The Historical Traditions of Nat Turner

Dan Sacks
Department of History
Senior Thesis
Professor James Krippner, Adviser
May 2, 2008
When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood….or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all.¹

1. Introduction

This thesis examines how distinct historiographic traditions assign meaning to a controversial event shrouded in mystery but fraught with symbolism. The event was the rebellion of Nat Turner and the historiographic traditions include the mainstream academic, the abolitionist and the African-American popular. As we shall see, these traditions collided in the late 1960’s in the turmoil that surrounded the publication of William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. William Styron on the one hand and his critics, on the other, each inherited a distinct tradition for which Turner held a specific meaning. Although Turner’s critics were a diverse group, I focus on a small subset, the authors of *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*; I call these critics “the Ten.” Tracing the history of the construction and circulation of these narratives provides insights into the role of power and interpretation in assigning meaning to the past.

In different traditions, Nat Turner was a hero, a villain, and a cautionary tale. His legacy held a particular meaning that depended on the circumstances in which his life passed from actuality to history. Each of Turner’s distinct meanings was down passed from their nineteenth century origins and independently retained and reshaped, until they collided in the 1960’s. The meanings of a particular moment depended both on the

political and social context and, especially, on how Turner was understood in previous
generations. In other words, I argue that meaning is constituted historically.

Nat Turner’s revolt began on the night of August 21, 1831, in Southampton
County, Virginia, just above the North Carolina border. As a child Turner was
precocious, demonstrating intelligence and strong religiosity. As an adult he worked as a
skilled slave, a carpenter, and also served his fellow slaves as a Baptist preacher. The
revolt began as Turner and a small group of slaves killed their owners and every other
member of their owner’s family, and moved on to the next home. “The murder of the
family, five in number,” Nat remembered, “was the work of a moment…there was a little
infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some
distance, when Henry and Will [his co-conspirators], returned and killed it.” They were
thorough and deliberate. “Until we had armed and equipped ourselves,” Nat later
explained to his interrogator, “neither age nor sex was to be spared.” Working in speed
and silence, they killed and recruited, and their numbers grew until dawn. Their brutality
was exceptional, as Nat’s official testimony suggests. “I saw Will pulling Mrs.
Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body,
with his broad axe. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the
corner…at my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken and after repeated blows with a
sword, I killed her by a blow on the head with a fence rail.” At some point, however,
word of the revolt reached white authorities, who mobilized the Southampton militia and
notified the governor. By the afternoon of the first day of the revolt, armed militias
confronted Nat Turner and his rebels, and by the second day, the revolt had been broken.
Nat Turner fled into hiding and was captured some months later.
Sixty to eighty individuals participated in the revolt, which by numerous tallies accounted for the lives of fifty-five whites. Nat Turner, along with many others, was executed. Others were killed in the fighting, but the final toll on the black and enslaved population is difficult to estimate, because whites, including ones as far as away as North Carolina, engaged in frequent and undocumented retribution in the days and weeks following the violence. Historian Kenneth S. Greenberg can only guess at the total death toll on the black population: “scores, if not hundreds.” Contemporary white observers varied in their assessment: as few as thirty, perhaps forty, or even ninety blacks had been killed in the indiscriminant reprisal.²

For contemporary actors as well as historians, the revolt posed unanswerable questions. Although not the first slave revolt in the United States, Nat Turner’s insurrection nonetheless raised the possibility of systematic and violent resistance to slavery. Slaveholders hoped that a personal mistreatment or grievance motivated Turner, but feared that the institution of slavery itself was to blame for his revolt; if so, then further rebellions, bloody and traumatic, would follow. Thomas R. Gray aimed to put the matter to rest by interrogating Turner to produce a lengthy confession, which purportedly showed that Turner acted alone and as a religious “fanatic;” his own lunacy impelled him to rebel, and “the insurrection in this county was entirely local, and his designs confided but to a few, and these in his immediate vicinity.” Turner’s revolt, Gray concluded, was the single act of a fanatic, not the product of systematic slave resistance.³

---

³Turner, p. 37, although note here that Gray wrote these words and claimed to write them.
Gray published *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as a pamphlet, hoping both to
dispel the rising panic in Virginia and nearby states and also to earn a profit. Historians
and others later interested in Turner have relied on his testimony for a window into
Turner’s mentality; although literate, Turner apparently left no written record. But the
testimony is the product of collaboration between Gray and Turner, and is therefore
partial: both biased and incomplete. The bias is clear. Gray, as he notes in the preface,
sought to show Turner’s lunacy and, as many including David Almendinger have argued,
hoped to restore calm to Virginia. He was uninterested in the details of Turner’s life and
thoughts except insofar as they supported his goals. The testimony to which we have
access also passed through a number of filters. Turner could only answer the questions
that Gray asked; Gray could not have recorded all of Turner’s answers. And the
document, with its flowery language and clear paragraphs and structure, must have been
the product of deliberate reconstruction.⁴

There remains, however, an extensive primary record of the insurrection,
consisting of newspaper reports and letters penned by the white population of Virginia.
These documents, often easily accessible, tell only one side of the story; they give no
indication of what the slaves thought of the revolt. A second body of evidence may
represent this perspective: there is an oral slave tradition, set down in particular by a 1936
Works Project Administration Project. If anthropologists and folklorists are correct in
arguing that oral traditions change only slowly, then this body of thought is our best clue
into what slaves thought of Nat Turner.

---

We are separated from our sources by more obstacles than time; it is no accident that the only record of Turner’s voice was penned by a white man. The anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that the mediation that governs the production and archiving of historical sources tends to silence those stories that do not fit in with hegemonic ideology. The hegemonic ideology is the set of beliefs, practices, and unspoken assumptions that ensure a social status quo. As Eugene Genovese has shown, in the United States slave system, a paternalistic illusion served as the hegemonic ideology. Paternalism claimed that slaves depended on their masters for moral and economic development, and their labor was not coercively extracted, but freely offered in exchange for their stewardship. Slave revolts like Turner’s, however, challenge that ideology by violently rejecting paternalism’s implicit bargain. Although slaves resisted their condition and refuted the paternalist dream every day, their resistance was often subtle; slave revolts could not be ignored in the way that acts of sabotage could. Because of the mere possibility of Gray’s censorship, and because Turner left no other documents, we cannot know much about the man, his thoughts or beliefs or plans, or indeed much of his attitude towards slavery. Trouillot reminds historians to be sensitive to moments like this one, when the historical record is silent on a central question.5

More generally, however, Trouillot is concerned with the biases that attend to the production of historical material. Suppose, following G.R. Elton as well as Greg Denning, we think of history as the study of the texted past, or “all those human sayings, thoughts, deeds, and sufferings which occurred in the past and have left present deposit.” Under this view, Trouillot’s notion of historical silences calls attention to the process by

---

which present deposits are left. If some peoples and opinions are less likely to leave
record of their thoughts, deeds, and sufferings, then unless historians attend to silences as
well as speeches, those perspectives will be absent from history.\textsuperscript{6}

Trouillot might also call our attention to the \textit{texted} part of the definition of history
as a “texted past.” What distinguishes text from reality is the former’s susceptibility to
interpretation and representation. Claims about the past may be revised, not willfully, but
because standards of interpretation—norms about truth—will change. As Trouillot
points out, even grammars express notions of truth: “must be” and “are” indicate very
different levels of certainty in standard historical writing, and some non-western
languages have cases to indicate degrees of evidentiary support for claims. What is
ingrained in language is felt more deeply in a particular society and historical moment.
The testimony of a black man in Virginia in 1831 carried much less weight—that is,
counted for less truth—than it would to a historian reading it today.

Trouillot's silences prevent any systematic examination of Turner’s life and
beliefs; the record is just too thin. Where Trouillot’s notion of silences closes one door of
historical analysis, however, it opens another. Trouillot’s argument, along with broader
claims about interpretation, has created a space for historical investigation: the analysis of
historiography as historical source.\textsuperscript{7}

In this thesis I analyze historical claims about Turner to see how historical writing
interacted with broader political and social concerns. By historiography, I mean the
creation and dissemination of claims about the past. The writing of history, in reinforcing


\textsuperscript{7} For an explicit discussion of historical methodology and the challenges postmodernism holds, see Natalie Zemon Davis, \textit{Slaves on Screen}, Cambridge: 2000.
or challenging hegemonic ideologies and their underlying epistemologies, is an act of power and authority that serves alternatively to consolidate dominant interest and to undermine it. That is, in a historical moment, claims about history are claims to power. But the historian of a later generation may look back on these claims to understand what was at stake in the making of history and how individuals fought over it. Nat Turner as a historical figure appears in the historiography of both slave owners and abolitionists. His meaning to them varied immensely; for slave owners he was a “troublesome property” whose revolt had to be rationalized and whose memory had to be desecrated or, as much as possible, silenced. For abolitionists, he symbolized the potential of slavery for crisis and violence. For African-American abolitionists, he represented the capacity for proud resistance and autonomy, and a standard of masculine greatness.  

These three historical traditions existed separately from 1831 until 1967, when William Styron’s controversial novel, The Confessions of Nat Turner, restored Turner to the American limelight. Styron, influenced by the slave-owning tradition, sought to present a humane, though by no means flattering portrait of Turner. But the Turner of his novel was a gross caricature of the Turner of the African-American tradition, and many protested. The most vocal critics, “the Ten” published a critical volume, William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond, in which they hoped to present their own image of Turner and rebuke Styron’s. They did not hesitate to call Styron racist. 

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. In section one, I describe the immediate attempt by the whites of Virginia to make sense of and then rationalize Turner’s revolt, an experience equally traumatic and troublesome for their notion of
slavery. This attempt formed the basis for the Southern historiography of Turner, passed down in oral tradition and preserved in William Drewry’s monograph, *The Southampton Insurrection*. In section two, I present the abolitionist historiography. Turner vindicated William Garrison’s claim that slavery would one day bring an avenging angel; for many he represented the cruelty and immorality of slavery. For African-American abolitionists, however, he also stood as an image of a proud and powerful African-American, to be championed for his resistance. These sections provide evidence in support of the notion of history as inescapably partial. Each of the historians—writers of claims about the past—deployed history for their own ends, and their stories were incomplete, missing critical details. In the third section, I recapitulate the debate surrounding the publication of Styron’s novel, showing how each of the agents involved was motivated by their particular historiography tradition. At stake in the debate was not only Turner’s legacy but also the right to historical authority. This section indicates the power of Turner's history; not only was history tied up with social authority and identity, but the desire to see it properly presented exerted an independent force over historical actors.

