Portraits of John Brown, the Abolitionist

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Brief abstract:

Comparative review of exhibitions about John Brown mounted and published online and in book form at the sesquicentennial of the raid, October 2009. A major component of this paradox is recurring language to describe John Brown that discredits the competing classifications. Words frequently seen on the detracting side are: ‘treason, fanatic, zealot, holy warrior, and insanity.’ On the adherents side are ‘liberator, sacrifice, bravery, martyr, folk hero, and freedom fighter.’ The most common word associated with John Brown is violence. How that violence is described is a major conflict of classification. Modern biographies are analyzed in this relationship.

Photo portraits of John Brown and his relationship to their disposition and enhancement are described. Jean Libby is the curator of the “John Brown Photo Chronology” exhibition, and the author of a catalog of the exhibition as it appears in Harpers Ferry National Historic Park beginning in October 2009. Two famous art portraits—the John Steuart Curry mural at the state capital in Topeka, and Thomas Hovenden’s “The Last Moments of John Brown”—are examined for their representation by the sesquicentennial exhibitors.
Essay and Illustrations

The law’s our yardstick, and it measures well
Or well enough when there are yards to measure.
Measure a wave with it, measure a fire,
Cut sorrow up in inches, weigh content.
You can weigh John Brown’s body well enough,
But how and in what balance weigh John Brown? (Benet 1928:55)

John Brown knew the value of his photographed image, although not in monetary terms of today when an original daguerreotype realized $115,000 at auction. (NY Times 1996)

John Brown recognized the new medium of photography suited his urgency to organize and recruit for resistance to slavery by northern black abolitionists. Introduced to the African American photographer Augustus Bailey Washington, he was described by Frederick Douglass: “though a white gentleman, he is in sympathy a black man, and is as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery.” F. Douglass to William C. Nell (The North Star: February 1, 1848)

Just as John Brown wanted the most modern weapon of his day, the fast-loading Sharps rifle, he initiated replication and enhancement of his image at the cutting edge of photographic technology in the 1850s. Standing for this daguerreotype with his left hand upraised so it would appear to be his right in the reversed image, it was necessary to
remain still and unblinking for thirty seconds. Brown and his friends knew the photograph captured his determination and charisma.

The discovery of the original daguerreotype in 1996, mislabeled at a rural Pennsylvania auction, galvanized historical photography and generated interest in African American photographers. Research by Anne Shumard at Smithsonian Institution and assistance from the Connecticut Historical Society resulted in an entire exhibition of the daguerreotypes of Augustus Bailey Washington, whose studio was in Hartford at the Kellogg Building, a strong abolitionist family. Washington emigrated to Liberia in 1853 because of disappointment with pervasive racism in America, and photographed many of the Liberian government officials who were originally African Americans. (2000)

When John Brown moved back to Akron, Ohio, in difficult pursuit in the wool business with Simon Perkins in 1851, he continued organized resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law by developing with African Americans the Underground Railroad westward to Detroit. He was frequently visited by Frederick Douglass. (DeCaro 2002:211-212) Another newly discovered daguerreotype was auctioned in 1996—this one an unknown 1852 photograph of Douglass by pioneer Akron photographer Samuel J. Miller.1 (Westerbeck 1998)

The author, an independent scholar, researched the photo portraits of John Brown at archives manuscript collections over thirty-five years, publishing them in exhibition and a full-color catalog at the 150th anniversary of the John Brown raid at Harpers Ferry. (2009) Classification into chronology became methodical in 2002, with workshops among teachers, archivists, photo historians, the American Studies Association, and Civil War Round Tables. Digital reproductions of the photographs were examined by Dr. Eileen Barrow at the FACES (Forensic Anthropology Computer Enhanced Services) at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in June 2003 for identity and aging opinion, contributed for a study by The Daguerreian Society. (Libby 2004).

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1 The Douglass daguerreotype was purchased at auction by the Art Institute of Chicago for $185,000.
Twelve different portraits of John Brown were determined, classified with numbers, the location and likely date of sitting, format and size of the extant photograph, attributed photographer or unknown, life or mirror view, credit of the owner, name of the donor and date of acquisition. The time period of the sittings spans 1847 to 1858. Half of them took place between November 1856 and April 1857, concurrent with Brown’s New England fundraising tour for weapons for Kansas freestate settlers. Fees were paid by Emigration Committees encouraging Kansas settlement.

