

You Say I Want a Revolution

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ABSTRACT

An underexamined insight of W. E. B. Du Bois's *John Brown* is that John Brown worked for much of his life to cultivate democratic relationships with the Black Americans with and for whom he worked. Brown did so through practicing deference and deliberation, and by seeking authorization. However, Brown's commitment to these practices faltered at a crucial moment in decision making: when he raided Harpers Ferry absent widespread support. Examining this aspect of *John Brown* brings into relief an overlooked tragic choice Brown made: To act in accordance with his own substantive vision of what justice required, Brown eschewed democratic ideals and practices that grounded the distinctive relations of equality he had cultivated with the Black communities with and for whom he worked.

1. INTRODUCTION

This is the story known to many: On October 16, 1859, white abolitionist John Brown led eighteen men—a group of fugitive slaves, freedmen, and white abolitionists, including several of his own sons—in a raid on the armory in Harpers Ferry.¹ His plan, so far as anyone knows it, was to wrest arms from the United States Government, give them to fugitive slaves and freedmen, and thereby to “creat[e] . . . an armed force which should act in the very heart of the South.”² The raid went awry and Brown was hanged on December 2 of that same year.³

The raid at Harpers Ferry is at the center of many accounts and analyses of Brown, in which Brown is either lauded as a hero,⁴ ally,⁵ martyr,⁶ or saint;⁷ or villainized as a madman,⁸ fanatic,⁹ traitor,¹⁰ terrorist,¹¹ militant,¹² radical,¹³ or a demonic¹⁴ and bloodthirsty¹⁵ prophet¹⁶ accustomed to “being obeyed,”¹⁷ “called of god”¹⁸ to fight what amounted to a “holy war” against slavery.¹⁹

These characterizations, although not unfounded, are misleading and incomplete. They tend to emerge from rather narrow interpretations of Brown's example that treat his most striking, violent acts—the bloodshed in Kansas, the raid on Harpers Ferry—as the centerpieces of his political work. In one way, the tendency to focus on Brown's violence makes sense: Brown planned these actions throughout his life, prioritized them over much else (his family,²⁰ his business,²¹ his own personal welfare²²), and, ultimately, undertook them without widespread contemporaneous support, particularly in the case of Harpers Ferry.²³ Accordingly, many focus

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on whether Brown's violence was justified and how, if at all, his violence can be squared with democracy.²⁴

However, outsized attention to Brown's violence illuminates some questions and occludes others. Although attention to these discrete, bloody moments, and the raid on Harpers Ferry in particular, is an ineliminable feature of studying Brown's example, as Frederick Douglass cautioned, it cannot be "[v]iewed apart and alone, as a transaction separate and distinct from its antecedents and bearings."²⁵

W. E. B. Du Bois's *John Brown*—part biography, part democratic theory—does not view the raid "apart and alone," but instead puts it into the context of Brown's overall life and commitments. Although others' biographies may admit of fewer factual inaccuracies²⁶ (a fact not lost on Du Bois himself²⁷), and although Du Bois relied entirely on others' archival research,²⁸ Du Bois's biography is distinctive for having "helped illuminate the meaning of John Brown."²⁹

As others have noted, Du Bois appraises Brown as distinct among white Americans for his understanding of and relations of equality with Black Americans.³⁰ In this article, I introduce and examine an overlooked aspect of this appraisal: I argue that, according to Du Bois, Brown's distinctive epistemic and egalitarian relationships with Black Americans emerged from Brown's commitment to three democratic practices: deference, deliberation, and authorization. This is an unusual claim to make about both John Brown and *John Brown*. Brown is not often hailed as an adherent to (let alone exemplar of) democratic ideals or practices; indeed, his example is considered "undemocratic"³¹ or even "deeply antidemocratic."³²

Yet, an overlooked insight of Du Bois's account is that Brown worked for much of his life to create and maintain fundamentally democratic relationships with the Black Americans with and for whom he worked. Brown did so by exhibiting deference toward, engaging in deliberation and consultation with, and seeking authorization from Black Americans. Brown's cultivation of these democratic relationships is significant in itself, as Brown's democratic practices exhibited recognition respect³³ towards his Black interlocutors. However, an additional consideration adds further significance to Brown's practices: Brown attempted to create many of the conditions of democracy for his Black interlocutors against the backdrop of a formal political system that intentionally excluded and oppressed them. Given this context, Brown's adamance that his Black interlocutors were co-citizens and co-reasoners became a form of corrective justice.³⁴ Yet, Brown's adherence to these ideals and practices faltered at a crucial moment in decision making—namely, when he executed the raid on Harpers Ferry absent widespread support from Black Americans. My interpretation of *John Brown* brings into relief an overlooked tragic choice Brown made: In order to act in accordance with his own substantive vision of what justice required (violent rebellion against the state), Brown ultimately decided to eschew democratic ideals and practices that he himself had endorsed and performed for much of his life—ideals and practices that grounded the distinctive relations of equality he had spent his life cultivating with the Black communities with and for whom he worked.

The specific question whether Brown acted in accordance with democratic ideals he himself endorsed should be distinguished from a broader question, which I do not examine, whether Brown's decision was all-things-considered right. (Du Bois says: "John Brown was right,"³⁵ although he also expresses ambivalence.³⁶) Nor, in examining Brown's commitment to democratic ideals, do I deny his other moral commitments arising from, for instance, his Christianity³⁷ and his belief in absolute moral truths.³⁸ However, evaluating how these further commitments interacted with and ultimately informed Brown's judgments concerning what to do or how they might inform our assessments of Brown's actions falls outside the scope of this article.³⁹

I proceed as follows: In §2, I discuss two core aspects of Brown's example that Du Bois emphasizes—Brown's distinctive understanding of and relations of equality with Black Americans—and explain how each of these aspects supports the deliberative democratic interpretation of

John Brown I advance in the rest of this article. In §§3–6, I consider the three democratic ideals by which Du Bois evaluates Brown: his deference to (§3), deliberation and consultation with (§4), and search for ex ante informal authorization from (§5) the Black communities with and for whom he worked. In §6, I conclude by considering whether Brown’s own commitment to these democratic ideals and practices grounds a novel criticism of Brown—namely, that, in raiding Harpers Ferry without ex ante informal authorization, Brown failed to live up to his own ideals of democratic inclusion and relational equality.

2. UNDERSTANDING AND EQUALITY

In *John Brown*, Du Bois emphasizes two aspects of Brown’s example: Brown’s distinctive understanding of (§2.A) and relations of equality with (§2.B) Black Americans. Each of these aspects is, according to Du Bois, grounded in and explained by Brown’s adherence to the democratic practices discussed in subsequent sections.

A. Understanding

According to Du Bois, among Brown’s defining virtues was his special and distinctive understanding of Black Americans’ lives and circumstances. “To most Americans the inner striving of the Negro was a veiled and an unknown tale.”⁴⁰ John Brown was different. He knew “far more than most white men.”⁴¹ Not only was he one of the “[f]ew Americans” who “recognized in 1839 that the great central problem of America was slavery,”⁴² Brown had “a sense of what the institution must mean to black Americans themselves.”⁴³ Du Bois regards Brown as singular in this respect, deeming Brown “the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk.”⁴⁴

However, Du Bois concerns himself not merely with establishing that Brown had a deeper understanding of Black Americans’ lives than other white Americans, but also with how Brown developed that understanding. Although some of Brown’s unique understanding was attributed to self-study,⁴⁵ the most important sources of Brown’s knowledge about Black people’s lives were Black people themselves. Brown lived his life in closer proximity to Black American communities than most if not all of his white contemporaries, which enabled him to develop ongoing deliberative relationships with those communities and their leaders.

