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John Brown, Martin Luther King, and the Art of “Creative Suffering”

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Abstract

Over the years, artists and writers have been drawn to the historical figure, John Brown, and to questions surrounding his life story. What motivated his resistance to slavery? What did he have in mind when he attacked the Harpers Ferry arsenal? Ironically, representations of Brown attempt to revivify a man who recognized that he could best advance the cause of antislavery by dying, and was fascinated by the possibility that his body, as it disappeared, might produce something other than itself. Rather than looking at Brown as an object of artistic representation, I propose that we consider his place in a tradition of direct action that utilizes suffering as a medium of expression. Fascinated by the power of what Martin Luther King would later call “creative suffering,” Brown hoped that his death on the scaffold would enunciate a common good, which attached to no particular body or identity.

Brown faced certain death with equanimity. Writing from prison, he insisted that he had never felt more “cheerful,” and explained, “I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose.”¹ As it filtered into popular culture, Brown’s death demonstrated the social

power of physical suffering. Marching into battle soldiers sang, “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave/His soul is marching on.” Reversing the effects of violence, granting agency and meaning to the process of decay, the song suggests that progress begins with the body’s demise. Singing “John Brown’s Body,” soldiers imagined battlefield death as a form of action and, in doing so, took comfort in Brown’s example. Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which transforms the original tune and invokes Brown indirectly, also imagines death in war as a means to progress. The cultural transmission of Brown’s body through song fulfilled his hope that his influence, freed from the constraints of individuality, would circulate widely.

It was not until the post-WWII era that the expressive capacities of the endangered or violated body were fully realized by the widespread use of direct action. During this period, activists staged the vulnerability of their own bodies in order to produce conflict, confrontation, and disorder. Using a range of tactics, from sitting in to self-immolation, they experimented with the power of suffering to disrupt and transform social life. In his speeches and writings, Martin Luther King explained the concept of “creative suffering” so important to his activist practice and to other radical movements of the day. Comparing Brown to King illustrates Brown’s relevance to the evolution of a radical tradition of performative suffering, as well as King’s efforts to expand this tradition by elaborating its secular dimensions. Like Brown, King believed that “unearned suffering is redemptive.”² In King’s view, however, this excess—suffering that is undeserved—not only fulfills a religious obligation to “remember them that are in bonds,” but also provokes social change as individuals “transform...suffering into a creative force.”³ The spectacle of people who willingly, even cheerfully, embrace pain that they have not “earned” disrupts the status quo and alters social relations.

On the evening before he was murdered, Martin Luther King told his audience that he was certain they would make it to the promised land, though he warned, “I may not get there with you.” While acknowledging the dangers he faced, King insisted he was in good spirits: “I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything.” He concluded—and these were the last words he addressed to a public audience—“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”⁴ Invoking the refrain of Howe’s “Battle Hymn,” it seems unlikely that King had either

Howe or Brown in mind. The reference is vague, charged with the many meanings that the song had acquired over the years. When King speaks these words, Brown has nearly disappeared, but he has not disappeared completely: he is accessible to King's audience as an echo, a trace, or, as Herman Melville would have it, a "gaunt shadow."⁵ This may have been the effect that Brown desired and cheerfully anticipated as he awaited death on the scaffold. Certainly, Brown's death belongs to an evolving tradition of creative suffering that enacts physical pain as a means to a better day.

¹ Qtd. in Franklin Sanborn, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (1885; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 610, 588.

² Martin Luther King, *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 18.

³ "John Brown's last speech to the Court," qtd. in Louis Ruchames, *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1969), 134. King, *Essential Writings*, 47.

⁴ King, *Essential Writings*, 286.

⁵ Herman Melville, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War* (1866; New York: Da Capo, 1995), 11.