down out of the air, while the meteor swept on, it would not have been more sudden, or less apparently connected with a cause or an effect," he observed. Brown is a moral meteor in the national sky—his violence as natural and mysterious as an exploding aerolite.<sup>18</sup>

Metaphors of natural violence extended beyond meteors. The Reverend Fales Henry Newhall echoed Martin, calling Brown "a volcanic blaze that rises as if to 'lick the stars,'" and the Reverend Moncure Conway concurred, explaining that Brown's actions were therefore impossible to judge: "We may as well question the moral propriety of a streak of lightning or an earthquake as of [Brown's] deed," he insisted. Again, Harpers Ferry was a freakish occurrence. Thoreau agreed that Brown was like "lightning," Phillips called him a "central sun," and Douglass set Brown equally far from the question of "moral propriety," claiming him as "a mountain pine." Decades later, demonstrating the pervasive influence of this mythologizing, the black historian Lerone Bennett Jr. echoed earlier descriptions of Brown and called him "an elemental force like the wind, rain and fire," "pure transcendence," and "a pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day."<sup>19</sup>

Some, like Thoreau, also imagined Brown as part of the cycle of nature itself: "When good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating it," Thoreau observed. "When you plant or bury a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up." Closely related to these images of the natural world was the idea of Brown as part of an "inevitable" process, as Thoreau put it. If not a force *of* nature, then Brown was at least forced *by* nature; caught in an inexorable current, Brown was the agent of a larger element. Douglass described Brown as a vessel through which the judgment of God could act, an agent of justice, and others saw Brown as a



FIGURE 2. John Stuart Curry, *The Tragic Prelude*, 1937–42, copy of mural in the State Capitol in Topeka, Kansas, north wall of the East Corridor, Department of the Interior, National Park Service (II), Civil War Centennial Commission. (Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration)

victim of Fate, caught in a tragic drama: one journalist called him an “Othello,” who “loved his fellow man not wisely but too well,” and in 1910 a reviewer for *Atlantic Monthly* claimed Brown’s story had “the movement of a Greek tragedy.” The strange spectacle of raid, trial, and execution seemed an almost choreographed process of violence, punishment, conversion, redemption, and catharsis—through trial, ritual execution, and audience response, Brown moved from degradation to sainthood. Drawing all these threads together, John Stuart Curry eventually made Brown a force of nature, *and* part of an historical process, *and* a fated, tragic hero. His Kansas mural *The Tragic Prelude*, which he painted between 1937 and 1942, links Brown visually to the prairie fire and tornado that rage in the background, so making the ten-foot figure of Brown in the foreground a force of nature [Figure 2].

Curry’s understanding of Brown’s actions in Kansas as a “Prelude” to the Civil War then suggests Brown’s life was part of a historical process, like the movement westward by the figures behind Brown, as they move across the canvas from right to left. Finally, Curry’s title (“Tragic”) and the possible visual allusion to Shakespeare’s *Lear*, “bound upon a wheel of fire” (IV, I, 46), lifts Brown’s story into the realm of tragic drama.<sup>20</sup>

If Brown was a prelude to war, as in Curry’s mural, then he could also be claimed as its first soldier. Another strategy for translating Brown’s “charter” into comprehensible and palatable terms was to blend its violence with that of the war. Phillips claimed that history would date the “Virginia Emancipation

from Harpers Ferry,” and Douglass declared that “not Carolina, but Virginia, not Fort Sumter, but Harpers Ferry and the arsenal, not Col. Anderson, but John Brown, began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic.” In fact, once the fighting began, it was “impossible to keep the name of John Brown out of the war,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson observed in 1865. War vindicated Brown’s actions and made him a prophet. Union soldiers replaced the unappealing war cry of “preservation of the Union” with the marching song, “John Brown’s Body.” The “apotheosis of old John Brown is fast taking place,” noted the *Illinois Weekly Mirror* on August 6, 1862; “All over the country, the John Brown song may be heard at all times of the night or day in the streets of Chicago and all other cities; it is the pet song among the soldiers in all our armies.” Even Theodore Roosevelt, no friend of blacks and radicals, expanded upon the theme of Brown as a war hero in 1910: “John Brown stands to us now as representing the men and the generation who rendered the greatest service ever rendered this country. He stood for heroic valor, grim energy, fierce fidelity to high ideals,” explained Roosevelt; “He embodied the aspiration of the men of his generation; his fate furnished the theme of the song which most stirred the hearts of the soldiers. John Brown’s work was brought to completion by the men who bore aloft the banner of the Union.”<sup>21</sup>