That Du Bois regards deliberative democratic relationships as providing distinctive epistemic value is not surprising. In “Of the Ruling of Men,” Du Bois identifies one of the main virtues of democracy to be its epistemic value: “The real argument for democracy is, then, that in the people we have the source of that endless life and unbounded wisdom which the rulers of men must have.”⁴⁶ He describes democracy as a method for “accumulat[ing] vast stores of wisdom” from both individuals and groups that could not be gotten by other means because “only the sufferer knows his sufferings.”⁴⁷ Although in “Of the Ruling of Men,” Du Bois is mainly concerned to provide an epistemic justification for extending ballot access to women and Black people, Du Bois’s arguments across his corpus do not limit the fora in which democratic methods and practices can be valuable. In both “Of the Ruling of Men” and elsewhere, Du Bois identifies the value of democratic methods and practices as extending beyond the sphere of government into workplace and industrial contexts as well as civil society.⁴⁸ *John Brown* extends this vision of democracy’s fora even further—showing how the distinctive epistemic value of democratic practices may be achieved far outside the corporately organized structures of either government or industry, in informal political settings, among activists, neighbors, and friends.

B. Expressions of political equality and exhibitions of relational equality

Du Bois further emphasizes Brown’s evident commitment to equality—both political equality between Blacks and whites and relational equality between Brown himself and everyone else.

As Du Bois puts these two points in the 1962 edition of *John Brown*, Brown “regarded [Black people] as equals to all Americans of any color” and was a “pioneer in the fight for human equality.”⁴⁹

Toward a racist political community, Brown publicly expressed and affirmed his commitment to political equality: In the League of Gileadites’s founding document, he proclaimed the American citizenship of his Black co-participants,⁵⁰ and, when instructing League members on obstructing slave catchers, he identified the desired end as “the enjoyment of *our* inalienable rights.”⁵¹ At a meeting of white settlers in Osawatimie, Kansas, Brown “alarmed and disgusted the politicians by asserting the manhood of the Negro race.”⁵² He also created fora in which he and his Black co-deliberators could engage in constitutional construction together—reasserting the political equality and political personhood of Black Americans in direct response to the Supreme Court’s denial of same in *Dred Scott*.⁵³

However, Brown did not merely assert but “acted on that conclusion—that all men are created free and equal.”⁵⁴ Toward his Black co-deliberators, his “lack of racism and his ability to treat African Americans as equals and comrades”⁵⁵ set him apart from other white abolitionists, who were known to exhibit “condescension or outright racism.”⁵⁶ That he regarded Black people as his equals manifested in his everyday undertakings—for instance, giving up his family’s church slip to a Black family in protest of his church’s discriminatory seating policy;⁵⁷ living, working, and worshipping in a Black abolitionist community “on a plane of perfect equality”;⁵⁸ simple hospitality to those who entered his home.⁵⁹

However, in addition to Brown’s public expressions of political equality and interpersonal exhibitions of relational equality, Brown also developed egalitarian relationships through his engagement in deliberative democratic practices with Black Americans: treating Black Americans as sources of knowledge whose lead he should follow (*deference*, §3), co-deliberators whose criticisms he must take up and treat as serious (*deliberation and consultation*, §4), and parties whose authorization he needed in order to legitimately undertake political action on their behalves (*authorization*, §5).

3. DEFERENCE

Given that Du Bois takes one of the core values of democracy to be its ability to help us understand lives unlike our own, it is no wonder that he evaluates Brown partly in terms of whether and to what extent Brown exhibited deference to those with whom he made common cause.

John Brown is not often associated with deference to others.⁶⁰ He is characterized even by Du Bois as accustomed to “being obeyed” which “rendered him . . . too much disposed to speak in an imperious or dictating way.”⁶¹ However, closer examination reveals that Du Bois portrays Brown as taking cues from and following the lead of Black abolitionists with whom he worked—intentionally acting in furtherance of their extant norms, priorities, and plans.⁶² Du Bois develops this deferential portrait of Brown in two ways: first, by emphasizing Brown’s attention to and knowledge of past and ongoing Black-led abolition efforts; second, by illustrating how Brown’s own abolition efforts mimicked Black-led efforts.

First, Du Bois establishes that the Black communities with whom Brown worked were independently and antecedently engaged in abolition efforts, and that Brown went to great lengths to learn about these efforts. Two chapters, in particular, cast Brown as an onlooker whose own political plans developed as a result of his deepening knowledge of Black-led abolition efforts.⁶³

In Chapter V, “The Vision of the Damned,” Du Bois discusses a tradition of Black-led abolitionism in the United States and Canada stretching back well before Brown came along—introducing Black-led slave uprisings⁶⁴ and Black abolitionist organizations in Philadelphia, New York, Cincinnati, Boston, Canada, and Springfield (where Brown spent time).⁶⁵ According to Du Bois, Brown’s knowledge of slavery and commitment to abolition resulted from his deepening

knowledge of this tradition and his personal acquaintance with these organizations⁶⁶: From “the boy and the young man” who “knew little” of Black-led slave rebellions, Brown “learned of Gabriel and Vesey and Turner . . . and studied their plans.”⁶⁷ As Brown studied slave rebellions and met Black abolitionists, “his conception of his own relation to slavery . . . broadened and deepened.”⁶⁸ He committed “to make active war on slavery,”⁶⁹ made abolition his priority,⁷⁰ and joined the Black abolitionist community in Springfield.⁷¹

In Chapter IX, “The Black Phalanx,” Brown all but disappears from the narrative of his own biography as Du Bois explains “the unknown history of African-American protest before the Civil War, the appearance of black journalism beginning in the 1820s, the Negro Convention Movement of the 1830s, and the appeal of emigrationism in the 1850s.”⁷² Only after this historical survey is Brown reintroduced: “Of all this development John Brown knew far more than most white men and it was on this great knowledge that his great faith was based.”⁷³ Although David Levering Lewis interprets Brown’s disappearance from “The Black Phalanx” as evidence of shoddy craftsmanship on Du Bois’s part,⁷⁴ I believe Du Bois uses Brown’s disappearance from the chapter to illustrate (i) that, just as Black-led abolition efforts are at the center of the chapter and the book generally, so too were they at the center of Brown’s own life and work,⁷⁵ (ii) the depth of Brown’s understanding of these efforts,⁷⁶ and (iii) that Brown aimed to play a supporting role to Black Americans who helmed their own political organizations.⁷⁷

Second, Du Bois illustrates several occasions on which Brown’s actions were substantively similar and subsequent to either actions taken by the Black communities with whom Brown worked or historical precedents Brown had studied. For instance, in Springfield, Brown followed the lead of and joined extant Black-led resistance to slavery.⁷⁸ Brown cofounded the Springfield Branch of the League of Gileadites (“an organization of whites, free blacks, and runaway slaves dedicated to protecting fugitive slaves from slave catchers”⁷⁹) with members of Springfield’s Black community in January 1851,⁸⁰ months after Black Springfieldians had started planning organized resistance to the anticipated Fugitive Slave Act in meetings that Brown attended.⁸¹ Joseph Carvalho III points out that the League’s founding document was “likely [drafted] with the aid and influence of [Brown’s] associates in the African American community” and echoed a “call[] for armed vigilance” previously expressed by Springfield’s Black community leaders in their September 17, 1850 document, “Colored Citizens of Springfield.”⁸² Even Brown’s advisory letter to Blacks in Springfield to be armed and resist enforcement of the Act⁸³ simply echoed a commitment “already demonstrated . . . by Springfield’s African American community members.”⁸⁴