### 2. Vilification of Turner

The white citizens of Virginia struggled in the days and months following Turner’s revolt to understand what happened. In newspapers and letters, they recounted and synthesized their traumatic experience. To this end, John Hampden Pleasants served in Southampton County as a war correspondent and soldier putting down the revolt. The
son of a four-term US representative and plantation owner, educated at the College of William and Mary, and senior editor of the *Constitutional Whig*, Pleasants’ initial dispatches revealed the confusion and anxiety that many felt: “On the road we met a thousand different reports, no two agreeing, and leaving it impossible to make a plausible guess at the truth.” The words suggest not only that witnesses viewing the event perceived in multiple, inconsistent ways, but that even in the best of circumstances, deciding on the “truth” of the revolt would have required as much guesswork as research. Pleasants, as a journalist, could hope only to cobble together the truth from all his source work. Truth, history, was a patchwork quilt to weave from inconsistent sources, rather than a fact to uncover and record.

Pleasants eventually reached a conclusion. “Rumor had infinitely exaggerated [the] extent of the insurrection;” some put the number of insurrectionists at 1200, and estimated that the revolt had spilled into adjacent counties. In fact “the numbers engaged are not supposed to have exceeded 60.” But, as Scot French shows, it was not so easy to dispel the notion of a mass revolt. Armed mobs rounded up and killed suspect slaves in neighboring counties and even in North Carolina. A slave girl named Beck implicated eleven slaves in Sussex County; all went to trial. As French also shows, the notion of a larger revolt grew out of and supported Southern anxieties about a general slave revolt, and many, including Thomas R. Grey, were eager to ease those concerns. Nat Turner’s testimony verified the official narrative of the revolt as local insurrection, and put to rest
the fear that it presaged wider violence. Eventually the slaves identified by Beck were pardoned by the governor of Virginia.⁹

The difficulty Pleasants faced in making sense of the confusion surrounding an event has been recaptured by the novelist Margaret Atwood. As sociologist Charles Tilly points out, the construction of stories requires enormous simplification of events that may seem overwhelming. Already we have seen how John Hampden Pleasants could not at first tell fact from fiction, and that, like any journalist, his first concern was to determine what happened; to tell a story about it. Pleasants was hardly alone among reporters in confronting a mass of rumors offering contradictory accounts. But Atwood suggests a second distinction between experience and stories: in experiences, one is often powerless, while storytelling, in offering clear explanations of events, reestablishes power. Resolving the contradictions and turning the disparate tales into a single story is an essential and powerful step.¹⁰

Indeed, theoretical reasons suggest that story telling is central to the establishment of the social status quo. Gramsci, in his Prison Notebooks, sketched out a theory of hegemony, the process by which one group convinces others to sanction its authority. Authority is hegemonic when it goes unquestioned. Thus the challenge for leaders is to suggest the naturalness of their own authority, which Gramsci suggests that they accomplish with such “organic intellectuals” as school teachers and media figures. This naturalness ensures that an existing power structure finds support even among groups and

---

⁹French, p. 35. French relates the story of Pleasants, and Beck in much more detail. French has been an invaluable resource, not only in his specific pieces of evidence and analysis, but especially in providing structure for a narrative of the historiography of Turner.

¹⁰Tilly, op. cit. On the official, public uses of Turner’s historical narrative, see French, pp. 33-64.
people do not benefit from it. Storytelling, in allowing the teller to offer arbitrary or conventional explanations, is one part of the naturalizing process.\textsuperscript{11}

This section views the local, white response to Nat Turner’s revolt through the lens of hegemony. This approach has sound theoretical support, since a slave revolt threatens the ideological foundation upon which the Southern slave state was built; namely the paternalistic relation between master and slave. Southern paternalism, in Eugene Genovese’s conception, “grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation,” which it accomplished by defining “the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction.” Paternalism depended on a notion of slaves as “acquiescent human beings,” men who freely offered their labor. Slave revolts threatened that vision because they repudiated the slaves’ supposed acquiescence. Slaveholders and other whites responded to the revolt by denigrating the rebels, showing contempt for them, and especially labeling them as mad. In so doing they marginalized the rebellion, fitting it into a scheme that tolerated madness but not explicit resistance.\textsuperscript{12}

The earliest newspaper accounts of Nat Turner’s revolt isolated Turner and his followers from the great mass of slaves and slave opinion. On August 24 the Richmond Compiler provided the first published report, which was picked up and spread by newspapers through the country. Although the article noted that precious little information existed, it added, “The wretches who have conceived this thing are mad – infatuated – deceived by some artful knaves, or stimulated by their own miscalculating

passions. The ruin must return on their own heads – they must fall certain sacrifice to their own folly and infatuation.” The logic was clear: the revolt proved the rebels’ madness; no other reason need be given. That is, madness for a slave meant defying his master. In a later dispatch, dated September 3, John Hampden Pleasants underlined that point. He speculated that the slaves had drunkenly killed one white, then, trying to cover their tracks, killed more; quickly the situation escalated. “If there was any ulterior purpose,” he concluded, “Turner probably alone knows it. For our own part, we still believe there was none.” Pleasants denied the possibility of deliberate, systematic resistance to slavery, and in so doing suggested the normality of paternal relations.  

Having replaced the fear of a general revolt with reassurances that Turner’s rebels acted alone, motivated only by their madness, newspapers heaped scorn and contempt on Turner. One gentleman, writing to a newspaper, reported “with pleasure” the news that Turner was not an authentic Baptist preacher, but instead was “deluded” and “of fanatical character.” The Richmond Enquirer published the definitive account of the insurrection, the result of interrogation by Thomas R. Gray after Turner’s capture. The Enquirer noted,

No man can read this account, without setting Nat Turner down as a wild fanatic or a gross imposter—but without possessing a single quality of a Hero or a General—without spirit, without courage, and without sagacity.—We are happy however, that he is taken; as it will extinguish in the minds of the ignorant wretches the delusions which his pretensions may have created; and as it may enable the citizens of Southampton better to understand the plans and extent of the insurrection, from the confessions of its leader.  


The passage hinted at the anxiety attending to the possibility of a more general revolt, attenuated by Turner’s confession. More importantly it communicated intense contempt, piling insult atop insult. The contempt served to further marginalize the rebels and make sense of their brutality by depicting it as moral failure and lunacy.

As Kenneth Greenberg argues, the language in which Southern authorities cast the revolt best measured the extent of contempt that Turner provoked. The key indicator is Turner’s name. In the press he was often mockingly referred to as General Nat. In denying him a last name, whites emphasized his status as slave, rather than autonomous individual. After the revolt, when the Virginia legislature debated how best to respond to it, they discussed the “Southampton Tragedy” or the “Southampton Affair” endlessly. “This method of naming,” writes Greenberg, “shifted “attention away from the agency of the man who was at the heart of the rebellion.” If contempt is a dangerous attitude because it shows a complete lack of regard for its object, then removing a man’s name from history is the ultimate act of contempt.  

In the eyes of many Southerners, the Southampton tragedy occurred because of the slaveholders’ absolute trust in their slaves. Pleasants, in his second dispatch, claimed that “Twelve armed and resolute men were certainly competent to have quelled them at any times. But, taken by surprise—with such horrors before their eyes, and trembling for their wives and children, the men, most naturally, only thought in the first place of providing a refuge for those dependent upon them.” This claim served two purposes. First Pleasants hinted at the weakness of the revolting slaves, despite their numbers, only a handful of whites would have put them down. Second, he suggested that surprise and its

ally, fear, carried the day. He concluded, “It will be long before the people of this
country can get over the horrors of the late scenes, or feel safe in their homes….It is an
aggravation of the crimes perpetrated, that the owners of the slaves in this country are
distinguished for their lenity and humanity.” Elsewhere he wrote similarly: “It is difficult
for the imagination to conceive a situation so truly and horribly awful, as that in which
these unfortunate ladies were placed. Alone, unprotected, and unconscious to danger…”
The conclusion contained an unmistakable sense of betrayal. The “lenity,” with its
premise of trust, had resulted in wanton, immoral slaughter. The breach of trust, with its
implicit rejection of paternalism, further proved the rebel’s madness. 16

Another observer offered the same opinion. “At no time could an attempt of this
type have been made with greater chance of success,” explained one friend in a letter to
another. “The militia were unarmed—the inhabitants perfectly unconscious of
approaching danger from that course never dreamed that they were fostering adders in
their bosoms who ere long would inflict the sting of death.” Contemporaries could not
separate the violence of the revolt from the utter surprise with which they greeted the
prospect of revolting slaves. 17

Thus three trends run through contemporary accounts of the revolt. First, Nat and
his followers were considered to be exceptional fanatics. Second, the county was in no
way prepared for it; a genuine sense of trust preceded the revolt, and a sense of betrayal
followed. Third, the revolt represented a brutal and tragic betrayal of slaveholder’s trust.
The trends reflect the meanings of Nat Turner, a terrifying murderer, a threat to the

16 Hampden, John Pleasants, letter of August 29, p.64; Hampden, John Pleasants, letter of September 3, p.
74.
17 New York Morning Courier and Enquirer, “Extract of a letter from a friend, dated Petersburg,
ideology of slavery, and the cultural response he demanded: marginalizing and silence. These trends resurfaced in the first monograph-length treatment of Nat Turner’s insurrection. Written seventy years after the revolt, William Drewry’s *The Southampton Insurrection* combined the major themes of the 1830s with a Southern pride that can only be understood as a reaction to the Civil War. Drewry, a Southampton native, based the book on newspaper accounts and interviews with survivors and their descendents. The stories Drewry presented should not be taken as true (or false), but as indicators of moods and opinions: they reveal the attitude of Southampton towards the revolt.

Drewry began his work by establishing the progressive nature of the Antebellum South. The South, he argued, was no “laggard,” but a leader in “education, politics, and industry.” The steam locomotive, the telegraph, and the steamer, all had their American origins in the South. Likewise many of the nation’s greatest intellectuals hailed from Virginia: Thomas Jefferson, of course, but also “the younger line of distinguished soldiers and statesmen, prominent among whom were John Y. Mason, the distinguished Cabinet officer and Minister to France, Henry A. Wise, the statesman, soldier, and author.” Drewry aimed in resurrecting these figures and accomplishments to retrieve the status of Virginia and the South in general from the post-Civil War slump into which they had sunk. Drewry’s loyalty lay with the South and Virginia, as did his affection, an emotion most evident in the personification of Virginia. Consider his description of Virginia: “With her strong conservatism, she finally assumed the position of pacificator, and sent Benjamin Watkins Leigh, one of her most renowned citizens, as a commissioner
to South Carolina.” The language suggested intimacy and fondness for the personified State.\textsuperscript{18}

Drewry’s depiction of Southampton revealed a fond nostalgia for the simple days before industrialization and urbanization transformed American life. In the days before the revolt, “every farm had its carpenter and shoemaker who was, in many cases, the master…The old slaves also made the best physicians and nurses. They were gentle and sympathetic and their services were especially valued. The gradual disappearance of this class of negro marks the changes of modern times.” Drewry complained about specialization and pined for the long-passed loyal slaves who stood as loved and loving members of the family.\textsuperscript{19}

Drewry thus wrote \textit{The Southampton Insurrection} in part to refute the notion of Northern superiority, to establish the excellence of Antebellum Virginia. The key tenet of that notion was the North’s moral superiority, achieved by not holding slaves. Drewry rebutted that claim by establishing the paternalist and harmonious relationship between slaves and masters. The revolt, far from threatening that image, reinforced it, by providing loyal slaves—that is, the vast majority of slaves—with the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty by protecting their masters.

