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From Elevation to Uplift:
Gender, Citizenship and Northern Black Political Culture
On the Eve of the Civil War

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Colin Palmer

This dissertation examines the relationship between racial elevation ideology, and the gender ideals and practices espoused by the spokesmen and women for the northern black population in the nineteenth century. It begins by discussing the origins of racial elevation ideology and defining its place in black political culture in the 1820s and 1830s. The dissertation then investigates the radicalization of northern black political culture in the 1840s and 1850s, when calls to "elevate" the race through "redemption" moved to the forefront of black political discourse. Finally, the dissertation ends by analyzing the ways in which northern black spokesmen and women redefined the concept of elevation during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Throughout, the dissertation argues that gender ideals remained central to elite African American interpretations of morality, virtue, politics, citizenship, self-improvement and representation – all elements bound up in the concept of racial elevation.

By analyzing the ways that gender ideals and practices shaped African American political culture in the decades surrounding the Civil War, the dissertation revises the scholarship on northern black political development in two important ways. First it demonstrates that northern black support for the Civil War did not constitute a significant break with the politics of the previous decade. Rather, northern black spokesmen and women saw the war as an opportunity to act on the previous decades' discourse regarding the importance of manly virtue, citizenship, and the desire to redeem the race. Second, the dissertation revises the very terminology used by the scholars who examine black political thought and activism in the nineteenth century. Though scholars have generally conflated the phrases "racial elevation" and "racial uplift," the dissertation will demonstrate that the change in terminology corresponded with a shift in the black elite's interpretation of the principle sources of vice in the black population. While responsibility for moral elevation rested with African American men in the antebellum era, by the late nineteenth century, responsibility for the moral uplift of the race rested primarily with African American women.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Gender, Elevation, and Uplift

On July 4, 1827, New York became the last northern state to grant freedom to its population of enslaved African Americans.[1] To commemorate the momentous event, African Americans gathered throughout the state, delivering speeches and leading processions on the fourth and fifth days of July. In New York City, a group of black New Yorkers marked the day by attending a special service at the A.M.E. Zion church on the July fourth. In an effort to avoid negative white attention, they set themselves apart from those thousands of African American men and women who flooded into the city to celebrate on July fifth by joining the ranks of black men in a celebratory procession, or standing with the proud "wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of the celebrants" on the crowded sidewalks.[2]

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[1] After years of agitation by antislavery Quakers, lawmakers, and other activists, the New York State legislature passed a law of gradual emancipation in 1799. The law did not cover those born before 1799, so in 1827, lawmakers emancipated the remaining enslaved peoples residing in New York State. For more information on emancipation in New York State see, Rhoda Golden Freeman, *The Free Negro in New York City in the Era Before the Civil War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) and James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Search of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73, 74.

[2] Some black New Yorkers feared that public celebrations and processions would invite white hostility and derision, while others preferred to claim emancipation day as their own. The division between those New York City blacks who preferred the "respectable" church service over a public procession was played out in the pages of the *Freedom's Journal*, and discussed by Shane White in, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994), 41. The quote is James McCune Smith's personal account of the event, quoted in Sterling Stuckey, "A Last

In Rochester, New York, Austin Steward rose to deliver the main oration to his city's black community. Born a slave in Virginia, Steward had successfully petitioned for his freedom after being hired out by his owner to work in New York State. Now a successful Rochester grocer who had experienced life both as a slave and as a free man, Steward must have seemed a fitting choice to address the crowd of newly freed men and women on that fifth day of July. As he spoke, he laid out the major principles that he believed would enable the free black population to "continually rise in respectability, in rank and standing," within the borders of the United States. He discussed the importance of fidelity to Protestant Christianity, explaining that "a strict observance to all the precepts of the gospel ought to be your first and highest aim." He stressed the importance of "that of which none should be ignorant – [the ability] to read." He admonished them to attend to "industry, prudence, and economy," and thus successfully avoid, "abject poverty...the greatest, most terrible of all possible evils....a most deadly and damning sin." Finally, Steward warned the crowd to "refrain from the excessive use of ardent spirits," and urged them to teach their children "sobriety, temperance, justice, and truth." If the newly freed could simply adhere to these principles as he had, Steward was certain that "wealth, virtue, and happiness" would follow these "moderate exertions."[3] When Austin Steward finished detailing the areas that free black women and men should focus on in their efforts to improve their lives, he surveyed his audience, and boldly declared,

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Stern Struggle: Henry Highland Garnet and Liberation Theory," in Leon Litwack and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 131.

[3]Austin Steward's emancipation address, Rochester, New York, July 5, 1827 is printed in his autobiography, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Free Man: Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony*, (1856; reprinted in NY: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 150 - 162.

> My countrymen, let us henceforth remember that we are men. Let us...do good to all mankind, [and] we will claim for ourselves the attention and respect which as men we should possess. So shall every good that can be the portion of man, be ours--this life shall be happy, and the life to come, glorious.[4]

As striking as Steward's exhortations may seem to today's students of African American history, his comments were hardly unusual in his time. In fact, in laying out this prescription for black success to his audience – hard work, thrift, temperance, and fidelity to Protestant Christianity – Steward succinctly defined the themes that would continue to define black political culture throughout the nineteenth century. In the years both before and after the Civil War, northern black spokesmen and women like Steward would continue to view individual efforts at self-improvement as essential to the health, prosperity, happiness, and future of the African American population. The antebellum era, in particular, would be a time when belief in the importance of the methods outlined by Steward would lead members of the northern black elite to continually work to "elevate" themselves on an individual basis, and create organizations to facilitate the attempts at self-improvement made by other members of the black population. Ultimately, spokesmen and women for the northern black population would politicize these efforts as essential in their fight for Civil Rights in the North, and against slavery in the South.

In recent decades, an increasing number of scholars have suggested that the bundle of ideas that nineteenth-century northern black spokesmen and women invoked in the name of "elevation" occupied a central position in antebellum black political discourse. R. J. Young makes this point in *Antebellum Black Activists*, where he argues, "the word that summed up the path activists wished their race to follow was 'elevation.'

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[4] Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 162.

This term covered temperance reform, education, values like hard work and religious sensibility but can be thought of as African Americans making themselves 'respectable,' both in their own eyes and in those of whites."[5] In *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representative Identity*, Robert Levine makes the case that similar calls for "elevation" appeared in competing black political discourses, transcending the strategies of assimilation and emigration hotly debated in the 1850s.[6] In her discussion of the life of the antebellum black activist Martin Delany, a man characterized as the "father of black nationalism" by one scholar, Nell Painter points out that "elevation" was "one of Delany's favorite concepts throughout his life." For Delany, Painter writes, "elevation" meant "the acquisition of gentlemanly culture and correct speech, of upright morals, independent thought, and "manly religion."[7] Scholars have also agreed that these calls for "elevation" formed an important impetus for the development of northern black institutional life.

In addition to examining the centrality of the concept to the development of northern black institutional life, scholars have long pointed out the close relationship between the northern black campaign to "elevate the race," and the black abolitionist movement. For example, in *Reconstruction*, Eric Foner notes:

> The small black political leadership of ministers, professionals, and members of abolitionist societies, had long searched for a means of improving the condition of Northern blacks while at the same time striking a blow against slavery....Free blacks were advised to forsake menial occupations, educate themselves and their children, and live un-impeachably moral lives, thus "elevating" the race.

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[5] Young, R. J. *Antebellum Black Activists: Race, Gender, Self.* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 110-111.

[6] Robert Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[7] Nell Painter, "Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism," in Litwack and Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 152.

> disproving the idea of black inferiority, and demonstrating themselves worthy of citizenship.[8]

In his landmark contribution *Black Abolitionists*, Benjamin Quarles demonstrates an even more direct connection. Throughout his study, he discusses the structure of northern black institutional life, and demonstrates the links between black self-improvement institutions like churches, literary associations and benevolent societies, and abolitionist institutions. By discussing the ways in which a variety of black community institutions supported the abolitionist cause by raising funds for abolitionist organizations, sponsoring abolitionist speakers, and providing financial and personal support for the underground railroad Quarles makes it clear that African American efforts to elevate the race and abolish slavery were both cut from the same institutional cloth.[9] And in *They Who Would Be Free*, Jane and William H. Pease argue that it is this pattern – this connection between racial elevation and the fight against slavery – that ultimately distinguishes white abolitionist ideology from black abolitionism. According to the Peases, despite black abolitionists' insistence that the issues are inseparable, white abolitionists tended to view the northern black campaign for civil rights as a secondary concern, and focused primarily on the abolition of southern slavery.[10]

In his recent study of antebellum black political culture, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, Patrick Rael agrees with these characterizations and goes further, arguing that the ideal of elevation formed the cornerstone of black protest thought before the Civil War. According to Rael, the leadership of the northern black community consistently

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[8] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 26.
[9] Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1979.
[10] Jane H. and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

proclaimed that individual improvement of one's physical state, intellect, and personal morality should remain the goal of each member of the free black population, and be used as a tool in the struggle to combat the growing anti-black sentiments in the North.[11] In addition, Rael convincingly counters those who argue that the antebellum black embrace of moral reform issues such as temperance and fidelity to Protestantism constituted a movement away from political activism and engagement, and constituted a simple imitation of "white" or "western" value systems.[12] According to Rael, the earliest proponents of racial elevation were participants in, and co-creators of, the northern urban bourgeois culture of antebellum reform and self-improvement. As members of this community, elite northern blacks and their children continued to believe in the inherent value of individual efforts toward self-improvement. However, as African Americans concerned with political change, they clearly connected moral, material, and intellectual self-improvement with the broader transformation of the entire black population's political, social and economic status.[13]

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[11] Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), 127.

[12] See Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1781-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 89, 90, 104; Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 83, 137; Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850, 1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15-27; Shirley Yee *Black Women Abolitionists*, and Linda Perkins, "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation" in Filomena Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge: Sheckman Publishing, 1981) for examples of studies that note the "middle-class", "western" or "white" value systems of elite African Americans. Wilson Jeremiah Moses specifically argues that "Separatists often strove to build institutions that were *imitations* of white institutions." Moses, *Golden Age*, 23 (emphasis mine).

[13] Patrick Rael convincingly makes this case in his recent study, *Black Identity and Black Protest*. Other scholars make similar claims about specific African Americans or black institutions in their work. For example, in Rigsby's biography of Crummell, he writes that Crummell made "Victorian ideas and values his own and expressed them in his own terms and through his own experience. Gregory Rigsby, *Alexander Crummell: Pioneer in Nineteenth Century Pan African Thought* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 31. Clarence Walker, in his study of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, notes that though the church encouraged moral and economic self-improvement for its members, "it would be a mistake to assume that these black people were merely emulating their fellow country men. If the ideology of pre-Civil War

Despite the growing interest in the concept of antebellum racial elevation, the scholarship suffers from two major flaws. First, historians have neglected to investigate the role gender ideologies played in shaping this political perspective. While scholars have published some work that provides insight into the organizational strategies of African American women's associations and unearthed the contributions of individual antebellum black female activists, they have not examined the impact that contemporary gender ideals and practices made on the ideology of racial elevation itself.[14] This dissertation will correct this deficiency by analyzing the relationship between the regional gender ideals and practices of the period, and the rhetorical strategies and behaviors of northern black spokesmen and women. Ultimately, the dissertation will demonstrate that in the years before the Civil War, contemporary gender ideals remained central to elite African American interpretations of morality, virtue, politics, citizenship, self-improvement and representation – all elements at the heart of the concept of racial elevation.

In addition to failing to incorporate gender into their analysis, scholars have portrayed the northern black desire to "elevate the race" as a static concept. This dissertation will show that while calls for racial elevation remained frequent in African American speeches, newspaper articles, pamphlets and conventions between the 1830s

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America was individual achievement, as some historians have suggested...the intent of these injunctions was...to aid the race as a whole." Clarence Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 28.

[14]Contributions to the scholarship on antebellum black northern women include: Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*; Marilyn Richardson, ed. *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Writer. Essays and Speeches*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds. *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Kevin Gaines has investigated the impact of gender ideals on racial uplift ideology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

and the outbreak of the Civil War, the meaning of the concept changed dramatically. Though the leaders of the northern black population would continue to agree that moral, material, and mental self-improvement efforts were important tools in the collective elevation of the race, by the 1840s and 1850s, calls to elevate the race through self-improvement would give way to calls for elevation through the acquisition of the rights of citizenship, and the redemption of the race.

The dissertation begins by examining the foundations of elevation ideology, and its relationship to contemporary ideals of self-improvement. The first chapter argues that beginning in the late eighteenth century, spokesmen in northern black communities increasingly suggested that the transformation, or elevation, of the collective status of African Americans could best be achieved by creating institutions that would enable northern blacks to improve themselves on an individual basis. But by the 1830s, however northern black spokesmen began attending "national" black conventions, and supporting a national black press, the leadership of the northern black population began politicizing individual moral, material, and mental self-improvement as the means to achieve the suffrage and the rights of citizenship in the northern states.

The second chapter analyzes the roles gender conventions and ideals played in northern African American efforts to elevate the race in the decades before the outbreak of the Civil War. The chapter argues that the same spokesmen who politicized self-improvement as a means to attain citizenship also understood the privileges and duties of full citizenship to be primarily male concerns. Therefore, though they considered female self-improvement to be important to racial elevation, they defined male self-improvement as a political imperative. The chapter ends by examining the ways in which an emerging

generation of African American women began claiming the rhetoric of self-improvement for themselves, and politicizing black domesticity as a means to elevate the race.

Chapters three and four explore the ways in which the political strategies and objectives bound up in the popular phrase "elevation" changed during the two decades preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Chapter three argues that with the maturation of a new generation of African American spokesmen and women, belief in the political efficacy of individual self-improvement waned. Though they would continue to utilize the phrase "elevation," spokesmen would cease to focus solely on the benefits of self-improvement. Instead, they would expand the concept of elevation to include their demands for the privileges of citizenship, and the immediate abolition of southern slavery. In the process, they reaffirmed male prerogatives of political rights and independence. Chapter four continues by analyzing the concept of redemption, and its impact on the discourse of elevation. It argues that though African redemption, both a religious and political concept, appeared in earlier decades, by the 1840s and 50s, as black spokesmen debated the various political choices available to them, northern blacks grew to embrace the rhetoric of self-defense, militarism and divinely sanctioned revolt. Ultimately, in the decade before the Civil War, African American spokesmen and women agreed that the improvement or elevation of the collective status of all African Americans rested on the redemption of the race through manly displays of virtue on the field of battle.

Finally, chapters five and six trace the transition from racial elevation to racial uplift. Chapter five examines the changing nature of northern black political discourse as African Americans became involved in the Civil War. It argues that northern blacks

interpreted the war as an opportunity for them to demonstrate their race patriotism, and act as human agents in the divine plan for black redemption. Moreover, during the Civil War, as the battlefield heroism of African American men satisfied the goals of the discourse of redemption, northern black spokesmen used black male participation in the war to underscore their demands for citizenship rights and universal manhood suffrage. Chapter six then analyzes the ways in which northern blacks returned to the discourse of individual material, mental, and moral self-improvement as they traveled to the South to facilitate the institutional development of the newly freed population of African Americans. It argues that as the Civil War generation of northern black spokesmen and women began working with the freedmen and women of the South, spokesmen in particular began to articulate a new critique of black morality – one that focused on the morality of African American women, and placed the responsibility of the moral elevation of the race directly on their shoulders.

By paying close attention to gender ideologies and practices, and following northern black spokesmen and women through the Civil War, this dissertation ultimately offers an alternative interpretation of nineteenth century black political development. Scholars have traditionally argued that northern black political culture progressed rather naturally from integrationist campaigns at the beginning of the century to separatist ones by the 1850s. For some, this story has been one of black political maturation where the movement away from the "artificial bondage" of white influences and institutions constituted a process of growing race consciousness, political maturation and ultimately nationalism.[15] For example, Harry Reed argues that black political awareness developed

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[15] In his analysis of the national antebellum conventions, Howard Bell argues that the delegates' rejection of the emigration movement in 1833 reflected an "artificial bondage" of the black leadership to the white

in five distinct stages, beginning with the creation of separate black churches, followed by the creation of other self-help organizations. In his analysis these first developments were followed by the creation of black newspapers that provided a communications network and shaped cultural tastes, and the organization of conventions that allowed the leadership to put forth a national platform for political change. In Reed's analysis, all of these developments lead inexorably toward black nationalist and emigrationist movements, which he considers to be the most sophisticated expression of black political consciousness.[16]

For others, this same trajectory has been a narrative of declension, with black spokesmen giving in to a rhetoric of despair in response to the insensitivity of white abolitionists and the hostile climate of the 1850s. The Peases for example, argue that because white abolitionists failed to examine their own racial prejudices, and support northern black to "elevate the race" by encouraging "economic and social mobility for Northern blacks," and working "to acquire the franchise," "insure civil rights," and "establish a sense of black identity and community," divisions developed between black and white allies. Ultimately, these divisions, coupled with the rapidly declining status of northern blacks, caused black abolitionists to ultimately embrace separatist and black nationalist programs.[17]

In either case, by accepting the argument that antebellum black political culture moved from one of assimilation to separatism, historians are hard pressed to explain the immediate northern black support for the Civil War. In most of the scholarly literature,

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abolitionists who attended, observed and sometimes participated in black conventions. Howard Holman Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 33.

