

The 11th Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University

# **John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid**

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## *The Wind and the Whirlwind: Can Biography Explain John Brown?*

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/john-brown/gilpin-abstract.pdf>  
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### **Abstract**

As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote on the day of Brown's execution, "This will be a great day in our history, the date of a new revolution, quite as much needed as the old one. [Brown's execution] is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will soon come." Rather than debate the minutiae of Brown's life, my presentation will briefly explore the whirlwind(s) that Brown continues to inspire. The revolution Longfellow so trenchantly anticipated seems to be of far greater concern than whether or not Brown was hellbent on invading Harpers Ferry in 1849 or 1852. I will discuss Brown's appearances in several generations of American thought, as he served as a fluctuating emblem of race, violence, and radicalism in order to probe the relationship between biography, memory, and the politics of the present. Through Brown, we can better understand not only how attempts to make sense of this dramatic personality have changed over time, but how those efforts reflect profoundly on unchanging truths about the American past. Tracking Brown as an emblem along the axis of race in American history reveals the extent of Brown's distorted image at various junctures from 1850 to the present day. More

importantly, these distortions reveal how Brown's story has informed broader narratives which consistently marginalized his beliefs. In our nation's enduring racial struggle, from the antebellum period to the present day, these incarnations of Brown expose the persistence of white supremacist binaries and the ways his story continues to underscore broader truths.