Drewry acknowledged his belief in the moral, paternalistic nature of slavery. “Slavery in Virginia,” he wrote, “was not such as to arouse rebellion, but was an institution which nourished the strongest affection and piety in slave and owner, as well as moral quality worthy of any age of civilization.” To argue that slavery did not arouse

\textsuperscript{18} William Sydney Drewry, \textit{The Southampton Insurrection}, Washington, 1900, pp. 9-17.

\textsuperscript{19} Drewry, 104. That these slaves may never have existed is immaterial.
rebellion, Drewry provided an alternative explanation for it: Turner’s madness and “fanaticism,” a vision of Turner that grew out of earlier attitudes.\(^{20}\)

Drewry regarded Turner with the same contempt that Pleasants and other contemporaries felt for him. Drewry introduced him as a “wild, fanatical Baptist preacher,” but snubbed him first by refusing to mention his name. As he began to discuss the revolt, he described “many of the ringleaders,” but never dropped a name. The naming slights continued; he often referred to him as “General” Nat, with general in quotation marks. And note, of course, the title of his work: *The Southampton Insurrection*, with no reference to its leader.\(^{21}\)

Drewry, though perhaps impressed with Turner’s early learning, nonetheless doubted his mental abilities. Turner’s testimony showed “how his mind, attempting to grapple with things beyond its reach, first became bewildered and confused, until he was finally deluded and led to the perpetuation of foulest butchery.” Drewry suggested that Turner’s lunacy inspired him to revolt. Indeed, a descendent of Nat’s, interned in the “lunatic asylum at Petersburg, Virginia, well illustrates the trend of his early ancestors” toward madness. Drewry also hinted at Turner’s madness with small anecdotes. For example, John Barrow, though killed by the rebels, nonetheless fiercely defended his property. Recognizing his bravery, the insurgents “drank his blood.” Clearly no witness could have survived this scene; according to Drewry, the rebels spared none. The hyperbole should be read as a symbolic fact, indicating the sense in Southampton of the grotesque violence of the revolt.\(^{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Drewry, p. 44.
\(^{21}\) Drewry, pp. 23, 26, 35.
\(^{22}\) Drewry, pp. 28-29, 51. Incidentally, these words (“how his mind…confused”) also appear in Gray’s preamble to Turner’s confession; it appears that Drewry borrowed them without acknowledgment.
Having provided an alternative explanation for the revolt, Drewry still needed to demonstrate the love, morality, and especially loyalty of the bulk of the Southampton slave population, which he did by illustrating the numerous ways in which slaves helped to defeat the revolt. Consider the following story:

[Captain Harris] had been a soldier in the war of 1812 and now was old and feeble. His large and prosperous farm was entrusted mostly to the care of the negro overseers, Aaron and Ben….On Sunday Ben went to Dr. Jones’ to visit his wife, and Monday morning while returning home heard the report that the British were in the country killing the people….Captain Harris would not believe Ben’s story and refused to fly. This was very natural for a man of his intelligence. But Ben knew there was danger afloat, and, with a heart full of love for his master, replied, “You shall go,” and taking the invalid upon his shoulders, bore him to the swamps behind his house.23

The story unmistakably illustrated the paternalistic vision by stressing the love and loyalty of slaves. It hinted at their morality and regard for proper relations: the young and able care for the old and infirm. To the extent that Drewry’s slaves have personality, they love their masters and embrace their subordinate position.

Aaron and Ben also showed the will of slaves to fight the rebels. Learning of the revolt, Vaughn gathered together his slaves and told them “they were at liberty to do as they liked, either to remain or to go with the insurgents. They chose the former course.” Other slaves, faced with the same choice, “replied they would die in [their master’s] defense.” Thus Drewry asserted with confidence, “Any account of Southampton would be ineffective which failed to compliment the good sense, fidelity, and affection of the slaves. It was only the deluded and fanatical who took part.”24

Drewry felt love and pride for his Virginia, and therefore felt acutely the pain of the revolt. One mistress had told the men to flee, on the mistaken notion that the rebels

23 Drewry, p. 52.
24 Drewry, pp. 61, 69-71,
would spare women and children. Drewry commented, “How mistaken, poor woman!” and then narrated the remaining brutality in the house.

One of her own slaves slashed her with a razor as she defended herself. Martha Waller was concealed by the nurse under her large apron, but the child could not endure the reckless destruction of the furniture, so arose, and threatened to tell her father. One of the negroes seized her and dashed her to death against the ground.\(^\text{25}\)

Drewry communicated the brutality of the revolt and, in the death of the young, the end of innocence. In the oral and popular, as well as formal historical tradition that Drewry drew upon and enhanced, Turner epitomized villainy. The vilification of Turner served to reinforce hegemonic claims about slavery by normalizing slave acquiescence and by casting resistance and moral decrepitude and mental decay.

3. Turner as Hero

Scott French argues that the trials following the revolt—of Nat Turner but also of those charged by young Beck, and their eventual pardon—reconciled history as told by Gray and memory as detailed by the white communities. Whereas Gray’s story stressed Turner’s autonomy and ultimate lunacy, individual memory recalled a widespread revolt. The pardon laid to rest that memory, and Drewry’s subsequent historiography appears to have ignored it as well. French is correct but his argument is too limited, for the bounds of memory—in the sense of informal history—extend beyond white memory. In the white collective memory, in the stories told to keep children awake at night, told after one too many drinks, told whenever talk of manumission got too serious, Nat Turner served as a vivid reminder of the fanaticism and barbarity of blacks, of slaves. However, he was

\(^{25}\) Drewry, pp. 58-59.
a different figure and character in the black and abolitionist movement. He lived on as a symbol of resistance in the oral tradition of slaves and in the abolitionist writings, and in the history of African Americans. Although these sources are far from homogenous, even in their view of Turner, they consistently deployed him as an anti-slavery symbol, and he became a larger-than-life figure with whom many black Americans felt familiar; Turner became a hero to whose example generations of African-American men would turn for inspiration.

The word “hero” is usually used to define these extraordinary figures who exist not in reality but in our memories and stories. John W. Roberts, a folklore scholar, claims that “A hero is the product of a creative process and exists as a symbol of our differential identity.” Heroes are created by a culture; although they are exceptional, their virtues become an identifying characteristic. “The heroes we create are figures who, from our vantage point on the world, appear to possess personal traits and/or perform actions that exemplify our conception of our ideal self.” It may not be possible to live up to these idea types. Rather,

The embodiment of the exploits of a particular figure in folk heroic literature is not designed to provide a model of adaptive behavior in a literal sense. Rather, folk heroic literature offers a conception of attributes and actions that a group perceives as the most advantageous for maintaining and protecting its identity in the face of a threat to values guiding action….In essence, folk heroic literature facilitates the group's ability to identify its antagonist, the nature of the threat that the antagonist's actions pose for the group, and the types of behavior most advantageous for dealing with the threat.26

According to Roberts, the creation of heroes allows groups to maintain their identity and map out strategies of survival and growth in the face of oppression. In this section, I will

argue that Nat Turner served as a folk hero to African Americans, before and after emancipation, because he embodied not only resistance but also nobility and masculinity. Although slaves and leaders could not always live up to his ideal, they trumpeted it in rhetoric and story, reminding themselves of the possibility of dignity and hope.

If this tradition did not begin with Henry Highland Garnet, then he at least did much to lionize Turner’s memory. Garnet was born a slave in 1815 and escaped into freedom at the age of nine when his family fled to New York City. Garnet attended an African-American school and from a young age committed himself to the abolitionist cause. “As a young man,” records French, “Garnet hewed the Garrisonian line, eschewing violence and political action in favor of moral suasion.” But by 1843 his position had changed. The twenty eight year old Garnet had become a Presbyterian pastor, and in his “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” he declared, “there is not much hope of Redemption without shedding blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather, die freemen, than live to be slaves.” Garnet delivered his fiery address at the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo.27

Garnet, in his address, argued against slavery on logical as well as religious grounds. He suggested that earlier generations of Americans opposed slavery: “The gross inconsistency of a people holding slaves, who had themselves ‘ferried o'er the wave’ for freedom's sake, was too apparent to be entirely overlooked.” Garnet implied that white Americans were sensitive to the hypocrisy of legalized slavery in a nation built on freedom. But his principal argument for freedom was not a legal or logico-moral one. “Humanity supplicated with tears for the deliverance of the children of Africa. Wisdom

---

27 French, Rebellious Slave, p. 74-75. French uses the word “apotheosis” to depict the process that I have described with “lionize.”
urged her solemn plea. The bleeding captive plead his innocence, and pointed to Christianity who stood weeping at the cross.” Children of Africa, being good Christians, deserved better treatment than what they received. Their humanity alone demanded that their maltreatment end. Religious language and moral logic alike made the case for abolition.  

In this context, Garnet held Nat Turner in the highest regard. “The patriotic Nathaniel Turner followed Denmark Veazie,” Garnet explained. “He was goaded to desperation by wrong and injustice….future generations will remember him among the noble and brave.” Turner stood exalted, along with Vesey, accused of plotting a slave rebellion and other heroes of resistance, Joseph Cinque who led the Amistad rebellion and Madison Washington, stood exalted. “Noble men! Those who have fallen in freedom’s conflict, their memories will be cherished by the true hearted and the God fearing in all future generations; those who are living, their names are surrounded by a halo of glory.” These figures of liberation had achieved the epitome of nobility and respect, religious and secular. Garnet viewed Turner as the exemplar of achievement. As French notes, however, “Garnet stopped short of advocating armed rebellion, saying it was ‘inexpedient’ under the present circumstances.”

Frederick Douglass was also a slave who escaped to freedom, and at the age of twenty five, he spoke at the Convention of 1843. Douglass, however, rebutted Garnet: “there was too much physical force, both in the address and in the remarks” of Garnet. Douglas was worried that Garnet’s speech could incite a revolt, one that he opposed because of the violence it required. After Douglass and Garnet’s remarks, the delegates

---

29 French, Rebellious Slave, p. 75.
at the convention voted whether to adopt the remarks, and by a nineteen to eighteen margin, the vote was defeated.  