[16] Harry Reed, *Platform for Change: The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community, 1775-1865* (East Lansing: Michigan Statue University Press, 1994), 4-5.

[17] Pease and Pease, *They Who Would be Free*, 16.

the Civil War emerges as a break with the past for northern African Americans, and a new period of optimism and faith in contrast with the previous decade of despair. By placing gender at the center of the story, however, northern black support for the Civil War appears to be a logical expression of the previous decades' discourse regarding the importance of virtue, citizenship, and the desire to redeem the race.

In addition, by examining the way gender ideologies shaped and functioned within the ideology of racial elevation, this study also ultimately revises the very terminology used by scholars to describe black political thought and activism in the nineteenth century. Scholars have generally conflated the later nineteenth century ideals of "racial uplift" with the antebellum notions of "elevation."[18] On the surface, the two terms may appear to be interchangeable, for both before and after the Civil War, African American spokesmen consistently argued that individual efforts toward moral, intellectual, and material self-improvement were both an inherent good, and necessary steps in the process of disproving white stereotypes about black degradation, and transforming the collective status of the black population in America. But upon closer examination of the gendered nature of the rhetoric and behavior of the Civil War generation of the black elite, we see that the meaning behind the much-emphasized strategy of moral improvement changed dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. During the antebellum era, when northern black reformers used the terminology

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[18] See Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, Harry Reed, *Platform for Change*, Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, Shirley Yee *Black Women Abolitionists*, and Linda Perkins, "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation." Winch, Reed, Bethel, Moses, Yee and Perkins all tend to use the terms "elevation" and "uplift" interchangeably. Kevin Gaines, however, noted some distinctions between elevation and uplift in his study of racial uplift ideology, *Uplifting the Race*, 31-40. Gaines argued that while late nineteenth century ideals of uplift hinged on gendered notions of morality and class distinctions, those who espoused ideals of elevation in the antebellum era cast their efforts as unified efforts for universal black improvement. He is correct to note a difference in the two ideologies, but as we shall see, proponents of elevation framed their political methods and goals in explicitly gendered ways.

"elevation," moral elevation specifically meant temperance and fidelity to the Christian principles closely tied to the Protestant work ethic. Moreover, when elevation advocates discussed the importance of "morality, or purity of conduct," and the eradication of "licentiousness" and "vice," they turned their attention to "the most fruitful sources of vice in this community...*the theatre, the gaming table,* and *the porter house*," spaces frequented most often by men.[19] Consequently, before the Civil War, northern black spokesmen agreed that the primary responsibility for elevating the social, material, and moral status of the race lay with African American men.

It was only after the Civil War that African American spokesmen and women began using the phrase " racial uplift" to define their social and political efforts and goals. This change was not solely a change in terminology, however. The change marked a major shift in the black elite's interpretation of the principle sources of vice in the black population. Now they argued that the race's moral degradation stemmed not from "the theatre, the gaming table, and the porter house," but more importantly, from the destruction of the black family under slavery. In the decades following the Civil War, African American spokesmen would increasingly agree that, as a prominent minister argued in 1869, "we find ourselves destitute of *Mothers*—of mothers qualified to train our sons into a noble manhood, and our daughters into a noble womanhood!" By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, responsibility for "uplifting" – or "degrading" – the moral condition of the race would ultimately belong with African American women.[20]

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19 *Colored American*, June 22, 1839.

20 See Gaines, *Uplifting the Race* for an analysis of racial uplift ideology and black political concerns about black female sexuality, morality and racial purity in black bourgeois political discourse after Reconstruction.

Finally, it should be noted that by focusing on the discourse and activism of northern black spokesmen and women, this dissertation delineates the perspectives of the most visible members of the northern black population; in other words those who made their opinions known in black political conventions, contributed to African American print culture, and held positions of leadership in community institutions. Such men and women usually belonged to the educated reform-minded northern black elite, clearly a minority group in the larger black population.[21] My focus on this particular stratum of the northern black community does not imply that all northern blacks (and certainly not the black population as a whole) shared this group's interpretation of the best strategies and goals for the larger African American population. Clearly, a certain amount of distance existed between those elite leaders who publicly stressed the importance of individual self-improvement, and those African Americans who remained at the bottom of the class structure of nineteenth century American society. Nevertheless, these individuals, whether self-selected or endorsed by their local communities, perceived themselves to be "representative" men and women in the nineteenth century sense of the term, or leaders of the black population, charged with the responsibility of tending to the social needs of the race, and articulating their political goals and strategies.

As we will see, the various tactics preferred by those African Americans who hoped to first "elevate the race" and then "uplift the race" would shift, gain, and lose

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[21] In a study of the free black population in antebellum cities, Leonard Curry found that while less than two percent of all employed free men of color were engaged in professional, managerial, artistic, clerical or scientific enterprises that required substantial or specific education, over one quarter of those who did resided in New Orleans, a southern city that employed free blacks in skilled positions far more readily than northern ones. Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 18-22. Patrick Rael has found that delegates to the antebellum state and national black conventions reflected the elite of northern black community, included a higher percentage of property owners, and greater literacy rates than found among the general northern black population. See Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 38-44.

popularity over the course of the nineteenth century. In addition, northern black spokesmen and women's understanding of who needed to be "elevated" and how would change dramatically between the decades immediately before and after the Civil War. At times, leaders of the black population would designate individual moral, material, and intellectual self-improvement as the best strategy for advancement. At other times, these calls for self-improvement would take a backseat to more direct demands for political change. In the midst of these developments, however, the demands placed upon African American women, and the roles they would claim for themselves, would ultimately help to redefine the meaning of black morality, and lay the foundation for the black political developments of the late nineteenth century.

Chapter One

Elevation and the Origins of Bourgeois Black Political Culture

Introduction

In March of 1827, New York State emancipated the remaining enslaved residents of the state, a newspaper appeared that marked a watershed in the development of northern black political culture.[1] Proclaiming, "We wish to plead our own case. Too long have others spoken for us," *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper to be published by African Americans, gave the free black inhabitants of the North their first opportunity to publicly define themselves as a larger community with particular needs and goals.[2] The role of the *Freedom's Journal* in the development of northern black political culture cannot be overstated. Though *Freedom's Journal* would permanently suspend publication less than three years after it began, the paper forged new connections between disparate and previously isolated African American communities throughout the North. This and subsequent black newspapers would provide a common space for African Americans to discuss and debate the most pressing issues of the day, and convey their varied opinions

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[1] The New York State legislature passed an initial law of gradual emancipation in 1799. The law did not cover those born before 1799, so in 1827, lawmakers emancipated the remaining enslaved peoples residing in New York State. For more information on emancipation in New York State see, Rhoda Golden Freeman, *The Free Negro in New York City in the Era Before the Civil War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) and James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Search of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73, 74.

[2] *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827.

before an audience that extended far beyond their immediate locales. Ultimately, the space would become one of the most important crucibles for the development of a collective black identity, a springboard for the emergence of the northern African American population's male leadership, and the means to disseminate a discourse that based the collective elevation of the race on efforts to achieve individual self-improvement. [3]

John Russwurm's editorial statement in the inaugural issue of the *Freedom's Journal* makes it clear that creating a sense of community for the northern black populace defined one of two major goals for the paper. Russworm wrote:

> It is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy; that through its columns an expression of our sentiments, on many interesting subjects which concern us, may be offered to the publick [*sic*].

But the editor's goals extended beyond hopes of community formation to community *improvement*. He also noted that "there are FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND free persons

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[3] Scholars have long considered the publication of the *Freedom's Journal* to be a benchmark in the growth of black political consciousness. In her early article on the subject, Bella Gross wrote that "the Freedom's Journal marked the beginning of a national movement among the colored masses, and ushered in the Negro Renaissance. It was the first attempt at national race-solidarity." Bella Gross, "*Freedom's Journal* and the *Rights of All*" *Journal of Negro History* 17 (July 1932), 245. In "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50," Frederick Cooper, wrote "the most crucial period in the formation of approaches to social reform began in 1827 with the publication of the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, and the convening of a series of national conventions of northern black leaders starting in 1830." Frederick Cooper, "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50," *American Quarterly*, XXIV (December 1972), 604. Elizabeth Rauh Bethel documented the significance of the publication in *The Roots of African-American Identity*. She wrote, "*Freedom's Journal* was distributed in all major urban areas along the eastern seaboard, throughout upstate and Western New York villages, in Hayti, and in the Canadian provinces, where a growing number of fugitive slaves were establishing new lives and communities. Providing an open forum for discussion of racial oppression, the paper marked a radical departure from the spiritual confessions [and] cautious rhetoric...that had prevailed in earlier decades." Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 125. Finally, Martin Dann argues that the black press joined the black church as "a central institution in the black community." Like ministers, black editors and their correspondents became leaders in the community who provided information "vital to the community and necessary for its cohesion." Martin E Dann, *The Black Press, 1827-1890: The Quest for a National Identity*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 13.

of colour, one half of whom might peruse, and on the whole be benefitted [*sic*] by the publication of the Journal." And because "no publication, as yet, has been devoted exclusively to their *improvement*," the *Freedom's Journal* would be the one to devote itself to that endeavor.[4]

With this goal in mind, the contributors to the *Freedom's Journal* regularly provided articles, letters, and short stories extolling the virtues of temperance, economy and education. In fact, during its two years of publication, the theme of collective racial elevation through individual self-improvement would assume a more prominent place in the weekly than anti-slavery articles.[5] Even in the weeks before its demise, when the paper focused on promoting emigration to West Africa after John Russwurm embraced the motives of the unpopular American Colonization Society, the debate over emigration itself centered upon the question of elevation: that is, whether free blacks would have better opportunities to improve themselves in the United States or abroad.[6]

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[4] *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827. (Emphasis mine).

[5] Cooper makes a good point when he notes that the prospectus of *Freedom's Journal* discusses elevation issues first, civil rights second and then mentions slavery in two sentences. He goes on to argue, "in the two-year lifetime of *Freedom's Journal*, slavery was mentioned with some frequency, but rarely was it the subject of the featured article or editorial." In fact, Cooper goes so far as to suggest, that because the journal primarily covered activities, societies, weddings, deaths, and published articles on important black, national, international figures, short stories, and jokes, "*Freedom's Journal* can be better understood as a journal designed to serve a developing black community than as a paper of protest." Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 606, 607. Though he sees *Freedom's Journal* primarily as a political text, Martin Dann agrees that this and subsequent newspapers provided important educational and social resources for their audience. Dann, *The Black Press*, 13.

[6] The final issues of *Freedom's Journal* focused on emigration after the editor John Russwurm converted to the cause and began supporting the ACS. Though neither emigration to Liberia nor the ACS ever received the support of the northern black community, a few prominent African Americans did embrace the cause and leave the United States for West Africa in this period. Daniel Coker and John Russwurm are two such examples. See Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), and Horton and Horton, *In Search of Liberty*, for discussions of the negative black response to emigration and the American Colonization Society in this period.

Throughout the life of the paper, *Freedom's Journal* contributors regularly connected three major issues to the term "elevation." Educational improvement, material improvement, and moral improvement, which they defined narrowly as temperance and fidelity to the tenants of Protestant theology and practice, quickly became the standard themes in their discussions of the most pressing needs of the free black population. Columns repeatedly reminded readers to "eat sound and wholesome food," to drink pure water, and avoid "rum, or any kind of intoxicating liquors; for they are ruinous to health and productive of the greatest miseries." They also prompted African Americans to be "clothed in clean and neat" garments, to be "be prudent, as well as industrious," and to "never forget, that if you are filthy in your person, or your family, that you give evidence of a low and degraded mind." And finally, they assured their audience that adherence to such behavior would "honour God your Maker," and ultimately "elevate" the individual, the race, and all of humankind.[7] Ultimately, they argued that to best facilitate an increase in the number of "People of Colour treading in the steps of the virtuous and enlightened part of the whole community," they must continue to establish, "Societies for the promotion of religion, the education of their children, and the relief of the needy. These institutions, one contributor argued, "cannot fail to elevate their character, and improve their condition."[8]

As the previous passage suggests, contributors to the *Freedom's Journal* hoped that efforts to foster individual self-improvement would infuse all aspects of northern black institutional life. In addition, the passage also illustrates just how closely together contemporary concepts of character and condition were linked. In their minds, and the

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[7] *Freedom's Journal*, August 3, 1827.

[8] *Freedom's Journal*, June 1, 1827.

minds of the growing number of native-born white northerners who would embrace the emerging middle class values of the age, one's strong moral fiber and ability to be temperate in all things, would inevitably improve one's material condition. Thus *Freedom's Journal* contributors argued that if African Americans continued to use their press and community institutions to facilitate the "moral, religious, civil and literary improvement of our injured race," that "their condition will become improved, not only in their daily walk and conversion, but in their domestic economy."[9]

Efforts to foster individual self-improvement among the masses of black northerners were not implemented solely to facilitate the material advancement for free African Americans however. In fact, the contributors to the *Freedom's Journal* also politicized these ideas of elevation as essential to the effort to transform the collective political and social status of northern free blacks. Understanding that white lawmakers increasingly justified the legal discrimination against northern blacks by arguing that the degradation of the black population made them unfit for various social and legal privileges, black spokesmen used the pages of the *Freedom's Journal* to impress free blacks with the political implications of their behavior. An 1827 editorial in *Freedom's Journal* reminded its readers of the high stakes involved in the politics of representation, saying:

> Placed as we are in society, propriety of conduct never was more essential to any people than to us. Daily facts convince us, that we stand in daily need of it. Is a man of color guilty of some indecorous conduct in the streets? Our whole body is considered as wanting in decorum...[10]

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9 *Freedom's Journal*, April 25, 1828.

10 *Freedom's Journal*, July 13, 1827. In *Black Identity and Black Protest*, Patrick Rael has described this process as one of "racial synecdoche." Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), 179.

The political concept of elevation is built on the premise that this process can also work in reverse. Appropriate behavior, they argued, would certainly counteract negative stereotypes, and thus buttress their arguments for political and civil rights.[11] With this in mind, men like Philadelphia's James Forten sent letters to the paper, urging any white Pennsylvanians who might be reading to remember that "if there are worthless men, there [are] also men of merit among the African race, who are useful members of Society. The truth of this let their benevolent institutions and the numbers clothed and fed by them witness."[12]

The Ideological Origins of Self Improvement

The architects of the ideology of racial elevation were a generation of self-made men who spearheaded black institutional development at the turn of the nineteenth century. They included successful businessmen like Philadelphia resident James Forten, who served with the Patriots during the American War for Independence, established a prosperous sailmaking firm, and became a prominent anti-slavery activist and

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[11] Such a connection was not unusual for the period. George Fredrickson points out that Garrisonian abolitionists continually asserted that it was condition, rather than color that caused prejudice; condition interpreted both as the relationship between slavery and black skin, as well as poverty and behavior. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 39, 40. Black abolitionists and activists hoped that by improving the public and private behavior of northern blacks, they could combat northern white prejudice and build support for their anti-slavery campaign.

[12] *Freedom's Journal*, February 22, 1828.

philanthropist. Among them were ministers like Peter Williams, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, men who established and led churches that catered to the needs of northern black communities. And the generation included lesser known, but still successful community leaders like Austin Steward, who rose from slavery to become a successful grocer and antislavery advocate in Rochester, New York.

