

Review Symposium on Christopher Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner*

A Vertiginous Experience: Historical Ethics and Practice in the Age of Trump

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TOMLINS, CHRISTOPHER. *In the Matter of Nat Turner. A Speculative History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

*This essay considers Christopher Tomlins' thoughts—as expressed in his *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*—on historical ethics and practice in the context of recent and ongoing controversies concerning the history of race and slavery in the American past. Tomlins endeavors to recover as much as he can relating to Nat Turner and his mentalité at the time of the infamous 1831 rebellion. He also promises a self-conscious engagement with the creation of history as an intellectual practice, and invites readers to reflect on their standpoint in the histories they create. For Tomlins this practice means a close reading of Turner's "confession" through the work of social theorists, an approach that will likely prove controversial for some readers. For those who stay with him, however, Tomlins provides a bravura demonstration of historical methodology with implications for current debates and divisions within the wider field.*

Culture shock is an overused term, but inasmuch as it describes a "distress or disorientation" brought on by sudden subjection to an unfamiliar culture (OED), it is perhaps apt to describe the reaction of many Americans to the presidency of Donald Trump. From the moment he secured what had seemed like an improbable victory, President Trump blithely disregarded time-honored policy verities and behavioral norms, causing "distress or disorientation" amongst his opponents. Unsurprisingly, this disquiet also registered in academic circles and debates. Pre-Trump (but post the global financial collapse of 2008–?) American historians and others were reconsidering the long predominant focus on culture and language as influential historical contexts, and rediscovering materialist approaches to history (Graeber 2011; Piketty 2014). Scholars working mainly in the antebellum period offered a "new history of capitalism," highlighting the integrated and codependent character of enslaved and early capitalist economies and substantiating eloquent calls for a debate on the question of reparations (Rockman 2012; Coates 2014). After the election of Trump, controversies concerning the history of repression of enslaved, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color have intensified in sometimes acrimonious newspaper and academic

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debates that divided the field, or at least the most vocal sections of it (Hannah-Jones 2019; Lichtenstein 2020).

There is much that is shared by all commentators in the debate concerning the significance of slavery and enduring structural and institutional racism in America. However, the positions of different sides have also been subject to caricature and ad hominem remarks, such that exchanges focus less on historical questions and methods and more on the legitimacy of different individual and group contributions (Friedersdorf 2020). If our understanding of the American past is, as a longstanding historiographical consensus maintains, inextricably bound up with slavery and race, then the debate over who can speak and should be heard and heeded on these topics is significant.

All of which makes Chris Tomlins's study of Nat Turner and the ethics of historical methods both timely and salutary. The evidence concerning enslaved Americans who organized and led rebellions against their oppressors is scant. We cannot even be sure if the man at the center of Tomlins's study called himself "Nat" or used his enslavers' surname, first Benjamin and, after 1810, Samuel Turner. Tomlins undertakes to recover as much as is possible of what we know about Turner, relying like others on the testimony Turner provided to a young Virginia lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, while he awaited trial and certain execution late in 1831. In this "confession" Turner described the divine inspiration that prepared him to lead forty or so rebels in the murder of fifty-five whites earlier that summer. Shortly after Turner's death, as white supremacist reprisals killed an estimated two hundred black men and women across Virginia and North Carolina, Gray published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a twenty-four page pamphlet portraying Turner as a deranged and bloody-thirsty terrorist.

Commentators and historians since have debated the detail of the confession, rendering Turner "a signifier pushed and pulled toward an extraordinary and contradictory array of signifieds" (Tomlins 2020, ix). Setting out, Tomlins promises a "speculative history" to be presented as a "constellation of narratives" that "fold together both imagistically and dialectically as a succession of layers that together form one montage" (ibid., xi). To which some readers may be tempted to respond with a mystified . . . eh? As the book proceeds, however, it becomes clear that Tomlins's at times dense analytical language is crucial to grasping Turner's *mentalité* and also to his challenge to other historians of law, slavery, and political economy to address their own epistemic and ethical standpoints, and to think about how and why they write their histories, "no matter how vertiginous the experience may prove to be" (ibid.)