Roosevelt’s claim that Brown represented a “generation” was part of yet another dominant theme in cultural representations of Brown that helped revise his “charter” of blood and meliorate his violence. Brown became a representative American, and part of the country’s revolutionary heritage. A Quaker woman, writing to Brown on October 27, 1859, had made the connection: “If the American people honor Washington for resisting with bloodshed for seven years an unjust tax, how much more ought thou be honored for seeking to free the poor slaves.” The parallels then came thick and fast after Brown’s death: “But was he not a rebel, guilty of sedition and treason?” asked the Reverend Newhall; “Yes, all this. But we are to remember that the words ‘rebel’ and ‘treason’ have been made holy in the American language.” Also identifying Brown as a patriot, Phillips reminded Americans that “now, it may be treason; but the fact is it runs in the blood. We were traitors in 1776.” George Stearns claimed Brown as “the representative man of this century, as Washington was of the last,” Douglass repeatedly referred to Brown as “THE MAN OF THIS NINETEENTH CENTURY,” and Sanborn added in 1885: “So much was he in accord with what is best in the American character, that he will stand in history as one type of our people, as Franklin and Lincoln do.” Brown’s character, Sanborn said, showed a “homely, Franklin-like wisdom and Connecticut shrewdness.”<sup>22</sup>

Sanborn also invoked the Puritans: “[Brown] embodied the distinctive qualities of the Puritan, but with a strong tincture of the humane sentiments of later times.” Brown had “entered upon his perilous undertaking with deliberate resolution”—here not a victim of fate or natural forces—like “the Pilgrims before they set forth from Holland to colonize America.” If responsible for his actions, Brown had at least acted within the bounds of a recognizable American tradition. Others identified the same tradition: William Lloyd Garrison declared Brown was “of old Puritan stock, a Cromwellian,” and Emerson was intrigued by Brown’s direct descent from Peter Brown, a Plymouth colonist of the Mayflower. Phillips even wondered if Brown’s “Puritan” identity explained his militancy—again seeking a palatable explanation for the violence: “You cannot expect to put a real Puritan Presbyterian, as John Brown is—a regular Cromwellian dug up for two centuries—in the midst of our New England civilization, that dares not say its soul is its own . . . Put a Christian in the presence of a sin, and he will spring at its throat, if he is a true Christian.”<sup>23</sup>

The “tribunal” of history seemed determined to separate Brown from the history of his prewar moment. As a transplanted Puritan, early war hero, archetypal tragic character, or quintessential American icon, Brown was safely lifted onto a pedestal—as far from the world’s action as the madman’s attic where (in detractors’ minds) he still so often languishes. Equally, as lightning strike or meteor shower, Brown’s raid could be considered a historical anomaly. The pervasive persistence of such attempts to read myth and mystery between the lines of Brown’s “charter in blood” perhaps suggests that his particular form of abolitionism made the John Brown story difficult for Americans to confront without recourse to symbolism; after all, Brown’s story, with its combination of treason and patriotism, lawlessness and idealism, dramatizes a set of conflicts in American history and culture. If, as Harold Bloom writes, “salvation for the American cannot come through the community or the congregation, but is a one-on-one act of confrontation,” or as David Brion Davis notes, America has “glorified personal whim and has ranked hardened killers with the greatest of folk heroes,” then symbolism allowed these uncomfortable narratives to exist; cloaked but expressed. Personal freedom secured by righteous violence, through a sense of Biblical mission, is part of the national teleology, but confronting Brown’s violence head-on might have forced an acknowledgment of the *centrality* of violence to American history (from Indian Removal and the brutality of the American West, to slavery, the Civil War, and the lynchings of Reconstruction), and therefore demand a reconsideration of what *really* constitutes an American

hero. As a kind of national mirror, Brown's mythology is reminiscent of the famous scene in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), where Hester Prynne stands in front of a mirror and sees the symbol that defines and contains her "in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance"—a shape-shifting national mirror, Brown's symbols grew larger than the man. For, to have recognized that he was more than the "weird John Brown" of Melville's poem "The Portent"—that he was neither hero nor villain, but both and much in between—would have been to see a man whose actions were made possible by his time and country. Distanced through myth, defensively simplified, Brown's violence was prevented from speaking dangerous truths.<sup>24</sup>

### Renewing the Charter of Blood

[Injustice and wrong] . . . will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both.