It would be tempting to conclude that Douglass disapproved of violence in general. But as French observes, “the public debate over Garnet’s address obscured the degree to which Douglass himself viewed antislavery violence as both a legitimate expression of black manhood and powerful evidence of slave discontent.” In support of this proposition, French points us to a scene from Douglass’ 1845 autobiography, where he fought with an overseer: “My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place….I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.” Douglass indicated the redemptive, rejuvenating power of violent resistance to immoral authority. Douglass echoed this sentiment ten years later. “In his autobiographical narrative My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Douglass created a new pantheon of historical heroes for American freedom, explicitly linking himself both with the founding fathers and with slave rebels like Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner.” Douglass mocked the Americans who celebrated false ideals of liberty on Independence Day. Hence, as Eric Foner suggests, “in effect, Douglass argued that in their desire for freedom, the slaves were truer to the nation’s underlying principles than the white Americans who annually celebrated Fourth of July.” Like Turner, Douglass elected to face death rather than live as a slave; like Garnet, Douglass identified with Turner and ascribed the highest value to him and other leaders of slave revolts.  

---

30 French, Rebellious Slave, p. 78-79.  
For Garnet and Douglas, Turner was a heroic figure, larger than life, but still one with whom they could identify. This Turner, however, was not to be found in the newspaper accounts of insurrection, in Gray’s pamphlet, or even in the writings of white abolitionists, as we shall see. How, then, did Douglass and Garnet come to know this Turner? They did not witness the revolt themselves, could not have been present at his trial. Rather they learned of him from a vibrant oral culture, a popular history, traces of which lingered on years later.

John W. Roberts provides hints of a heroic Turner in the oral tradition. Stories about him circulated after his death, attributing mystical power, on account of his religiosity. Allegedly, for example, “the limb of the tree on which he was hanged died at the same moment that he did.” The stories hint at the power Turner’s memory held. “Stories also circulated that, like Christ, Nat appeared to selected ones in the community.” Turner’s presence signified a kind of blessing and authority; he was remembered and venerated.32

In 1936, the Works Project Administration commissioned black workers to interview former slaves living in Virginia. All the extant interview records were published in 1976. Multiple interviews mention Nat Turner. Cornelia Carney, born in 1838, had heard mention once of a Nat Turner:

Father got beat up so much dat arter while he run away an’ lived in de woords. Used to slip back to de house Saddy nights an’ sometime Sunday when he knowed Mrase and Missus done gone to meetin’. Mama used to send John, my oldes' brother, out to de woods wid food fo’ father, an’ what he didn't git fum us de Lawd provided. Never did ketch him, though ole Marse search real sharp.

32 Roberts, p. 164.
Father wasn’t de onlies’ one hidin’ in de woods. Dere was his
cousin, Gabriel, dat was hidin' an' a man name Charlie. Niggers
was too smart fo’ white folks to git ketched. White folks was
sharp too, but not sharp enough to git by ole Nat. Nat? I don’t
know who he was. Ole folks used to say it all de time. De
meanin’ I git is dat de niggers could always out-smart de white
folks. What you git fum it?33

Mrs. Carney’s words revealed an intimate connection between resistance to slavery and
Nat Turner. For her, Turner symbolized the ability of slaves to escape their condition. It
is possible, however, that the “Nat” old folks spoke to refers more to a generic trickster
figure, common in African and African American oral tradition, than to the Nat Turner of
the past.34

But other recollections of Nat are much more specific. Mrs. Fannie Berrie
recalled her neighbor running up to her window one morning and yelling “de Niggers is
arisin’, ” over and over again. Mrs. Berrie notes that this must have been “Nat Turner’s
Insurrection, which wuz some time ‘fo’ de breakin’ of de Civil War” (35) (If true, this
story would make Mrs. Berrie well over 100 years old at the time of her interview.) Ella
Williams remembered the revolt in similar terms, although she learned of it from her
rifle-wielding master (who relinquished his arms when it became clear that the revolt
occurred several hundred miles away). Allen Crawford, who was born in Southampton
County in 1835, also recounted the revolt in particular detail. These interviews provide a
glimpse of the oral tradition that kept Nat Turner alive. In this tradition, Turner
represented opposition to slavery, whether explicitly in revolt or implicitly in his cunning.

33 Cornelia Carney in Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Phillips, eds. Weevils in
34 On the trickster figure in African American folklore, see Roberts, ch. 2.
Turner, moreover, appeared as a familiar character: “ole Nat” who was mentioned “all de time.”

It is difficult to say what information about antebellum America can be gleaned from interviews conducted during the Great Depression. Recent history and contemporary culture are likely to influence the way stories are told, so that they reflect the moment of telling rather than the time they purport to describe, or the context in which they were learned. But comparative evidence gives reason to believe that the stories the ex-slaves repeated to the WPA interviewers differed little from the stories they may have told as slaves. In Russian folktales, “variations of detail remain subordinate to stable structures” and “Field workers among illiterate peoples in Polynesia, Africa, and North and South America have also found that oral traditions have enormous staying power.” While we might not read these testimonies as literal description of historic events, we may nonetheless trust that they reflect oral tradition of the nineteenth century where they must have originated.

What is at stake in this question is the consistency of oral tradition. If it varied significantly over time or place, then we would not be able to make any conclusions about the Nat Turner that Garnet and Douglass encountered in everyday conversation. The field work of folklorists and anthropologists gives us some confidence on this matter, but it tells us little about the consistency of the Nat Turner tradition in African American culture. Fortunately we may turn elsewhere for confirmation: the *Journal of Negro History*.

---

36 Darnton, p. 19.
The *Journal of Negro History* was founded in 1916 by Carter G. Woodson, a scholar of African American history. Woodson also inaugurated Negro History Week, first celebrated in 1926. During the week, people would recall the memories of heroes such as Nat Turner “who lived up to the ideal of Jesus that, ‘greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’” It is shocking how thoroughly Turner had been transformed by 1926: from a violent revolutionary figure to a Jesus figure, personifying great love. But Woodson felt Turner was worthy of veneration, and the pages of the *Journal of Negro History* reflect that sentiment.37

Between 1916 and 1967, twenty-three separate articles mention Nat Turner in the *Journal of Negro History*. By contrast, between 1895 and 1934, Nat Turner’s name appears in the index of the *American Historical Review* zero times. (Slavery was often mentioned; Turner’s omission was not for choice of subject matter.) The references in the *JNH*, for the most part, are in passing, as a token example, particularly of African American religiosity or of slave resistance to authority. “The threat of a black Spartacus waiting to rise in the South,” wrote one historian, “pervaded the decade of the fifties; it was John Brown’s idea precisely to raise up such leaders. The names of Gabriel, Vesey, Turner and Douglass were familiar names in American households.” The quotation is illuminating not only because of the role Turner plays in it, but also because of the multiple layers of knowing it depicts: the names “were familiar” in John Brown’s day; but apparently, no longer. Yet the author cites them without explanation; they must still

---

be familiar to his audience. Knowledge of Nat Turner, intimate in this journal, granted access to a realm of society distinct from “American” households.38

Turner was invoked as an explanatory force. His revolt accounted for the passage of legislation in numerous states. Its repercussions encouraged free African Americans to move to Liberia, and shocked Southern industrialists into excluding blacks from the cotton industry. Turner’s revolt also momentarily halted the trend in slave movement: the violence of the revolt so shocked slave owners in the Gulf States that they slowed the importation of slaves from Virginia and the East. These examples reveal a comfortable familiarity with Turner and a profound respect for the influence and power of his revolt. Even if it failed to win freedom, even if it worsened the conditions of slaves, it had a deep impact on the South. Turner represented resistance to white authority and the status quo, much as he had in the oral tradition recorded by the WPA interviewers. His capacity to inspire fear and action, from legislators and African Americans, testified to his heroic stature.39

White Abolitionist Tradition

The historiographic tradition that I have discussed held Nat Turner in the highest regard. He exemplified slave resistance and epitomized achievements; he was the manliest and noblest of men. We have reached these conclusions by studying the

writings of African-Americans, but others viewed Turner positively as well, although some qualification must be made. Three names in particular deserve mention: Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Herbert Aptheker. Although Higginson was a tireless abolitionist, a supporter of John Brown and a prolific writer of anti-slavery tracts, he remained another example of a white man writing about and speaking for blacks. Garrison, Higginson and Aptheker did not identify with Turner as did Douglass and Garnet; instead they and other whites sympathetic to equal rights viewed him with caution, as a pathology rather than an exemplar.\(^\text{40}\)

The first abolitionist to write about Turner was William Lloyd Garrison. With impressive foresight he warned of an imminent slave revolt in January of 1831. Such warnings were part of his rhetorical arsenal; Garrison “wielded the threat of slave rebellion like a sword of Damocles;” if abolition were delayed, then harsh retribution would follow. After the revolt itself, Garrison circulated news of the uprising. Although Garrison thought that Turner’s rebellion would call other slaves to arm and heralded widespread revolt, he continued to advocate for nonviolent means. He thought that Turner’s testimony would “only serve to rouse up other black leaders and cause other insurrections, by creating among blacks admiration for the character, Nat…” Though Garrison admired Turner as a hero, the abolitionist did not look to him as a model of resistance.\(^\text{41}\)

In 1861 Francis Wentworth Higginson, the Harvard-educated abolitionist, published an influential essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He titled his essay “‘Nat Turner’s

---


\(^{41}\) French, 31; William Lloyd Garrison, *Boston Liberator*, 17, in French 50; see also French, 65.
Insurrection,” but of his thirteen pages, he devoted only two to the revolt itself. He began with a biographical sketch of Turner and the aftermath of the revolt occupies most of his attention. He described in detail a hysteria that shook the South, from Virginia to Louisiana, filling the land with the conviction that a massive, angry slave population was always and everywhere about to rise in arms. Higginson’s sketch of Turner focused on his exceptional attributes. Paraphrasing Turner’s testimony, he noted that “he had…felt himself singled out from childhood for some great work,” and was gifted with “great mental precocity” as well as “mechanical ingenuity”—and had apparently “experimentalized very early in making paper” and, shockingly enough “gunpowder.”  

Turner was exceptional as a man or as a slave, but Higginson struggled to provide details of his life. “The biographies of slaves,” he wrote, “can hardly be individualized; they belong to the class…it is only the general experience of human beings in like condition which can clothe them with life.” As an example, he noted that newspaper accounts from the time hinted at Nat’s wife; “we know that she belonged to a different master” and little else, “but this is much. For this is equivalent to saying” that Turner was helpless to protect the sanctity of his marriage subject to the whims of masters. Higginson’s discussion of Turner’s wife may have provided some explanation for the revolt, but was most surely intended to clarify the difficulties of writing about a slave. One could only make general conclusions. Higginson saw no individuality in Turner; he was an example of the trouble and tragedy of slavery only in general.  