Characterizing Brown’s time in Kansas, Du Bois describes Brown as neither “the central figure of Kansas territorial history” nor “the acknowledged leader of men and measures; rather . . . a humble co-worker.”⁸⁵

Notwithstanding these examples of deference, Brown’s decision to raid Harpers Ferry over the objections of Douglass⁸⁶ and Brown’s Boston abolitionist backers,⁸⁷ and absent widespread support from the Black Americans on whose behalves he purported to act,⁸⁸ is considered a paradigmatic example of his failure to defer. Gerrit Smith, present at the February 1858 Boston meeting, said Brown had “made up his mind, and [could] not be turned from it.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Douglass says, at their August 1859 stone quarry meeting, Brown “‘had fully made up his mind and could not be dissuaded.’”⁹⁰ However, even here, Du Bois suggests a more nuanced appraisal of Brown’s decision. Although Brown did not defer to the counsel of his Black and white abolitionist interlocutors, he was still (in an admittedly less direct way) following others’ leads. While unique in its details, Brown’s raid descended from a lineage of Black-led violent resistance to slavery⁹¹ and ongoing Black-led organized resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act.⁹²

Of course, that one’s plan takes inspiration from similar past (or even contemporaneous⁹³) plans is insufficient to establish that the plan itself was carried out in a manner deferential to those on whose behalves it was meant to be undertaken. This distinction was not lost on Brown,

who spent more than a decade deliberating with and seeking informal authorization from Black leaders and participation from Black Americans, more generally.⁹⁴ “If John Brown was to carry out his idea as he had now definitely conceived it, he must first find the men who could help him. On this point there seems to have been deliberation and development of plan, particularly as he consulted Douglass and the Negro leaders.”⁹⁵

4. DELIBERATION AND CONSULTATION

Characterizing John Brown as a paragon of deliberation will strike some as odd. His impatience and contempt for moral suasion and deliberation is well known. He “did not believe that moral suasion would ever liberate the slave;”⁹⁶ having “realized that the complex of interests, prejudices, and fear that preserved slavery was not susceptible to dissolution through reasoned debate.”⁹⁷ In fact, “Brown once opined that were the abolitionist orators to have their tongues cut out, perhaps they might finally stop talking and take real action.”⁹⁸

However, Brown’s doubt that public deliberation among nonviolent white abolitionists would be adequate to abolish slavery must be carefully distinguished from his evident deep and sustained commitment to deliberation and consultation with members of the Black communities with whom he worked.⁹⁹ Brown was distinctive among white abolitionists in part because he treated Black people as not merely a cause but a community of co-deliberators—individuals to whom he had to make his ideas scrutable and from whom he was beholden to receive support as a minimum condition of the adequacy of his plans: “From his earliest interest in Negroes, John Brown sought to know individuals among them intimately and personally. . . . He talked to them, and listened to the history of their trials, advised them and took advice from them.”¹⁰⁰

Du Bois emphasizes Brown’s deliberative relationships with Black Americans throughout *John Brown*, particularly by recounting three broad episodes in Brown’s life: Brown’s time in the Black abolitionist community of Springfield, Massachusetts; his ongoing deliberative relationships with Black leaders in the United States and Canada, and Douglass in particular; and the Chatham Convention.

Du Bois characterizes Brown’s Springfield years as formative for the development of his deliberative relationships with Black abolitionists: “He had met black men singly here and there all his life, but now he met a group.”¹⁰¹ Brown immersed himself in the civic life of Springfield’s Black community, not merely worshipping with, working alongside, and befriending its members;¹⁰² but organizing with local Black leaders: He cofounded the League of Gileadites and developed “plans for a more effective and organized Underground Railroad.”¹⁰³ He also deliberated with Black abolitionists about slavery and his developing plan, hosting “black men in animated conversation about the evils of slavery in the south and prejudice in the north” in the counting room of his business.¹⁰⁴

Around this time, “[h]e sought and gained the acquaintance of Negro leaders.”¹⁰⁵ These relationships continued over years, and, between February and May 1858—as Brown tried to garner support for his raid—he wrote to and met with “many colored leaders.”¹⁰⁶ His most abiding and important deliberative relationship was with Douglass, to whom he first disclosed his proposed raid during their meeting in Springfield in 1847.¹⁰⁷ Although Douglass “was never convinced”¹⁰⁸ of Brown’s plan while Brown was alive and ultimately declined to join Brown at Harpers Ferry,¹⁰⁹ much of Du Bois’s account (and Douglass’s account on which it draws) concerns the sustained, serious, iterative manner of their deliberations. Brown conferred with Douglass again and again.¹¹⁰ In Springfield, for instance: “From 8 o’clock in the evening till 3 in the morning, Capt. Brown and I sat face to face, he arguing in favor of his plan, and I finding all the objections I could against it.”¹¹¹ During their “final conference”¹¹² in August 1859, they debated the raid for two days.¹¹³ The result is well known: Douglass “opposed the measure with all the arguments at [his] command;” deciding not to join Brown.¹¹⁴ Still, Douglass credits Brown with having caused him to become

“less hopeful of [slavery’s] peaceful abolition,”¹¹⁵ himself proclaiming that “slavery can only end in blood.”¹¹⁶ (As discussed in §5.D, Douglass partly retrospectively ratifies Brown’s raid.)

Then, there is the Chatham Convention, held May 8 and 10, 1858.¹¹⁷ Brown and Martin Delany convened 34 Black and 12 white delegates to consider and ratify the proposed Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States, drafted by Brown while he was staying with Douglass.¹¹⁸ When asking Delany to organize the convention, Brown stated explicitly that his aims were deliberation and consultation: “he desired to carry out a great project . . . which, to be successful, must be aided and countenanced by the influence of a general convention or council”¹¹⁹ “of free Africans.”¹²⁰

So, Brown spent (conservatively) 1846 to 1859 deliberating and consulting with Black communities and their leaders.¹²¹ He arranged a constitutional convention.¹²² He returned to the same interlocutors many times, pursuing their authorization for his raid. Through these intentional and iterative actions, Brown demonstrated the importance he himself assigned to the democratic ideals of deliberation and consultation. And, by recounting Brown’s ongoing commitment to deliberation and consultation, Du Bois emphasizes their importance to understanding Brown.

5. INFORMAL AUTHORIZATION AND RETROSPECTIVE RATIFICATION

We may also infer from Brown’s dogged deliberative and consultative efforts that Brown himself regarded authorization from his Black interlocutors—particularly from Douglass—to be necessary for legitimizing his proposed efforts, at least for a time.

A. Informal authorization and ratification, generally

The question whether and how a political actor could be authorized or ratified outside of a formal political forum is one Du Bois took up more than once in his writing on democracy. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, for instance, Du Bois considers whether Booker T. Washington had received informal authorization to serve as the legitimate informal political representative for Black Americans.¹²³ In *John Brown*, too, Du Bois considers the question whether Brown or his actions had been informally authorized or ratified. In fact, the distinction between agent and action authorization is a key distinction on which Du Bois relies in the biography.

As I argue elsewhere,¹²⁴ political actors can receive *ex ante* authorization or *ex post* ratification even outside of formal political fora. Informal authorization and informal ratification may be granted to either

- (i) a political actor, in which case the actor is deputized in a broad, general sense to act on behalf of the authorizing or ratifying party—we may think of this as a type of principal-agent relationship (call these *informal agent authorization* and *informal agent ratification*); or
- (ii) particular actions undertaken by the political actor (call these *informal action authorization* and *informal action ratification*).