—Frederick Douglass, 1857

Through the twentieth century, history's "tribunal," anticipated by Brown a few days before his death, continued to decipher his "charter." In the 1930s, Muriel Rukeyser even made him a witness to a real tribunal—that of the Scottsboro case. "John Brown, Nat Turner, [and] Toussaint L'Ouverture . . . watch the trial from the corner," wrote Rukeyser in *New Masses*, on June 12, 1934. Other twentieth-century radicals used Brown's myth to place their own radical action in an American tradition (echoing one strategy of earlier Brown sympathizers, who had set *him* in a tradition of patriotic protest). Arthur Covey's New Deal mural *John Brown* depicted Brown as a pioneer, straight off the mythic American frontier, and Reverdy Ransom compared him to Moses, David, Joshua, Cromwell, and Toussaint L'Ouverture, then declaring: "Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the spirit of John Brown beckons us to arise and seek the recovery of our rights." From 1776 to the Niagara Movement was a straight line: "The Negroes who are aggressively fighting for their rights have the same spirit that animated the founders of this nation. In them the soul of John Brown goes marching on," explained Ransom. Similarly, Michael Blankford explained of his 1936 play *Battle Hymn*, written with Michael Gold and focused on the connections between 1856 and their present moment: "The left creative movement had a great burden to bear and that is the Russian burden. Lenin was hero . . . or Trotsky was hero . . . It seemed to us then that we



FIGURE 3. Thomas Hovenden, *The Last Moments of John Brown*, 1884. (Courtesy, Library of Congress)

had to find our own roots in our own revolutionary past . . . and Brown was such a perfect example of that because he wasn't an import . . . He was a rock of American rock."<sup>25</sup>

This search for racial roots in a “revolutionary past” often meant an immortalizing of Brown—a symbol of liberty, and a ghostly presence, his soul went marching on, out of that revolutionary past and into the struggles of the present. Eugene Debs looked to the abolitionists, asked for a “John Brown of Wage-Slavery,” and called Brown the “spirit incarnate of the Revolution.” The radical lawyer and civil libertarian Clarence Darrow claimed Brown was “of the type of Cromwell, of Calvin, of Mahomet . . . needful to kindle a flame that should burn the decaying institutions and ancient wrongs in the crucible of the world’s awakening wrath.” Socialist Michael Gold also saw Brown as a “type,” explaining that Brown’s was “the story of thousands of men living in America

now,” and that Brown had “been hung and shot down a hundred times since his first death.” This meant Brown was immortal, for “his soul is marching on; it is the soul of liberty and justice, which cannot die or be suppressed.” Brown’s soul marched on to different words when the John Brown Song was rewritten by Ralph Chaplin as “Solidarity Forever” (1915), and apparently marched during the Spanish Civil War, when Kenneth Porter equated Brown and the Spanish Left, writing in his 1936 poem “To the Jayhawkers of the International Brigade”: “John Brown of Kansas . . . goes marching on / his tread is on the plains of Aragon.” The soul of John Brown even marched across South Africa. In a speech to the United Nations on October 9, 1963, R. H. Amonoo of Ghana called upon the “great American whose soul still goes marching on throughout the world . . . taken prisoner at Harpers Ferry over one hundred years ago,” as though Brown’s story had stopped with his capture and not extended to his death, then quoted Brown’s words to his captors: “You may dispose of me very easily; I am nearly disposed of now; but the question—this negro question I mean—the end of that is not yet.” Amonoo added: “Mr. Chairman, John Brown’s soul still goes marching on in South Africa today. It will find no rest until it has seen justice done.” First seized upon as “the inspiration of the Union armies,” Brown seemed to have become “the inspiration of all men in the present and distant future who may revolt against tyranny and oppression,” as Kansas governor Charles Robinson had anticipated.<sup>26</sup>

But some twentieth-century judges at history’s ongoing “tribunal” did forgo what Douglass called “polishing wheels,” choosing to *not* revise Brown’s “charter” of blood, as usual, into a more palatable myth of saintly gentleness, natural force, or historical anachronism—to *not* polish Brown until he became a benign ghost, a catch-all inspiration, and an immortal symbol. Instead, they embraced the rawness of his “charter.” Surprisingly, that charter of blood had been visible in one of the kissing scene paintings. Hovenden’s *Last Moments of John Brown* has the rifle and bayonet on the left at the same angle as Brown’s leaning torso, forming an X with Brown’s right arm and the sheriff’s head and left arm [Figure 3].

