

COMPARING THE VIEWS OF DAVID WALKER AND JOHN DAY, TWO NINETEENTH-CENTURY FREE BLACKS

STUDENT HANDOUT 3

The following three scenarios will help you explore the difficult decisions that nineteenth-century African Americans faced when considering colonization in Africa.

Scenario 1

It is 1820 and you are a free black boy named **John** living in Hillsborough, North Carolina. You are a healthy, strong thirteen-year-old. Your parents have just learned that the first ship funded by the American Colonization Society has sailed for Africa, and its passengers will be the first group to set up a free and racially equal society in the new colony of Liberia. Your parents are excited by this new opportunity and have pledged to be on the next ship that sails for Liberia. They want you to come with them, but you like North Carolina. Hillsborough is growing prosperous as travelers and merchants use the town as a central depot for trade to and from the seaports of Virginia and the western territories. A small, but successful, community of free blacks has established businesses and professions on the periphery of white society, and although denied political or legal rights, many make a reasonable livelihood in Hillsborough. Your uncle is one of these businessmen, a successful furniture maker who would happily give you a job in his shop if you stayed. Your parents love you and remind you that you will not be free or equal as long as you stay in the United States, but your uncle seems to be making good money, and as a result, seems to have the respect of his white clients.

Would you choose to move to Africa or stay in the United States? Why?

Scenario 2

It is 1832, you are a young slave girl, named **Millie**, about eleven years old, living in Virginia, but you are not sure of your exact age, because your owners do not celebrate slaves' birthdays. Your parents live on separate plantations so you only see your father occasionally. Your mother's owner, with whom you live, is a fairly kind person who has allowed you to learn to read and write and gives you easy housekeeping tasks to do. Your mother also cooks and cleans house for the owner's family. Your older brothers' work is much harder, since they are required to do the farm and field work for the plantation. Your father, who lives on another plantation, has a very cruel owner, and is deeply frustrated with the harsh conditions in which he lives. Recently, he has learned that there is an opportunity to join a community in Africa where he will have his own land and be treated as an equal citizen regardless of his color. He implores you, your mother, and your brothers to come to Liberia. Your mother does not want to go; her parents, her brothers, and her sisters are all staying in Virginia, and live on the same plantation with her. Besides, her owners do not treat her as badly as some masters do. Your father points out that if her owners died or came on hard times, she might be sold and would have no control over her life and circumstances. At least in Africa, she could choose her fate. Still, your mom does not want to leave the only home she has ever known, and decides to stay. Your father and your brothers, who are purchased by the ACS from their owners, decide to go.

Do you want to stay with your mother as a slave in familiar surroundings or leave with your father to an unfamiliar and possibly dangerous new home and gain your freedom? Would you choose to move to Africa or stay in the United States? Why?

Scenario 3

You are a free black man, named **George** living in rural Maryland in 1858. You are a skilled wood worker, and make your living by constructing barrels for local farmers in the neighborhood, and occasionally, hiring yourself out for fieldwork during the harvest season. You are not rich, but you make enough money to support your family modestly, and you are comfortable. Although you are not legally a citizen in the United States, within your small community the white folks have allowed you to own property, to do business and to raise your children with reasonable tolerance and respect. As long as you are quiet and respectful to them, they have been polite to you. Recently, however, you have heard that anti-slavery supporters have been causing conflict in Baltimore and Virginia. Abolitionists have made speeches and put out circulars that demand equality for blacks, and their tone has been insulting to Southern whites. As a result, your white neighbors have been less pleasant to you recently. Moreover, there is talk of new laws that will restrict the freedoms of free blacks, require them to produce official documents proving they are free and allowed to travel in the state. Some of the angriest whites have been suggesting that the best plan for foiling abolitionist influence would be to enslave ALL people of color. This seems extreme to you, but you also just heard of troubling court case, in which a free black man named Dred Scott was declared a slave by definition of his race, regardless of his freed status. You have also learned that the colony of Liberia in Africa has just become an independent nation, and that much of the early difficulties of settlement, including disease and struggles with local natives have diminished. In the evenings, after work, you watch your children getting ready for bed, and worry that they are facing adulthood in the United States with even less opportunities and freedoms than you have had. Perhaps moving to the new nation of Liberia would give them a fresh start with guaranteed rights that can never have the United States . . .

Would you choose to move to Africa or stay in the United States? Why?

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