Tomlins begins with the most controversial reading of Gray's pamphlet, William Styron's 1967 novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which was written against a backdrop of rising unrest regarding social and racial injustice—not dissimilar to our current, troubled times. Styron aimed to rescue Turner from Gray's portrayal and to foster a cathartic racial reconciliation. He also pitched his novel as a "meditation on history" at a time of growing dissatisfaction with established and conservative narrative approaches to history and experimentation with anthropological and literary methods and innovative methodologies drawn from social sciences. Inspired, in part, by existentialist philosophy and the emerging subfield of psycho-history, Styron portrayed Virginia's enslavers as drunken sadists and Turner as a man driven less by eschatological fervor and more by Freudian, homoerotic and violent sexual fantasies, and an "exquisitely sharpened hatred for the white man" (Styron, 257). *Confessions* earned Styron a

Pulitzer Prize and admirers amongst leading historians. However, he was castigated by others, especially by Black historians and writers, for perpetuating racial stereotypes.

Subsequent studies portrayed Turner more sympathetically: a religious zealot, to be sure, but also as a man engaged in rational resistance; a subaltern voice in the past, who gave his life to the struggle against slavery. Recovering the voices of subaltern subjects from documents, especially legal documents, written by others and subject to institutional and practice constraints, has long occupied historians across diverse eras. As Michael Johnson argued in his critical review of studies of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, historians can be too eager to credit court-generated testimony as evidence of conspiracies and heroic but ultimately doomed enslaved resistance (Johnson 2001).¹ In Johnson's view, the records just as easily point to enslavers' fantasies rooted in fears and shame that legal institutions and process assuage by condemning and executing subaltern subjects.

In an effort to avoid these pitfalls, and noting that there is no doubting the reality of Turner's rebellion, Tomlins marshals a glittering array of theorists—from Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Marx, to Freud, Weber, Lacan, Žižek, and, in particular, Walter Benjamin—to craft his subtle reading of Turner's self-understanding and motives. In doing so, he clearly rejects Styron's fictive, sex-obsessed killer, while noting that Styron did attempt to theorize Turner—a grudging acknowledgement one might read as an implied critique of subsequent historians for relying on undertheorized conceptualizations of agency when telling stories of conspiracies and heroic resistance.

Everyone agrees that the core of Turner's worldview was his deep and abiding religious consciousness, evident in the biblical exegesis that comprises the first half of the confession. Samuel Turner was, like many enslavers, a pious man and held regular prayer meetings and white supremacist Bible readings for the edification of his enslaved workers. Modern and mostly secular scholars, Tomlins notes, often struggle to describe the depth and nuance of religious faith, which is frequently reduced to a behavioral phenomenon embedded in key texts, practices, and institutions. Thus previous studies have attributed Turner's convictions and self-identification as a prophet bringing divine retribution to the influence of Old Testament figures such as Isaiah. Tomlins seeks a firmer grasp on Turner's reading and beliefs. As an Anglican become Methodist, Samuel Turner's household likely heard sermons on evangelical and millenarian themes, stressing the harvesting of souls, more than their Baptist counterparts who remained enthralled by older doctrines of Calvinistic predestination. Tomlins's close reading of the confession also reveals that Turner was particularly inspired by the gospel of Luke—the longest and richest narrative of the life of Christ, from his birth to Paul's ministry, and of the role played by Jesus in God's plan for salvation. Through prayer and his ascetic lifestyle, Turner came to consider parallels with his own experience and his role in God's plan.

1. Denmark Vesey (1767–1822) was born into slavery but purchased his freedom at age thirty-two and rose to prominence as an African-American businessman and church leader in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1822 he was accused of planning an ambitious slave revolt which aimed, reputedly, to kill the slaveholders, liberate thousands of enslaved people, and sail to Haiti for refuge. The authorities learned of the conspiracy and dispatched the militia to arrest the ring leaders, leading to a series of investigations and trials which provided details on the failed plot and the execution of those accused, including Vesey.