A political actor may be granted *ex ante* authorization to undertake or *ex post* ratification of a specific action without receiving broader agent authorization or ratification. Conversely, a political actor may be granted broad agent authorization or ratification without thereby receiving *carte blanche* action authorization or ratification—often, principal-agent relationships admit of scope limitations that specify and constrain the breadth of the agent’s mandate. Informal authorization and ratification may only be conferred by the principal—that is, the party on whose behalf the action would be taken or actor would act.

Many, including Du Bois, characterize Brown as “imperious or dictating” in speech,¹²⁵ patriarchal,¹²⁶ resistant to the advice or input of others.¹²⁷ There is something to this characterization: Asked once whether he acted “under the auspices of the Emigrant Aid Society,” Brown replied, “No, sir, I went out under the auspices of John Brown.”¹²⁸ If one thinks Brown simply a prophetic visionary who regarded himself as answerable to only God¹²⁹ and “the great broad truths”¹³⁰ (slavery is wrong and must be destroyed “stem, blossom, and branch”¹³¹) it is easy to conclude that he did not much care whether he received authorization for his political program from the Black communities with and for whom he worked. So characterized, there is no mystery as to why Brown raided Harpers Ferry even after Douglass objected severally.

However, there is evidence that Brown sought informal authorization of two sorts: (i) to serve as an agent of the Black communities with whom he worked (*agent authorization*) and (ii) for his planned raid on Harpers Ferry in particular (*action authorization*). He sought this authorization from both Black leaders with whom he was in conversation and from the broader Black communities with whom he worked. It makes sense that a man distinctive for treating others as his equals would seek their approval when he intended to undertake political action on their behalves. Here, I discuss Brown’s attempts to receive, respectively, informal action authorization (§5.B) and informal agent authorization (§5.C), and consider whether widespread posthumous support for Brown’s raid might be regarded as retrospective ratification of the raid (§5.D).

B. Informal action authorization

As discussed in §4, Brown sought ex ante authorization for his raid plan for over a decade, working tirelessly to garner support from prominent Black leaders.

Du Bois expressly states that Brown’s aim during his February to May 1858 deliberation and consultation with Black leaders was to receive their ex ante authorization to execute the raid:

Brown proceeded carefully to sound public opinion, got the views of others, and, while revealing few of his own plans, set about getting together a body who were willing to ratify his general aims. He consulted the leading Negroes in private, and called a series of small conferences to thresh out preliminary difficulties. In these meetings and in the personal visits, many points arose and were settled.¹³²

However, Brown’s search for ex ante action authorization extended back in time well before 1858 and extended in scope well beyond conferring with a few community leaders. For decades, Brown had been trying to gauge the interest of broader Black communities in radical antislavery political action. Douglass claims that “forty years had passed between [Brown’s] thought and his act,”¹³³ during which time Brown “had been . . . looking for colored men to whom he could safely reveal his secret.”¹³⁴ Douglass adds that Brown reported “almost despair[ing] of finding such men; but that now [at the time of their first meeting in 1847] he was encouraged, for he saw heads of such rising up in all directions.”¹³⁵ The amount of time and effort Brown devoted to watching and waiting for widespread interest among Black communities suggests that, for quite some time, Brown himself regarded ex ante action authorization to be important to if not necessary for carrying out the raid—a point Du Bois emphasizes.¹³⁶

Yet, in the end, Brown did not wait for widespread ex ante authorization before acting.¹³⁷ Still, as Du Bois points out, there is subtlety to Brown’s decision: Although, even in 1858, Brown was trying to “organize Negroes for his work” and “determined to enlist a larger number,” Du Bois claims that Brown had not in fact set out to garner widespread ex ante authorization:

At no time . . . did John Brown plan to begin his foray with many Negroes. He knew that he must gain the confidence of black men first by a successful stroke, and that after initial success

he could count on large numbers. His object then was to interest a few leaders like Douglass, organize societies with wide ramifications, and after the first raid to depend on these societies for aid and recruits.¹³⁸

According to Du Bois, although Brown did seek out *ex ante* raid authorization from some Black leaders, his search for authorization was at least partly instrumental to his goal of finding raid participants, and, furthermore, he in fact believed that he had to execute the raid in order to demonstrate the value of his political program and thereby gain buy-in for future political work.

Of course, Brown did not receive widespread *ex ante* action authorization to raid Harpers Ferry. Du Bois is clear that, aside from a small band of followers (perhaps, ultimately, no more than the Black men with him at Harpers Ferry¹³⁹) Brown did not during his lifetime receive authorization to raid Harpers Ferry from the Black abolitionists or broader Black communities to whom he had spent so many years making his case.¹⁴⁰

Even so, Du Bois and others identify several episodes that suggest that Brown received encouragement, if not authorization, to execute the raid. For instance, Du Bois recounts Osborne Anderson's account of a chance encounter en route to Harpers Ferry: "On the road we met some colored men, to whom we made known our purpose, when they immediately agreed to join us. They said they had been long waiting for an opportunity of the kind. Stevens then asked them to go around among the colored people and circulate the news, when each started off in a different direction. The result was that many colored men gathered to the scene of action."¹⁴¹ Hannah Geffert discusses support for and participation in the raid by the local Black community around Harpers Ferry,¹⁴² which suggests that Brown had received more authorization for his raid than formerly thought, even by Du Bois.¹⁴³ Herbert Aptheker notes that Brown probably received word sometime after December 25, 1856, that "The slaves are in a state of insurrection all over the country. Every paper brings us accounts of their plots for a general uprising" which "likely . . . in part explains Brown's feelings, expressed August, 1857, that the Negroes would immediately respond to his efforts though no preparatory notice had been given them."¹⁴⁴

Still, a central point remains that Brown in the end decided to carry out his plan absent the *ex ante* authorization from Douglass and other Black leaders that Brown himself sought.¹⁴⁵

There are many reasons to think Black American authorization mattered for legitimizing Brown's raid—for instance, because they would likely bear the brunt of any retaliatory violence in the event of the raid's failure and so should have say as to its occurrence.¹⁴⁶ However, my aim is not to argue that or how such authorization would have legitimized the raid, nor simply to object that Brown acted without authorization. (Informal authorization is rare and difficult to achieve, so criticism that an action is undertaken without it is not in itself especially damning.¹⁴⁷) Instead, I am evaluating Brown in terms of Brown's own commitments: Brown sought and, therefore, evidently valued such authorization. In raiding absent authorization, Brown failed to live up to his own commitment to receiving authorization. Furthermore, because seeking authorization partly constituted Brown's treatment of Black Americans as equals, by abandoning his search for authorization at the crucial moment, he imperiled relations of equality partly constituted by that search.

Although Brown did not receive *ex ante* informal action authorization, Brown and his plans, respectively, received two other forms of normative endorsement worth elaborating: informal agent authorization and (arguably) retrospective action ratification.