The northern black leadership's belief in the efficacy of self-improvement as a political strategy that would facilitate the political and social elevation of the entire free black population grew from a variety of religious, social and economic impulses sweeping the northern states at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although men like Austin Steward, the successful Rochester grocer, or the wealthy Philadelphia sail-maker James Forten recognized the difficulties they faced as African Americans living in the North, many of the men of this generation had also lived through the early years of the American republic, and viewed the previous decades as a time of a slow, but largely successful, movement toward the abolition of northern slavery. In the midst of the American Revolution, the enslaved men and women of the region had petitioned for their own freedom, and forced the emerging state governments to grapple with the practical implications of the Revolutionary era rhetoric of slavery and liberty. Ultimately, northern states began outlawing the practice of slavery itself, and creating legislation that gradually phased out the institution.[13]

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[13] The state of Vermont first outlawed the enslavement of persons "born in this country or brought from over the sea," in its 1777 constitution, and the Massachusetts state supreme court outlawed the institution 1783 after ruling that slavery violated the state constitution. Pennsylvania passed the first legislation providing for the gradual emancipation of slaves in 1780, and Rhode Island and Connecticut followed suit in 1784, with New York and New Jersey adopting similar gradual emancipation plans in 1799 and 1804 respectively. Only a few African Americans would fall between the legislative cracks and remain enslaved in the North well into the nineteenth century. Some African Americans remained enslaved in New Hampshire until the state explicitly prohibited the practice in 1857. Those slaves not covered by the emancipation act of New Jersey would remain enslaved until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in

Harbingers of freedom had appeared at the federal and international levels as well. In 1808, the United States had finally ended its official role in the Atlantic slave trade, forcing the planters of the southern states to depend solely on the natural increase of the enslaved population. In Britain, Parliament began to take measures toward emancipating those enslaved in the British Caribbean by 1830. Meanwhile, slaves in San Domingue rebelled against those in power in 1791, and declared themselves citizens of their own Republic of Haiti in 1804. Spokesmen like Steward and Forten regarded these developments of the previous decades with a measure of satisfaction. In 1837, the newspaperman Charles B. Ray would declare theirs, "an age of reform," and "hope" for African Americans.[14]

The optimism with which men like Charles B. Ray initially interpreted these contemporary events located them firmly within the social and intellectual trends of the period. Like several nineteenth century social thinkers, some educated free blacks embraced what one scholar has called a "unilinear conception of cultural progress" during the first half of the nineteenth century.[15] For men like Steward, this intellectual trend offered profound hope that African Americans would be included in the process of "the gradual advancement of man from barbarism to civilization." [16] But many prominent northern free blacks also subscribed to the intellectual trend that viewed modern history

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1865. For a discussion of the movement toward emancipation in the post-Revolutionary era, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 228-255; and Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 70-76.

[14] Charles B. Ray wrote, "The present age of time, may be considered verily, one of hope; for wherever we turn our eyes, we see men of all classes buoyant with hope...But with no class of citizens is the above more emphatically true, than with colored Americans." *Colored American*, April 8, 1837.

[15] Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

[16] Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Free Man; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony*, (1856; reprinted in NY: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 153.

as moving in cycles. These African Americans utilized the concept of the "rise and fall" of empires to create their own interpretation of the destiny of the "African Race."[17] They argued that though the African continent currently lingered in an "uncivilized" state, the former glory of the continent would soon reassert itself among peoples of African descent around the world. John Russwurm, for example, the second African American to graduate from college, based his commencement address, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti," delivered on September 6, 1826 at Bowdoin College, on such a view of history.[18] Russwurm began his commencement address by saying, "the changes which take place in the affairs of this world show the instability of sublunary things. Empires rise and fall, flourish and decay. Knowledge follows revolutions and travels over the globe." He then continued:

> It is in the irresistible course of events that all men who have been deprived of their liberty shall recover this precious portion of their indefeasible inheritance. It is in vain to stem the current: degraded man will rise in his native majesty and claim his rights. They may be withheld from him now, but the day will arrive when they must be surrendered.
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> "Among the many interesting events of the present day, and illustrative of this, the Revolution in Haiti holds a conspicuous place."[19]

For northern free blacks, these themes of inevitable progress and revolution were more than abstract ideas. As Russwurm argued in his speech, the events in Haiti offered proof that New World slavery was doomed to fail, and that the man of African descent

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[17] The importance placed upon Ethiopia cannot be overstated. Albert Raboteau writes: "In a kind of mythic geography, nineteenth-century black Americans identified Ethiopia and Egypt with their own African origins and looked to those ancient civilizations as exemplars of a glorious African past, surely as legitimate a fictive pedigree as white American claims of descent from Greco-Roman civilization." Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 42-43.

[18] Though historians have often contributed the honor to Russwurm, the first black college graduate was actually Edward Jones, who graduated from Amherst College on August 23, 1826.

[19] The quotation is from John Russwurm's 1826 speech, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti," reprinted in Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds., *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787 - 1900*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 101-104.

would continue to rise "and claim his rights."[20] But for many, what gave more urgency and immediacy to these ideas was the Biblical prophecy in Psalm 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God." African Americans generally read this prophecy as one that spoke directly to the conditions of Africans and their descendants around the world. In short, the passage gave spiritual authority to secular views of history and assured northern free blacks that their day of redemption would soon arrive, and Africans would rise in rank and status around the world. This, in particular, gave northern free blacks a profound sense of hope about what the future would bring.[21]

Russwurm, Steward, and Ray's belief in human progress and the prospect of African redemption were buttressed by mainstream interpretations of the religious and social upheavals that swept the region in which they lived. During the 1820s, a series of religious revivals spread across the northeast, bringing with them new ideas about the perfectibility of humanity. Men like Charles Grandison Finney traveled through the region admonishing men and women to repent, and turn their lives over to the service of the Lord. Though they focused their efforts on the souls of white Americans, blacks of the region did not remain unaffected. In his narrative of his life in the North, Austin Steward made a special point to refer to the year 1825, which he described as a year "rendered memorable by the efficient labors of Professor Finney, through whose faithful

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[20] Alfred Hunt sees primarily "more militant blacks" invoking the glory of Toussaint L'Ouverture and insurrection in the period. Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 98-101. He is right to note that few spokesmen in the 1820s and 1830s endorse violence, however, black spokesmen do point to Haiti with pride as evidence of black military and political accomplishment.

[21] Albert Raboteau argues that though northern and southern African Americans continued to interpret the Exodus story as a prediction of their divine racial destiny, it was specifically northern free blacks who focused on Psalms 68:31 in an effort to understand their past and create a sense of promise for their future. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*), 41-43. See also Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22-23.

preaching of the gospel, many were brought to a saving knowledge of the truth." The African Americans of the area attended services and revivals, and experienced profound religious transformations. Some, like Sojourner Truth, gave public expression to their conversion experiences by becoming itinerant ministers, or joining one of the many experimental utopian religious communities of the period.[22]

Those with the resources and the time combined the religious impulses of the day with concern for the particular communities in which they lived. With faith in the perfectibility of humanity, an emerging group of reformers argued that with intense effort, men and women could improve American society and help to bring about the thousand years of peace and prosperity that would herald the final judgment of God. In the 1820s and 1830s, they created a "benevolent empire" of voluntary associations designed to combat the remaining sins in the American social order: alcohol, poverty, slavery, and various other forms of immoral behavior.[23] Elite African Americans, familiar with the black tradition of communal associations, quickly became converts to and participants in the emerging culture of reform. For African Americans like Steward, Psalm 68:31, the previous decades of emancipation, the surge in millennial fervor, and the expanding reform movements of the region suggested that "the time is not far distant

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[22] After powerful conversion experiences in 1827, and again in 1843, Sojourner Truth was at times an itinerant preacher, and a member of a variety of Christian utopian communities, including the Kingdom of Matthias, the Millerites, and the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth, A Life a Symbol*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 26-95; Steward, *Twenty Two Years a Slave*, 150; John Mercer Langston also makes a special note of Finney's travels through his Ohio neighborhood in his own autobiography, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol, or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion*. (1894; reprint New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1969).

[23] The literature addressing antebellum reform movements in the North and their relationship to the market revolution and evangelical Protestantism is vast. For particularly useful studies, see Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997) and Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

when liberty and equal rights being everywhere established, morality and the religion of the gospel everywhere diffused, -- man shall no longer lift his hand for the oppression of his fellow man."[24]

Men like Steward and Ray could also find promise in the growing institutional infrastructure of local African American communities, for northern blacks had long been working to create community institutions, schools, and voluntary associations to meet their various needs. As early as the second half of the eighteenth century, northern African Americans had begun establishing their own mutual aid and fraternal societies. And at the end of the eighteenth century, northern blacks began withdrawing from white-controlled churches, to create their own independent, black-controlled churches and denominations. Temperance also emerged as a concern among this generation of African Americans, particularly among those northerners who worked closely with white reformers.[25] And as early as 1788, the Free African Society of Philadelphia made temperance a prerequisite for membership.[26] Together, these churches, mutual aid societies, and social organizations helped to sustain the growing free black communities throughout the North.[27] With the emancipation of northern blacks and the spread of the bourgeois ideology of reform, these organizations continued to proliferate in the first half of the nineteenth century. And it was through this institutional framework that influential

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[24]Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 154.

[25]Howard Bell noted this relationship in his study of the Black Convention movement, and Julie Winch noted this in her study of black Philadelphians. Both scholars see the moral reform impulse as a result of these relationships, and describe the movement as a shift away from political engagement. See Howard Holman Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 33; and Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1781-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988),.

[26]Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 93.

[27] For a history of free black institutional development in the North, see: Horton and Horton, *In Search of Liberty*, 125-154.

African Americans like Austin Steward promoted an ideology of collective racial elevation through individual self-improvement. These institutions helped northern urban African Americans to better meet the material, religious and social needs of their various local communities, institutionalize their longstanding sense of racial affinity, and discuss and define for themselves a larger group identity and distinct public culture. [28]

By 1827, when *Freedom's Journal* first appeared, many members of the northern black population felt they had much to discuss. For despite the promise some elite African Americans may have seen in the social and intellectual and trends of the previous decades, the majority of the northern black population continued to face a variety of difficulties as freemen and women in the northern states. The economic pressures placed upon northern free blacks certainly limited their ability to thrive in the new urban landscapes of the North. Mainstream societal prejudices effectively barred African American men from all but the lowest paid and least prestigious occupations. City officials habitually rejected the applications of those black men who requested licenses to work as restaurateurs, or in unskilled but potentially lucrative positions as carters or draymen. In addition, white employers rarely hired or trained African Americans as artisans. Consequently, skilled African Americans, like the young caulker Frederick Douglass, found themselves suddenly unemployable when they moved from southern to

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[28] Several scholars see black organizational efforts in this period as primarily reactive. In this interpretation, scholars argue that the desire to create separate black organizations grew from failed attempts to participate in white organizations, and a growing understanding that whites would do little to help improve the situation of northern blacks. For examples, see Moses, *Golden Age*, 25; Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 604; Jane H. and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 19. However, it is important to note the importance that racial affinity played in the process of building a black institutional life. It is also important to note that organizational life resulted in the creation of an African American identity. See Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity* and Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest* for discussions of this phenomenon.

northern cities.[29] Consequently, the majority of the 125,000 free antebellum African Americans living in the North remained in the unskilled lower ranks of the urban working-class communities of the region. By 1830, one quarter of all African Americans in Massachusetts lived in Boston, two thirds of black Pennsylvanians lived in the city or county of Philadelphia, and one third of all black New Yorkers resided in New York City.[30] There, they found it difficult to gain employment or training in artisanal trades, and therefore remained primarily in the service industries as servants, laundresses, waiters, stewards, and barbers, or in the marginally remunerative entrepreneurial trades as hucksters, peddlers, traders, and boardinghouse proprietors.[31] In addition, as Rhonda Freeman reminds readers in her study of antebellum blacks in New York City, in a time with rampant poverty and without compulsory education laws, young children may have been sent "to work rather than to the schoolhouse," to supplement a family's income.[32] Not surprisingly, the urban free blacks of the North also faced inadequate housing, and higher mortality rates than their white counterparts.[33]

Free blacks also faced severe political disadvantages. During the decade of the 1820s, as several states expanded the electorate by adopting universal manhood suffrage, they simultaneously moved to disenfranchise African American men. In 1821, New York lawmakers removed the remaining property qualifications for the state's white male

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[29] Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 18-22.

[30] By 1830 the free Negro population of the North numbered around 125,000, "most of them an unskilled or semiskilled labor force concentrated in and about certain urban areas." Pease and Pease, *They who Would Be Free*, 27. After the American Revolutionary War, particularly hard hit were "those who had lived and worked on farms. Although emancipated, many were denied land ownership. Unable therefore to earn a livelihood in the country, they drifted to the cities, where their rural skills were useless." Pease, and Pease, *They who would be Free*, 17.

[31] Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America*, 19-33.

[32] Freeman, *The Free Negro in New York City*, 236.

[33] Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America* 52, 79, 140.

voters, but limited eligibility to those few African American men who had lived in the state for three years, and owned at least $250 in property. As a result, the size of the black electorate declined immediately, leaving only 16 of New York City's 12,499 blacks and 298 of New York State's African Americans eligible to vote in 1826. In 1822, Rhode Island's legislature moved to bar African American men from the polls. With the exception of Pennsylvania, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts, northern state constitutions severely restricted, or prohibited African American men from voting. And in 1838, Pennsylvania voters approved the new constitutional provisions barring African American men from the polls. African American men were also generally excluded from juries, and prohibited from testifying in court cases involving white men.[34]

As several scholars have noted, the decades once praised by historians as the "era of the common man" was also an era of growing white hostility toward African Americans.[35] As the eighteenth-century emancipation efforts cooled, northern whites increasingly viewed African Americans as a "social danger" to the body politic. During the 1830s and 1840s, pro-slavery theorists developed an extensive arsenal of rhetoric supporting natural black inferiority. They argued that people of African descent were physiologically and biologically inferior to whites, by pointing to the "uncivilized" history of Africa, and they spread fears about the threat of miscegenation in the United

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[34]Such discrimination also extended across the country. In Oregon, African Americans were unable to hold real estate, make contracts or bring lawsuits. Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 93, (emphasis mine); Freeman, *The Free Negro in New York* City, 92.

[35] See for example, Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, Litwack, *North of Slavery* and Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

States.[36] At the same time, white community leaders began creating committees to investigate the poverty, vices, criminality and general "depravity" of free blacks in northern cities. Not surprisingly, these committee reports confirmed the growing racialist discourse about the free black population; that is, that free blacks were "degraded" both by their own behavior, and by the pressures placed upon them by northern society.[37] Arguments such as these grew prevalent in the urban areas of the North, and lent support to the growing colonization movement headed by the white African Colonization Society.

The consequences of these social, political and economic barriers in a time of rapid political and economic expansion were obvious to both the whites and the African Americans of the region. After visiting New York in 1832, an English traveler assessed the situation and conceded that, "to be worth two hundred and fifty dollars is not a trifle for a man doomed to toil in the lowest stations; few Negroes are in consequence competent to vote. They are in fact *very little better than slaves*, although called free." In 1830, the Reverend Peter Williams of New York City's St. Philips Episcopal Church thundered, "We are NATIVES of this country, we ask only to be treated as well as FOREIGNERS." And in an editorial entitled "Free Man of Colour," a contributor to the *Weekly Advocate* invoked the ideal of American liberty and charged:

> What an empty name! what a mockery! That liberty, and those privileges which of right, and according to the principles of our CONSTITUTION, ought to be his,

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[36] All of these arguments were first brought together in a pamphlet published in New York in 1833: "Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proof, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes" by Richard Colfax. These ideas increasingly found support in the urban areas of the antebellum North. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 49.

[37] Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 4-6.

> he enjoys not...Persecuted, and degraded, he wanders along through this land of *universal liberty, and equality,* a desolated being.[38]

What then would be the solution for this contradiction between the American ideal of "universal liberty and equality," and the inequality with which African Americans contended? Unable to imagine a more radical critique of the society in which they lived, the architects of elevation ideology argued that a continued focus on individual self-improvement would be the best way to transform the status of the entire race. Believing that because "it is impossible that our condition in this land of republicanism, and in this age of reform, can be worse than it has been; we must, therefore be on the verge of a better condition," men like Austin Steward began to articulate a prescriptive ideology of self-improvement for the free black population.[39] By the 1830s, spokesmen for the northern free black community would argue that "Mental and Moral Improvement" should be understood as "the grand basis on which rests our every hope."[40] Believing that they could best combat discrimination by improving the moral, material, and mental condition of the majority of free blacks, prominent African Americans disseminated the gospel of self-improvement in a variety of forums: newspapers and magazines, pamphlets, the pulpits of black churches, the meetings of African-American literary societies, voluntary associations, temperance organizations, and the debates and speeches of black political conventions.[41] Spokesmen also used

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[38]Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 168-169; Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 84-85; Peter Williams, Jr., "Slavery and Colonization," July 4, 1830 reprinted in Foner and Branham, eds. *Lift Every Voice*, 117; *Weekly Advocate*, January 14, 1837.

[39] *Colored American*, April 1, 1837.

[40] *National Enquirer*, May 13, 1837 in *Black Abolitionist Papers* (hereafter *BAP*) reel 2, fr. 1984.

[41] The range of antebellum black-controlled newspapers, beginning with *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, became an important vehicle for spreading these ideas to an increasingly wider audience. Later antebellum black publications include, *The Weekly Advocate*, *The Colored American*, and *The North Star*, all of which

these forums to attempt to regulate the behavior of the masses of northern blacks. Arguing that white legislators relied upon descriptions of "degraded" African Americans to justify discriminatory legislation and their disfranchisement, black spokesmen agreed that any negative public behavior, from drunkenness to "vain expenditures of time" and "pomp in dress" should be considered "injurious to our interest as a people" and discontinued immediately.[42]

Class Conflict and Conventions

In the years after 1830, the emphasis placed upon self-improvement assumed an even greater role in the ideological structure of black civic life, when conventions designed to discuss, define, and express the political agenda of northern blacks became a

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echoed the *Freedom's Journal*'s intent to act as a "channel of communication...through which a single voice may be heard, in defence [*sic*] of *five hundred thousand free people of colour.*" *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827. The ideology of racial elevation also appeared in pamphlet form. Less expensive to publish than any type of serial, pamphlets were an effective means to quickly spread the political, religious, and philosophical arguments of the day to a mass audience. And African American writers would go on to stress the importance of self-improvement in their anti-slavery novels and narratives. See Bethel, *Roots of African American Identity*, 57.