---


43 Ibid.
Following the biography, Higginson described the revolt and then the hysteria that followed it. The repercussions of this hysteria were fatal for the slave population. “In shuddering at the horrors of the insurrection, we have forgotten the far greater horrors of its suppression.” The slave population, rather than the white population, commanded Higginson’s sympathy. He related stories circulating in Southern newspapers that describe the violence inflicted on innocent slaves; “These were the masters’ stories,” he added, and therefore they understated the carnage. He quoted his “honored friend, Lydia Maria Child,” who provided him with “some recollections of this terrible period, as noted down from the lips of an old colored woman, once well known in New York, Charity Bowery.” Bowery describes the incessant patrols that came in the wake of Turner. They rounded up “the brightest and the best” of the slaves.44

Higginson, through Bowery’s testimony and other reports, established the brutality and injustice of the response. One particular example is worth quoting in full

There is one touching story…which rests on good authority, that of Rev. M. B. Cox, a Liberian missionary, then in Virginia concerned a slave who had saved his master during the insurrection. In the hunt which followed the massacre, a slaveholder went into the woods, accompanied by a faithful slave, who had been the means of saving his life during the insurrection. When they had reached a retired place in the forest, the man handed his gun to his master, informing him that he could not live a slave any longer, and requesting him either to free him or shoot him on the spot. The master took the gun, in some trepidation, leveled it at the faithful negro, and shot him through the heart.45

The slave asked for liberty or death, and in asking received both. For Higginson, the story illustrated the injustice of the masters: a master, who owed his life and his liberty to his slave, nonetheless chose to kill his slave rather than set him free; that the bullet went through the slave’s heart was no accident. The story reflected Higginson’s view of

44 Ibid., p. 179-180.
blacks as equal to white. Consider the sentence “The man handed his gun to his master.” We know that the man in question is a slave, but first we hear he is a man, then that he holds a gun, and only finally that he has a master. The particular sentence structure emphasizes the masculinity, autonomy, and ultimately morality of slaves: after all, holding the gun, this slave could have killed his master and freed himself. Higginson therefore disapproved of Turner’s indiscriminate violence, but recognized the injustice of slavery to which Turner responded.46

One other aspect of the story stands out: its reliance on oral accounts. Higginson learned the story from Rev. Cox; many of his other anecdotes he read in newspapers. Higginson is careful to establish Rev. Cox’s credentials, just as he described Lydia Maria Child as his “honored friend,” and noted that her black informant was once “well-known in New York City.” Higginson had to rely on oral testimony because the Southern newspapers that covered the revolt were unlikely to represent viewpoints sympathetic to the slave population. But he was anxious about these sources; hence his insistence on providing their credentials.

The source of Higginson’s knowledge of Charity may not have been a personal correspondence, but an 1848 article in the Emancipator in which Lydia Maria Child recounted her memory of Charity Bowman. Child acknowledged the fuzziness of her distant, second-hand knowledge. “Some confusions of names, dates, and incidents, I may very naturally make; I profess only to give ‘the pith and marrow’ of Charity’s story.” A prolific writer educated in Massachusetts, Child was co-editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, and would have been eager to relate stories of the abuses of slavery;

46 It is tempting to read Higginson’s essay as a criticism of violent means for abolition, but this view is probably too strong. Higginson was one of “The Secret Six,” the group of prominent abolitionists who supported John Brown in his armed forays into the south. See French, p. 102.
Bowman’s was no exception. The bulk of her story centered on efforts to buy her children’s freedom from their cruel master; instead they were sold and scattered throughout the South. But Bowman also told Child “about the patrols, who, armed with arbitrary power and frequently intoxicated, break into the houses of colored people.” Against this backdrop, Nat Turner loomed large in Bowman’s memory: “Nothing seemed to excite her imagination as the insurrection of Nat Turner.” The excitement of the revolt, the way Turner reversed the power dynamic in the South, and the harsh consequences that followed impressed Bowman deeply. The article concludes by noting that Bowman died in 1847; she had been deceased for 13 years by the time Higginson composed his essay.\(^47\)

Turner’s revolt repulsed Higginson; the violence and horror of it disturbed him and spoke to the evils of slavery. The revolt impressed not because of what it said about Turners or even about blacks, but because of its moral implications for white Americans: the sin of slavery promised nothing but violence. The Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, shared these concerns. Lincoln’s biographers note that as Lincoln composed the Emancipation Proclamation, he worried incessantly about a slave insurrection. According to Carl Sandburg Lincoln must have thought, “What should be his course if suddenly there came news of scores or hundreds of Southern masters, their women and children, slaughtered in their beds and their houses burned, in the style of the Nat Turner

\(^{47}\) Slave testimony Two centuries of letters, speeches, interviews and autobiographies, John W. Blassingame, ed., Baton Rouge: 1977, pp. 261-267. Bowery and Bowman undoubtedly refer to the same person; what accounts for the name shift is unclear.
rebellion?” Turner was a threat to Lincoln; his revolt indicated the dangers of freedom rather than the troubles of slavery.48

Like Lincoln and Higginson, the man Styron identified as the source of all controversy surrounding his novel, Herbert Aptheker dwelled on the violence of Turner’s revolt rather than its implications about slave autonomy and capacity for resistance. Aptheker, whose master’s thesis detailed Turner’s revolt, wrote a history of slave revolts, American Negro Slave Revolts. The book argued that Turner’s revolt “was not an isolated, unique phenomenon, but the culmination of a series of slave conspiracies and revolts which had occurred in the immediate past.” (Aptheker, 11) Thus Aptheker took for granted the capacity of slaves to revolt. “The Turner Cataclysm” occupied a chapter, 33 pages of his 409 page monograph. Elsewhere he has offered a detailed treatment of “The Event,” but here the description of the revolt and the man is brief. Turner impressed Aptheker, as he had Higginson. Aptheker reported that Turner was “keen, mechanically gifted,” and that his powers of persuasion were such that “even white people were influenced, if not controlled by him” (295, 296). But the praise is fleeting; Aptheker focuses on the aftermath: the legislative implications and the horrific consequences of the revolt for the slave population.49

Aptheker, in uncovering and popularizing the frequency of slave revolts, fought against the image of the complacent slave. Even before Stanley Elkin’s thesis that slavery debilitated the African-American psyche had taken hold, slaveholders had long sought to justify slavery with the claim that slaves approved. Aptheker was a friend of

the civil rights movement and a devoted progressive, but it is clear that Nat Turner had a very different meaning for him than he had for Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet. I have shown that for them he was the ideal hero, a symbol not only of resistance but also of nobility and masculinity. Turner’s memory, for Aptheker as well as Douglass and Garnet, was preserved in the stories and memories passed on after his death, more so even than in his testimony or the accounts of his revolt.

4. Turner in Popular Culture

Thus far I have identified three historiographic traditions, three ways of knowing Nat Turner: the white plantation tradition, born in the aftermath of Turner’s revolt and set down eternally in Drewry’s monograph; the African-American tradition, which Garrison brought to life in his initial coverage and which lived on into the 1960s through prominent African-Americans, ex-slaves and eventually race leaders; and the abolitionist tradition, in which Turner was a tragic exemplar of the evils that slavery wrought. But the men who produced the textual evidence for their tradition relied on oral, popular accounts; Nat Turner became a stock cultural figure, to be lauded or feared (and, ideally, silenced). In this sense, the development of the genealogy of Nat Turner has the “circular” characteristics that Carlo Ginzburg attributes to the culture of the Friuli in sixteenth century Italy, with oral culture reinforcing formal, lettered culture, and high culture influencing the development of popular culture. The oral tradition of Nat Turner informed abolitionists and African-American leaders, but these same leaders, in their
inventive and impassioned rhetoric, shaped Turner’s legacy, giving new meaning and prominence to it.\textsuperscript{50}

This reciprocity was more than evident in the U.S. academy in the 1960s and 1970s; indeed the influence of mass culture—and counter culture—on academic development is a defining characteristic of this feature. For our purposes, two groups of academic historians are worth singling out. The first consisted of the established historians who came to prominence in earlier decades. Its members include C. Vann Woodward, Eugene D. Genovese. These historians were trained in the tradition of Leopold Van Ranke’s objectivism, his famed ability to detach personal concern from his scholarship. Peter Novick, in his study of objectivity and the American historical profession, notes that these historians appreciated the notion of historians as “free-floating and socially detached observers, whose liberation from particularist loyalties allowed them to approach closer to objectivity.” As Novick argues, the 1960s were troubling times for such historians, because of the collision of politics, ideology, and the academy.\textsuperscript{51}

The second group of historians associated with or influenced by the Black Power movement. Julius Lester, a prominent member of this group, spoke for them when he wrote, “Malcolm X and Black Power rejected [the integrationist agenda of the 1960s], and the first step in rejecting that agenda was to state forcefully that white liberals were not in a position to speak with authority about black history and black culture.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, as Malcolm X described it, his speeches often centered on reclaiming black history; they


\textsuperscript{52} Email correspondence, 2/24/2008.
emphasized the awful conditions of slavery and the immorality of slave masters.

Malcolm used history as central recruiting device in his effort to develop and popularize new temples for the Nation of Islam. 53

Although Malcolm recalled that his middle school history books lacked all but the most cursory mention of African-American history, from his first history class he became an avid history buff. When he was in prison, he read extensively in his prison’s apparently excellent library, and quickly encountered Carter Woodson’s description of Nat Turner. Turner inspired in Malcolm X a strong pride and sense of accomplishment. Turner represented the possibility and necessity of active resistance to slavery.

Responding to Malcolm X, this “new generation of black historians aggressively challenged the claims of any whites to speak authoritatively on their past.” By 1969 these challenges were rarely polite: Novick reports that “Herbert Gutman, presenting a paper to the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, was shouted down.” Eugene Genovese, among others, responded in kind. “My attitude was I’m not going to take the crap.” If someone challenged him, “I’d look him straight in the eye and say, ‘you’re an idiot’.” Rancor characterized the era, and the tension reflected the stakes: as Novick suggests, the Black Power historians, with their emphasis on the uniqueness and superiority of their perspective, threatened the paradigm of historical research. 54

William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner fictionalizes the life of Nat Turner, describing his early years, the growth of his hatred for whites, and the

54 Novick Noble Dream, p. 475, his emphasis. Genovese, quoted in Novick, p. 478. Let me emphasize that whether one agrees with the claim of historians like Lester (to be proper, 1969 Lester) is immaterial; what matters is that they made the claims and that some, particularly university administrators, took them seriously enough that they responded by, inter alia, establishing African-American studies departments. On this point, too, see Novick, ch. 14.
development of his plans for revolt. The book takes a first-person perspective, beginning in Turner’s jail cell as he narrates his life for Gray. Styron presented Turner’s internal, psychological life as much as his public and social life. As a child, Turner was the kind of house slave that Malcolm X would loathe years later: obsessed with his own intelligence and his owner’s regard, he looked down on the uneducated field slaves and their coarseness, especially their sexuality. Turner, except for a brief homosexual encounter, remains chaste throughout the book. Turner’s master, Samuel Turner is liberal and educated, made in the mold of Thomas Jefferson. He despises slavery and promises to free his pet slave Turner. But as Nat comes of age, Benjamin faces crippling debts, and sells Nat to an abusive owner.