C. Informal agent authorization

In a well-known refrain, Du Bois concisely distinguishes informal action authorization and informal agent authorization: "They believed in John Brown but not in his plan."¹⁴⁸ During his lifetime, Brown received (and, it seems, knew himself to have) broad informal agent authorization

from many of the Black abolitionists and broader communities with whom he worked to act on their behalves across many political contexts: “They loved the old man and cherished him, helped and forwarded his work in a thousand little ways.”¹⁴⁹

More than that, Brown actively sought informal agent authorization. Nowhere is Brown’s quest to secure broad agent authorization more apparent than his 1856 covenant with the volunteer militia he gathered in the forests of Kansas.¹⁵⁰ This covenant includes the men’s voluntary enlistment and their pledge “to serve in the Free State cause under John Brown as commander.”¹⁵¹ Robert L. Tsai further suggests that the supermajority alteration and amendment provision (Art. XXIII) is “evidence of an effort to establish a more lasting community,”¹⁵² presumably under the auspices of John Brown. This, too, is evidence that Brown recognized the importance of acting with the authorization of those on whose behalves he purported to act.

However, that Brown had broad agent authorization in fact grounds a further criticism of his decision to raid Harpers Ferry absent widespread action authorization. When Brown failed to receive ex ante informal action authorization to raid Harpers Ferry, he was not receiving wholesale disavowal of his abolition work. Rather, he was being informed of a specific constraint on his otherwise broad agent authorization: he had broad authorization to act on behalf of Black Americans *except* in (at least) this particular respect. This specific constraint may have given Brown a further reason to not raid Harpers Ferry.

D. Retrospective informal action ratification

Although Brown did not receive ex ante informal action authorization to raid Harpers Ferry, Brown’s raid has received retrospective informal action ratification—immediately after the raid, after Brown’s hanging, and in the decades since.¹⁵³ Du Bois points out: “That John Brown was legally a lawbreaker and a murderer all men knew. But wider and wider circles were beginning dimly and more clearly to recognize that his lawlessness was in obedience to the highest call of self-sacrifice for the welfare of his fellow men.”¹⁵⁴ Shortly after his death, Brown and his raid were both widely memorialized and celebrated “in songs, paintings, poetry, and . . . other celebratory commemorative practices.”¹⁵⁵ Notes Douglass in 1881, this support was even more widespread than one might have expected in 1859: “Many consented to [Brown’s] death, and then went home and taught their children to sing his praise as one whose ‘soul is marching on’ through the realms of endless bliss.”¹⁵⁶

What matters, however, is not whether Brown’s raid received widespread retrospective informal action ratification from just anyone, but in particular whether it received ratification from the Black abolitionists and broader Black communities with and for whom Brown worked. This, it seems, it did.

Notably, Douglass himself retrospectively ratified the raid in an October 31, 1859 letter published in the *New York Times* alongside the announcement of Brown’s death sentence: “it can never be wrong for the imbruted and whip-scarred slaves, or their friends, to hunt, harass, and even strike down the traffickers in human flesh. . . . My position in regard to the Harpers Ferry insurrection may be easily inferred from these remarks.”¹⁵⁷ In 1881, Douglass again ratifies Brown’s raid, with qualification, condemning “the shedding of human blood for any purpose,” yet suggesting Brown’s raid must be contextualized as a response to centuries of organized violence against Black Americans¹⁵⁸ and crediting Brown with “begin[ning] the war that ended slavery” when it seemed “words, votes and compromises” left no other path.¹⁵⁹

Many others unequivocally ratified Brown’s raid. At “memorial services held by blacks on the day of Brown’s execution . . . blacks extolled everything about Brown, including his raid.”¹⁶⁰ Further, “his raid inspired bold acts of defiance and liberation in the slave community”¹⁶¹—which Du Bois suggests was Brown’s object all along.¹⁶²

Retrospective ratification of both Brown and his raid have continued apace in Black American communities.¹⁶³ Benjamin Quarles notes, “To post-Civil War blacks, his name was to conjure

with, almost a presence to be summoned.”¹⁶⁴ At the second meeting of the Niagara Movement in August 1906, Reverdy Ransom declared that “‘God sent John Brown to Harpers Ferry . . . to become a traitor to the government in order that he might be true to the slave.’”¹⁶⁵ Black American retrospective ratification of Brown’s work and example has continued in generations since,¹⁶⁶ including notable approbation by Malcolm X¹⁶⁷ and James Baldwin.¹⁶⁸

Although retrospective informal action ratification may provide ex post affirmance of Brown’s raid, it does not mean Brown was not criticizable at the time of the raid for having acted without ex ante informal action authorization—authorization he himself sought.

6. CONCLUSION

John Brown is often considered a book about the limits of democracy—in particular, whether and when extrajudicial force can be used to uproot unjust institutions in purportedly democratic states.¹⁶⁹ I have argued that it is also about the limits of democracy in another sense, offering underexamined insights concerning how and between whom democratic ideals may be realized. Elsewhere in his corpus, Du Bois discusses the role democratic practices play in government, industry, and civil society.¹⁷⁰ In *John Brown*, Du Bois considers how democratic ideals may be realized entirely outside of formal political structures, between Brown and the Black communities with and for whom he worked. (Note here, for instance, Tsai’s comment that Brown’s 1856 covenant was “enforced at campfires and in relations between the self-described freedom fighters.”¹⁷¹)

John Brown is not the first book in which Du Bois considers the value of democratic practices outside of formal political fora. In *Souls*, he discusses how legitimate leadership can emerge outside such fora. There, he states, “[h]onest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched,—criticism of . . . leaders by those led,—this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society.”¹⁷² Robert Gooding-Williams interprets Du Bois here to be “impl[ying] that leadership is legitimate only if it is responsive to the criticism of the persons led.”¹⁷³ It is no wonder, then, that Du Bois devotes so much consideration to the question whether Brown was responsive to those on whose behalf he purported to act—whether by deference, deliberation, or the search for authorization.¹⁷⁴ Du Bois was, it seems, examining whether Brown’s action on behalf of Black communities was legitimate.

Although there is no gainsaying that many of Brown’s actions—in particular, taking up arms against the state—exhibited willingness to cast aside democratic ideals,¹⁷⁵ there is much to be said about what in Brown’s example was democratic. In particular, Brown worked for much of his life to create many of the conditions of democracy for Black Americans outside of the formal political systems that excluded them. Through telling the story of Brown’s life in and among different Black communities, Du Bois evaluates Brown against the standards of several democratic ideals, especially deference, deliberation, and authorization.

Return to the earlier discussion of understanding (§2.A). Concordant with his later claim that “only the sufferer knows his suffering,”¹⁷⁶ Du Bois attributes Brown’s special understanding of Black Americans’ lives and circumstances to practices of deference (studying historical and joining extant Black-led political action, planning political action that mimicked these models) and deliberation (consulting Black interlocutors about his plans)—learning from those who had suffered under slavery about its effects. It is unsurprising, then, that when Brown’s actions contravene guidance he received from many of his Black interlocutors, he evinces a limitation in his understanding:

Why did not Douglass join John Brown? Because . . . he knew, *as only a Negro slave can know*, the tremendous might and organization of the slave power. . . . As it was with Douglass, so it

was practically with the Negro race. . . . The Canadian Negroes, for instance, were men who knew what slavery meant. They had suffered its degradation, its repression and its still more fatal license. They knew the slave system. They had been slaves.¹⁷⁷

In the moment when Brown fails to defer and to heed criticism he sought and received through deliberation and consultation, he turns his back on the “vast stores of wisdom” and “the whole experience of the race” that Du Bois in “Of the Ruling of Men” identifies as the promised outputs of democracy.¹⁷⁸