Because the original portraits were daguerreotypes, which are single-images, Brown and his supporters were eager to make engravings. The negative process of reproduction was invented and rapidly spread in the U.S. in the 1850s. The innovative and best technical photographers in Boston and New York were patronized in order to achieve replication. The John Brown Photo Chronology exhibition includes three separate versions of the single ¾ length bearded portrait, bringing the twelve sittings to a total of fifteen numbered images. There are five additional subnumbered versions, engravings or painted photographs. The twenty panels are reproduced and exhibited in 15 x 20-inch size and published in a full color catalog in half the exhibition size.¹ (Libby 2009)

Five of the original daguerreotypes are extant at archives, including the first two by Augustus Washington which were rediscovered in the past fifteen years. The archives control the replication by copyrighting the prints or digital scans and strict permissions criteria. An exception to this is the Library of Congress, who publish high-resolution images online and do not have permissions fees for publication.

Two new negatives of his bearded photograph were made in 1859 at the direction of John Brown, who was suffering from a recurrence of Bell’s Palsy that is evident in earlier sittings. Some textbooks and histories describe his facial distortion as evidence that he was insane. The physical cause was first identified by Dr. Barrow in 2003 as a possible mild

¹ The suggestion of Richard Raymond, museum director at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park that the images should be shown in their original size as well as enlarged is taken for planned addition and revision.
stroke. In a symposium at Harpers Ferry in 2009 when the photo chronology was first exhibited, the John Brown performance artist and author Greg Artzner suggested the cause more resembled Bell’s Palsy, a nerve condition unrelated to stroke. This was confirmed by descendants of Brown who still carry the malady. (Interview, Paul Keesey, Santa Clara, California, December 9, 2009.)

There are two copies of the John Brown Photo Chronology exhibition—a permanent installation at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia and a travelling set which has been on view at the National Archives and Records Administration at Philadelphia in winter and spring 2009-2010; the Library and Archives Research Gallery at the Kansas Historical Society in Topeka in summer 2010, and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library at San Jose State University in California in October–November 2010.

**New York and Richmond: opposing discourse**

Two online exhibitions commemorating the 150th anniversary of John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry are based on holdings at the respective historical societies, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History at the New York Historical Society and the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond. Both have published catalogs of their exhibitions which articulate their opposite points of view toward John Brown. In New York, the collection is based on materials acquired in part from Brown’s family over a period of years, two of three photograph portraits most recently in 1994.¹

The Gilder-Lehrman curators describe the raid as

   part of a larger plan to destroy the slave system by freeing and arming slaves…Frederick Douglass, like most African Americans and abolitionists, saw John Brown as a martyr and a hero. Others saw him as a terrorist who attacked legal institutions and was willing to achieve to his goals. The

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¹ A painted print from a negative made by John B. Heywood in May, 1859, by artist Nathum Onthank, is directly signed by John Brown ‘your affectionate father’ and dated in his handwriting June 18, 1859.
exhibition concludes with documents and images highlighting the gradual acceptance by Americans of John Brown’s vision of racial equality for the America of today. (Basker et al., 2009:5)

James G. Basker, Sandra Trenholm, Susan Saidenberg, and Justine Ahlstrom write the timeline of the GLC John Brown materials based his response to the three major governmental acts regarding slavery from 1850 – 1857, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the Dred Scott Decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in 1857. Several of the GLC manuscript letters originate in 1855-1856 Kansas. Escalation of warfare leading to the massacre of five proslavery settlers by John Brown’s forces on May 24, 1856 begins at GLC with the murders of two free state settlers in late 1855 and the sack of Lawrence on May 21, 1856. Brown’s “violent reprisal” is from the point of view of Mahala Doyle, the wife and mother of three of the men killed “hacking at them with broadswords and cutting their throats before shooting them.”(Basker, et al. 2009:44)

The GLC exhibition catalog includes bibliographic references to modern biographers Stephen B. Oates (1970,1984) and David S. Reynolds (2005,2006), specialized histories, and several other websites that were launched with the 150th anniversary of the John Brown raid. John Brown, The Abolitionist & His Legacy concludes with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution “…realizing his ideals….The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other federal legislation ratified John Brown’s vision of racial equality set forth in his provisional constitution of 1858.” (64)