[42] *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour, 1831* (Philadelphia, 1831), 11; reprinted in Howard Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) hereafter NNC. When defining inappropriate, and thus politically detrimental behavior, prominent free blacks cast a wide net, condemning intemperance, theater attendance, public processions and parades, and fancy dress. According to Shane White, spokesmen who condemned public parades did so because public displays ran the risk of drawing the attention of whites who enjoyed disrupting black celebrations, or ridiculing the formations preferred by black marchers. See Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994.

fixture in black public culture. In response to the crisis facing the black community of Cincinnati, prominent Philadelphia blacks issued a call for a national convention.[43] Then, upon meeting in 1831, the delegates began laying out a structure and format that would be replicated and refined in the subsequent national, state and local conventions of the nineteenth century. Delegates to the convention appeared as representatives of their respective communities. Throughout the proceedings they followed the strict rules of parliamentary procedure. They created committees to draft reports on the most pressing issues facing the general free black population. And they issued formal addresses, usually one for the white population, and the other for the African American population of the United States.[44]

Though the initial convention was called to address the laws "abridging the liberties and privileges of the Free People of Colour" in Ohio, subsequent conventions increasingly focused on strategies for promoting self-improvement and exhibiting elevated political behavior.[45] In the 1831 Convention, the Committee on the Condition of the Free People of Colour reported that, "in their opinion, *Education, Temperance and Economy*, are best calculated to promote the elevation of mankind to a proper rank and

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[43] In 1829, the Cincinnati city fathers decided to enforce the city's longstanding black codes, discriminatory legislation that had remained un-enforced for some years. The laws required African Americans either to post bond for good behavior, or leave town. Unsure of what to do, the leaders of the black community requested and received an extension. Impatient whites then rioted, forcing the bulk of the city's black population to flee their homes and take refuge in Canada.

[44] See: *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour*, Philadelpha, 1831, NNC; *Minutes and Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Color In these United States*, Philadelphia, 1832; *Minutes and Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in these United States*, New York, 1833, NNC; and *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, In the United States*, New York, 1834, NNC.

[45] At the end of the "Address to the Free People of Colour" written in the 1831 convention, delegates turned from discussing possibilities of creating settlements for black Ohioans in Upper Canada, and noted "that it has been a subject of deep regret to this convention, that we as a people, have not availingly appreciated every opportunity placed within our power by the benevolent efforts of the friends of humanity, in elevating our condition to the rank of freemen." *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention*, 9, 11, NNC.

standing among men." They then decided to "respectfully request an early attention to those virtues among our brethren, who have a desire to be useful."[46] In 1832, the delegates made the importance of elevation for African Americans explicit by naming their proceedings Conventions "for the Improvement of the Free People of Color." And in an effort to supplant representations of African American "degradation" with evidence of free black "elevation," delegates continued to invite prominent and sympathetic white Americans to observe and address the proceedings. One speaker self-consciously praised the free black population's achievements by imagining the perspective of these and other white observers saying:

> But how beautiful must the prospect be to the philanthropist, to view us, the children of persecution, grown to manhood, associating in our delegated character, to devise plans and means for our moral elevation, and attracting the attention of the wise and good, over the whole country, who are anxiously watching our deliberations.[47]

The rhetoric surrounding the creation of these organizations also suggests nascent class tensions within the northern black community. For example, because spokesmen agreed that "*Education, Temperance* and *Economy*," would be the best means to advance their effort to achieve citizenship rights, most of the proceedings of the early conventions focused on developing plans to challenge the "dissolute, intemperate, and ignorant condition of a large portion of the coloured population of the United States."[48] As the previous quote suggests, these members of the black elite had little patience with those who failed to adhere to the emerging middle-class behavioral ideals extolled in the urban

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[46] *Proceedings of the First Annual Convention*, 1831, 5, NNC.

[47] From the "Address to the Free Colored Inhabitants" in the *Minutes and Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Color, 1832* (Philadelphia: 1832), 32, NNC.

[48] *Minutes of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour*, 1831, 4-5; reprinted in NNC.

centers of the northeast. Some scholars have suggested that the economic and educational differences between the leadership and the majority of the northern African American population led the leadership to grossly misinterpret the needs of most free blacks. In their study of black abolitionism, the Peases argued:

> Most Negroes in the North did unskilled, menial, or domestic work, usually for whites, and were thus widely separated, socially and economically, from their would-be leaders. The latter were the elite of the black community and constituted an early version of a black bourgeoisie. Because of their differences in economic security, education, and relative independence from white control, they frequently failed to understand the moods, needs, and life-style of their would-be followers. Critical of devices which the rank and file used to survive in hostile surroundings with limited resources and unpredictable futures, the leaders often seemed paternalistic and overbearing.[49]

Rather than reflecting the black leadership's lack of knowledge about the opportunities available to the majority of African Americans, the leadership's paternalistic admonitions to elevate the black population stemmed from their own personal successful attempts to educate themselves, achieve a measure of economic stability and independence, become involved with the political questions of the day, and take on a leadership role in their local communities. For them, attempts to achieve moral, intellectual and economic improvement not only "gave the individual concrete opportunities, but made him a better person."[50] As Peter Hinks points out in his study of David Walker, local leaders with less formal education and lower level occupations than the delegates to the conventions had similar complaints about the need to elevate the black population. David Walker, a self- educated used clothing dealer, railed against the apathy and ignorance of free blacks in his *Appeal*. And in her speeches to the Boston

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[49] Pease and Pease, *They Who Would be Free*, 291

[50] Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 611.

community, public speaker and writer Maria Stewart did the same. They and other local community leaders believed in the political efficacy of racial elevation, and were deeply interested in improving themselves as well as those around them.[51] Thus, Austin Steward described the importance of education, saying:

> Truly has it been said, 'knowledge is power.' But it is not like the withering curse of a tyrant's power;...not like the beastly, demonical power of rum, nor like the brazen, shameless power of lust; but a power that elevates and refines the intellect; directs the affections; controls unholy passions; a power so God-like in its character, that it enables its possessor to feel for the oppressed of every clime, and prepares him to defend the weak and down-trodden.[52]

With this belief in self-improvement viewed as an integral factor in their political concerns, they argued,

> If we ever expect to see the influence of prejudice decrease, and ourselves respected, it must be by the blessings of an enlightened education. It must be by being in possession of that classical knowledge which promotes genius, and causes man to soar up to those high intellectual enjoyments and acquirements, which places him in a situation, to shed upon a country and a people, that scientific grandeur which is imperishable by time, and drowns in oblivions cup their moral degradation.[53]

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[51] We must be careful not to draw too stark a line between elite and working class free blacks in this period. In his study of David Walker, Peter Hinks has noted that the friendships established between Walker's fellow African Lodge members and non-Masonic associates indicates a sense of community between clothes dealers like Walker, craftsmen and skilled workers, who represented the elite of Boston's black community, and unskilled and service workers. More importantly, few professional doctors, lawyers, teachers and the like existed in the black community of Boston at that time. According to Hinks, "all blacks in Boston were poor, and all were subject to extreme discrimination. Differences in income were never enough to create glaring dissimilarities in condition among segments of the black population." Ultimately, "close living quarters, an imposed lack of occupational opportunity, and poverty" helped to foster a closeness between ordinary and elite blacks." Peter Hinks , *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren, David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 79-81, 84. Maria Stewart is known as the first woman to give a public address to an audience of men and women in the United States. For more information about Maria Stewart see Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987).

[52] Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 130

[53] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention*, 1832, 34, NNC.

Those who, like Walker, Stewart and Steward, managed to educate themselves under trying circumstances had little patience for those African Americans who failed to make similar efforts. Thus, black elites continually complained about the lack of children in schools, and the low numbers of blacks engaged in the trades. Steward remarked that while living in Rochester in 1818, he "commenced teaching a Sabbath School for the neglected children of our oppressed race. For a while it was well attended," he wrote, "and I hoped to able to benefit in some measure the poor and despised colored children, but the parents interested themselves very little in the undertaking, and it shortly came to nought."[54]

Given the scarcity of evidence, it is difficult to analyze the majority of free blacks' response to the proliferation of these ideals. Certainly the leadership's continued admonitions against intemperance, lack of education, profligate spending, and poor public behavior attest to the continuation of these activities among the majority of free blacks. Throughout the era, black newspapers continued to provide negative descriptions of those whose behavior fell far short of the elevated ideal. And as Peter Hinks suggests, the often "chastising and condescending tones" of elite northern African Americans may have exacerbated the distance between the black leadership and those they hoped to improve.[55] In contrast, organizations that dealt with the most immediate concerns of the masses of free blacks may have experienced greater success in gaining and maintaining members. Despite his poor relationship with other prominent northern African Americans, David Ruggles maintained a strong rapport with the working class blacks

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54 Steward, *Twenty Two Years a Slave*, 132.

55 Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 89.

who made up the membership of his New York vigilance committee.[56] Similarly, in Boston, "hundreds of blacks could be rapidly rallied in Boston in the 1830s to protect a fugitive from extradition to the South."[57]

But at the same time, the steady growth in the number of institutions explicitly designed to combat degraded behavior, suggests that the political imperatives attached to the ideals of self-improvement may have indeed grown in popularity. The temperance movement accelerated in the black community during the antebellum era. Throughout the North, free blacks organized temperance associations, and lectured on the topic. In 1837, when the "Colored People of Troy" held a six-night meeting to "Promote their Intellectual and Moral Improvement," they devoted the first evening to the subject of education, while they devoted the second, fifth, and sixth nights to discussions of temperance and the formation of temperance societies.[58] Steward suggests that the 1830 Convention in Philadelphia was well attended by a variety of people. He wrote, "The convention...was largely attended by all classes of people, and many interesting subjects were discussed; but the most prominent object was the elevation of our race."[59] In addition, the A.M.E. Church, with its particular emphasis on moral improvement, continued to grow long after Allen's death.[60] One convention praised the progress of

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[56] With the exception of black Garrisonians, Ruggles was soundly criticized and denounced by prominent blacks. Ultimately he dies penniless and nearly blind at the end of the 1840s. (Young, *Antebellum Black Activists*, 99-103) Young argues that Ruggles' success in motivating the masses of African Americans indicates that the "lower class was responsive to leadership that more closely reflected their values." (Young, 93)

[57] Hinks suggests that in contrast, "few answered the call to join a temperance society or attend a lecture on moral improvement." But as we will see, anecdotal newspaper evidence suggests that such organizations began to attract members in increasing numbers in the period after 1830, after the end of his study. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 89.

[58] *Colored American*, April 1, 1837.

[59] Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 166.

[60] Clarence Walker writes: "the church which he founded in 1816 with only 400 members had spread throughout the North into New York and New England, and westward into Ohio....By 1836 it is estimated

"*moral reform*" in free black communities, saying: "Temperance societies are being made the order of the day; gaming and extravagance are being superseded by a judicious husbandry of finances; and idleness and levity are yielding precedence to industry and reflection."[61]

In the 1833 national convention, the spokesmen for the northern black population reaffirmed their commitment to political power of individual behavior asserting that "in all our deliberations, we recognize the idea, that intelligence, industry, economy, and moral worth, in connexion [*sic*] with the purifying powers of heaven-born truth, are sufficient alone, to prostrate this *iron hearted monster* [prejudice]." And proclaiming, "MORAL WORTH IS POWERFUL AND WILL PREVAIL," they advised the men and women of their communities to create more religious and secular organizations to inculcate these values in the free black population of the North.[62] Ultimately, the Philadelphia leadership would underscore the importance of public and private behavior by discontinuing separate national conventions, and creating the interracial American Moral Reform Association (which proclaimed "Piety, Philanthropy, and Patriotism," as its goals) to make self-improvement central to the efforts to secure citizenship rights in the United States.[63]

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that the church had a membership of 7,594 and was sending missionaries to Haiti. In 1840 it established a Canadian Conference and by 1856 it had conferences in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Louisiana." Clarence Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 19.

61 *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, 1834*, 25, NNC.

62 *Minutes and Proceedings of the Third Annual convention*, 1833, 18, 19, NNC.

63 The interracial American Moral Reform Association is formed in 1835 and national black conventions suspended until the 1840s. The formation of the organization did not represent a total consensus in the black community, but rather a coup spearheaded by the Philadelphia elite. Quoted in Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, 104.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, spokesmen for the northern free black population agreed that the best way to better the condition of northern blacks would be to encourage northern black men to make individual efforts to improve their personal, mental, moral, and material condition. But many spokesmen also noted that the "degraded" status of the northern black population was used to justify discriminatory legislation. Therefore, community leaders began establishing a variety of organizations designed to improve the condition. Because of this, they increasingly politicized individual self-improvement as they best way to disprove white stereotypes and combat the economic, social and political effects of prejudice they faced.

Nowhere was the politicized nature of racial elevation through individual self-improvement illustrated more clearly than in the national black conventions of the 1830s.[64] These meetings, with delegates composed of the black ministerial and professional elite, provided an opportunity for the black leadership to demonstrate the ability of free black men to act as political beings. They used these gatherings to register their official disapproval of the institution of slavery, and petition legislatures and

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[64] By 1829, free blacks were well aware that their political status deteriorating rapidly. But their position fell into stark relief in 1829 in Cincinnati, where the city fathers decided to enforce the city's black codes, discriminatory legislation that had remained un-enforced for some years. The laws required African Americans either to post bond for good behavior, or leave town. Unsure of what to do, the leaders of the black community requested and received an extension. Impatient whites then rioted, the bulk of the city's black population to flee their homes for Canada. In response to this crisis, prominent African American men met in Philadelphia in 1830, in the first of several national conventions that would become the major political institution for the northern free black population.

government officials for the removal of the discriminatory legislation that circumscribed their lives. By politicizing self-improvement in this way, spokesmen provided a new political imperative for a process already underway. As a result, a growing number of churches, schools, newspapers were established, and northern black institutional life flourished. And in the 1834 National Convention, delegates submitted formal reports on the status of "*moral reform*" and institution building in their particular communities, which the chair praised as "very satisfactory." "Not only," he proclaimed, "have the institutions for moral, religious and literary improvement throughout the non-slave holding states increased in numbers, but that they have during the past year assumed a character of decided superiority."[65]

Ultimately, faith in self-improvement permeated the discourse produced by the elites of the free black population of the North. Concerns about intellectual improvement shaped their decisions to create private secular and Sabbath day schools to instruct the young, and literary societies to educate the adults of their communities. Frequent descriptions of associational activities in various antebellum black newspapers suggest that in the period before the Civil War, black communities continued to participate in old, and found new organizations designed to facilitate the moral improvement of the race, including religious institutions and temperance societies. A growing belief in the political efficacy of these endeavors influenced subsequent men and women to create newspapers to spread the ideology of elevation, and attend conventions to implement it. Ultimately, despite the various tensions inherent in the philosophy, the gospel of

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65 *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, 1834*, 25, NNC.

individual self-improvement remained a staple of black political thought throughout the nineteenth century.

Chapter Two

The Gender Politics of Racial Elevation

Introduction

Throughout the antebellum era, the northern black leadership continued to believe that self-improvement should be the goal for all African American men, women and children. They viewed moral, intellectual and material self-improvement both as a positive good in itself, and as a crucial step in the campaign against white stereotypes and prejudice. African American men and women established elementary schools for boys and girls, admonished both men and women to adopt plain, frugal habits, and described the benefits of Protestant Christianity as a benefit for men and women alike. But however universal its aims, the ideals of self-improvement were not embraced in gender-neutral terms. This is particularly evident in cases where self-improvement was identified as a vehicle to effect political change. Then, invariably, spokesmen cast such politicized discussions of elevation in expressly male terms. In an effort to trace the nineteenth century roots of feminism in African American communities, scholars have

generally ignored this evidence, arguing instead that African American spokesmen often used the term "manhood rights" to refer to human rights, particularly the right to be free, and the right to control one's own sense of dignity.[1] But as we will see, during the 1830s, African American spokesmen also clearly defined "manhood rights" as the gender-specific privileges and duties of citizenship claimed by white men in antebellum America. For despite the presence of a vanguard of black and white woman's rights advocates in the northern black populace, most spokesmen for the northern black population claimed the suffrage as a distinct male political right and campaigned for it as such. The relationship between ideals of manliness and contemporary interpretations of citizenship rights also shaped the way northern black spokesmen interpreted their political status in the North, and the nature of slavery in the South. As we will see, this conflation of manhood rights and citizenship rights would continue to define black political culture, and impact the nature and visibility of black women's activism throughout the nineteenth century.