Brown’s body remains a weapon as commanding as the bayonet that parallels his torso and as powerful as the death warrant that he visually supplants as the scene’s centerpiece. In spite of his attention to the kissing scene, Hovenden—whose wife had been involved with the abolitionist cause and whose studio was once used as a stop along the Underground Railroad—allows the fierceness long associated with Osawatomie Brown and his cause to seep into the painting. Connecting his very human old Brown, gentle and beslippered, to the question of violence, Hovenden’s reminder of Brown’s “charter of

humanity” was a glimpse of *one* future direction in the John Brown story: in 1964 Lerone Bennett Jr. explained Brown’s violence as the result of so complete a human empathy that Brown had become black and acted in self-defense. “There was in John Brown a complete identification with the oppressed. It was his sister that a slave-owner was selling . . . his wife who was being raped in the gin house,” wrote Bennett. “It was not happening to Negroes, it was happening to him . . . John Brown *was* a Negro, and it was in this aspect that he suffered.” Brown’s long-shrouded body peeked out from behind his soul.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, it was during the 1960s, through the writings of Bennett and others, that one manifestation of the John Brown story came full-circle: just as his “charter of humanity” was traceable through the history of nineteenth-century black abolitionism, when realities made “inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony” of July 4 celebrations (as Douglass put it in his famous 1852 speech, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”), so its bloodline continued through twentieth-century black radicalism, as the Emancipation Proclamation seemed increasingly null and void. Insisting that true emancipation was *still* delayed, Atlanta civil rights campaigners wore “Juneteenth” buttons in the early 1960s, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People began to use the motto “Free by ’63.” Then, in August 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King, Jr., cried: “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation . . . But one hundred years later . . . the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.” Four years later, at the 11th convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, on August 16, 1967, King asked for a new “charter,” the African American’s “emancipation proclamation,” signed “with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood.”<sup>28</sup>

It was, however, the Black Panthers and proponents of “Black Power” who set out to write a new charter, in the ink of “assertive selfhood.” In 1970 Huey Newton protested: “The end result of the Emancipation Proclamation was supposed to be the freedom and liberation of Black people from the cruel shackles of chattel slavery . . . Where is that freedom supposedly granted to our people by the Emancipation Proclamation and guaranteed to us by the Constitution?” Newton called for a convention like Brown’s of 1858 to write a new constitution: “The empty promise of the Constitution to ‘establish Justice’ lies exposed to the world by the reality of Black Peoples’ existence,” he explained. “The Constitution of the U.S.A. does not and never has protected our people or guaranteed to us those lofty ideals enshrined within it . . . Black people have no future within the present structure of power and authority in

the United States under the present Constitution.” Newton continued: “the present structure of power and authority in the United States must be radically changed or we, as a people, must extricate ourselves from entanglement with the United States. If we are to remain a part of the United States, then we must have a new Constitution that will strictly guarantee our Human Rights to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The delegates to the Black Panthers’ Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, in September 1970.<sup>29</sup>

Writing a new American charter, black radicals of the 1960s renewed Brown’s charter of blood. “If you’re going to get yourself a .45 and start singing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ I’m with you,” observed Malcolm X on December 20, 1964, seeming to match Douglass’s 1859 description of *Brown* as a “man of . . . deeds” not “words,” resisting oppression “with blows” not “breath.” Malcolm looked back to Brown, once declaring: “If you are for me and my problem . . . then you have to be willing to do as old John Brown did.” Similarly, the activist Truman Nelson examined the “John Brown principle” and claimed there was a “John Brown in every man’s conscience,” and Robert Williams explained: “We do not need paternal white ‘Big Daddies’ for our friends now. What we need are some fighting John Browns.” Then, after Malcolm was killed while speaking in Harlem on February 21, 1965, Ossie Davis explained that he stood in relation to the “‘responsible’ civil rights leaders, just about where John Brown stood in relation to the ‘responsible’ abolitionist in the fight against slavery.”<sup>30</sup>