This sale, coupling cruelty and betrayal, lights in Turner the flames of hatred for not only his masters but also whites in general. Turner feels “hatred so pure and obdurate that no sympathy, no human warmth, no flicker of compassion can make the faintest nick or scratch upon the stony surface of its being.” Turner develops a strong religiosity along with his hatred; he comes to see himself as an Ezekiel figure, a wrathful servant of the Lord, whom Turner constantly senses. His religiosity impels him to self-discipline, he fasts and keeps chaste and is given to periodic visions, which Styron suggests may be hallucinations brought about by fasts.\footnote{William Styron, \textit{The Confessions of Nat Turner}, New York: 1967 (Fourth Printing), p. 256.}

Turner’s hatred and religiosity collide in his relationship with the beautiful Margaret Whitehead. In their weekly buggy rides to church, Margaret interrogates Turner on all manners religion. On these rides, Margaret overwhelmed Turner. “Her closeness, her presence stifled me….Suddenly, despite myself, the godless thought came: I could stop now and here….do with her anything I wished….I could throw her down and
spread her young white legs and stick myself in her…” But Turner does nothing. The scene captures the contradictions that Turner lives with. His sexuality and hatred required him to dominate, rather than love, a white woman, but Turner lacked the resolve to follow through, so transfixed was he by his feelings for her. Turner’s complex emotional make-up turned him into a man of talk, not action.\textsuperscript{56}

The action reaches a climax when, after fasting for five days, Turner sees a vision in the sky that demands he revolt. He has been plotting for months, grooming his select lieutenants and a handful of other recruits and mapping out his attack route. When the attack begins, however, Turner loses his nerve; he cannot kill his master, or anyone else. Another slave, Will, takes action and kills wantonly. Needing to impress his troops in order to retain command, Turner at last forces himself to kill; his target is Margaret Whitehead. Soon, the militia arrives and breaks the revolt, and eventually Turner is captured. In jail, awaiting execution, unable to feel God’s presence, he reflects on his life and his revolt; his one regret is that he killed Margaret. The novel concludes as the image of Margaret Whitehead promises him bliss in heaven: “\textit{We’ll love one another, she seems to be entreating me’.” An epigraph follows; it is a quotation from Drewry’s \textit{The Southampton Insurrection}.\textsuperscript{57}

Born in Southampton County, child of liberal parents and grandson of a slave owner, William Styron knew nothing of the abolitionist traditions of Nat Turner. Rather Styron knew of Turner through the traditions of white Virginia and especially through Drewry’s historiography. Styron saw the novel as an important step in improving race

\begin{footnotes}
\item[56] \textit{ibid}, p. 367.
\item[57] \textit{ibid}, p. 428; Styron’s emphasis. The epigraph states that all the rebels except Turner were given a decent burial. Turner was hung from a tree and dismembered. His scalp, claims the epigraph, was turned into a wallet, and his head has been seen in various places throughout Southampton.
\end{footnotes}
relations, which it would do by communicating to a mass audience the depravity of slavery. Because Styron constructed his Nat Turner in relation to the slaveholding historical tradition, his “hero,” although a rich character by Drewry’s standards, looked like a caricature to many African-American readers. The publication of Styron’s novel brought into conflict the disjoint historical traditions of Turner, one which denied the capacity of African-Americans to resist, the other which insisted on the primacy of resistance as a virtue. The conflict centered on the validity of alternative traditions, learned as they were in the intimacies of everyday life. Such traditions threatened the generalist claims of established historians, but their primacy was central to the message of Black Power.

Styron’s liberal attitude towards race relations developed when he was young, and was tied up with his sense of self-regard. He saw himself as an “unusual child” in the 1930s, because he felt slavery and the denigration of blacks were “evil.” The evilness of slavery extended beyond its impact on slaves. Styron stated that “It’s often unremarked that segregation, in addition to the injustice it worked upon black people, had a concomitant effect on white people,” forcing them as it did to compromise their morals. Indeed, Styron saw himself as “a little unusual” when he was growing up in the South, “in that I was a bit more sensitive than most of my young contemporaries to the ironies and paradoxes of this thing they called Jim Crow segregation.” His parents, “who were advanced in their thinking, liberal, enlightened” introduced him to the notion that “this whole system was something profoundly wrong, profoundly evil.” Styron’s moral
opposition to slavery and segregation, although established at an early age, was evidence of his own exceptionality.58

Styron hoped *The Confessions of Nat Turner* improve race relations. Principally the novel would do so by illustrating the depravity of life as a slave. Asked about the importance of continuing to study and interpret Nat Turner, Styron said, “Very few Americans are aware of the continuity that exists between slavery and the racial discrimination we still live with in this country.” The suggestion was clear: his novel, in showing the awfulness of slavery, remained important for the lesson it offered on contemporary race relations. He preceded the suggestion by saying:

Anything that allows us to understand the nature of slavery in America is of enormous value. I think that we suffer from historical amnesia, historical ignorance, and that very few people realize the unbelievable dehumanization wrought by slavery. Americans have a penchant for historical amnesia.

For Styron, the purpose of his novel was to illustrate the dehumanizing effects of slavery, and especially by showing how slavery made Turner into that Drewry knew him to be. Styron tacitly acknowledged that he was writing for a white audience; blacks, by and large, need not be told that slavery was awful. For a white audience, there was no vision of Turner to reinforce or contest; most Americans simply had not heard of Nat Turner. The mere act of presenting Turner would bring prominence to slavery and acknowledge the possibility of resistance.59

Styron, of course, was friends with African-Americans as well as white Americans. He formed friendships with African-American writers Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. The latter served as an inspiration and who enthusiastically reviewed *The

---

Confessions. But Ellison, at least, held a more complicated attitude toward African-American history than did Styron. While Styron hoped to show the awfulness of slavery, Ellison worried about claims that his ancestors were simply abused. “From one perspective,” he wrote in review of the Moynihan report, “slavery was horrible and brutalizing.” But it would be dangerous to stop there: “there is from my perspective something further to say. I have to affirm my forefathers…. I am forced to look at these people… and conclude that there is another reality …” one in which the continued survival of African-Americans represented a singular triumph. History, though it has its tragic moments, gives meaning to the present moment, so unless Ellison was forced to acknowledge the accomplishments of his predecessors. Ellison’s insider perspective thrust upon him a particular view of history, nuanced but also biased.  

Styron’s novels and interviews reveal a contradiction in his attitudes towards race. While Styron condemned slavery and worked as a novelist to make his readers feel its horror, the peculiar institution also held a strange power over him, evoking intense nostalgia. Styron’s grandmother owned a slave, and he recalled with wonder that he knew someone who had owned other humans as property, “an amazing fact.” Styron’s grandmother communicated to him a deep sense of loss that attended to emancipation, which tore her playmates from her. Styron continued to feel that loss even in a 1997 interview. His grandmother, in providing a link to the “amazing” past, also endowed him with the feelings of a paternalistic slave owner, one who feels a deep connection to his

---

property. Events and relationships more than 130 years passed continued to move Styron by their transmission through accounts of the past.61

Styron’s relationship with his grandmother also reveals his deep fondness for the South, his pride in Virginia and attachment to the pastoral way of life. Like Sydney Drewry, then, Styron would come to know of Turner from his everyday interactions with his peers and, especially, with adults who told of rebellious slaves. Even had Styron never read Drewry, his knowledge of Nat Turner—not the formal knowledge one acquires through research, but knowledge in the way that one knows a person—could only have come from the same tradition as Drewry’s. But Styron did read Drewry; indeed Drewry was Styron’s principal historiographic source. Styron told his friend, the Cornell professor Saunders Redding, about his interest in Nat Turner, “and it was he who supplied me with a remarkable book, *The Southampton Insurrection* by Drewry, which of course is the seminal work for anyone who wants to know anything about Nat Turner.” Drewry was an inspiration for Styron.62

Thus in writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron appropriated a historical tradition that sought to excuse slavery and ratify Southern pride. More importantly, when Styron suggested that he was presenting a more humane and complete vision of Turner than had been previously recognized, he had in mind only the white Southern tradition. That tradition vilified Turner because of his threat to their hegemonic system but also because of the pain and suffering that he caused. He was no hero to Drewry or Styron.

---

62 *ibid.*, pp. 217-218. It is worth emphasizing that Styron spoke these words in an interview in 1997. He suggested that anyone who wants to know anything about Turner ought to consult the man who suggested that “slaves were the happiest working class in the world” and “the system of labor seems to have been an ideal one.” (p. 110) That Styron did not censure himself in the name of political correctness indicates how thoroughly he was taken with Drewry. On Styron’s retiring to Martha’s Vineyard, see Mark Feeney, “William Styron; novelist plumbed dark recesses of history, the mind,” the Boston Globe, 11/2/2006.
Styron’s Nat Turner drew heavily on the idea of a ruthless fanatic, and moreover Styron defended this figure by appealing to history. In a 1968 interview he said,

The facts tell us this: that if you examine the testimony, the original Confessions, any intelligent person is going to be appalled by this vision of a heroic figure, because he’s not very heroic looking at all. He looks like a nut who gathers together several followers, plows through a county one evening, admittedly without even having devised a plan, and kills fifty-some white people, most of whom are helpless children. Big deal! Fine hero.63

Styron’s saw Nat as an anti-hero: unable to lead a revolt, a murderer of innocents, possibly out of his sane mind.

But his attitude had changed by 1997. (That the theme of the 1997 interview was “reconciliation” may account for the shift.)

One of the beauties of the whole situation, from a novelist’s point of view, was the fact that almost nothing was known about this man….this allowed me to make him into what I, as a novelist, wanted to make him into. Since he did not correspond, on the crudest level, to a kind of stereotypical cardboard black hero, but instead to a person with enormous frailties, wounds, miseries, and indecisions—that is what disturbed the black critics of the book more than anything else.64

Whereas before the historical record left “any intelligent person…appalled” by Nat Turner, in 1997 almost nothing was known, so that the historical Turner was a blank slate to be painted with the image of Styron’s choosing. Styron chose to make Turner into an anti-Hero, but was not forced to do so.