The discourse of “The Portent: John Brown’s Raid in American Memory” exhibition by the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond takes the point of view that John Brown was a “bloodthirsty terrorist…whose attack on an American military installation [was] an action that can be described by no term other than treason.” (2009:5) The catalog by William M.S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton draws upon W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1909 biography and the African American artist Jacob Lawrence’s gauche series in 1941 to present the liberation point of view, and acknowledge that the modern Civil Rights Movement owes
much to reassessing Brown’s legacy. But the ponderous text spares no opportunity to vilify Brown, even with outstanding scholarly review.

“The Tragic Prelude, John Brown” by John Steuart Curry was printed for the John Brown Photo Chronology on display at the Kansas State Library and Archives in Topeka in the summer of 2010. The KHS text:

“Even though Curry was born almost 40 years after the execution of John Brown, his ancestors were ardent abolitionists who moved to Kansas after its establishment as a free state. Curry painted the mural during the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Kansas. Perhaps Curry’s vision of John Brown as a modern day Moses stems from his own reaction to civil rights conflicts he experienced during the 1930s and 1940s.”

The VHS exhibition signature image is ‘The Tragic Prelude,’ the John Steuart Curry mural of Kansas history that was painted in the capitol rotunda in Topeka ca. 1937-1942. The Society obtained a loan of the artists’ oil sketch from the Spencer Art Museum at the University of Kansas for their exhibition, which was on display from October 10, 2009 through April 11, 2010. In the press release for the exhibition, the Curry figure of Brown was painted as an “Old Testament prophet.”
published online: “To Curry, John Brown was a fanatic whom many Kansas historians blamed for causing the bloodshed and desolation that had ravaged their state.”(2009a)

The man in the Curry mural foreground on the Confederate side is Henry Clay Pate. The capture of Pate with a company of sixty men known as ‘ruffians’ at the battle of Black Jack in June, 1856, is best detailed by Evan Carton in *Patriotic Treason; John Brown and the Soul of America.* (2006:210-212) In the mural, Pate is wearing the pearl-handled Bowie knife that Brown took from him and used as a model to design the pikes (VHS calls them ‘spears’) that were manufactured in Connecticut for self-defense by liberated slaves.

What is most ahistorical by VHS is the simplistic description of the mural. The focal center is more than dead Union and Confederate soldiers, it shows the battle of slave vs freestate forces in which William Quantrill, the leader of the August, 1863 attack on Lawrence which murdered nearly 200 residents, black and white, and encamped recruits for the Union Army. Quantrill, wearing a guerrilla blouse, is firing his revolver into a group of African Americans, one of whom is a woman with a grey headscarf looking
beseechingly up at John Brown. (see “The Tragic Prelude” detail) This is a clear reference by Curry to the art of John Brown kissing the black child on the way to his execution. The 1884 Thomas Hovenden painting was loaned to the VHS exhibition by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.¹

In its online conclusion, the Virginia Historical Society states that “all 20th century biographers and in the last decade have been apologists for Brown” and dismiss them by noting: ‘the detractors have not been active. It has mattered little—the imagery and the biographies have changed few opinions. Americans remain as divided over Brown now as ever.” (2009a)

The Enemy Within: The Terrorist Crusade

Considerable consternation occurred in October 2010 when an announcement of a gallery talk about John Brown in connection with an exhibition at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati in October 2010, “The Enemy Within; Terror in America – 1776 to Today”, identified Brown as an “infamous terrorist.”