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[1] See R. J Young, *Antebellum Black Activists: Race, Gender, and Self* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1996), 68-70. Also see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Black Male Perspectives on the Nineteenth-Century Woman" in Sharon Harley and Terborg-Penn eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997) who argues that nineteenth century black male spokesmen actively supported feminist causes and generally supported progressive gender issues. In "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation" in Filomena Steady, ed. *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge: Sheckman Publishing, 1981 and "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women" *Journal of Social Issues*, vol 39, no 3. 1983, 17-28, Linda Perkins argues that "antebellum uplift" efforts were gender egalitarian pursuits that promoted the participation of women and gender equality.

Citizenship and the Gender Politics of Self-Improvement

By the 1820s, the expansion of white male political participation had strengthened the relationship between power and male prerogative in American society.[2] And like other nineteenth-century American men, free black men viewed the exercise of political rights as a pursuit that was central to the male identity.[3] Though some believed that the right of suffrage could be extended to include women, all agreed that political rights, particularly the vote, were the fundamental rights of "elevated" men.[4] The right to vote, they argued, was important not simply because it enabled individuals to participate in the machinery of government, but because the suffrage:

> clothes a man with the power of a freeman. The exercise of which gives him the consequence of a man, gives him reputation -- brings him into association with men -- creates for him business -- a participation in all the privileges, growing out of the relations of life.[5]

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[2] Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998), 21; E. Anthony Rotundo, , *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 170.

[3] James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Search of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 170.

[4] This argument should not be interpreted as an attempt to prove or disprove the existence of black male feminists in the antebellum era. The list of antebellum black male woman's rights activists is substantial and well-known. It includes prominent men like Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet in addition to those African American men who remained connected to the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement like Charles Lenox Remond. For a discussion of black male supporters of the woman's rights movement, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Black Male Perspectives on the Nineteenth-Century Woman." However, by focusing on northern black male activists most supportive of woman's rights, scholars have ignored the diversity of opinion expressed on the subject. A closer look at the newspaper articles and conventions of the period indicates that female political participation was a debatable issue for the black men who chose to express their opinions in northern African American print culture. Black male suffrage, however, was not.

[5] *Colored American*, December 5, 1840, in BAP reel 3, fr. 5234.

Consequently, when discussing questions of citizenship, black spokesmen consistently cast the "universal" themes of self-improvement and elevation in explicitly gendered terms about manliness, and invoked the term "manhood" to represent what they considered to be natural male prerogatives they were unjustly denied. In an "Appeal to the People of Philadelphia," free black petitioners argued that denial of their right to vote would not simply weaken their neighborhoods and communities. It was also an outright attack on their male privilege. They wrote:

> When you have taken from an individual his right to vote, you have made the government, in regard to him, a mere despotism; and you have taken a step towards making it a despotism to all. -- To your women and children, their inability to vote at the polls may be no evil, because they are united by consanguinity and affection with those who can do it....But when a distinct class of the community, already sufficiently the objects of prejudice, are wholly, and for ever, disfranchised and excluded....They have lost their check upon oppression, their wherewith to buy friends, their panoply of manhood; in short they are thrown upon the mercy of a despotic majority.[6]

Thus when northern blacks campaigned for the suffrage, they often limited these rallies and discussions to African American men. For example, when the editors of the *Weekly Advocate* called upon black New Yorkers to support three new petitions – one against slavery, one for trial by jury, and one for the right of suffrage – they specifically noted that while women were invited to sign the others, "the petition on the *right of suffrage*, is intended for *men* only...who are twenty-one years of age or over."[7]

By interpreting citizenship as a male concern, and politicizing self-improvement as a means to attain citizenship, male efforts and programs for self-improvement carried a different weight than those of their female counterparts. Furthermore, contemporary

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[6] *Appeal of Forty Thousands Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement to the People of Philadelphia, 1838* in BAP reel 2, fr. 2677-2678.

[7] *Weekly Advocate*, February 22, 1837.

gender ideologies played an instrumental role in determining the key areas in which improvement was most necessary. As we learned in the previous chapter, the northern black leadership of the antebellum era connected their ideals of moral, material, and intellectual improvement to the emerging social, economic and political ideals of their environment. According to Anthony Rotundo, the middle-class gender ideologies of the period imbued a man's occupation with a great deal of importance. He argued that, "in the nineteenth century, middle-class men's work was vital to their sense of who they were.... It helped to connect a man's inner sense of identity with his identity in the eyes of others." Moreover, nineteenth-century urbanites tended to believe that "if a man was without 'business' he was less than a man."[8] For the urban free blacks of the North, who faced severe discrimination in the urban workforce, and remained clustered at the bottom of the economic ladder, these popular gender ideologies reaffirmed the prevailing stereotypes of African American degradation. Given these ideological currents, free blacks framed black male intellectual elevation as not just a social ideal, but more importantly, a political imperative. "An education," Samuel Cornish and John B. Ruswurm wrote, "is what renders civilized man superior to the savage." Free black author and newspaper publisher William C. Nell agreed, and further proclaimed that:

> A great responsibility devolves upon the young colored men of the present generation, who should duly prize the means now at their disposal, and...[prepare] themselves for stations of honor and respectability – gaining access to the various avenues for improvement in morals, science, and the mechanic arts, and through that medium, like valiant pioneers, affecting an opening for their brethren to the goal of human prosperity.[9]

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[8] Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 168.

[9] *Liberator*, February 7, 1835.

Thus, though many free-black spokesmen looked forward to the day when their daughters could "acquire an education which will fit them to become the wives of an enlightened mechanic, a store keeper, or a clerk,"[10] it was the process of shaping the young men of the race into future mechanics, store-keepers and clerks, that occupied their full attention.[11]

A look at the published justifications for higher education and intellectual improvement makes the gender specificity of their efforts more apparent. For despite the belief that basic educational opportunities should be improved for African Americans of both sexes, discussions of African American higher education often focused on the means to best improve the educational opportunities for young men. To facilitate their intellectual elevation, African American men began founding literary societies that offered those previously unable to receive an education the opportunity to "improve" themselves.[12] While women's literary societies generally taught basic literacy skills to those enrolled, young men's literary societies often functioned as valuable substitutes for college educations. Unlike women's literary societies, men's societies usually offered public lectures (sometimes to audiences of men and women), sponsored debates and scholarly presentations, and maintained their own libraries.[13] Though instruction was

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[10] *Colored American*, November 23, 1839.

[11] A distinction should be made here between higher education and early education. Northern blacks did create coeducational schools where the children of their communities could learn to basic skills. The Free African School of New York City was one such school, as was the school run by Sarah Mapps Douglass in Philadelphia. The ideals of male and female education expressed in the black press principally applied to discussions of the education appropriate for gender specific adult employment.

[12] See Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents -- Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 101-118.

[13] In *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society*, published in 1841, Joseph Willson notes that in Philadelphia, men's societies including the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons, the Rush Library Company and Debating Society, and the Demosthenian Institute all sponsored debates and other

rarely formal, members would work together through cooperation and criticism to improve their body of knowledge and their writing, public speaking, and analytical skills.[14] In New York City, the men of the Phoenix Society maintained a reading room for the free black population, and the Young Men's Society entertained the black public by demonstrating their debating and public speaking skills on a regular basis. Black Bostonians patronized the male-controlled Adelphic Union Library Association, and the Young Men's Literary Society.[15] In Philadelphia, men developed and polished these skills in the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons, the Rush Library Company and Debating Society, and the Demosthenian Institute.[16] For the emerging free black elite, societies such as these offered an opportunity to educate those sons who were excluded from the American colleges of the Northeast, and lacked the funds or sponsorship to travel and be educated abroad or attend select American institutions like Oberlin College in Ohio.

The discourse around appropriate education for African American women was decidedly different. To begin with, while spokesmen portrayed young men's education as a political imperative and immediate concern, discussions about black female education remained infrequent until the late 1830s. One writer, using the pseudonym "Uncle Ben," complained about this discrepancy with aplomb in 1839, saying:

> While our Editors and Divines are declaiming through the press and the pulpit, on the necessity of the moral and mental elevation of our young men, lamenting, in doleful strains, the apathy and indifference of our *hopeful youth*, shedding rivers of ink and oceans of briny tears, on the prevalence of vice and immorality among

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public activities. The women's literary societies he highlights do not. See Julie Winch, ed., *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia.* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000), 111-117.

[14]Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 68.

[15]*Liberator* February 7, 1835.

[16] Willson, *Sketches*, 111-117.

> our men in embryo, they seem to have lost sight of "Heaven's last best gift to man" and either neglect to encourage them to cultivate their minds for the important place they are designed to fill in the domestic and social relations of life...or speak of them incidentally as though they were a disjointed part of creation that may or may not be connected with the great plan of human improvement, as sketched on the six by nine "Tressel Board," of our learned sages, for the *special* benefit of our men.[17]

And women themselves apparently remained reluctant to transgress contemporary gender roles in their literary societies. In his discussion of his elite social circle, Philadelphia resident Joseph Willson noted "that the ladies' associations have [not] yet introduced the form of systematic debates. If such an introduction were made, there is little cause to doubt, but that great improvement would result therefrom. [*sic*]"[18] Finally, even though prominent African American men would increasingly espouse higher education for young African American women by the 1840s and 1850s, during the 1830s, many spokesmen agreed that any education for young African American women should emphasize the domestic arts. One writer in the *Freedom's Journal* explained his position on the subject by reasoning that females gained their "respect, happiness, and influence" primarily through their kind and gentle personalities, rather than through any "good qualities or personal accomplishments" any individual might claim. Moreover, he argued, women lacked the "masculine strength and courage to enforce any other kind of respect," and these circumstances, "should be considered by those who advise that no difference should be made in the education of the two sexes."[19]

Such gendered discourse and behavior in northern, urban black communities should not be considered surprising, for it simply reflects the influence of the emerging

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[17] *Colored American* November 23, 1839.

[18] Willson, *Sketches*, 89.

[19] *Freedom's Journal*, April 20, 1827.

bourgeois gender ideologies shaping the larger discourse and behavior in the towns and cities in which northern free blacks overwhelmingly resided.[20] Some scholars have argued that the acceptance of these gender roles represents an acceptance of white value systems and an implicit rejection of African ones.[21] Other scholars suggest that the adoption of these roles offered a form of resistance against slavery, a rejection of an oppressive lifestyle where women and men were forced to work alongside each other in the field. However, I have found no evidence that their comfort with northern bourgeois gender ideals was viewed as a reaction to gender relations under slavery in this period. Nor should black spokeswomen and men's embrace of urban northern bourgeois gender roles be interpreted as a calculated rejection of older African ones. Urban free blacks, particularly those whose families had achieved a measure of economic independence and success, shaped and were shaped by the emerging gender systems and ideals just as they were by the religious, capitalist and political ethos of their region. [22]

Just as they did in their discussions of education, free black spokesmen also tended to cast the issue of moral improvement in terms of male improvement. In the years before the Civil War, black spokesmen generally referred to women, both black and white, as innately pure, and rarely critiqued the morality of African American women. In fact, the idea that women would need to be morally elevated seemed preposterous to one

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[20]For a discussion of the relationship between the rise of the middle class and domesticity in the northeast see Mary Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Nancy Cott, Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835, 2d. ed.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[21] Shirley Yee for example writes, "The acceptance of contemporary notions of male and female natures and separate sex roles as a measure of free status represented an attempt to destroy the stereotypes that slavery had engendered, but at the price of precluding a complete departure from oppressive stereotypes: Free blacks traded one system of oppression for another." Shirley Yee *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 58.

[22] Patrick Rael convincingly makes the case that northern blacks were co-creators of bourgeois northern value systems. Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002), 125.

Freedom's Journal contributor, who noted with derision a "society in Brazil for mending the morals and manners of young ladies! What next?" he asked. "Young ladies are admitted to be angelic; and really we consider them as patterns of all that is moral and mannerly. The men had better set about reforming themselves before they undertake to improve the ladies" he wrote.[23] Evidence of male immorality, however, abounded in the working class urban areas where northern African Americans lived. In his second published piece in a series entitled "Means of Elevation," the New York City resident, "Cushing," complained of the:

> numerous porter-houses and low grog-shops that...are more or less frequented by youth and young men, on every day of the week, but more especially upon the Sabbath, who neglect their business and desecrate God's holy day, to congregate in these vicious places, to the utter ruin of their prospects and their reputation.[24]

The effects of intemperance extended well beyond Cushing's example of Sabbath-breaking. According to nineteenth-century American reformers, intemperance placed in question a man's ability to exhibit self-control, and imperiled his ability to support his wife and children. Intemperance, and other displays of "vice and debauchery" were increasingly viewed by members of the northern middle class as signs of laziness and poor character, traits incompatible with political behavior, and therefore extremely poor measures of manhood.[25] Thus, for those African Americans who believed so fervently in the ideals of racial elevation, black male intemperance could be nothing but devastating to their efforts to present a black male citizenry worthy of the ballot to the larger American public. It's "not that intemperance abounds more among us,

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[23] *Freedom's Journal*, November 9, 1827. These ideas about the innate morality of women circulated as part of the ideology of the emerging middle class in the urban northeast. For examples see, Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* and Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*.

[24] *Colored American*, June 22, 1839.

[25] Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 179.

than among others," a committee reporting on the issue argued in 1833, "but [that] it, more than anything under our control, tends to perpetuate that *relentless prejudice*, which arrays itself against our dearest interests; frowns us away from the avenues of useful knowledge and of wealth; and which with a cruel hand wrenches from us our *political rights*."[26] Cushing decried the New York City porter houses that were "kept and patronized, almost exclusively by colored men," and reminded his audience that "When the enemies of the colored man (and these are not a few) see these places, they say, 'O, I see how it is – the slaves, if liberated, would do just the same."[27]

Not surprisingly, spokesmen for the northern black population also framed their discussions of material elevation, or property accumulation, in terms of contemporary gender ideologies. To be elevated to the status of men, they argued, African American men must exhibit their spirit of independence. And, believing that the surest road to independence lay through landownership, prominent free blacks emphasized the importance of property accumulation -- particularly through the agricultural pursuits – during their convention proceedings and in the columns of the black press. They argued that African Americans should leave the limited occupational opportunities, and the dirt, crime, and vice of the city behind, and instead seek independence as virtuous yeoman farmers in the West.[28] "In our large cities," they agreed, "we are passed by as not at all incorporated in the body politic." They argued that free black men should follow the example of those who "overcame all obstacles, conquered the soil, and finally became the independent masters of it," because only then would free blacks become "respectable"

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[26] *Minutes and Proceedings of The Third Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, 1833* (Philadelphia: 1833), 18, NCC. (Emphasis mine).

[27] *Colored American* June 22, 1839.

[28] Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 175.

with "power" and "influence."[29] Austin Steward agreed, saying that while he resided in upstate New York:

> I knew many colored farmers, all of whom are well respected in the neighborhood of their residence. I wish I could count them by the hundreds; but our people mostly flock to cities where they allow themselves to be made "hewers of wood and drawers of water;" barbers and waiters, -- when, if they would but retire to the country and purchase a piece of land, cultivate and improve it, they would be far richer and happier than they can be in the crowded city. It is a mistaken idea that there is more prejudice against color in the country. True, it exists everywhere, but I regard it less potent in the country, where a farmer can live less dependent on his oppressors...[30]

In New York, where the back male suffrage was limited to those with $250 in property, the link between property ownership and the political rights of a male adult would have been more explicit. But the ideological connection was not lost on free black spokesmen, and the concept continued to inform their political discussions throughout the nineteenth century.[31]

If, as Anthony Rotundo has argued, the early nineteenth-century middle class father acted as a member of the political citizenry, made the financial decisions about his household and prepared his son "in a practical sense for entry into the world" by directing his schooling and education, and steering him toward a career, the free black men of the North found themselves in a disadvantaged position all around.[32] In his 1830 address against the American Colonization Society, the Reverend Peter Williams of New York

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[29] *Colored American*, April 15, 1837.

[30] Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Free Man: Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony*, (1856; reprinted in NY: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 167.

[31] The connection between manhood rights, citizenship and property ownership would inform the debates over emigration in the 1850s as well.

[32] E. Anthony Rotundo argues that early nineteenth-century middle class fathers expected to do these things as well as take the lead in educating their sons on the moral value of work, achievement, property, perseverance, thrift, diligence, punctuality, industry, and ambition. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 26-27.