The incremental development of Turner's religious consciousness between 1828–1831 allows Tomlins to account for his increasingly intense religiosity and sometimes erratic behavior—such as his obsession with prayer and times he ran away and then returned, and when he realized that it was God's plan that he should remain a slave until the appointed time. Our sense of Turner's beliefs is enhanced by this reading of his developing consciousness as less a general, religiously informed resentment leading to idealistic and desperate action, and more as a deliberative, Christological progression bound up with his own sacrificial atonement. It also enhances our understanding of the challenge Turner faced in translating his personal faith into collective action, developing a vision of counter-sovereignty sufficient to persuade his fellow workers of the justice of their cause and the need to act. As the argument proceeds, Turner appears less and less a fanatical and desperate killer, and more a principled and purposeful actor with a clear sense of the ethical basis of his actions.

Thomas Ruffin Gray's prologue to the pamphlet containing Turner's confession, claimed that the rebellion erupted in an otherwise peaceful and harmonious community. In truth, Virginia was wracked by political divisions and the class conflicts common in Jacksonian America. In the years since the political settlement of the Constitution, the Jeffersonian vision of a republic of egalitarian, white, male freeholders had birthed a racist, violent, and debt-financed settler colonialism dependent on commercial agriculture. Profiteering commodity production sundered earlier, idealized links between freehold farms and the independence necessary to sustain liberty. The shift rendered land a form of capital dedicated, like any other, to exploitation and accumulation. In this context, newly settled and predominantly non-slaveholding small farmers in the western regions of the state found common cause with eastern urban artisans and merchant capitalists in opposing the longstanding political dominance of the eastern enslaving elite. The former favored internal improvements, commercial development, and political liberalization, especially concerning the landed property qualification for the franchise; the latter, unsurprisingly, defended the proven benefits of the state's quasi-aristocratic governance over a deferential white population and the proven prosperity of plantation economy.

By the 1820s these contentions fostered debates concerning Virginia's reliance on slavery. The twists and turns were many and winding: the land-poor clamored against slaveholder suffrage as repugnant to their natural rights and argued for gradual abolition of a system that no longer served the interests of society at large; and enslavers warned of lower-class insurgency and resisted any uncompensated action against their property rights. Both sides agreed that the nub of the issue was the prohibitive cost of freeing 400,000 enslaved African Americans and then, since few if any whites could imagine a racially integrated Virginia, shipping them off to distant colonies. Over time, a compromise surfaced: the connection between property and political attachment endured, but it was broadened to include self-possessed productive white labor, which, like land, was deemed productive capital deployed in commodity production and worthy of the franchise.

As I noted in the introduction to the symposium, from his earliest work, Tomlins has combined social theory with the study of American legal and labor and social history in the sixteenth through twentieth centuries. Debates concerning the relationship between theory and methodology and history have ebbed and flowed throughout the

past century, beginning with the early *Annales* historians' dissatisfaction with biographical and event-driven studies and their call for interdisciplinary approaches and a refined conception of historical time.² In the last half century or so, any randomly assembled group of historians could probably be divided between those eager to employ concepts and frameworks drawn from other disciplines—whether anthropology, sociology, or literary theory—and those more dubious about the value of “theory” and who favor empirical and narrative approaches (Evans, 2000).

Clearly Tomlins is in the former camp, and his use of theory enhances his study of Turner in various ways; for example, when it provides methodological underpinning for what might otherwise be challenged as an impressionistic reading of the confession, thereby substantiating his key claim that the voice on the page is Turner's. Thus, he notes that the opening pages of the confession contained information relating to Turner's childhood and beliefs, of which Gray could have had little or no prior knowledge; also the untidy syntax, compared to later parts of the text, suggest the notes were taken in haste and perhaps, tantalizingly, verbatim from Turner. But Tomlins supports these assertions with an analysis of the paratextual elements that inform and determine how the text is read. For example, the ways in which Gray and others contained Turner's unruly and seditious remarks by embedding them within a legal text, an empirical record, and a confession. In this way, Tomlins is able to establish not only the authenticity of Turner's voice, but also its power. Thus when Gray attempts to draw Turner into a shared and condemnatory moral conception of the rebellion, he retorts, “you've asked me to give a history of the motives which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call it” (Gray, 7).