The concept of John Brown as an enemy terrorist of the domestic stripe is historically inaccurate and highly problematic for two reasons that have both political and historical aspects:

A. To isolate and elevate Brown in such a negative manner ignores the record of events in Kansas in 1855-56, during which time the territory was overrun by

¹ The curators are careless with “The Last Moments of John Brown” by reversing the historical order of rendition by Currier and Ives, which was based on the 1860 painting by Louis Ransom. They use secondary sources to describe John Brown’s slippers, rather than looking at the painting closely or consulting the excellent Hovenden biography which details his accuracy. (Terhune 2006:130,238 n.8) Rasmussen and Tilton reference the account by biographer David Reynolds of the permission granted Mary to bring the bodies of her sons and the Thompson brothers with her to New York for burial by Governor Wise, (2005:389) but omit that this did not in fact occur—making it appear to readers and visitors that their remains were brought to New York with those of John Brown. (2009:42)
pro-slavery thugs bent on using violence to force the territory to adopt slavery ‘democratically.’ The free state side was non-violent, vainly trusting in the federal government (which was dominated by pro-slavery forces), and ill-prepared to deal with this terrorism and it is a matter of record that they were being completely intimidated and violently assaulted prior to the response of men like Brown, Montgomery and others… How can you discuss Brown as an ‘enemy within’ without dealing with the larger issue of pro-slavery terrorism and the extensive program of violent filibustering, expansionism, and territorial conquest that characterized pro-slavery terrorism in Brown's era? How can you justify excising John Brown completely out of historical context and portraying him as ‘the bad guy’?

B. To further isolate Brown as an inimical terrorist presence is not only an affront to the free state side in Kansas, but is to stand in virtual negation of the explicit terrorism of slavery as a system. How can anyone responsibly speak of terrorism in the antebellum era as if John Brown invented it, when four millions of black people lived as chattel slaves under a system that regularly used terror in explicit ways and relied upon implicit terrorism to sustain its operation and infrastructure? It is essentially a slap in the face of African Americans who were the real victims of terrorism. It is to suggest that the political and social status quo of the antebellum era in the U.S. was essentially stable and democratically functional until aberrant people like John Brown upset it. Such a stance is either indicative of historical ignorance or it may be judged as inherently racist and certainly problematic. ¹

¹ The full text of several of the objections and the original “infamous terrorist” gallery talk announcement can be found on Lou DeCaro’s “John Brown A Biographer’s Blog,” http://abolitionist-john-brown.blogspot.com/2010/10/pd-off-again-national-underground.html
The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center Interpretive Services Manager, Richard Cooper, responded:

Dear Dr. DeCaro,

I understand the strong criticism of the title and description of the upcoming Gallery Talk on John Brown at the Freedom Center. From the view of those who sought to uphold the institution of slavery John Brown was likely viewed as a domestic agitator. From the view of us who know the atrocity of slavery then and now, he clearly was not. I apologize for not writing this with clarity the first time on the Freedom Center website. The Gallery talk will look at the life of John Brown, the events around Harpers Ferry, and his significant contributions to bringing slavery to an end.‘(e-mail copy to Jean Libby, Friday October 29, 2010)

Examination of the publication of the exhibition by the International Spy Museum of Washington, D.C. and History Associates of Rockville, Maryland, does not bring clarity to the issues raised. Although a subhead reads ‘Slavery: State-Sponsored Terrorism?’ there is no mention of the Fugitive Slave Laws in the text or the timeline, which includes John Brown’s photograph with upraised hand, a brief description of the May 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre, and the Harpers Ferry raid of October 1859. (2004:8)

In contrast, the 1863 massacre of nearly 150 abolitionists and seventeen unarmed U. S. troops in a recruits camp in Lawrence by William Quantrill and his guerilla associates has a single mention in the timeline of *The Enemy Within*. Quantrill’s raid has been considered the single largest act of domestic terrorism in United States history until the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people. The exhibition authors spend more time discussing the motivation of Timothy McVeigh than the actual event. (2004:47)

The use of John Brown to portray incidents of terrorism in “The Enemy Within” was not lost on CNN Senior Producer Henry Schuster:
John Brown. Leon Czolgosz. Bernardine Dohrn. These are the faces of American terrorism—as much as Timothy McVeigh, Eric Rudolph or Osama bin Laden. All of them are reminders that terrorism is as old as America itself, having manifested itself in many different ways and for many different causes. These individuals share space with Ku Klux Klan robes, anarchist bombs and grisly reminders of the September 11, 2001, attacks at The Enemy Within: Terror in America, an exhibit at the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C… Peter Earnest, the museum's executive director says, ‘As for Brown, convicted of treason and executed two months after the Harpers Ferry raid, Earnest says he is ‘a classic case of the debate about defining terrorism: One man's patriot is another man's terrorist.’ (2005)