City's St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church took time out to point out that though they were now free:

> Freedom and equality have been put asunder. The rights of men are decided by the colour of their skin; and there is as much difference made between the rights of a free white man and a free coloured man as there is between a free coloured man and a slave.[33]

Seven years later the Colored American essentially agreed with Williams' assessment saying, "The hope of colored Americans differs materially in kind, from that of other citizens; we hope for rights -- rights which as men, as American men, as Christian men, belong to us; but of which, we have been most unjustly deprived."[34] Whether such rights should also, as the North Star masthead would proclaim some years later, "belong to no sex," would be a matter of debate for African American men and women throughout the nineteenth century.[35]

Northern Black Women and the Politics of Domesticity

Despite their emphasis on extolling the inherent virtues and political possibilities of male self-improvement, spokesmen did not remain entirely silent about appropriate

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[33] Peter Williams, "Slavery and Colonization," in Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds., *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787 - 1900.* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998. 116.

[34] *Colored American*, April 8, 1837.

[35] The masthead of the *North Star* stated, "RIGHT IS OF NO SEX."

roles for free black women. According to the *Freedom's Journal*, women were "formed to adorn and humanize mankind, to sooth his cares, and strew his path with flowers."[36] The "cares" the writers referred to certainly reflected the prevailing discourse about the rough and tumble nature of the market forces and political debates that shaped public activity in the urban North. But for the free black population, racial proscription and hostility served to make the public sphere that much more threatening. Thus, one writer politicized black women's domesticity as a necessary refuge from a masculine world of racial oppression. In an ode to "Female Tenderness," S. wrote that:

> At a time, alas! when everything displeased me...when my sufferings had destroyed all the energy and vigour of my soul...when I wished that I had not been born, or that I could retire from a world of wrongs, and end my days far from the white man's scorn: the kind attention of a woman, were capable of conveying a secret charm, a silent consolation to my mind. Oh! Nothing can render the bowers of retirement so serene and comfortable, or can so sweetly soften all our woes, as a conviction that woman is not indifferent to our fate."[37]

To facilitate the creation of safe, domestic havens for the free black population, the black press urged its female readership to adhere to the emerging ideals of northern urban domesticity.[38] Many of the columns and editorials in the *Freedom's Journal*, *Weekly Advocate*, and *Colored American* presented marriage as the first important duty for African American women. In fact, through the end of the 1830s, they actively argued that the women who neglected this important role would inevitably find themselves unhappy. To underscore this point, the papers published cautionary tales about the perils

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[36] *Freedom's Journal*, April 13, 1827.

[37] *Freedom's Journal*, July 27, 1827.

[38] The black press's celebration of northern black female domesticity cannot be overstated. Shirley Yee notes that "The most powerful institutions within the free black community – the press, the schools, and the churches – provided the greatest support for a gender ideology during the antebellum period." Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 58. Oliver and Lois Horton note this tendency, and suggest that the black press reflected the mainstream press's tendency to glorify "the submissive wife and female helpmeet." Oliver and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 103.

of spinsterhood; such as the tale of "Miss Becky Driguid," who hoped to "escape the snares and anxieties of the married state," but soon found that as the unmarried Aunt, she was constantly expected to sit with a "dull and sickly wife," an "ill-natured husband," or "nurse the children" of her siblings, without ever being invited to "any party of pleasure."[39]

Editors also reminded their female readership to nurture happiness in their marriages by holding their tongues, remaining pious and good-natured, and deferring to their husband's authority. As late as 1839 the *Colored American* reminded wives to: "resolve every morning to be cheerful and good-natured," to "dispute not" with their husbands, and to remember that while "submission in a man to his wife is even disgraceful to both...implicit submission in a wife to the will of her husband is what she promised at the alter."[40] In addition, newspaper contributors held up other women, both fictional and real, as examples to emulate. Prominent men like Martin Delany described African American women like the deceased "Mrs. Mary Ann Elizabeth, consort of Owen Astor Barret, aged 18 years 8 months and 27 days," in ideal terms as a woman who was "young and beautiful...possessed the principle of self-denial," and remained, "regular in her walks, graceful in her demeanor, and perfectly simple in her attirement: [*sic*] being free from vanity."[41]

If the kind words and gentleness of African American women helped to create a domestic refuge from the difficulties of the outside world, another aspect of wifely behavior – supervision of the domestic economy of the home – proved more crucial to

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39 *Freedom's Journal*, February 28, 1827.
40 *Colored American*, February 16, 1839.
41 *Colored American*, October 10, 1840.

the success of male efforts at self-improvement. Men were warned to avoid marrying young women with an apparent affinity for fancy dress, for such tendencies usually indicated a lack of thrift with potential to ruin even the most industrious of men. Women were encouraged to be attentive to the tasks of housework, and manage their homes with an eye toward improving their family's financial condition.[42] Charles B. Ray made the point more explicitly when, almost immediately after his young wife Henrietta's untimely death, he submitted a series of editorials to the *Colored American* arguing that "our daughters" be given "a solid education" consisting first and foremost "of the use of the needle, house work, and domestic economy generally." Ray complained that many young African American women suffered from a lack of the proper knowledge of housewifery, a deficiency he believed to be:

> the cause of the greatest amount of domestic broils, and contentions, the cause of so many abandoned females [and an impetus for] intemperance, suicide, and to all the prevailing evils of the day.[43]

To avoid potential disaster, Ray suggested that girls first remain at home with their mothers to learn "all the art of domestic cookery" and to "be taught to know how to manage a house, and govern and instruct children." Only then did he agree that they be sent away for further education.[44] With these evils in mind, cautionary tales like "The Slovenly Wife," abounded, and reminded female readers that weakness for expensive clothing and mismanaged households would inevitably lead to "poverty," "shame, and remorse," alongside "wretchedness and ruin." [45]

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[42] *Colored American*, March 4, 1837.
[43] *Colored American* March 18, 1837.
[44] *Colored American* March 18, 1837.
[45] *Colored American*, June 30, 1838.

On the other hand, tales like the story of Harry and Mary Hemphill, served to illustrate an ideal version of female domesticity and its positive impact on male industry and morality alike. When the newly wed Henry and Mary Hemphill set up housekeeping in the country, Mary Hemphill turned "her whole attention" to all things domestic, so that

> all went like clock work at home; the family expenditure were carefully made; not a farthing was wasted, not a scrap lost; the furniture was all neat and useful, rather than ornamental; the table plain, frugal, but wholesome and well spread; little went either to the seamstress or the tailor: no extravagance in dress, no costly company-keeping, [and] no useless waste of time in ceaseless visiting.

In short, Mary created an ideal home where Harry could seek "repose after the toil and weariness of the day," and forget "the heartlessness of the world, and all the wrongs of men." Harry meanwhile

> devoted himself to business with steady purpose and untiring zeal; he obtained credit by his plain and honest dealing; custom by his faithful punctuality and constant cares; friends by his obliging deportment and accommodating disposition.

Ultimately, Harry "gained the reputation of being the best workman in the village," the family thrived, "and he and Mary mutually [gave] each other the credit" for their success. The author then charged his readers, both male and female, with following the examples of his characters, saying: "I pen their simple history in the hope, that as it is entirely imitable, some who read it will try to imitate it."[46]

Despite male attempts to politicize female domesticity, the evidence suggests that a variety of African American women failed to conform to the ideal depictions of the black press. The sheer number of columns and letters on female conduct certainly suggests that many African American women failed to follow the examples of women

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[46] *Colored American*, June 16, 1838.

like Mary Ann Barret, or Henrietta Ray, who Samuel Cornish eulogized as a pious woman who never "[was heard] to speak an evil word of others."[47] Instead, the contributors to black newspapers found themselves continually chastising African American women for inappropriate behavior, and repeatedly warning their female readers that "a female wit" was destined to degenerate "into a most venomous backbiting old-maid of forty five" who "turns all her sensibility to cats and dogs."[48] They continually reminded them that men preferred not to marry the woman with "a babbling tongue," by printing letters from men who swore they would "rather dwell in the dens of the Caucasus, and abide two years at Liberia, than remain one month in the town that is blest with her residence." This was strong condemnation, indeed, given the free black population's opposition to the American Colonization Society's Liberian colonization plan.[49]

Male concern over black female propriety of behavior emerged as a consistent theme in the black press in the 1820s and 30s. The historian Shirley Yee has noted that African American women who transgressed the bounds of acceptable behavior often faced public condemnation in their communities. Maria Stewart faced a severe condemnation from male spectators after chastising them too forcefully for their tendency to attend dancing and gambling halls, and what she perceived to be a lack of opposition to northern racism.[50] While editorializing against public demonstrations, *The Colored American* reserved its strongest censure for the working-class African American women

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[47] *Colored American*, March 4, 1837.

[48] *Freedom's Journal*, May 11, 1827.

[49] *Freedom's Journal* November 2, 1827; *Freedom's Journal* October 5, 1827.

[50] Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 125; Dorothy Sterling, ed. *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. (New York: Norton, 1984), 157.

who joined their husbands and brothers gathering at the sight of fugitive slave trials in New York City saying: "Everlasting shame, and remorse seize upon those females that so degraded themselves yesterday. We beg their husbands to keep them at home for the time to come, and find some better occupation for them."[51] And after tiring of paying for slander suits brought against his wife, "Job" used the press to publicly declare that his wife, "a leading member of this society" was "one of the greatest shrews of whom you ever heard" whose tongue "goes as steadily as the clack of a mill." He advised other young men to choose their wives more wisely.[52]

If northern free black women failed to "hold their tongues," they also failed to live idealized lives as cloistered middle class mothers, safely ensconced within the domestic sphere. Instead, many worked for low pay as domestics and street vendors. Others worked as entrepreneurs running boardinghouses and catering establishments. This type of economic participation received scant substantive attention or analysis in the early black press. But the habitual inclusion of advertisements for black women's entrepreneurial establishments help to underscore the contradictions between changing ideals and reality in the lives of antebellum African American women.[53]

Despite the black press's emphasis on domesticity as a vital refuge from the male world of capitalism, politics, and prejudice, free African American women also exhibited a significant interest in African American political concerns both through their organizational activities, and as individuals. Women had long been active participants in black institutional and community life, particularly in religious institutions where women

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51 *Colored American*, April 15, 1837.

52 Job's letter in *Freedom's Journal*, September 5, 1828.

53 All black journals contained advertisements for female-run boardinghouses, and catering establishments. Marilyn Richardson notes the existence of black female laundresses, cooks and boardinghouse operators in 1820s and 1830s Boston. Richardson, *Maria Stewart*,4.

took the lead in creating fundraising groups to sustain their churches.[54] But the level of African American women's participation in public life increased in the 1830s, as an emerging group of spokeswomen began politicizing female self-improvement as essential to the task of collective racial elevation.

In 1832, a letter appeared in the *Liberator* from "Beatrice," a "young woman of color" from Philadelphia. In this, and her future letters, Beatrice spelled out an argument for the importance of increased educational opportunity for African American women. Throughout her piece, Beatrice relied upon the ideals of domesticity endorsed by the black and white press and ministerial elite. But rather than simply echoing the male-oriented rhetoric of elevation ideology, Beatrice argued that African American women, as well as men, had an important role to play in the movement for the moral, intellectual, and material improvement of the free black population. She argued that women in particular had a "high destiny to fulfil [*sic*]." And she countered those who disagreed, by extending their own logic about the importance of the domestic sphere, saying:

> Though she possess not the physical strength, nor yet the moral courage or ambition of man, yet she *may* have the wide field of the domestic circle to interest her. The father – brother – husband – or children...the great responsibility attending the cultivation and formation of infant minds...call for strict attention, on her part, to the benefits of a good education. [55]

Interestingly, unlike the rhetoric of Republican Motherhood so important a generation earlier, Beatrice didn't argue for improved educational opportunity for women on the basis of their potential to form a virtuous male citizenry.[56] Instead she buttressed

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[54] Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 60-65.

[55] *Liberator*, July 7, 1832 in BAP Reel 1 fr. 0201.

[56] Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton discussed the ways in which American women used the rhetoric of republican political ideology and the American Revolution to increase their educational opportunity in the years of the early republic. They argued that women, as mothers were charged with the task of creating a

her argument by drawing upon the fears of working class black depravity that animated the free black discussions of moral elevation. Rather than focusing on the benefits of a mother's positive influences as white American women had done a generation earlier. Beatrice suggested that the negative influences of a mother should be considered just as powerful.

> We see too often that the offspring of ignorant parents are generally vicious; -- advice or instruction is not given them at home, simply because the father or mother is as ignorant as the child – and through inattention and unpardonable carelessness, is suffered to run the whole course of vice, until he becomes an outcast from society...[57]

Finally, she encouraged young women to take her advice to heart, and improve themselves intellectually for the good of the race. She reminded them:

> There are instances I have known of youthful depravity, that would wring many a mother's heart: and yet these could be traced to ignorant and vicious parents. This was their misfortune, – perhaps their fault. But it must not, it cannot be the excuse with you, my friends. You have talents – only cultivate them; you have minds – enrich them; you have a desire after knowledge – encourage it. Go on – rise superior to every obstacle – let nothing prevent you in this laudable pursuit in which you are engaged; and be assured you have my warmest wishes for your continued success.[58]

Beatrice was not the first African American woman to encourage other African American women to turn their efforts toward intellectual improvement. In 1827, a contributor identified as "Matilda," penned a similar argument in the pages of the Freedom's Journal. "Maltida" addressed the editors of the paper saying,

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virtuous male citizenry necessary for the success of a virtuous republic. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986). Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

57 *Liberator*, July 7, 1832.

58 *Liberator*, July 7, 1832.

> I don't know that in any of your papers, you have said sufficient upon the education of females. I hope you are not to be classed with those, who think that our mathematical knowledge should be limited to 'fathoming the dish-kettle,' and that we have acquired enough of history, if we know that our grandfather's father lived and died. 'Tis true the time has been, when to darn a stocking, and cook a pudding well, was considered the end and aim of a woman's being. But those were days when ignorance blinded men's eyes. The diffusion of knowledge has destroyed those degraded opinions, and men of the present age, allow, that we have minds that are a capable and deserving of culture....[59]

Like Beatrice, Matilda did not argue that women deserved education based on their mental capabilities alone. She also couched her argument in the rhetoric of the prevailing ideology of domesticity. She wrote:

> The influence that we have over the male sex demands, that our minds should be instructed and improved with the principles of education and religion, in order that this influence should be properly directed. Ignorant ourselves, how can we be expected to form the minds of our youth, and conduct them in the paths of knowledge?[60]

Matilda then concluded her letter by suggesting that African American women take the task of intellectual self-improvement as seriously as men. She called them to arms saying,

> There is a great responsibility resting somewhere, and it is time for us to be up and doing. I would address myself to all mothers, and say to them, that while it is necessary to possess a knowledge of cookery, and the various mysteries of pudding-making, something more is requisite. It is their bounden duty to store their daughters' minds with useful learning. They should be made to devote their leisure time to reading books, whence they would derive valuable information, which could never be taken from them.[61]

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[59] *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827, in Herbert Aptheker describes the letter as the first black "expression of a 'women's rights' viewpoint." Herbert Aptheker, *Documentary History of the Negro People*, (New York: Citadel Press, 1951), 89. Dorothy Sterling describes the letter as "close to being a feminist statement." She also notes that some of the phrasing of 'Matilda's' letter "indicates that she had read Hannah Mather Crocker's pamphlet, 'Observations on the Real Rights of Women.'" Dorothy Sterling, *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Norton, 1984), 98.

[60] *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.

[61] *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.

The publication of Matilda's and subsequently Beatrice's letters are significant for a number of reasons. First, the publication of Beatrice's letter marked a shift in the visibility and politicization of black women's activism. Beginning in the late 1830s, black women's public voluntarism became increasingly visible in, and celebrated by the black and the abolitionist press. Second, as the content of both letters suggest, African American spokeswomen increasingly redefined the ideology of elevation through self-improvement to include the role of motherhood. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, the most visible of politically-minded African American women would continuously emphasize the importance of women's responsibility to the future of the race, asserting as Maria Stewart did in 1831,

> O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge, and God will require a strict account of you. It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of a pure heart.[62]

Prior to the 1840s, black women had often remained unrecognized participants in the emerging institutions of black political culture. Women did not attend the early national conventions as delegates; and no reference was made to their issues, needs, or even their presence in the published records of the proceedings. Likewise, the *Freedom's Journal* and initially the *Colored American* did not provide a forum to address black women's concerns, or publicize their community activism. With the exception of "Matilda's" unique letter, early black newspaper issues simply presented female readers

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[62] From Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," Boston, 1831 in Richardson, ed., *Maria Stewart*, 35.

with original and reprinted conduct articles and stories designed to regulate female behavior and buttress the emerging ideology of American bourgeois domesticity.