While Thoreau had promised America upon Brown’s death that “when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up,” Douglass had issued a warning to those who would “profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation,” calling them “men who want crops without plowing up the ground,” who want “the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.” Any harvesting of planted heroes would be bloody. Now, Malcolm’s mourners offered not a promise but a *warning* that Malcolm’s blood was a seed: “His blood soaked the floor / One drop found a crack through the stark . . . flowed / Into pipes and powerlines, the mains and cables of the city: / A thousand fiery seeds,” wrote Raymond Patterson in his poem “At That Moment” (1969). And, while admittedly echoing words that had naturalized Brown’s violence as part of a natural, black radicals emphasized the *future* violence implicit in such a cycle: “what we place in the ground is no more now a man—but a seed,” said Davis at Malcolm’s funeral, “which, after the winter of discontent—will come forth again to meet us.” In addition, Davis was echoing Malcolm’s prophecy in “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964): without action, Malcolm had warned, there would come “seeds up out of the ground with vegetation on the end of them looking like something these people never dreamed

of.” Here was no meteor, aerolite, sun, earthquake or mountain pine, but simply “something . . . never dreamed of.” The attempt to familiarize violence through florid metaphors (to understand it as *something else*) was finally broken down—appropriately perhaps, for Malcolm had insisted: “I don’t usually deal with . . . big words because I don’t usually deal with big people,” echoing Thoreau’s praise of Brown’s simple language (“such as ‘*It will pay.*’”)<sup>31</sup>

In renewing Brown’s “charter” as one of violence, 1960s black radicals embraced his attempt to collapse words and action. Brown’s “charter of humanity,” the abolition of slavery, was writ in blood but also in what Parker called a “less costly ink,” after all. In prison Brown exchanged weapon for pen, then to wield his pen *as* weapon. “Having taken possession of Harpers Ferry,” Phillips quipped in a speech in New York on December 15 that year, “he began to edit the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald* for the next three weeks.” Brown perhaps suspected, as Phillips exclaimed in his funeral oration on December 8, that “Hearts are stronger than swords” and in the time before his sentencing and execution, set his violence alongside the realities of family life, Biblical themes, and his wider political philosophies, converting many to his point of view in letters to family and friends that were swiftly published in dozens of newspapers across the land. Eventually, just as Brown had seemed rhetoric becoming violence, a human literalization of politics who turned words into actions (especially when Douglass proclaimed that liberty “must . . . cut the throat of slavery” while Brown murdered five proslavery settlers), so he turned action back into words. With his trial speech, prison letters, and eloquently silent death, Brown offered himself as the Northern preachers’ text of the day. His “wonderful message of . . . forty days in prison . . . all in all made the mightiest Abolition document that America has known,” explained W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>32</sup>

In part because of this connection between sword and pen, Brown’s “charter” was renewed by many in the protest tradition—comprising writers straddling the gap between words and action. One model of the protest artist has always been the writer as fighter; justice holds scales and sword, but protest artists wielded *pen* and sword, sometimes referencing Tom Paine’s pen alongside Washington’s sword. Across history the sword-pens of American writers have made words into weapons: Douglass once claimed that words were useful only “as they stimulate to blows,” Paul Robeson said his literature was a weapon, Ishmael Reed said writing was fighting, Richard Wright imagined “slashing with [the] pen . . . using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club,” Audre Lorde called herself a “a Black woman warrior poet,” Gwendolyn Brooks described Langston Hughes as a “hatchet,” slicing though

“mud and blood and sudden death,” and the Black Student’s Union at San Francisco State College used an image of a black man with a gun in one hand and a book in the other as their symbol. Amiri Baraka believed “poetry should be a weapon of revolutionary struggle,” as he put it in 1979, and described poems as daggers, fists, and poison gas in “Black Art” (1966), and words as “fire darts” in “For Malcolm” (1965). Black Arts Movement writer James Stewart explained that white Western aesthetics were “predicated on the idea of separating . . . a man’s art from his actions,” and in 1970 Black Panther Party member Emory Douglas told artists to “take up their paints and brushes in one hand and their gun in the other,” adding “all of the Fascist American empire must be blown up in our pictures.” Brown, whose words were “rifles,” according to Phillips, would likely have approved.<sup>33</sup>