Cameo appearances of John Brown’s portrait

“Faces of the Frontier; Photographic Portraits from the American West, 1845-1924”, the exhibition by Frank H. Goodyear III, Associate Curator of the National Portrait Gallery at Smithsonian Institution, displays a salted paper print, the bearded ¾ length portrait which was the last to be taken of John Brown. The original daguerreotype is credited to Martin M. Lawrence of New York, who made prints from the original with his studio marking in 1858. The NPG print is credited to J. W. Black of Boston, who made a negative at John Brown’s direction in 1859 and copyrighted it in the Massachusetts Registry ten days after his execution, December 12, 1859.¹ (Libby 2009:54)

John Brown appears early in the timeline, in the section entitled “Land.” The question of land use in the West includes political, economic, and development considerations, of which Brown is a primary example of the issue of slavery. In the published catalog Brown is preceded by Territorial Governor James Denver, who correctly assessed that the opposing views would likely result in ‘cutting each other’s throats,’ and followed by Abraham Lincoln and a brief history of the Agricultural and Homestead Acts of 1862 as well as the authorization of the transcontinental railroad. (Goodyear 2009:46–48)

¹ The national Copyright Registry at the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C. did not begin until 1872.
John Brown’s life history is westward movement, beginning with his father’s emigration to Ohio with other Connecticut antislavery adherents in 1805. As well as the Kansas freestate settlement of Brown’s sons and their families in 1855, his plans for resettlement of liberated slaves were organized with the models of the Cherokee and Mormon nations providing a self-determining refuge. His Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for governance on their journey, ratified among black settlers in Canada in 1858, excluded massacre of slaveholders and property destruction, and especially the rape of southern white women, which carried an automatic death penalty in Brown’s organization. Slaveholders who cooperated with liberation were to be protected. ([1858]1969:10-13)

The spectre, or promise, of a slave uprising is the heart of the oppositional dialogue regarding John Brown. To detractors representing the Confederate viewpoint of the Civil War, such as Dr. Thomas Cole in the Special Issue on Human Rights/Violence of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) that features John Brown as the cover example, the assumption is murder and destruction if he were successful. (2010)

African American scholar James Horton suggested to the authors of John Brown’s Holy War, the PBS documentary: “Think about the possibility of Nat Turner well-armed, well-equipped….Nat Turner might have done some pretty amazing things.” (Chowder 2000:90)

To adherents, the contemporary biographers Carton (2006), DeCaro, (2002,2007,2009) and Reynolds (2005,2006), determine that the militant action of arming slaves is necessary to end it, and that massacre of slaveholders is not the intended result. This is proved with the arming of slaves in the Civil War without slaveholder revenge except on a limited scale, and by the immediate history of the John Brown raid on Harpers Ferry when he took great caution to protect the hostage slaveholders, even during the final fight when he refused to surrender to Lieutenant Jeb Stuart and Colonel Robert E. Lee.
Biographer Evan Carton is especially eloquent on this point in response to a New York Times op-ed piece by Tony Horwitz (2009):

Mr. Horwitz strategically omits the second sentence of John Brown’s final public statement before his hanging, which reads in full: ‘I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.’ Although in his provisional constitution for a racially egalitarian United States, Brown reasonably described chattel slavery as a ‘barbarous, unprovoked and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion,’ his own militant efforts to end it — both in Kansas and in Virginia — scrupulously observed the principle implied by this second sentence: no gratuitous bloodshed, even of prominent slaveholders like his captive Lewis Washington, and no targeting of noncombatants. This scruple, among other things, distinguishes Brown from Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, as it did from Nat Turner, whose retributive violence Brown thought justified yet (vainly) hoped that his method of attacking slavery might prevent from recurring on a large scale. (Carton 2009)

This author began scholarly study of John Brown in 1976 motivated by Stephen Oates biography, *To Purge This Land With Blood* (Harper 1970) which has extensive bibliographic resources, primary sources, and manuscript collections. As I began visiting the various archives, the scattered photo portraits of John Brown became an Independent Study project for the Associate of Arts degree in Professional Photography at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, in 1978. At that time I conducted both telephone and personal interviews with Professor Oates.