Tomlins uses theory to do more than add analytical heft to readings of the confession. Remembering his opening challenge to readers to reflect on their own ethical standpoints and approaches, it is in the discussions of different concepts and ideas that he shows how diverse theorists can animate and reinvigorate long-used categories—belief, culture, agency, resistance, violence—that routinely feature in historical and legal studies, but in undertheorized terms. Thus Tomlins's digressions into Kierkegaard's notion of the “knight of faith” enables an exploration of Turner's Abrahamic faith in God and in himself as a divine messenger. Freud helps Tomlins and his readers grapple with the rebellion as an instance of “overdetermination,” in which Turner is simultaneously one of many participants but also a precipitating cause. Next up, Hegelian dialectics, derived from observations on feudal relations between vassals and lords, offer insights into the purposeful logic of what appeared at the time, and to some since, as indiscriminate killings, but which Tomlins maintains were prosecuted by self-aware rebels who were themselves transformed and redeemed through the “destruction and death of the other.” These diverse and complex strands are drawn together using Michel De Certeau's distinction between tactics and strategies to enhance our understanding of the many facets of Turner and his intervention summed

2. The *Annales* School refers to a group of French historians, usually identified in successive generations, who have advocated interdisciplinary approaches to social and cultural history, mostly medieval and early modern, reimagining foundational concepts, such as the notion of varieties of historical time, and figuring in influential historiographical departures, such as the turn toward the study of *mentalités* and micro-history. See Iggers, George G. *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

up by the overall judgement of the incredible courage needed to undertake a rebellion “within the enemy’s field of vision. . . . Within enemy territory” (De Certeau 1984).

Turner did not succeed in overturning the state’s plantation slavery regime, but his rebellion undoubtedly influenced the way Virginians conceived and justified their dependence on enslaved labor. Endeavoring to resolve the bitter political discord over slavery—divisions that looked increasingly irresponsible and risky in the wake of Turner’s rebellion—Virginia’s incumbent governor, John Floyd, called on Thomas Roderick Dew, professor of history, metaphysics, and political law at the College of William and Mary, to adjudicate. Dew obliged the governor with an essay combining natural rights philosophy and the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment, with Ricardian notions of labor value, and utilitarian arguments prioritizing “natural” market processes and marginal utility theories (Dew 1832). His essay reconceived slavery as less an unwanted imperial inheritance or evil to be lamented, and more a positive and productive labor system which “was eternally present.” Interfere with slavery, Dew declared, and “you pull down the Atlas that upholds the whole system.” Moreover, the eminent scholar averred, a “more merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe, than the Negro slave of the United States.”

Historians have long noted that Dew’s essay marked an important turn in the debate toward positive pro-slavery ideology (Faust 1981). Tomlins’s takeaway is that Dew and his acolytes forestalled regime change by changing the definition of the regime: repositioning slavery within liberal political economy and discourses of property, labor, commodification, and debt, thereby putting it safely beyond the reach of political and ethical debates. To appreciate the power of this reconceptualization, and how securely it attached slavery to the antebellum South, one only has to reflect on how the current variants of these same discourses continue to obstruct meaningful debates on contemporary political and ethical tradeoffs, on questions ranging from the response to climate emergency and the implementation of public health measures to combat COVID-19—both of which take second place to something called “the economy.”

Dew’s response repurposed the idiosyncrasies of the federalized republic that had emerged out of a late eighteenth-century compromise between a patchwork of colonial commonwealths. In so doing, he doubled down on the sectional particularities that Lincoln and the Republican Party would later refuse to countenance as a basis for secession, leading to the Civil War. The precise steps in this drift to hostilities and the transformation effected by the war continue to be hotly debated. Here, just as in his earlier studies, most recently *Freedom Bound*, Tomlins emphasizes political economy, the law, and its relationship to labor, but also religious ethics and the power of debt. In an epilogue, and a final burst of theoretical pyrotechnics, Tomlins draws on Max Weber and Walter Benjamin in a reading of the notion of “full faith and credit” in which these elements are fused in an ethics of capital and religion and the social power and violence that stands behind debts enforced by legal accountability.