Now, consider again Brown’s commitment to equality (§2.B). Christiano and Bajaj define “democracy,” broadly, as “a method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process.”¹⁷⁹ So defined, we might recast Brown as neither simply “undemocratic”¹⁸⁰ nor “antidemocratic”¹⁸¹ but instead “almost but not quite democratic” insofar as his engagement with and treatment of his Black interlocutors satisfies most of this definition except the “essential stage of the decision-making process” clause. Du Bois’s Brown spent much of his life following the lead of, deliberating with, and seeking authorization from Black interlocutors—seemingly, trying to coordinate wide-ranging collective decision making over a course of decades. These democratic practices grounded Brown’s relations of equality with his Black interlocutors. So, when Brown failed to receive the authorization he himself sought but went about raiding Harpers Ferry anyway, he acted inconsistently with democratic principles he himself had long endorsed and, by so doing, jeopardized relations of equality he had spent decades cultivating. We need not look to the bloody facts of the raid itself to determine that Brown is criticizable for having acted inconsistently with his own principled democratic commitments to deference, deliberation, and authorization. I leave to the reader to assess whether widespread retrospective ratification of Brown’s raid (§5.D) cures the democratic deficiencies identified here.¹⁸²

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 133–45 (hereafter cited as *JB*).
2. *JB*, 41; see also Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *Freedom’s Dawn: The Last Days of John Brown in Virginia* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 54–57; Frederick Douglass, “John Brown: An Address at the Fourteenth Anniversary of Storer College,” May 30, 1881, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31839/31839-h/31839-h.htm>; *JB*, 119, 125, 151.
3. *JB*, 133–57.
4. Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy’s Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–70 (hereafter cited as *DR*); Russell Banks, “John Brown’s Body: James Baldwin and Frank Shatz in Conversation,” *Transition* 81/82 (2000): 250–66; Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., “Black People’s Ally, White People’s Bogeyman: A John Brown Story,” in Eldrid Herrington, ed., *The Afterlife of John Brown* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11–26; Douglass, “John Brown”; *JB*, 1, 41, 73, 87; Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom* (1974; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 2001); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf, 2005).
5. DeCaro, “Ally”; Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., “‘The Enemy of My Enemy’: Malcolm X and the Legacy of John Brown,” in Dustin Byrd and Seyed Javad Miri, eds., *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 179–94.
6. Nahum Dimitri Chandler, “The Souls of an Ex-White Man: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Biography of John Brown,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3(1) (2003): 179–95; Douglass, “John Brown”; *JB*, 16, 125, 147, 162.
7. DeCaro, “Ally,” 14; *JB*, 147 (“fit to be named with Jesus Christ”); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 358 (“saint of gore”).
8. DeCaro, “Ally,” 22–23; DeCaro, “Enemy,” 180 (quoting Malcolm X); *DR*, 56; *JB*, 152, 155.

9. DeCaro, "Ally," 23–25; Douglass, "John Brown"; *JB*, 147, 151, 152.
10. *JB*, 155–56.
11. DeCaro, "Ally," 23–25.
12. David Roediger, introduction to *John Brown*, by W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: Modern Library, 2001), locs. 73, 148 of 5365, Kindle.
13. *DR*, 48; Aston Gonzalez, *Visualizing Equality: African American Rights and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2020), 147, 185, 202; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
14. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 328.
15. *DR*, 50, 67; Andrew Johnson, "What John Brown Did in Kansas," speech, United States House of Representatives, December 12, 1859. <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/ajohnson1859.html>.
16. *DR*, 52, 53, 55, 56, 62, 67, 68; see also DeCaro, "Ally," 23.
17. *JB*, 8; see also Douglass, "John Brown."
18. *JB*, 4.
19. *DR*, 49.
20. *JB*, 35 ("Brown . . . bound his family in solemn and secret compact to labor for emancipation"), 44 (family agrees to use savings to buy clothing for Black North Elbans instead of furnishing their parlor).
21. *JB*, 16–27, 38.
22. *JB*, 12, 60, 66, 87, 108, 111, 154, 156.
23. *JB*, 127, 128.
24. See especially *DR*, 47–70; Robert L. Tsai, "John Brown's Constitution," *Boston College Law Review* 51(1) (2010), 151–207; William E. Cain, "Violence, Revolution, and the Cost of Freedom: John Brown and W. E. B. Du Bois," *boundary 2* 17(1) (spring 1990): 305–30.
25. Douglass, "John Brown."
26. Herbert Aptheker, "Du Bois as Historian," *Negro History Bulletin* 32(4) (1969): 14; DeCaro, "Ally," 19–20; Lewis, *Du Bois*, 360.
27. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 358, 360.
28. Chandler, "Souls," 2003, 185–86; Lewis, *Du Bois*, 357.
29. Aptheker, "Du Bois," 14–15; see also Chandler, "Souls," 179, 185–86, 192; DeCaro "Ally," 19; Lewis, *Du Bois*, 358, 360; Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 110.
30. *DR*, 50, 56–57; Joseph Carvalho III, "John Brown's Transformation: The Springfield Years, 1846–1849," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 48(1) (2020): 46–95.
31. *DR*, 62.
32. *DR*, 50.
33. Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88(1) (1977): 36–49.
34. See Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 12–13.
35. *JB*, 146.
36. On Du Bois's ambivalence toward Brown's raid, see *DR*, 68–69; Alexander Livingston, "The Cost of Liberty: Sacrifice and Survival in Du Bois's *John Brown*," in Nick Bromell, ed., *A Political Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 211, 216–19, 231.
37. See, e.g., *JB*, 4, 5, 6, 11–14, 33–35, 37, 38, 41, 42, 44, 53, 60, 64–66, 69–70, 90, 92, 95, 97, 123, 128–29, 132, 150, 154, 156–61.
38. See, e.g., *JB*, xxx, 42, 111, 146–47, 154, 160–61.
39. Another interesting question I cannot pursue is whether Brown's turn away from democratic ideals and practices is aptly characterized as a turn from political non-negligence to negligence. See Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "The Moral Neglect of Negligence," in David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall, eds., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 206–13.
40. *JB*, 104.
41. *JB*, 104.
42. *JB*, 36.
43. *DR*, 56. There were inevitable limitations to Brown's understanding, since he had not himself been subject to the institution of slavery. *JB*, 42–43, 148–49.
44. *JB*, xxx.

