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Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together With a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of ... for Towards a Metaphysics of Society 2)

David Walker

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"Walker's Appeal" is probably the most notorious of the early books on slavery written by a black American, David Walker (1796-1830). The first edition appeared in September 1829, and the present third edition was published in 1830, by the author himself, who was to die soon afterwards. William Lloyd Garrison, the most famous of the white abolitionists, reported initially favorably on David Walker, and spoke of the "conciliatory and generous language of a man, who has been denounced as a blood-hound and a monster", but other abolitionists soon took their distance with David Walker, due to what was considered the incendiary nature of his book. We see Harriett Martineau, the English author friend of Maria Chapman, wrote of this book :"It was an appeal to his coloured brethren, to drown their injuries in the blood of their oppressors. Its language is perfectly appalling.", and even went to suggest about the death of Walker: "whether he had been assassinated for his book, or had been killed by an accident, is not known." In fact, Walker seems to have died of tuberculosis. When read today, given its just indignation towards slavery and the general condition of black people, the book does not seem to be that incendiary: it should be compared with earlier pamphlets calling for revolt and revolution in Europe. Its main excesses seem to be relegated to the overuse of exclamation marks. Its language his very powerful, and in particular its criticism of the opinions expressed by Thomas Jefferson in his "Notes on Virginia" are scathing and to the point. Jefferson claimed in a letter from 1809 that "It was impossible for doubt to have been more tenderly or hesitatingly expressed than that was in the Notes of Virginia". We may ironically point that the "tenderness" of Jefferson seems to have been received as being as incendiary by black people as Walker's book was by the white population. There can be no doubt that Jefferson statements on the impossibility of the two populations to live side by side and his fear of black insurection and retaliation, which are omnipresent in the related literature of the 1820s and 1830s, have had a very detrimental effect on the situation. The incendiary pamphlet with the gravest consequences may not be that of David Walker.

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