

***The Textual Effects of David Walker's Appeal:
Print-Based Activism against Slavery, Racism,
and Discrimination, 1829-1851***

Marcy J. Dinius

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

ISBN 978-0-8122-5378-8

239pp

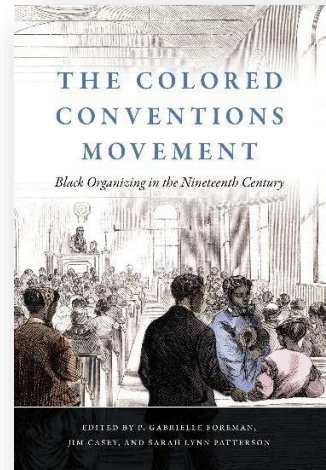
***The Colored Conventions Movement:
Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century***

P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey and Sarah Lynn Patterson (eds.)

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

ISBN 978-1-4696-5426-3

350pp



Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published online 5 November 2022.

Both the volumes under review concern the struggles of Black people in the United States before and after slavery ended during the Civil War. In *The Textual Effects of David Walker's Appeal: Print-Based Activism against Slavery, Racism, and Discrimination, 1829-1851* Marcy J. Dinius uses one of the most stirring and important clarion calls for revolt, David Walker's *Appeal*

to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829) and a number of pamphlets published in its wake.

P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey and Sarah Lynn Patterson are the editors of a collection of papers, *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, centered around a movement



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

which began before the first Abolitionist organizations were founded, and which continued into the 1890s. The Colored Conventions also happen to be one of the most ignored aspects of American history in general and Black history in particular.

In The Textual Effects of David Walker's Appeal: Print-Based Activism against Slavery, Racism, and Discrimination, 1829-1851, Marcy J. Dinius first examines successive editions of the *Appeal*, and then turns to five other pamphlets which sought to extend, elaborate or amend it:

- Maria Stewart's *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality: The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build* (1831) targeted free Black women.

- William Apes (or Apess), in "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" (1833) presented Walker's arguments as seen and extended through Pequot eyes.

- William Paul Quinn's *The Origins, Horrors, and Results of Slavery* (1834) circulated the *Appeal* throughout what then constituted the American West.

Henry Highland Garnet, in his "An Address to the Slaves" (1848) reprinted the *Appeal* and expanded it.

- Paola Brown's *Address on the Subject of Slavery* (1851) put the *Appeal* into a Canadian context following passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Arguably Chapter 1 – centered on the *Appeal* itself – is the most interesting and accessible). She points out the lack of copyright, and, as well as examining Walker's use of punctuation and typography, emphasizes the importance Walker placed on grammar. She notes the format of the *Appeal*: a Preamble followed by four Articles, echoing the Declaration of Independence. Walker's punctuation and typography served as a road map, analogous to rhetorical marks, on how to read the *Appeal*, especially to an illiterate audience. Finally, the *Appeal* served as weapon against Thomas Jefferson's racist *Notes from Virginia*.

One of the most interesting and problematic aspects of Dinius's chapter on William Apes concerns Apes' approach to Jefferson's *Notes*. Walker excoriated

Thomas Jefferson's "enlightened" views on racial hierarchy, particularly Jefferson's "speculation" that Black people were innately inferior to Whites and were more closely related to "Orang-Outangs" (*Appeal*, 12). Dinius notes that Apes accepted "Jefferson's racial theories as established fact, rather than debunking them as the product of subjective bias" (TE, 131).

In looking at Apes's use of Jefferson's *Notes*, Dinius writes

"Following Walker, Apes holds White Christian Americans to their best sacred and secular principles. In doing so, he only continues the important reform mission of Walker's *Appeal* after Walker's death but also extends it to apply to Indigenous people. At the same time, repurposing Walker's powerful appeal to advocate for Indigenous Americans effectively allowed Apes to do what Walker might and should have done himself more powerfully and fully." (emphasis added, TE, 114).

From a distance of more than 190 years and a social world away from a country filled with slaves, slaveholders and slave-catchers, a 21st century professor of English employed at a university who received a grant to publish *her* book criticizes a 19th century activist for not doing what he "might and should have done himself more powerfully and fully."

Dinius compares the approaches of Walker and Apes: "That Apes argued against discrimination against Indigenous people by drawing on, rather than contradicting, Jefferson's hierarchy of the races in the United States further suggests that Apes saw equal opportunity in the influential arguments of both Walker's *Appeal* and Jefferson's *Notes* for invoking aspects of each that would help him make his best case to White Christian Americans." (TE, 114). This reviewer can only repeat the old Yiddish line that "yes, and if my grandmother had a beard, she'd be my grandfather."

Reading Dinius led this reviewer to *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (TE, 272n7), edited by P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey and Sarah Lynn Patterson. A mostly ignored historical phenomenon, the Conventions occurred from the 1830 until the 1890s and involved



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

thousands of people from coast to coast; it embraced many voices and different solutions to the myriad problems facing Black people in America. Among the sixteen papers in this collection, the authors discuss the role of women in general, and specific women in particular; the routes to Conventions followed by various delegates; the Black press, and the world of print; boarding houses and sociability; debates over citizenship and colonization; and the collective nature of the Conventions.

Reading *The Colored Conventions Movement* put some of the issues raised in *The Textual Effects* into context. For example, throughout her book, Dinius raises questions concerning authorship. What did it mean or imply when Walker's words were employed by others without attribution? She cites Michel Foucault for the proposition that "'texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors' in the early modern period, 'to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses can be transgressive' . ." (TE, 194).