45. *JB*, 37 (“He studied the census returns and the distribution of the Negroes . . . he knew of the organized resistance to slave-catchers in Pennsylvania, and the history of Hayti and Jamaica.”)
46. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 112.
47. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 111–12; see also Liam Kofi Bright, “Du Bois’ Democratic Defense of the Value Free Ideal,” *Synthese* 195 (2018): 2240–41; Derrick Darby, “Du Bois’s Defense of Democracy,” in Melissa Schwartzberg and Daniel Viehoff, eds., *Democratic Failure: NOMOS LXIII* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 207–46; Robert Gooding-Williams, “W.E.B. Du Bois,” in E. N. Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/dubois/>.
48. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 52, 105–23; see also W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Free Press, 1998); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 494, Kindle (“More important than political democracy is industrial democracy; that is, the voice which the actual worker, whether his work be manual or mental, has in the organization and the conduct of industry.”); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 253–84, Kindle; see also Gooding-Williams, “W.E.B. Du Bois.”
49. *JB*, 172 (italization in original, indicating additions made in 1962 second edition); see also *JB*, 151.
50. *JB*, 44.
51. *JB*, 45–46, emphasis added.
52. *JB*, 60.
53. *JB*, 111 (“[W]e, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish ourselves the following provisional constitution and ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions.”); see also *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857); Tsai, “Constitution,” 187.
54. *JB*, 162.
55. Carvalho, “Transformation,” 48.
56. *DR*, 52.
57. *JB*, 34.
58. *JB*, 38; Carvalho, “Transformation,” 47–48, 55, 72–73.
59. *JB*, 38 (“[T]hey sat at his table and he at theirs.”); 39 (Douglass, of his first visit with Brown: “My welcome was all that I could have asked.”); 104 (“He invited them to his home and he went to theirs.”); 128 (“In John Brown’s house, and in John Brown’s presence, men from widely different parts of the continent met and united into one company, wherein no hateful prejudice dared intrude its ugly self—no ghost of distinction found space to enter.”); see also Carvalho, “Transformation,” 55 (Brown “developed a close friendship with his employee Thomas Thomas, even gifting his rocking chair to Thomas’s mother as a measure of respect when he left Springfield in 1849”).
60. See, e.g., *DR*, 50 (“a patriarch who dispensed advice to blacks and whites alike but took advice from no one”).
61. *JB*, 8; see also Douglass, “John Brown.”
62. Carvalho, “Transformation,” 68–69.
63. See, e.g., *JB*, 31 (“John Brown’s keen eyes were searching for the way of life and his tender heart was sensitive to injustice and wrong everywhere”).
64. *JB*, 31.
65. *JB*, 38.
66. See, e.g., *JB*, 38 (“He had met black men singly here and there all his life, but now he met a group.”).
67. *JB*, 31.
68. *JB*, 37; see also *JB*, 33.
69. *JB*, 35.
70. *JB*, 37.
71. *JB*, 37–39, 42.
72. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 358; see also *JB*, 99–115.
73. *JB*, 104.
74. Lewis describes Brown’s reappearance in “The Black Phalanx” as a “clumsy tack-on” in a chapter “pad[d]ed” with materials that read “like a composite of brilliant papers for historical conferences.” Even so, my interpretation of Brown’s disappearance concords with a point Lewis himself makes: “Du Bois had emphatically identified” “the point of view of his biography” to be “the little known but vastly

- important inner development of the Negro American' as seen through Brown's career." Lewis, *Du Bois*, 357–58.
75. *DR*, 55 ("Du Bois's biography of Brown aspires both to right the historical record and to recast African Americans as central characters in the drama of their liberation and that of the nation.")
 76. *JB*, xxx ("The view-point adopted in this book is that of the little known but vastly important inner development of the Negro American."); Chandler, "Souls," 184–86.
 77. *JB*, 99–115; see also Carvalho, "Transformation."
 78. *JB*, 44–47; Carvalho, "Transformation," 60.
 79. Paul Finkelman, "A Look Back at John Brown," *Prologue* 43(1) (spring 2011).
 80. *JB*, 47; see also Cliff McCarthy, "Who Were the Members of Springfield's League of Gileadites?" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 50(1/2) (2022): 148–97.
 81. Carvalho, "Transformation," 59–60; *JB*, 44.
 82. Carvalho, "Transformation," 58–62; see also *JB*, 44–45; McCarthy, "Members."
 83. *JB*, 45–47.
 84. Carvalho, "Transformation," 62, 58; see also *JB*, 46 ("There is evidence that this league did effective rescue work, as did other groups of Negroes in Boston, Philadelphia, Albany, New York and elsewhere. In this service the Negroes could not act alone—it would have meant mob-violence on purely racial lines;—but given a few determined white men to join in, they could and did bear the brunt of the fighting").
 85. *JB*, 53.
 86. *JB*, 39–43, 104–105, 127–28.
 87. *JB*, 95.
 88. *JB*, 128.
 89. *JB*, 96 (internal quotation marks omitted).
 90. *JB*, 128.
 91. *JB*, 31; see also Douglass, "John Brown"; *DR*, 54; Hannah N. Geffert, "John Brown and His Black Allies: An Ignored Alliance," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126(4) (2002): 593–94.
 92. *JB*, 37; see also *DR*, 54; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 66 ("[T]he assertion of the manhood rights of the Negro by himself was the main reliance, and John Brown's raid was the extreme of its logic."); Geffert, "John Brown," 594. In *Souls*, Du Bois characterizes Brown's raid as part of a "a new period of [Black] self-assertion and self-development" (66).
 93. Herbert Aptheker, "American Negro Slave Revolts," *Science & Society* 1(4) (1937): 533 (discussing evidence that Brown was influenced by "later risings of the slaves, particularly those of 1856").
 94. On informal authorization, see Wendy Salkin, *Speaking for Others: The Ethics of Informal Political Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), ch. 3.
 95. *JB*, 43.
 96. *JB*, 41; see also DeCaro "Enemy," 192; *DR*, 63; *JB* 37, 151.
 97. *DR*, 63.
 98. DeCaro "Enemy," 192.
 99. By *democratic deliberation* I mean "mutually acceptable and generally accessible" reasons exchanged between equal participants "with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all [participants] but open to challenge in the future." Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7; see also Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 67–91.
 100. *JB*, 104; see also DeCaro, "Ally," 13.
 101. *JB*, 38.
 102. Carvalho, "Transformation," 47–48, 55, 72–73.
 103. Carvalho, "Transformation," 47–48; see also *JB*, 38.
 104. Carvalho, "Transformation," 48; see also *JB*, 37.
 105. *JB*, 37; see also *DR*, 57.
 106. *JB*, 104–106.
 107. *JB*, 39–43.
 108. *JB*, 42.
 109. *JB*, 128.
 110. *JB*, 39–43, 104, 127–28.
 111. Douglass, "John Brown."
 112. *JB*, 127.

113. *JB*, 128.
114. *JB*, 127–28.
115. *JB*, 42.
116. *JB*, 48.
117. *JB*, 112.
118. *JB*, 109–12; Geffert, “John Brown,” 598; Tsai, “Constitution,” 185.
119. *JB*, 107.
120. Geffert, “John Brown,” 598.
121. Per Carvalho, “Transformation,” 47, Brown arrived in Springfield in 1846. 1859 is the year of Douglass’s final meeting with Brown and the year of the raid. *JB*, xxxii, 127.
122. Tsai, “Constitution,” 151, 154, 170, 172–74, 176, 183, 186.
123. Du Bois, *Souls*, 62–72; see also Salkin, *Speaking for Others*.
124. Salkin, *Speaking for Others*, ch. 3.
125. *JB*, 8.
126. *DR*, 50; *JB*, 9, 26.
127. *DR*, 50; *JB*, 95–96, 128, but see *JB*, 104.
128. *JB*, 59.
129. See, e.g., *JB*, 4, 12, 33, 35, 37, 44, 53, 64, 66, 69, 70, 90, 95, 150, 156, 159–62.
130. *JB*, xxx.
131. *JB*, 147.
132. *JB*, 108. These 1858 meetings are recounted in the second part of “The Black Phalanx,” once Brown reappears. If we interpret Brown’s absence from the first part of the chapter to mean that Du Bois deemed him a passive but present onlooker, here we can extend that interpretation: When Brown reappears, he begins to consult and deliberate directly with those whose abolition work he watched from the wings because it is their political work he means to support and augment.
133. Douglass, “John Brown.”
134. *JB*, 41; see also Douglass, “John Brown.”
135. *JB*, 41; see also Douglass, “John Brown.”
136. *JB*, 41.
137. *JB*, 149.
138. *JB*, 104.
139. *JB*, 84, 121–24, 128, 134, 149–50.
140. *JB*, 42–43, 148–49; see also Quarles, *Allies*, 76–79.
141. *JB*, 134.
142. Hannah Geffert, “They Heard His Call: The Local Black Community’s Involvement in the Raid on Harpers Ferry,” in Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman, eds., *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 23–45.
143. *JB*, 127.
144. Aptheker, “Slave Revolts,” 533.
145. *JB*, 127–28.
146. On the sacrifice Brown asked of Black Americans, see *JB*, 42–43, 128, 148–49; Livingston, “Cost,” 207–40.
147. Salkin, *Speaking for Others*, ch. 3.
148. *JB*, 42–43, 149.
149. *JB*, 149.
150. *JB*, 65; Tsai, “Constitution,” 162.
151. *JB*, 65; Tsai, “Constitution,” 201.
152. Tsai, “Constitution,” 162.
153. “[Ratification] In general,” *Williston on Contracts 4th Ed.*, §35:22 (1993) (“Ratification may be defined generally as the adoption or confirmation of a prior act purportedly performed on the principal’s behalf by an agent without the agent obtaining prior authority.”).
154. *JB*, 154.
155. Gonzalez, *Visualizing*, 203; see also DeCaro, “Ally,” 13; Douglass, “John Brown”; *JB*, 161–62; Quarles, *Allies*, 171.
156. Douglass, “John Brown.”
157. Frederick Douglass, letter to the editor of the Rochester Democrat, *New York Times*, November 3, 1859 (emphasis added); see also Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 224–25, kindle.