This seemingly innocuous, boilerplate phrase in the court records published at the beginning of the *Confession*, in fact expresses a “phantasmagoria or congealed armature” that articulated a structure of thought and feeling at once economic and juridical, moral and psychological, sacral and profane (Tomlins 2020, 205). A structure in which enslaved people were recast away from earlier associations with political conceptions

of property, social hierarchy, and enchantment and into a new relation to a political economy of commodity production, calculation, and exchange. Thus was the South and its enslaved workforce locked on a course of impending conflict with related but crucially also distinct and potentially antagonistic capitalist phantasmagorias in the northern and western states. Grappling with these “demonic ambiguities,” Tomlins concludes his analysis by characterizing the rebellion as, ultimately, a confrontation between cosmologies, clearest in Turner’s reply when asked, how he would plead: “not guilty, saying to his counsel, that he did not feel so” (ibid., 205).

It will be interesting to see how Tomlins’s theoretical engagement is reviewed and received. Die-hard empiricists, who would benefit most from working through the argument, may quickly tire of what they will likely regard as lengthy and self-indulgent digressions, wondering aloud why Tomlins cannot just “get on” and present his findings. Fans and fellow travelers will relish the application needed to keep up with what by any reasonable measure is a tour de force: a new and original view of a long-studied topic by a scholar whose command of arcane social theorists allows the rest of us to follow his steps through the hermeneutic challenge of recovering the thoughts and feelings of a man about whom, like so many other enslaved workers, so little is known and so much imagined.

For the field at large, Tomlins’s book perhaps chimes with recent observations of Jan DeVries concerning the increasing exhaustion of narrative studies often of otherwise marginal individuals and groups that have been so influential since the 1980s (De Vries 2018). As DeVries details, these studies drew some of their impetus from rising dissatisfaction among historians at the influence of social science and of “new” histories, and the rising popularity of cultural and micro-historical approaches as well as shifts in geographic focus and scale, for example from national to continental and global histories. Historians justified their focus on the stories of marginal subjects as challenges to earlier “master narratives.” Critics noted the similarly partial and descriptive character of new and older narrative approaches as explanations of change over time. As historians are rightly keen to emphasize, it matters whose story gets told. However, given scholarly obligations to seek concurrence and consilience among all the available evidence, the question remains whether particularistic accounts are likely to yield full and effective explanations.

This particularism, De Vries is far from the first to conclude, can lead to not only fragmentation and the production of many histories, but also an increasingly limited sense of history as a store of knowledge that is cumulative and self-correcting in ways that requires practitioners to pay attention to one another. But if histories communicate to smaller and smaller discursive communities, and in the absence of shared and credible approaches to understanding the experience of marginal subjects, some may be left wondering if it is the voice of the historian that is being recovered. This is the Gordian Knot that Tomlins’s use of theory loosens in his artfully entitled *Speculative History*. Tomlins’s reading of the very limited evidence via the insights of social theorists demonstrates the extent to which explanations can and should go beyond mere description and storytelling, however sympathetic, and thereby provide grounds for critique and consensus based on the evidence and methodological approach. In the end, Tomlins’s Turner is less a fanatic or tragic hero, and more a man possessed of faith so deep and firmly held that it allowed him to transcend his brutalizing worldly conditions and grim end: clothed in

ragged, manacled, bleeding, awaiting certain execution in a tiny and squalid cell, Nat Turner was still able to terrify his interrogator and the southern slave states. This terror was the reason Gray and the courts used the “full faith and credit” of the arsenal of literary, legal, and institutional weapons at their disposal, determined to deny Turner the integrity and power which Tomlins has worked so hard to recover.

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