Even within the 1997 interview, Styron was inconsistent. In explaining why his book drew so much controversy, he said, “I think that what became the basic bone of contention and provided the central misunderstanding from the very beginning was a failure on the part of the people who attacked the book to read it as a novel.” That is, as a

64 William Styron, “Interview, 1997.”
novelist Styron was not presenting facts and therefore should not be judged as a historian. But later he was asked about the hostile reception that greeted him from college students. Often audience members asked why Nat had no wife. “And I would struggle with that question,” recalled Styron, “by saying if the original confessions of Nat Turner had provided Nat with a wife I would have given him a wife, but I tried to hew what you consider the facts.” Styron wanted to retain his artistic prerogative but invoked the historical record to justify choices made under that prerogative.\(^\text{65}\)

These inconsistencies indicate more than the difficulty of separating history and description from interpretation; they suggest that one audience’s history may be another’s interpretation. While Styron wanted his 1967 white audience to recognize his novel as a reflection of the reality of slavery, he hoped that his critics would view it as an artistic interpretation, and therefore immune to historical criticism. But Styron walked a fine line, and in so doing left himself open to misinterpretation. The best intentions of Styron’s liberalism may have come across as grossly paternalistic and condescending.

In a 1967 interview with the New York Times, Styron linked his novel with the race problems of the day, speaking authoritatively on the Negro. The interview occurred after a series of race riots in Detroit and elsewhere; according to Styron the riots paralleled Nat Turner’s revolt. Paraphrasing Styron, the article wrote “Then as now…violent upheaval is explained by the disparity between promises given the Negro and the ultimate actuality of his life.” Styron sympathized with the injustices facing African-Americans, but simplified them to a single cause, and seemed confident that he could speak for all African-Americans. “The Negro is animated by a desire to break through and assert himself,” Styron said. Even had Styron been well-informed, this

\(^{65}\) ibid, pp. 222, 224.
claiming to speak for “the other” left would have left him open to censure and criticism. But the entire premise of the Confessions was Styron’s ability to write for other.  

Initially Styron’s novel was well-received. It enjoyed enormous advanced praise; 45,000 words of it were excerpted in Harper’s, and “It plainly was a book which had found its moment….it was a number one best-seller week after week.” What pleased Styron most, however, was the response of “quite a few distinguished historians, including not just second-rank historians, but people like C. Vann Woodward and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.” As one article exclaimed, “The novel has been hailed as a literary triumph and is considered a leading contender for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize;” indeed the book went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1967. 

Even if Styron intended his novel to attack the moral logic of race relations, however, not everyone read it that way. It soon drew criticism for its lack of historical accuracy. In an epigraph to The Confessions, Styron claimed that Nat Turner’s revolt was the only significant, sustained slave revolt in American history. Styron’s initial critics took issue with this claim, most notably the historian Herbert Aptheker. Aptheker, who wrote his 1937 master’s thesis on Nat Turner’s revolt, had become a specialist in slave revolts, and replied that “there were 250 uprisings, plots, and conspiracies, including several that cost more lives and lasted longer.”

Others picked up where Aptheker left off, and quickly published a slim volume of criticism: William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond. The volume contained eleven critical essays, one by each of “the Ten,” as well as an editor’s

---

66 Whitman, “William Styron Examines the Negro Upheaval.”
68 ibid. See Aptheker, Slave Revolts.
introduction. Though each essay took issue with a particular aspect of Styron’s "Confessions," they overlapped in their main concerns, Styron’s portrayal of Nat Turner as a weak leader and sexual impotent. The weak Nat was for the Ten the most important instance of Styron’s general problem of historical accuracy. They also claimed he distorted the historical record by failing to provide Nat Turner with a wife—related to the claim of sexual impotence—and by suggesting that slaves were involved in putting down the revolt.

The ten black critics were a diverse group unified by their involvement in the Civil Rights movement and the emerging field of African-American studies. They included a doctor, Alvin Poussaint, as well as historians and literary scholars. They drew their history not from Eugene Genovese or C. Vann Woodward or Arthur Schlesinger, but from Dubois and Woodson, and from the popular rhetoric of Malcolm X. In Genovese’s review of William Styron’s Nat Turner, the historian suggested that Styron deserved praise for popularizing Nat Turner, lifting the historical figure out of obscurity and making him known. Genovese suggested that Turner had been lost to mainstream America, and we should be thankful for having found him. “But,” responded Vincent Harding,

there is another “we” (the black part of the pronoun, one might say), and we wonder if Mr. Genovese is not familiar with the writings and speeches of former slaves and other black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, or H. Ford Douglass, to name only a few. For the memory of Turner evidently lived among them and was offered by them to black people as an inspiration to resistance.

Let him settle down among the pages of the recorded slave recollections in the Federal Writers’ Project papers. Let him listen to the black people from Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia who speak of the Sunday School and Lodge pageants and plays of their childhood which
dealt with the life and work of Nat Turner. Finally, let him listen again to the voice of Malcolm X.  

Harding claimed that Genovese had overlooked an entire historiographic tradition, one in which Nat Turner was alive and well. Harding’s tradition suggests, indeed, that they learned of Turner in every aspect of life, from the confrontational radicalism of Malcolm X to the conservative values of Sunday school. Theirs was an intimate knowledge of Turner. But if the list spans the dimensions of their life, then they have tacitly rejected even the white abolitionist tradition: Higginson’s name, for example, is conspicuously absent, even though the Ten cited him frequently, in support of their claim that Turner had a wife.

“Pigeon-holing,” Robert Darnton reminds us, “is…an exercise in power.” Whether we classify subjects as part of an academic historical tradition or not can be critical to their continued remembrance; “a misshelved book may disappear forever. An enemy defined as less than human may be annihilated.” When Harding grouped these figures, distinguished and not, into a single unit, he not only asserted their significance to him and insisted that they be remembered, but also challenged the dominant historiography that might offer a privileged position to Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman.

Turner’s heroic, masculine stature, and the grave damage done to it by Styron, are the central themes of the Ten’s criticism. According to Lerone Bennett, Jr., “the real Nat Turner was a virile, commanding, courageous figure,” while Styron’s Turner, “is not only the antithesis of Nat Turner; he is the antithesis of blackness. In fact he is a standard

---


Styron type: a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface." This difference holds significance well beyond academic disputes, as Bennett explains. “We are not quibbling here over footnotes in scholarly journals. We are objecting to something more insidious, more dangerous. We are objecting to a deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man's life”. For the Ten, Nat Turner was more than a man who led a revolt: his life and its legacy had acquired a particular meaning, heroic resistance to the evils of slavery, strength and masculine courage. The charges against Styron extend beyond his shoddy scholarship and revisionism, however. “In addition to reducing Nat Turners to impotence and implying that Negroes were docile and content with slavery, Styron also dehumanizes every black person in the book,” writes John Henrik Clarke.71

The Ten argued that Styron was writing in a long white tradition of diminishing black heroes. Many of the writers compared Styron’s Turner to Lawrence Olivier’s Othello. Both artists transformed powerful black men into confused anti-heroes. In Olivier’s hands, Othello became Hamlet. Both Killens and Williams contrasted Olivier’s performance with that of Paul Robeson, whose second career was dedicated to radical political change. He was closely affiliated with the Communist Party and wrote extensively about problems of class and race. For the Ten to seize on him indicates that Nat Turner was a symbol of not just revolt and resistance, but also political change and activism. Turner’s symbol was intimately connected with political resistance and alterity.72


Styron’s portrayal of Turner as weak suggested to the Ten that his revolt was not caused by any revolutionary impulse, but by his own depravity. Vincent Harding suggested that Styron should have titled his novel “The Emasculation of Prophet Nat” because it was “obvious that Styron is unable to comprehend Nat Turner’s real stature and meaning, that he does not perceive Turner’s role as a tragic-triumphant hero in the biblical genre.” Harding saw Nat not only as a hero, but a biblical one: a redeemer who, following God’s will, came to save the people from their sins. But if Nat was not a biblical hero, not a hero at all even, then it was not grand vision that motivated him. Instead his revolt can be explained by his attraction to Margaret Whitehead, his lust for white women, or perhaps simply madness. After all, his first prophetic vision, the inspiration to revolt, came after a five day fast when he was hot and sweaty, alone in the woods, his eyes blurred by smoke. Since Nat often engaged in these fasts to punish himself for sinful thoughts—lust, in particular—the connection between madness, revolt, and sexuality is not a distant one.\(^73\)

For the Ten, Styron’s portrayal of Turner can only be explained by Styron’s racial heritage. As a white man living in the South, he must have been torn apart by tension. On the one hand, he would have supported liberty and democracy, while on the other, he was the beneficiary of a historical legacy that degraded blacks. The only way for Turner to resolve this contradiction is to assert that blacks did not really hate slavery:

Styron is writing for his very life throwing up smokescreen after smokescreen to hide himself from the truth of the American experience…[with his psychoanalytic interpretation], Styron shifts the focus of the Turner insurrection, downgrading the main issue (white oppression and black liberation) and elevating the white woman to a position of central importance.\(^74\)

In the eyes of Bennett and the Ten, Styron’s work obfuscates the primary fact of American history, the oppression of blacks by whites, in favor of exploring an invented sexuality. Slavery and injustice, Styron suggested to the Ten, did not inspire Turner’s revolt; his own pathologies did.

Styron’s whiteness itself predetermined the novel’s failure, in the eyes of the Ten, to elicit the empathy that it needed. Styron lacked the ability to humanize, argued Kaiser, because he is “alienated and psychologically sick” and his “view of society and other human beings is colored by [his] subjective, Freudian views of [his] own problems and the effect of [this] is further alienation rather than humanization.” For the Ten, Styron’s subjective position as white southerner, beneficiary of racism, ensured that he could not sympathize with or understand the plight of African-Americans.75

The accusations did not stop with the publication of William Styron’s Nat Turner. In the years following his novel’s publication, Styron spoke publicly on numerous occasions. At one such appearance, a 1968 panel discussion of history and fiction, a member of the Ten was present in the audience. He “relentlessly taunted” Styron:

I can remember that the last time that I called you a liar, it became very bitter. It seems as though we confront each other from the North to the South. I met you in Massachusetts this summer, and now all the way down in New Orleans I’m here to call you a liar again.76

The Ten followed Styron so that every time he spoke publicly, they could contest his vision of history. They were not just defaming him or accusing him of bigotry. Styron’s critics confronted him most often on university campuses. As he recalled in the 1997

interview, “I was being attacked by people who had not bothered to read the book…I was really becoming less a target for literary criticism than a kind of political whipping boy….” Leaving aside the self-pity, Styron’s critics were persistent and intense enough to bother him enough to drive him from the lecture circuit: “I decided I would not appear any further in public, and I didn’t.”