158. Douglass, “John Brown” (“The bloody harvest of Harper’s Ferry was ripened by the heat and moisture of merciless bondage of more than two hundred years.”); see also *JB*, 152–53.
159. Douglass, “John Brown”; see also *JB*, 152–53.
160. Reynolds, *John Brown*, 489; see also Samuel Bowles II, “It Is Hanging Day in Virginia,” *Springfield Republican*, December 2, 1859, 2 (quoted in Carvalho, “Transformation,” 73) (“[I]n hundreds of towns and cities throughout the free states, congregations of people of color and others sympathizing with the oppressed will be holding solemn meetings for prayer, for sympathy with the bereaved family of Brown, and for the expression of their detestation of the system of American slavery.”)
161. DeCaro, “Ally,” 13.
162. *JB*, 104.
163. Reynolds, *John Brown*, 488.
164. Quarles, *Allies*, 171.
165. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 329
166. See, e.g., Banks, “John Brown’s Body,” 260; DeCaro “Ally,” 24; Quarles, *Allies*, 170–98; Reynolds, *John Brown*, 480–506; Ernest Crim III (@mrcrim3), “White folks (or anyone), can you name 5 of these?” TikTok, January 12, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/@mrcrim3/video/7187609471554948398>.
167. DeCaro, “Enemy”; Reynolds, *John Brown*, chs. 1, 6, 18.
168. Banks, “John Brown’s Body.”
169. See, e.g., *DR*, 51; Tsai, “Constitution,” 163–76.
170. See note 48.
171. Tsai, “Constitution,” 162.
172. Du Bois, *Souls*, 64–65.
173. Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 55. Gooding-Williams states, “In *Souls*, at least, Du Bois seems ultimately to reject the democratic criticism model of legitimate leadership” (55), but adds that Du Bois does not reject the model entirely, but “limit[s] its applicability to cases where the ‘led’ are capable of cogent criticism,” further adding that “Du Bois’s democratic sensibilities are evident even when he seems to have abandoned the criticism model” (R. Gooding-Williams, personal communication, May 19, 2023; see also Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 54–58, 152).
174. In this article, I discuss Du Bois’s overlooked employment of the democratic criticism model in his analysis of Brown; I do not thereby claim that expressionist interpretations of *John Brown* are inapt. See Gooding-Williams, *Shadow*, 54–58, 147, 152.
175. On this point, see especially *DR*, 47–70; Tsai, “Constitution,” 151–207.
176. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 112.
177. *JB*, 148–49 (emphasis added); see also *JB*, 43; my interpretation here is inspired by *DR*, 57.
178. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 112. An important further consideration is worth noting: According to Du Bois, Douglass’s skeptical response to Brown’s plan does not exhaust how Brown’s Black interlocutors viewed his plan: “The attitude of the black man towards John Brown is typified by Frederick Douglass and Shields Green,” *JB*, 148 (emphasis added). Unlike Douglass, Green supported Brown’s plan: “Green easily believed in Brown, and promised to go with him whenever he should be ready to move,” *JB*, 121. Green’s belief in Brown and support for Brown’s plan is steadfast, withstanding even Douglass’s last attempts to dissuade Brown from the raid: Green bears witness to Brown and Douglass’s final deliberation concerning the raid and, even after Douglass declines to go to Harpers Ferry and invites Green to return with him to Rochester (*JB*, 127–28, 150), Green remains committed and goes with Brown to Harpers Ferry (*JB*, 128, 134, 144, 149–50). Du Bois discusses Green’s commitment to Brown in terms of understanding: Du Bois emphasizes that, although Green, “a poor, unlettered fugitive” (*JB*, 149–50), understood only some of the details of the deliberation between Brown and Douglass (*JB*, 150), Green understood “the soul of John Brown” (*JB*, 150) which Du Bois elsewhere describes as “a great white light” (*JB*, 147) that revealed the “moral truth—that slavery is wrong” (Robert Gooding-Williams, *Du Bois’s Political Aesthetics: The Ends of Democracy and the Ends of Beauty* (manuscript in progress), ch. 5). Arguably, Du Bois is suggesting that Green understood something about Brown and the truth he revealed that Douglass, preoccupied with the practical details of Brown’s plan (*JB*, 42–43, 127–28, 148–49), missed. If so, then both Brown’s and Douglass’s understandings were limited: Brown overlooked the “vast stores of wisdom” (Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 112) typified by Douglass’s attitude, but Douglass overlooked (and, as discussed in §5.D, after Brown’s death, came to see) the “truth revealed . . . John Brown was right” (*JB*, 146; see also *JB*, xxx, 147, 154, 161, 162), a truth Du Bois suggests Green understood. There is an open question here, then, concerning whether, in thus incorporating

Shields Green, Du Bois means (i) to allow that, in certain circumstances, it is not undemocratic to act in accordance with revealed truths like those to which Shields Green seems to have been responsive (*JB*, 121, 125, 127–28, 150), even if these actions are undertaken nondeferentially and without the ex ante authorization of those on whose behalf they are undertaken, or instead (ii) to identify a tension between such claims of revealed truth, on the one hand, and the demands of democracy, on the other (R. Gooding-Williams, personal communication, May 19, 2023). Although Du Bois does not offer clear answers to these questions in *John Brown*, it seems evident he means to raise them.

179. Tom Christiano and Sameer Bajaj, “Democracy,” in E. N. Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/democracy/>.
180. *DR*, 62.
181. *DR*, 50.
182. For valuable feedback, I thank Elvira Basevich, Elizabeth Brake, Kimberley Brownlee, Emmalon Davis, Robert Gooding-Williams, Orlando Hawkins, Ty Larrabee, Japa Pallikkathayil, Jonathan Parry, Seana Shiffrin, Paulina Sliwa, and two anonymous reviewers. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Moral and Political Philosophy Work-in-Progress Group, and the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Society Annual Meeting. Thanks to everyone present on those occasions for their generous engagement with this project. I also thank Tommie Shelby and Walter Johnson for their 2016 “Reading Du Bois” seminar, students in my 2019, 2021, 2023 “Du Bois and Democracy” seminars, and Kurt Nutting, for many helpful conversations about both Du Bois and John Brown.