In many ways, however, authorship is a "so what?" issue. She notes that Apes and Walker used variants of the same phrase, "by the inches," referring to the relentless cruelty of the slavery system. But she also notes that Walker "may have drawn it from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* . . ." (TE, 122). Apes, in his pamphlet, restored "Shakespeare's original wording . . ." (TE, 122). The historian Lawrence W. Levine noted the immense popularity of Shakespeare, cutting across class, racial, ethnic and economic lines. Lacking further evidence, it remains open how or to whom Apes was alluding by using that phrase. Shakespeare's phrases have seeped into popular culture and discourse.

The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century, a production of the University of Delaware's Colored Conventions Project, presents readers with a collective case study in the possibilities of digital scholarship. However, the Project is much more than a book of papers. It is also a web site (ColoredConventions.org) with exhibits and links to deal with all aspects of the Conventions, from gathering Minutes from disparate locations, to collecting the names of participants and their families, their backgrounds, addresses, the kinds of homes they

inhabited, the foods they ate, and how delegates reached their destinations. It is a prime example of digging "narrow but deep." The mainly crowdsourced Project is a conscious expansion of knowledge, the product of many individuals who gathered and collated all manner of data, from many spaces and places. The papers in this volume deal with topics as disparate as the collective writing practices of the Conventions, the presence of Underground Railroad figures, the Black press, and the various networks of activism and agitation.

The Colored Conventions Movement utilizes modern technology both to assemble data and distribute it to provide a comprehensive look at the Colored Conventions, and also represents the possibilities inherent in collective scholarship. *The Colored Conventions Movement* presents sixteen essays on different aspects of the Conventions and their interactions with Black America, revealing a broad historical, political, social and economic vista. The open-ended nature of the Colored Conventions Project will hopefully lead to many more as yet unconsidered aspects of social networking, for example, the role of the Prince Hall Masons (and other fraternal or secret societies), the various Black churches (Baptist, A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion), and a deeper consideration of transportation networks (horseback, steamboat, railroad).

By reading *The Colored Conventions Movement* we learn about collective authorship practices in publishing material put out under the auspices of the Conventions. Struggles over issuing a new edition of Walker's *Appeal* under the imprimatur of the Convention led to Henry Highland Garnet's decision to print, in 1848, his own "Address to the Slaves," which appended his (Garnet's) own writing to a reprint of Walker's *Appeal*. This Garnet did after opposition by, among others, Frederick Douglass, to reissue the *Appeal* as a Convention document.

The Textual Effects is not an easy read; its intended audience consists of academics with specialties in Black history, literary studies and interpretation. In stark contrast, *The Colored Conventions Movement* is meant for all interested readers, who do not have to be specialists to follow the arguments. The authors did not



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

"dumb down" their analysis or conclusions, but have rather made their papers truly accessible. Dinius has done a service in making readers aware of authors who followed in the wake of David Walker.

Unfortunately, much of what Dinius writes falls into the realm of pure speculation. There are repeated uses of phrases such as "it may be possible" and "is probable": which can also mean "may not," in the absence of other evidence. In writing about Paola Brown's *Address on the Subject of Slavery* (1851), Dinius refers to people such as Brown, no longer living in or under slavery as "self-liberated and relocated enslaved and free Black people" (p. 200)—a long literary freight train to carry the concepts of "escaped" and "runaway." Dinius and many of the authors in *The Colored Conventions Movement* use the current term "enslaved persons" instead of "slaves," maintaining that the former phrase gives humanity to the latter. This, I fear, misses the point of slavery: supporters of the system of slavery and White supremacy saw Black people as property, not persons—property without the rights, privileges or any of the attributes of humans. This was the clear implication of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes*. In the third edition of David Walker's *Appeal*, Walker used the term "slave" or "slaves" no less than fifty times; only once, in

Article IV, does he employ "free or slave persons of color." (Hinks, 56). David Walker did not need to resort to linguistic legerdemain to emphasize the inhumanity of the system.

In her Conclusion, Dinius considers a copy of the *Appeal* owned, read, and notated by W. E. B. DuBois. Dinius works to draw conclusions from DuBois's corrections to his copy of the text, the first edition of the *Appeal*. These she interprets as Du Bois' correction of a typesetter's mistake (exactly what might be expected of someone who served as editor of *Crisis* magazine). There are those who are compulsive picture-straighteners (I plead guilty) without regard to the artist, the picture, the style, or even whether the picture appeals to them. If this is the sum total of Du Bois's involvement with the *Appeal*, so what? It was not until I read *The Colored Conventions Movement* that I learned about Othello Burghardt of Great Barrington, Massachusetts attending the 1847 Colored Convention in Troy, New York. (CCM, 27), long before the birth of Du Bois, his famous grandson.

The Colored Conventions Movement deserves wide circulation and emulation. May this volume be the first of many to come out of this exciting Project!

In the interests of full disclosure, this reviewer attended graduate school with two of the authors, Psyche Williams-Forsen and Cheryl Janifer LaRoche. I was honored to be among the readers for LaRoche's path-breaking study, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (University of Illinois 2013).

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) is an Independent Scholar who obtained his Ph.D. with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written about Jazz, Anarchism, and the labour movement, and was Associate Editor of Records of the State of Connecticut from 2012-2022. He presently is translating Volume 1 of the memoirs of Rudolf Rocker (*The Youth of a Rebel*) from Yiddish to English.