As the abolitionist movement gained momentum under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison however, black women began creating new institutions to address the needs and concerns of the larger black population, and publicizing their antislavery efforts in the *Liberator*.[63] In 1831, black Philadelphian women organized their own Female Literary Association. Later in 1834, they established the Minerva Literary Association. In 1832, black Bostonian women created the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society, while the African American women of New York City organized a Ladies Literary Society in 1834 and a Female Literary Society in 1836. Similar institutions appeared in smaller northern cities as well. In Rochester and Buffalo, for example, African American women created the Ladies Literary and Dorcas Society, and the Young Ladies Literary Society, respectively.[64]

Unlike the men's literary societies, which were designed to hone manly skills of debating and public speaking, these women's associations maintained a staid and religious sense of decorum considered more appropriate for the female participants. During a meeting of Philadelphia's Female Literary Society, Sarah Douglass made some brief, but prepared remarks. Afterwards, the women read from the Bible, sat in silence, offered a prayer, and then took turns reading "affecting slave tales." Significantly, the women did not consider the antislavery nature of their readings to be incidental to their efforts at organized intellectual improvement. In fact, Sarah Douglass explicitly blended

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[63] Shirley Yee has detailed the ways in which free black women supported the abolitionist movement: by raising funds, giving speeches, and inviting prominent abolitionists to their various societies. Yee *Black Women Abolitionists*, chapter 3.

[64] Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists* 62-63. Dorothy Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846, *Journal of Negro Education* 5 (1936), 555-576.

antislavery, elevation and self-improvement rhetoric as justification for her decision to become more active in the public sphere. She wrote,

> One short year ago, how different were my feelings on the subject of slavery...I had formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts. But how was the scene changed when I beheld the oppressor lurking on the border of my own peaceful home! I saw his iron hand stretched forth to seize me as his prey, and the cause of the slave became my own. I started up, and with one might effort threw from me the lethargy which had covered me as a mantle for years; and determined, by the help of the Almighty, to use every exertion in my power to elevate the character of my wronged and neglected race."[65]

Neither in their political actions nor their rhetoric did African American spokeswomen attempt to violently transgress the contemporary boundaries of female propriety. To do so would have brought unnecessary discord into tenuous black communities whose members maintained a variety of opinions about appropriate female behavior. In addition, controversial female behavior would have provided ammunition to those who campaigned against them, both within and outside the northern black community.[66] In a time when women's political activism was increasingly ridiculed in the mainstream press, even the most progressive African American women approached their activities with caution. In an 1854 visit to Toronto, Mary Ann Shadd "unexpectedly met with public opposition to a newspaper run exclusively by women. Realizing that hers was the only black newspaper left in Canada, Shadd acquiesced and very reluctantly

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[65] *Liberator*, July 21, 1832 in BAP Reel 1, fr. 0204-0205.

[66] Shirley Yee discusses the importance of northern black activist women's propriety throughout *Black Women Abolitionists*. In *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, Lori Ginzberg notes that conservative white women and men used the charge of "unsexed" women to censure those whose activism led them too far beyond the bounds of propriety. This tactic limited some white women's activism. Lori Ginzbuerg, *Women and the work of Benevolence*, 25-28. Interestingly, Joseph Willson complains about a tendency to gossip and impugn the character and morality of young women within Philadelphia's black community. Willson, *Sketches*, 93-95. The editors of the *Colored American* charged Fanny Wright with unsexing herself by giving public lectures, and urged black women not to follow her example. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, *115-116*. And after a disagreement over schooling the fugitives in Canada, Henry and Mary Bibb publicly charged Mary Ann Shadd Cary with "unsexing" herself by participating in behavior unfit for a lady. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 67-72.

searched for a male editor to placate her opponents and prevent any disruption of her press." She ultimately settled on Reverend William P. Newman.[67]

Despite the limits placed on their public behavior, free black women began highlighting their public activism in new ways in the 1830s. Some, like Philadelphian Sarah Douglass and Bostonian Maria Stewart, published their views and activities in the Ladies' Department of the *Liberator*. Others began holding public annual meetings, and inviting the prominent men in the community to observe their work, and speak out about their efforts. At the public meeting of the Female Dorcas Society in Buffalo, so many men attended in fact, that the keynote speaker Robert Banks felt justified in directing the final third of his address to all the "young men" present, urging them to follow the women's example, and "gird on the armor of moral improvement, and take hold of the work with spirit and energy."[68]

To avoid the appearance of impropriety, African American women stretched the limits of their public activism slowly and cautiously. In the first mixed meetings, the women of the organization often remained silent while the male speakers gave the keynote address, and read the president's written statement and the treasurer's report. In the Annual Meeting of the Female Assistant Society of New York, Mr. Henry Watson chaired the proceedings, while Rev. J.D. Richardson offered the prayer. Mr. F. Reynolds read the Society's Constitution, to those assembled, and Henry Highland Garnet followed with an address and a reading of the organization's annual report.[69] But despite their silence in mixed meetings, black female activists claimed their activities as their own. At

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67 Jason Silverman, "Mary Ann Shadd," Litwack and Meier, *Black leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 93, 94.

68 *Weekly Advocate*, February 18, 1837.

69 *Colored American*, March 15, 1838.

the public meeting for the fourth anniversary for the Female Benevolent Society of Troy, NY, the men present, Rev. Mr. Vandevere (Elder of the Methodist Church) and "Mr. Harris" a student at "Vermont University," followed the usual format with the Reverend sitting in the pulpit and presiding over the proceedings, and the young Mr. Harris presenting the keynote address.

But the female members of the association clearly decided to be active participants in the celebration of their own organization. The sixty-one members took places of honor in the front of the church, each wearing a "plain white scarf" to distinguish themselves as members of the society. One male observer described their presence as "truly imposing." The president, Vice President, and Directresses, sat directly in front of the pulpit facing the congregation while the Secretary, and members of the young women's auxiliary occupied a small platform. John J. Miter's description of the event indicates that the Secretary and the unnamed "young member" read aloud compositions and letters written by several young members of the organization. It is not clear from Miter's description who read the Secretary's and Treasurers report. But it is clear by their choice of dress and seating arrangement that the women of the Female Benevolent Society sought to actively claim their own success, rather than simply defer to the men present.[70]

Despite any early discomfort with the growing public activism of northern African American women, the black male leadership of the North quickly learned to accept, rely upon, and ultimately celebrate aspects of African American women's public activism as part of the larger effort to improve and elevate the collective status of the

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[70] *Colored American*, April 1,1837.

race. As black women became increasingly visible participants in black public culture, spokesmen began taking special pains to endorse women's causes. By the late 1830s, notices of women's organizations appeared with some frequency in the black press. The January 20, 1838 issue of the *Colored American* noted the Ladies' Literary Society of New York's monetary contribution to the paper and to the city's Vigilance Committee. The May 3, 1838 issue of the paper advertised an upcoming fair run by the "Ladies attached to the first Presbyterian Church of color." The *North Star* regularly printed the activities and charters of women's organizations – black, white, and interracial – in the pages of its publication.[71] And subsequent papers from the *Provincial Freeman* to the *Anglo-African* would follow suit in the coming decades.

African American women were so quickly incorporated into black political culture for a variety of reasons. First, their quiet activism had long been a source of sustenance for the communities in which they lived. In an 1830 report on African American voluntary associations in Philadelphia, the committee reported that twenty-seven religious and secular voluntary associations existed for African American women while only sixteen such associations existed for men.[72] Furthermore, as the women themselves argued, their public work supported rather than contradicted feminine ideals. Meeting "once every week for the purpose of sewing and fancy work," as the Philadelphia Woman's Association did, hardly suggested inappropriate female conduct. In fact, such behavior in the service of male political pursuits followed the precedent of

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[71] *Colored American*, January 20, 1838 and May 8, 1838. The *North Star* also regularly contained notices about black women's activities. For example see the March 9, 1849 issue of the *North Star*, which reprints the entire charter of the Philadelphia Woman's Association, an organization designed to "hold Fairs or Bazaars for the support of the Press and Public Lecturers, devoted to the Elevation of Colored People in the United States by Self-Exertion."

[72] Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of Negro Americans*, 112-115.

the patriot women in the service of the Revolutionary War. Though elite black women rarely drew upon those examples in their public discourse, they did however turn to the Bible in search of heroines to emulate. In her Farewell Address to Boston, for example, Maria Stewart invoked biblical heroines to justify her public speaking. "What if I am a woman," she argued, "is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel [Judges 4:4]? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?"[73] She then admonished her audience,

> If such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive, by their example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin. For God makes use of feeble means sometimes, to bring about his most exalted purposes.[74]

By accepting such arguments, even the most conservative of black spokesmen were able to accept women's public activism as evidence of their virtuous characters rather than the potentially troubling evidence of their political consciousness. In his "Address to the Colored Female Dorcas Society of Buffalo," Robert Banks told the ladies assembled that "Benevolence is a field peculiarly adapted to your character and feelings, and it is indeed cheering to see the spirit and energy with which you have entered upon this field of usefulness."[75]

Second, women's fundraising abilities proved too important to be ignored by the male leadership. In 1830, black women's organizations in Philadelphia paid out over

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[73] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in Richardson, 68.

[74] Stewart, "Farewell Address," in Richardson, 69.

[75] *Weekly Advocate*, February 11, 1837.

$3,616 to their needy members, while male associations paid out $2,200.[76] Without the support of women, their enterprises were doomed to fail. In the first issue of the Weekly Advocate (January 7, 1837) an editorialist addressed a piece "To the Females of Colour," urging them to use their "powerful" female "influence" to support the fledgling journal by making it a fixture in their homes. After arguing that the paper would be an important weapon in the fight to "disabuse the public mind of the misrepresentations made of our character: and to show to the world, that there is virtue among us, though concealed; talent, though buried; intelligence, though overlooked," the writer then charged, "Females of colour, let not our hopes of its success be indulged in vain, for want of effort on your part to sustain it." These appeals continued throughout the life of the paper. After taking over editorship of the paper and changing its name to the Colored American, Samuel Cornish appealed to every "industrious man or *woman*" to purchase a subscription to the paper, and thereby aid in the work of racial elevation.[77]

Finally, the growing woman's movement, closely aligned to the antislavery movement under the auspices of the American Anti Slavery Society, redefined the limits on appropriate female behavior. William C. Nell wrote to the *Liberator* from Rochester, New York, to praise the woman's rights conventions at Seneca Falls and Rochester, saying, "Proof was abundantly submitted at these Conventions of woman's equality with man, exploding the absurd dogma of her incapacity to take care of herself."[78] In a letter to Amy Post, Jeremiah Sanderson alluded to the changes in male attitudes.

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[76] Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of Negro Americans*, 112-115.
[77] *Weekly Advocate*, January 7, 1837. Emphasis mine.
[78] *Liberator*, September 1, 1848, BAP Reel 5, fr. 0762.

> Miss E. J. Hitchcock made a most eloquent and logical speech, occupying nearly an hour; she was listened to with delight and often applauded, how strange; what a change has come over the face of Society its character; a few years ago men in this city hissed at the mere idea of Women speaking in public in promiscuous assemblies; now men come to Anti Slavery Conventions attracted by the announcements that Women are to take part in the deliberations and they are more desirous of hearing Women than Men.[79]

And Robert Banks, in his address to the Colored Female Dorcas Society of Buffalo also pointed out that Elizabeth Heyrick's "clear, vigorous, and forcible" arguments on behalf of immediate emancipation inspired Wilberforce and his contemporaries to declare "war against that abominable system" of slavery.[80] Ultimately, statements such as these helped to legitimize elite black women's participation in the projects of individual self-improvement, collective elevation, and the abolitionist movement.

Conclusion

Although African American women had been active participants in the process of institution building since the eighteenth century, spokesmen for the northern black community did not initially politicize black women's efforts at individual self-improvement. While spokesmen linked black men's moral, material and intellectual

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[79] May 8, 1845, NYC, Jeremiah Sanderson to Amy Post, BAP Reel 6, Doc 702.
[80] *Weekly Advocate*, February 11, 1837.

status directly to their attempts to fight the spread of white prejudice and improve the collective social, political and economic status of the race, women's self-improvement was politicized only insofar as women's adherence to middle class gender ideals gave men the support they needed to improve themselves and thus the entire race.

Ultimately, it was African American women themselves who began politicizing both their individual efforts at self-improvement and their activism in the public sphere as essential in the task of collective racial elevation. They argued that it was their position as mothers that made it imperative that they work to improve themselves, those in their domestic circle and those around them. Elizabeth Jennings of the Ladies' Literary Society of New York framed her organization's efforts in such terms saying:

> We should cultivate these powers and dispositions of the mind, which may prove advantageous to us. It is impossible to attain to the sphere for which we were created, without persevering. It is certain we were formed for society, and it is our duty and interest to cultivate social qualities and dispositions to endeavor to make ourselves useful and pleasing to others.[81]

They did not dispute the centrality of male-improvement in the process of collective racial elevation. Rather they argued that without women's participation in the project, the children of the race would run the risk of degradation. By 1857 when Mary Still published her "Appeal to the females of the African Methodists Episcopal Church," the argument was well framed. Still wrote:

> The moral or degraded condition of society depends solely upon the influence of woman, if she be virtuous, pious and industrious, her feet abiding in her own house, ruleing [*sic*] her family as well. Such a woman is like a tree planted by the river side, whose leaves are evergreen; she extends in her neighborhood a healthy

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[81] *Colored American*, September 23, 1837, Elizabeth Jennings, delegate from the Ladies' Literary Society of New York to the 1837 First Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, in Foner and Branham, *Lift Every Voice*, 167.

> influence, and all men calleth her blessed. But if unhappily she should be the reverse, loud, clamorous, her feet wandering from the path of virtue, neglecting to rule her family, then indeed is the demoralizing effort of a bad influence felt in all avenues of her life.[82]

Ultimately, the male leadership of the northern black population accepted both black women's rhetorical strategies and public activities, and their role in black institutional life continued to grow. The male leadership joined the female leadership in increasingly speaking of African American women's "high destiny," and publicly congratulating those women who helped to promote the cause of self-improvement. An editorial in the January 7, 1837 issue of the *Weekly Advocate* specifically called upon African American women to help in "the improvement of our people – either moral, or mental." And like their female counterparts, male writers also begin pointing out that though "female influence is powerful...[but] when perverted from its original holy and benign purposes, the disadvantages and misery entailed upon a community, are incalculably great and wide spreading."[83] And by the 1850s, a new ideal for African American women had emerged, one that turned contemporary ideals of domesticity toward the task of collective racial elevation. John Mercer Langston's described his wife as the embodiment of this new ideal. On October 25, 1854, Langston married Miss Caroline M. Wall, who he described in his autobiography as:

> a talented, refined and pleasant person in appearance and conduct...with her brothers and younger sister respecting and honoring her authority, while she bore herself with dignity, self-possession and propriety, he discovered in her those elements of genuine womanly character which make the constitution of the true, loving and useful wife. He discovered too, in her conversation and behavior, that she was fully informed as to the condition of the colored people, with whom she

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82 Mary Still, *An Appeal to the Females of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, quoted in Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 46.

83 *Weekly Advocate*, January 7, 1837.

> was identified in blood in her maternal relationships, and deeply and intelligently interested in their education and elevation.[84]

The rhetorical means black spokeswomen used to justify their participation in black public life also contained negative as well as positive implications. By emphasizing women's power as virtuous nurturers, black spokeswomen also ran the risk of assigning a disproportionate share of the blame for those offspring who failed to meet standards of elevated moral, mental, and intellectual status, to their mothers.[85] And, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, this possibility would have profound effects on the way African American women and family life were discussed in the post-emancipation decades.

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[84] John Mercer Langston. *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol, or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion.* (1894: Reprint. New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1969), 142.

[85] The *Anti-Slavery Discourse* makes a similar claim in his study.

Chapter Three

Gender, Slavery and Citizenship

Introduction

In 1840, five years after the national convention movement disbanded in favor of the interracial American Moral Reform Association, a group of African American men met in Albany, New York to discuss their political concerns. The New York delegates had convened to register a formal protest against the discriminatory property qualification clause in the New York State Constitution that effectively disfranchised African American men.[1] The delegates included a variety of black New Yorkers, including Patrick Reason, the prominent engraver and lithographer, and his brother Charles. Episcopal priest Alexander Crummell, Presbyterian ministers Theodore S. Wright and Henry Highland Garnet, and the newspaper editor and minister Charles B. Ray. Austin Steward, who thirteen years earlier had prescribed the elixir of self-improvement to newly free New Yorkers in Rochester, presided over the proceedings.

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[1] The New York State "Reform Convention" of 1821 had first recommended universal suffrage specifically for the white male citizens of the state. In 1826 the state legislature abolished the remaining restrictions on white male voters while retaining the $250 freehold property qualification for black men. Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

In many ways, the delegates followed the patterns of the national conventions first convened by men like James Forten, Richard Allen and the other founding fathers of the bourgeois black political tradition. They strictly followed the rules of parliamentary procedure, and they created committees to enlighten the delegates on the dynamics of the issues they believed to be the most pressing for the northern black population. They approved resolutions that articulated their political perspective, and they used the convention to draft separate addresses to the African American and white citizens of the state.