Most unfortunately, the same historical omission is made in the second edition changes of the first biography of John Brown in modern times. The Harper & Row cover is an 1853/1854 portrait of Brown centered in an oval on a blue field. (1970) The University of Massachusetts second edition (paperback) changes the cover to Brown of Kansas in 1856,
making the entire portrait in blood red. Unlike the first edition, the second has a front
matter entire page with only half of Brown’s gallows inscription, just as criticized by Evan

**Longitudinal study**

A survey of the response of viewers to the portraits of John Brown at the Harpers Ferry
National Historical Park in West Virginia had a significant result: if the viewer responded
only to the over-enlarged graphic of the Curry mural, his comment was likely to be ‘crazy.
wild-eyed, or fanatic.’¹ But the more people looked at the chronological progression, a
variety of responses regarding the change in Brown’s face and his resemblance to Lincoln
and even Moses was generated. At Harpers Ferry the viewers showed great concern with
the chronological development with the evident fast growth of John Brown’s full beard, a
period of one year between his last beardless photo in June, 1857 in Akron, Ohio, and the
only bearded photo sitting by Martin M. Lawrence in New York in May, 1858, which is
often attributed to sitting in May, 1859, the date of the new negatives. (Libby 2009, 2010)
This fast growth is well-established among John Brown’s descendants in California.

High school students in Philadelphia responded with a similar result of the complexity of
the subject. Their assignment question was: ‘Is it ever appropriate for an individual to use
violence to achieve social change?’ They were required to use documentary sources to
express their viewpoints. According to Andrea Reidell, education specialist at the Mid
Atlantic Region NARA facility, students were selected by the teachers “based on their
interest and ability to commit to and complete a rigorous extracurricular project”:

> Working with your exhibit was only one aspect of the students participation in
the project. We also took them to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where they
were given a special tour about African-American art and artists and able to go

¹ The informal verbal questions by NPS staff were primarily answered by white men of senior age. In one
case, an African American man scolded the interpreter as making John Brown appear to be a lunatic.
into the collections area to see some John Brown prints that were not currently on exhibit. When the students did come to see your exhibit, they were struck by the variety of images, as well as the possible reasons each individual image looked the way it did. I believe the exhibit helped to add to the complexity of John Brown for the students. People found the images compelling and the images, text and other parts of the exhibit sparked conversation, which I always see as an important step in learning. (e-mail, December 9, 2010)

The John Brown Photo Chronology exhibition of the twelve known portrait sittings was displayed at the regional National Archives and Records Administration facility at Philadelphia from November 2009 to April 2010. Students responded to the images in an educational program, “Picturing John Brown”, in which they wrote essays and made their own portrait drawings of the abolitionist. Because the exhibition is laid out for walking, the chronological order is right to left. Images 3 through 9 include art-enhanced and engraved versions of the original photographs.

The students were from Constitution High School, Pennsylvania’s only history-based high school, which is a partnership between the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History based at Yale University.
Conclusion

Looking for John Brown, a thirty-five year preoccupation of the author and creator of a chronological exhibition of his photographic portraits, has an outcome of identification of diverging viewpoints about the militant abolitionist as well as the artifacts. The history is complex, and the competing classifications are not as straightforward as they seem. Do the ends justify the means? Is violence ever justified? These precepts are often voiced without knowing the nature of Brown’s violence, or the nature of its provocation. Documentation and historical context are necessary to make informed opinions.

The adherents for Brown and his plan to end slavery are tempered with realization that these questions are considered differently through time. In his time, voicing where the antislavery person stood in opinion of the necessity or conduct of the raid on Harpers Ferry and his subsequent hanging was required for that person’s associations in his and her community. His motives should be publicly admired, even if rationality was in question. The major biographers of the last century, W.E.B. DuBois (1909), Oswald Garrison Villard (1911), Stephen B. Oates (1970), Louis A. DeCaro (2002), and David S. Reynolds (2005) are all in agreement that John Brown was not insane.

In the slaveholding South, an antiabolitionist mantra invoking John Brown was required for community life as well. Today that mantra includes acknowledgement of slavery as a brutal oppression and the justification for the civil rights movement of the twentieth century. But the opinions of the John Brown raid and his perceived actions and motives are eerily the same.
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