



# **To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance**

*Peter P. Hinks*

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In 1829, David Walker, a free black born in Wilmington, North Carolina, wrote one of America's most provocative political documents of the nineteenth century: *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. Decrying the savage and unchristian treatment blacks suffered in the United States, Walker challenged his "afflicted and slumbering brethren" to rise up and cast off their chains. His innovative efforts to circulate this pamphlet in the South outraged slaveholders, who eventually uncovered one of the boldest and most extensive plans to empower slaves ever conceived in antebellum America. Though Walker died in 1830, the *Appeal* remained a rallying point for many African Americans for years to come. In this ambitious book, Peter Hinks combines social biography with textual analysis to provide a powerful new interpretation of David Walker and his meaning for antebellum American history.

Little was formerly known about David Walker's life. Through painstaking research, Hinks has situated Walker much more precisely in the world out of which he arose in early nineteenth-century coastal North and South Carolina. He shows the likely impact of Wilmington's independent black Methodist church upon Walker, the probable sources of his early education, and—most significant—the pivotal influence that Denmark Vesey's Charleston had on his thinking about religion and resistance. Walker's years in Boston from 1825, his mounting involvement with the Northern black reform movement, and the remarkable underground network used to distribute the *Appeal*, all reconstructed here, testify to Walker's centrality in the development of American abolitionism and antebellum black activism.

Hinks's thorough exegesis of the *Appeal* illuminates how this document was one of the most startling and incisive indictments of American racism ever written. He shows how Walker labored to harness the optimistic activism of evangelical Christianity and revolutionary republicanism to inspire African Americans to a new sense of personal worth and to their capacity to challenge the ideology and institutions of white supremacy. Yet the failure of Walker's bold and novel formulations to threaten American slavery and racism proved how difficult, if not impossible, it was to orchestrate large-scale and effective slave resistance in antebellum America. *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren* fathoms for the first time this complex individual and the ambiguous history surrounding him and his world.

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