Although Styron soon stopped responding to the criticisms, his supporters did not. Numerous of the “distinguished historians” came to Styron’s side. Eugene Genovese was the most vocal critic of the Ten; he wrote a review of their book for the New York Review of Books. Genovese’s review mainly addresses the historical criticism of the Ten. Genovese’s review began by denying the importance of historical criticism. “That the novel lends itself to historical or other criticism is true but irrelevant” for him, because he is interested mainly in what the Ten’s book “reveals about the thinking of intellectuals in the Black Power movement.” Nonetheless Genovese dedicated the majority of his review to rebutting the main historical claims of the Ten. “The historical data, Lerone Bennet…tells us, reveal the real Nat Turner as commanding, virile, and courageous, whereas Styron makes him impotent and cowardly. The historical data reveal no such thing” because they were too thin.

In general Genovese took a minimalist approach to historical realism: if a novelist makes a claim that does not violate the known record, then that claim is historically valid. Genovese excused Styron’s’ treatment of Nat’s sexuality by showing its historical precedent. “One wonders if Styron was thinking of the great Toussaint L’Ouverture, who…steadily plowed his way through those aristocratic French ladies.” Genovese defended Styron by invoking a historical precedent, establishing the possibility of sexual

relations between white women and slave leaders. It is telling that Toussaint L’Ouverture has little to do with Turner; Genovese knew Turner only to the extent that he knew the broader history of slavery. In defending Styron, Genovese asserted the prerogative of historians without particular allegiances or intimate knowledge over the pupils of a popular, oral tradition.78

This line of support was particularly sympathetic, since it considered a wide range of historical interpretations as valid; only the blatant liar could be accused of faulty history. Genovese held a sympathetic interpretation of the novel in general. “By giving Turner a kind master, Styron shows…that the kindest masters could not offset the inhumanity and injustice of the system,” inhumanity and injustice that manifests itself elsewhere. “The ‘personal’ suffering Styron describes flows from the slave condition; he is correct to dwell on this as the basis for revolutionary consciousness.” Of course this interpretation missed one of the Ten’s points, that the basis for Styron’s Turner’s “revolutionary consciousness” was his own depravity. Based on his reading, Genovese held considerable praise for Styron: his book “stamps him as a man who has the courage to confront the depths of America’s racial tragedy.” Regardless of the interpretation, however, Genovese commended Styron: “If Nat Turner is now a name widely known to black and white America, and if the existence of armed resistance to slavery is now generally appreciated, William Styron deserves as much credit as any other writer.” If nothing else, Styron did America a service by making known Nat Turner’s history.

Genovese therefore echoed Styron’s rhetorical strategy, by heralding the historical virtues of the novel while denying the need for historical veracity.\footnote{ibid.}

Genovese’s review drew considerable criticism, and many comments were published in the following issue of the \textit{New York Review}. Vincent Harding and Mike Thelwell, the two members of the Ten whom Genovese singles out, responded, as did the scholar Anna Mary Wells. Although Genovese claimed the historical criticisms were irrelevant, all three responders attempted to rebuke Genovese’s argument on historical grounds. In this capacity, Wells cited Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s 1861 essay which mentioned a wife of Nat Turner’s. Harding responds to Genovese’s claim that Styron made Nat Turner known to America. The claim “would be laughable were it not so tragic.” Genovese made the claim only because he was “not familiar with the writings and speeches of former slaves and other abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Samuel Ringold Ward, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, or H. Ford Douglas,” or the more recent writings of Marcus Garvey, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, Arna Bontemps, and Margaret Walker, or the oral tradition archived in the “pages of the record slave recollections in the Federal Writers’ Project papers.” Wells, Harding, and Thelwell, drew on abolitionist and African-American historical traditions of which Genovese had no knowledge.\footnote{Mary Wells, Vincent Harding, and Mike Thelwell, “Response,” \textit{New York Review of Books}, volume 11, November 7, 1968.}

Indeed, despite Styron’s disavowals and despite Genovese’s disavowal, the power to define history was at the heart of the debate. By this I mean not so much the “fact of the matter” of what happened, but the right to decide what happened, the right to recognize certain sources as part of the historical record and others as not belonging to it.
Thus when Styron ignores Higginson’s account because “I really can’t accept a word-of-mouth reference put down 30 years after the fact,” despite relying exclusively on Drewry’s history of Nat Turner, written in 1900, he made judgments not only about what happened but also about what constituted historical records. Likewise Styron ignored Aptheker’s objection that numerous slave revolts had occurred because “his evidence doesn’t convince me or any other responsible historian.”

The Ten themselves were quick to acknowledge that the right to history was at stake in the debate. Vincent Harding suggested that history can only be written by those who experienced it. For a white man to write—or claim to know—the history of a black slave, as Styron did, was to “seek…to become the official keepers of our memories and the shapers of our dreams.” It was a threat because “the society which eagerly accepts such assumptions offers to those of us who are black a slavery at once more subtle and more damaging than any we have known before.” Thus retorts like Genovese’s, or Time magazine’s, that Styron was free to invent because little was known, served only to accentuate the problem: the Ten knew plenty about Nat Turner; the dominant historical tradition knew little only because it had not yet looked. The Ten were as interested in reclaiming their history as they were in criticizing Styron. Vincent Harding used the incident to launch a successful academic career.

---

81 Leo, “Some Negroes Accuse William Styron of Distorting the Truth,” p. 34. That Styron considered himself a responsible historian is perhaps an interesting but tangential point. Incidentally, after publishing that quotation, the New York Times published an article entitled “Apthker Defends Work Against Styron Criticism.” The article notes “Mr. Styron had said in an article in the New York Times earlier this week that “neither I nor anyone else in the field of history has any respect” for Mr. Apthker;” (NYT Feb 3, 1968, page 27). That is, the New York Times misquoted itself.

82 Harding, “Response.” Time wrote, “It is always possible to attack a historical novel on grounds of inaccuracy and faulty detail. It is particularly difficult in this case, since there is actually very little known about Turner himself or the rebellion,” “Will the Real Nat Turner Please Stand Up,” TIME magazine, July 12, 1968.
Although the criticisms were extensive, they seem not harsh enough to account for Styron’s decision to drop out of public life. Indeed it was the tone rather than the content of the criticism that drove Styron from the limelight. Words like “laughable” that we have already seen begin to indicate the contempt with which both sides in the debate held each other. The book itself of course contained numerous *ad hominem* attacks, and Time’s review of *William Styron’s Nat Turner*, published some two months before Genovese’s review, returned the favor. The Ten’s arguments “border on irrelevancy;” the Ten “repeat the same points endlessly;” some of the criticisms are “absurd;” this last word Genovese echoes explicitly. These examples indicate the rancor of the debate, as do snide comments like Styron on Apthker. It was as the target of incessant attacks, rather, that Styron chose to withdraw from the public life. This withdrawal may have been an acknowledgment of defeat: in no longer defending himself, Styron admitted that the particularist perspective was not only legitimate but superior. If so, then the Ten and their allies they had secured for themselves an authoritative voice, and defied the generalist claims of history. 

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I review my arguments and present a synthesis. In section two I argued that in the days and months following Turner’s revolt, residents of Southampton County and elsewhere scrambled to make sense of the experience. Codifying the revolt into stories, they settled on an interpretation that stressed Turner’s lunacy and denied the

---

83 Styron is clear that his interviews served two purposes: they kept him entertained, for he loved to talk, and they gave him opportunity to defend himself from his critics. William Styron, “Foreword,” in West, ed., p. viii.
importance of slavery as an institution in motivating the revolt. Passed down from
generation to generation, these stories shaped William Drewry’s monograph, *The
Southampton Insurrection*. Taken collectively, the stories and the monograph represent a
distinct historical tradition, a particular Nat Turner and a particular way of knowing. This
historical tradition marginalized Turner, transforming his troublesome rebellion into a
manageable case of fanaticism.

In section three I showed how some African-Americans, lionized Turner, seeing
him as an exemplar of achievement, pride, resistance, and masculinity. Drawing on scant
documentary evidence, one another, and especially an active oral tradition, they held
Turner up as a hero, the ideal of masculine resistance to an oppressive society.
Abolitionists, I claimed, also held up Turner as an important example. For them,
however, he represented the dark and destructive nature of slavery; his revolt symbolized
the doom that would befall America should abolition not occur.

In section four I showed that these two traditions, though distinct until 1967,
collided with the publication of William Styron’s novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.
Styron, born to liberal parents in Southampton, Virginia, came to know Turner through
the oral tradition that Drewry captured. Styron hoped to humanize that tradition’s
monstrous Turner, and thereby open a space for dialogue on slavery and history. But the
humanization of a monster seemed to many to be the disgracing of a hero. Those who
knew Nat through the African-American tradition fought back with smearing of their
own, tarnishing as much as possible Styron’s own legacy. More than Turner’s legacy
was at stake in the fight: the debate centered on the admissibility of alternative historical
traditions, and on the ability of outsiders to write a group’s history.
This thesis makes two broad claims. The first is an explanation for the controversy following the publication of Styron’s novel. Superficially, it is not hard to see why the book was divisive: it was incendiary for a white man to write about a black man, a slave, at the moment when many African-Americans contested the right of whites to write “their” history. But to point out that the 1960s were a divisive time for race relations does not provide a satisfactory answer; why this book? Why the intensity of the debate, which managed to drive Styron from public life? I suggest that the answer lies in the confluence of distinct and hostile historical tradition. Styron’s tradition, descended to him from Virginian slave owners, cast Turner as a mad villain. Styron, though he humanized the Turner of his own tradition, grossly offended the heirs of an African-American tradition that lauded Nat Turner as a hero. Since, in particular, Nat Turner was a symbol of resistance, his memory demanded a brutal fight. Styron defended himself by appealing to the scarcity of the historical record: not having contradicted it, he had done no wrong. Historians like Eugene Genovese quickly came to his defense; in supporting Styron they also implicitly asserted the prerogative of their professional historical knowledge over the intimate knowledge represented by the way Styron’s critics knew Turner.

The second claim is that Turner’s meaning has been constituted historically. The value and character that a symbol takes on, the feelings it evokes, depend not only on the ways and contexts in which the symbol appears, but also on the past meanings of that symbol. Rather than starting in 1967 and looking backward, one might follow Nat Turner, as a theme in American prose, from 1831 onward. This line of reasoning focuses on how a particular symbol gains and loses meaning and popularity with the needs of
writers and orators. In 1831 Nat Turner meant very different things to William Lloyd
Garrison than he meant to the traumatized inhabitants of Southampton County. In 1861
the meaning he held for Frederick Douglass differed from Turner’s meaning for Lincoln.
And so on. This thesis argues not only that Turner’s meaning changed over time, with
changing circumstances, but that his meaning in a particular moment depended on what
he had meant in the past, more so than on what he had done in the past.