The most recent left-wing renewal of Brown’s “charter” came from 1970s guerrilla groups. In each issue of its 1970s journal, the Weather Underground printed a picture of Brown, and explained underneath that the publication was called *Osawatomie* because “in 1856, at the Battle of Osawatomie, Kansas, John Brown and 30 other abolitionists, using guerrilla tactics, beat back an armed attack by 250 slavery supporters, who were trying to make Kansas a slave state. This was a turning point in the fight against slavery.” In a 1975 article for *Osawatomie* Joe Reed focused on Brown as a “guerrilla fighter, an uncompromising swordsman,” and in 1978, a white antiracist group with connections to the Weather Underground began a national campaign against white supremacists and the racist violence of the Ku Klux Klan. They named themselves the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee (JBAKC) and explained in their newspaper: “We take our name from John Brown, the 19th century white abolitionist who gave his life fighting for Black people’s freedom from slavery. In this tradition we build solidarity with the Black Liberation Movement and support all its struggles for human rights and self-determination . . . We believe all people have the right to defend themselves against racist, sexist, or homophobic violence by any means necessary.” In a recent interview Lisa Roth, one of the founders of the JBAKC who worked with it until its end in the 1990s, added that the group appreciated Brown’s “leap from ideas to action”: “We named ourselves after John Brown because we felt like he was a white man who made fighting racism the center of his life. Brown’s willingness to fight for his principles are part of what made him so compelling for us,” she said. “For most white anti-racists making the leap from ideas to action is a bit of a challenge.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1988 JBAKC member Terry Bisson retraced Brown’s path through Lawrence, Osawatomie, and Harpers Ferry, then wrote the novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Acknowledging the tradition of black abolitionism from which

Brown emerged, his novel's epigraphs were Walker's line from *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens*, "America is our country, more than it is the whites' . . . we have enriched it with our blood and tears," plus Brown's statement, "My love to all who love their neighbors." One character then explains that if Harriet Tubman is "the Mother of Our Country and Frederick Douglass the Father . . . then bloody old Shenandoah Brown . . . is some kind of Godfather. Blood may be thicker than water, but politics is thicker than either." Not immortalized via blood, to live on in the veins of American dissent, Brown is simply "Godfather." Neither blood nor water, but politics is the thickest link in *this* John Brown story. For history went on, as the band Eek-A-Mouse observed in a track on their 1983 album *Mouse and the Man*: "John Brown him dead and gone / Jah know that him history still a go on / As him dead more John Brown born." Bisson's novel is a counterfactual history—"a story of what might have happened if John Brown's raid had succeeded," as the preface explains. In a sense, however, the JBAKC—along with the Black Panthers and all those who renewed Brown's "charter" as one of humanity, however violent and bloody—replaced counterfactuals with a *new* attempt to succeed; so that history, instead of John Brown's immortal soul, might go marching on.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

1. Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 28, 32.
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3. John Brown, "Words of Advice" (1851), in *Meteor of War*, ed. Trodd and Stauffer, 79, 78; William Wells Brown, *Clotel* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1853), 224–25; Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave" (1853), in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Phillip Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950–55), V:503; Douglass, in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 29, 1854; Douglass, *My Bondage and my Freedom* (1855), in *Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 283; Wells Brown, in *The Independent*,

- March 10, 1870. Wells Brown was the first to publish Brown's "Words of Advice," in *The Independent*, March 30, 1870.
4. *Proceedings of the Convention of Radical Political Abolitionists, Held at Syracuse, New York, June 26th, 27th, and 28th, 1855* (New York: Central Abolition Board, 1855), 17, Houghton Library, Harvard University; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 7, 1855; Frederick May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (1891) (New York: Haskell House, 1969), 247; *Radical Abolitionist*, 1, no. 12 (July 1856): 97, 102; *New-York Herald*, May 29, 1856; *New-York Tribune*, May 30–31, 1856; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21.
  5. Salmon Brown, "Salmon Brown (son), Reminiscences" in *Meteor of War*, ed. Trodd and Stauffer, 70.
  6. Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (1885) (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1989), 620; Brown, "Provisional Constitution," in *Meteor of War*, ed. Trodd and Stauffer, 110.
  7. Brown, prison letter, in *Meteor of War*, ed. Trodd and Stauffer, 159; Theodore Parker, "Brown's Prison Letters, Oct. 21–Dec. 2, 1859" in *Meteor of War*, ed. Trodd and Stauffer, 137.
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