Throughout the three days of the proceedings, they continued to define their aspirations in the language of collective racial elevation. However, the debates, resolutions, and addresses of the 1840 meeting marked a clear departure from the sentiments expressed in the past. Unlike the national conventions of the 1830s, which focused on eradicating the perceived deficiencies of the free black population, the 1840 delegates turned their attention toward the deficiencies of New York State, boldly stating:

> we look upon it as anti-republican, and repugnant to the assertion of man's equality, upon which our government is founded; first, because 45,000 of the inhabitants of this State are excluded from the basis of representation; and secondly, because the proscription, merely on account of color, denies the declaration, that "all men are created free and equal," results in the limitation of our liberties, and consequently in the curtailment of our means of "pursuing happiness."[2]

When they addressed the white population, they confidently demanded the rights of citizenship, not on the basis of their behavior, but on the basis of republican ideology, male privilege and natural rights philosophy. In a significant departure from the

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[2] *Convention of the Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York*, Albany, Aug 18-20, 1840, New York, 1840, in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds. *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 9 (hereafter BSC)

conventions of the past, the delegates invoked the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and republican principles to say:

> We base our claim upon the possession of those common and yet exalted faculties of manhood. WE ARE MEN.... For no vested rights, for no peculiar privileges, for no extraordinary prerogatives, do we ask. We merely put forth our appeal for a republican birth-right. We wish to be something more than political serfs and slaves. We fully believe in the fundamental doctrines set forth in Declaration of Independence.... We ask for a living manifestation of belief in the above doctrine; we know already too much of its dead letter.[3]

More importantly, the delegates no longer agreed that self-improvement efforts were the best means for free blacks to attain an "elevated" position in the United States. In fact, when some older delegates, including Charles B. Ray, editor of the *Colored American* and the Presbyterian minister Theodore Wright, supported a stance resolving that African Americans should "become possessors of the soil...as a means to their becoming more permanent residents, happier in their circumstances, and elevated in their condition," a group of younger delegates led by Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell vigorously protested. Though they agreed that the acquisition of property was in and of itself an appropriate endeavor, they objected to the implication that it was the acquisition of a sufficient amount of property that "*elevates us to the rights of freemen.*"[4] Instead, they resolved, that it was "the elective franchise [that was] a mighty lever for

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[3] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, in BSC, 22 – 23

[4] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, in BSC, 10. Ultimately the resolution was adopted, but it was followed by one proclaiming, "That in recommending our people to possess themselves of the soil, we no less protest against that clause in the Constitution of the State, which requires a property qualification of us, in order to exercise the elective franchise – considering it wrong in principle, sapping the foundation of self government, and contrary to all notions of natural justice." New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, in BSC 12.

elevating in the scale of society any people," and "that without it, we are but nominally free, the vital means of our improvement being paralyzed."[5]

Ultimately, the delegates established a new tone for the conventions that would follow, and reflected the birth of a radical consciousness that would define bourgeois black political culture for the following three decades. During this period, a new generation of black spokesmen and women would voice their opinions in increasingly self-assured tones of independence. Though they would continue to utilize the language of elevation, they would cease to focus solely on the benefits of self-improvement, and expand the term to call for radical changes in American society. In doing so, they would be underscoring the centrality of the male prerogatives of political rights and independence at the heart of the concept of collective elevation, and obscuring the material contributions of women's continued efforts to build and support institutions that facilitated individual self-improvement.

Racial Elevation and a New Generation

In many ways, the new spirit exhibited by the delegates to the 1840 New York State convention reflected the growth and transformation that the northern black population had experienced during the previous two decades. Most noticeably, the older African American statesmen, the architects of the ideology of elevation, began to pass away. A.M.E. church founder Richard Allen passed away soon after the first black

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[5] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, in BSC, 9.

national convention in 1831. The Revolutionary War veteran and wealthy sailmaker James Forten, Sr. would pass away in 1842, and Presbyterian minister Theodore Wright would pass away in 1847. In addition, *Freedom's Journal* editor John Russwurm, and A.M.E. Church leader Daniel Coker had left the United States, to live out their lives in West Africa. These fathers of northern black institutional life had forged alliances with the white antislavery statesmen of the Revolutionary Era, and watched post-Revolutionary era antislavery movements slowly bring an end to northern slavery. As men who had known both northern slavery and freedom, and relied upon their own piety, hard work, and education to attain positions of leadership in black society, self-improvement seemed the best way to gradually obtain African American citizenship rights in the northern states.

As these founding fathers passed away, a new generation of leaders emerged to take their place. Many of these young men and women were the children of the pioneers of black institutional life. For example, the children of James Forten would grow to become leaders in African American and interracial antislavery gatherings, and attorney George B. Vashon, son of the successful barber John B. Vashon, would become a fixture in the black convention movement. But they also included freeborn men and women from less prominent families, like the dentist John S. Rock, who would come to symbolize the political position of northern blacks after being denied a passport by Lewis Cass.[6] Joining the northern African Americans were a significant number of southern-

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[6] William Wells Brown proudly described John S. Rock as a self-made man who overcame Secretary of State Lewis Cass' refusal to issue him a passport to travel to France for surgery. Rock was born in Salem, NJ in 1825. After being denied admission to medical colleges, he became a dentist in 1849. He taught school and practiced dentistry in Philadelphia until 1853 when he came to Boston. He later studied and practiced law. William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, 2d. ed., (1865; Reprint, Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1992), 266-270.

born blacks. Some, like Henry Highland Garnet, arrived in the black communities of the North with their parents, who made the courageous decision to flee slavery with their children in tow.[7] Others fled the South as young adults, and arrived in the black communities of the North by themselves. James W.C. Pennington was one such individual. He escaped from his Maryland plantation as a young man in the 1820s, and received an education in New York City before becoming a Presbyterian minister.[8] And still others like Martin Delany and Mary Ann Shadd, belonged to the free black population of the upper South, and relocated with their parents who searched for freedom of movement, education and opportunity for their children.

These new arrivals from the South quickly joined their northern-born counterparts in the emerging associations and institutions that sustained northern black communities. Pennington, for example, became acclimated to the free labor economy of the urban North by day, while receiving an education from voluntary associations and literary societies in the evening.[9] Upon arriving in New York City as a fugitive from slavery, he immediately began pursuing an education for himself. Looking back on his experience he wrote:

> There is one sin that slavery committed against me, which I never can forgive. It robbed me of my education...It cost me two years' hard labour, after I fled, to unshackle my mind; it was three years before I had purged my language of

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[7] Garnet was born December 23, 1815, a slave on an estate in Kent County, Maryland. In 1824, his family fled to Wilmington, Delaware, finally settling in New York City. Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 4.

[8] Brown, *Black Man*, 276-278.

[9] When reflecting on his experience in his narrative, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, James W.C. Pennington contrasted his former enslaved condition with his new experiences in 1829 New York City saying, "I was earning respectable wages, and by means of evening schools and private tuition, was making encouraging progress in my studies." James W. C. Pennington. *The Fugitive Blacksmith: or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. 3d. Edition. (1850: Reprint. Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971), 51.

> slavery's idioms; it was four years before I had thrown off the crouching aspect of slavery...[10]

Younger arrivals, meanwhile, patronized the institutions that catered to the youth of northern black communities. They and their families looked to these black community institutions for their moral and spiritual, as well as intellectual educations. They attended churches, and joined various local societies. They also participated in literary associations and debating societies, and they contributed poems, letters and articles to the black press.[11]

By actively participating in the organizations that hoped to foster racial elevation through individual self-improvement, a new generation of African Americans came of age with a multifaceted education saturated with the ideology of elevation. This education often separated them from the majority of northern blacks who continued to prefer traditional forms of community life and worship.[12] But this separation involved more than an effort to draw social lines across the northern black population. Education in the institutions of elevation also groomed the recipients for future leadership positions in their communities. Thus, in 1826, when Garnet began attending New York City's African Free School, he formed relationships with classmates Ira Aldridge, Samuel

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[10] Pennington, *Fugitive Blacksmith*, 55

[11] On 9, Feb 1837, Sidney read Garnet's poem "Alonzo" before the Phoenix Literary Society of New York City. Schor, Henry Highland Garnet, 19. Sterling Stuckey says Garnet later used the pseudonym "Sidney" when writing in the *Colored American*. Sterling Stuckey, "A Last Stern Struggle: Henry Highland Garnet and Liberation Theory," in Leon Litwack and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 134.

[12] For example, when Henry Highland Garnet was a young student at the Free African School in New York City in the 1820s, he and the three hundred other grammar school students received a formal education that the thirteen hundred other African American children of school age in New York City did not. Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 7.

Ringgold Ward, James McCune Smith, and Alexander Crummell, all future leaders in northern black political life.[13]

As they matured, this new generation of African Americans took the initiative in founding their own organizations to facilitate self-improvement for themselves and those around them. Doubtless, many agreed with Pennington, who wrote,

> At length, finding that the misery, ignorance, and wretchedness of the free coloured people was by the whites tortured into an argument for slavery; finding myself now among the free people of colour in New York, where slavery was so recently abolished; and finding much to do for their elevation, I resolved to give my strength in that direction.[14]

In April 1834, Henry Highland Garnet joined other young black men in New York City by founding the Garrisonian Literary and Benevolent Association for young men like themselves, aged four to twenty. In keeping with the spirit of the 1830s, the organization was designed to aid in the "diffusion of knowledge" and "mental assistance" while encouraging the "moral and intellectual improvement" of its young members. Predictably, the members passed resolutions against degraded displays of behavior including intemperance and "profane swearing" in an effort to instill ideal values in them even before they faced the temptations of the adult world.[15] In the black community of Pittsburgh, southern arrival Martin Delany became a founding member of the Theban Literary Society. He also served as recording secretary in the local African American

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[13] Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 5. Aldridge would become a well-respected Shakespearian actor in Britain. McCune Smith would become a physician, and Ward and Crummell would become well-known ministers.

[14] Pennington, *Fugitive Blacksmith*, 55.

[15] Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 11 cites *Liberator* April 19 1834.

Temperance Society, and on the executive board of the Philanthropic Society.[16] By participating in these community institutions, young African Americans enhanced their education, improved their rhetorical and public speaking skills, honed their leadership abilities, developed their political consciousness, and socialized with other prominent young members of black communities.[17] By the time they reached adulthood in the 1840s, they were thoroughly familiar with the ideology of elevation through self-improvement and the machinery of northern black political culture.

Access to higher education outside of black community institutions also enlarged the opportunities available to young African Americans. Though access to formal higher education remained extremely limited throughout the antebellum era, young African Americans did indeed have greater access to formal institutions of learning than the previous generation. White abolitionists made repeated attempts to open institutions of higher learning to African Americans with some limited success. In upstate New York, young African Americans received educations at Oneida Institute and New York Central College on an interracial and co-educational basis. In Oberlin, Ohio, likeminded radicals opened Oberlin College to young African American men and women.[18] These

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[16] The Philanthropic Society helped fugitive slaves escape to freedom in the North and Canada. Nell Painter, "Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism," in Litwack and Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 151.

[17] Frederick Cooper also noted, "the success of self-improvement may have itself contributed to the increased emphasis on political agitation" because these small organizations "provided opportunities for potential leaders to develop skills of oratory and organization." Frederick Cooper, "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50," *American Quarterly*, XXIV (December 1972), 619.

[18] Oneida institute was founded by Finneyite Presbyterians in 1827 in Whitestown, NY. Manual education at the time meant "balance between mental and physical labor," so as not to "overwork the brain....Beriah Green opened Oneida Institute to interracial admission when he became the school's president in 1832 and maintained the school's character until it fell victim to economic depression and the Tappan brother's bankruptcy in 1844. Oneida was a small school with no more than 125 students at one time, but it enrolled six blacks in 1836, fourteen over the years of its existence, and had one of the most active student antislavery societies in the East." Meanwhile, "New York Central College was founded by the American Baptist Free Mission Society as a manual labor school and located at McGrawville, New York near

institutions educated a new generation of professional African Americans including attorney John Mercer Langston, New York Central College professor, George B. Vashon.[19] Other African Americans acquired an education while abroad with the help of organizations and individuals sympathetic to the anti-slavery cause. In this way, the Episcopal priest Alexander Crummell received his education in England, while Dr. James McCune Smith received his medical training in Scotland.[20] Still others received training from informal apprenticeships with progressive whites. Dr. Martin Delany and dentist John Rock received their training in this way after being denied admission to professional schools and universities.

As they reached adulthood, they cemented their membership in the northern black elite by maintaining close relationships with other members of the northern black elite, and marrying appropriate spouses. Garnet formed a close relationship with the Princeton educated minister and AAS executive committee member Theodore S. Wright, and married the Connecticut resident Julia Williams.[21] In Pittsburgh, Martin Delany formed a

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Cortland, south of Utica and Syracuse." James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Search of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 214-215.

19 Both of these men were graduates of Oberlin. Brown, *Black Man*, 223-224; Brown, *Black Man* 235.

20 Gregory Rigsby defines four major periods for Alexander Crummell's life: 1) 1819-47: Training in the United States, 2) 1847-53: Education in England, 3) 1853-73: Missionary work in Africa, 4) 1873-98: Return to U.S. Gregory Rigsby, *Alexander Crummell: Pioneer in Nineteenth Century Pan African Thought* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987). For information on James McCune Smith, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

21 "Before the destruction of the [Noyes] academy, [in Canaan, N.H.], Garnet had become acquainted with a former pupil of Prudence Crandall, Julia Williams, who later became his wife. Of Julia he confided to Crummell in 1837: "Oh what a lively being she is! Modest, susceptible, and chaste, a good Christian and a scholar." (Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 10, 15.

friendship with the successful barber and War of 1812 veteran John B. Vashon. And in 1843 he married the eligible, educated Catherine Richards.[22]

Young African Americans like Delany and Garnet were the successful examples of the previous decades' efforts to create an elevated free black population. Others included the artist Robert Douglass Jr., the teacher and newspaper editor Mary Ann Shadd Cary, and the dentist James J.G. Bias. In 1848, a delegate to the national convention pointed out the significant achievements of this new generation of northern blacks saying, "ten or twelve years ago, an educated colored man was regarded as a curiosity, and the thought of a colored man as an author, editor, lawyer, or doctor, had scarce been conceived. —Such, thank Heaven, is no longer the case." [23] Altogether, they formed an active and articulate, if not necessarily wealthy, stratum of the northern black population, and they congratulated themselves for their achievements in the face of difficult odds.[24] Professional African Americans throughout the northern states doubtless agreed with an observer of the 1840 New York State convention who wrote, "If the Convention was a fair representation of our people in the State, then we are a more

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[22] John B. Vashon was a well-to-do barber, veteran of the War of 1812, and, until his death in 1854, a friend and supporter of William Lloyd Garrison. With Vashon's encouragement Delany began publishing the *Mystery* in 1843, "the first black newspaper west of the Alleghenies." The paper suspended publication in 1847 due to lack of funds. "In 1843 Delany married Catherine Richards, the daughter of one of several relatively prosperous and educated blacks with whom he associated in church and antislavery work." Painter, "Martin Delany," in Litwack and Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 151.

[23] *The Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, September 6, 1848*, 18, in NNC.

[24] "It was not until the 1830's that an articulate, self-confident generation of leaders emerged. A professional and business group of some relative affluence came into existence in this decade. There were now Negro teachers, doctors, editors, ministers, and entrepreneurs who, by participation in newly-organized anti-slavery societies, developed sophistication as a group and experience and ability in a protest movement." Rhoda Golden Freeman, *The Free Negro in New York City in the Era Before the Civil War* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 94. Joseph Wilson discusses this stratum in his 1841 description of Philadelphia's black community. See Julie Winch, ed., *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000).

talented, a better educated, more improved and elevated people than we had any anticipation we were."[25]

As a consequence of their own personal achievements and successes, these children of elevation continued to believe in the benefits of individual self-improvement. The delegates at the 1840 New York State convention exemplified this perspective when they wrote:

> If we look into the past, we behold nothing... but "chains and slavery."... From this state, we have been but a few years relieved. During this time, we have been working our way up, with steady perseverance, to respectability and intelligence. Improvement and elevation, then for the future, is the universal sentiment among us.[26]

Still, despite their many individual successes, the emerging leadership realized that they and those they represented had yet to see the benefits of civil and political rights in most of the northern states. In 1841, Austin Steward, long an advocate of elevation through self-improvement, crystallized the position of elite northern blacks when he pointed out that,

> We present the curious and acknowledged creditable spectacle of a people bending under the weight of proscription, who will not suffer by comparison with their more privileged fellow-citizens of the same rank, in either religion, virtue, or industry. [27]

Joseph Willson agreed, saying:

> The educated man of color, in the United States, is by no means, so far as he may be affected by exterior circumstances, the *happiest* man. He finds himself in possession of abilities and acquirements which fit him for most of the useful and honorable stations in life, where such qualities are requisite: but does he find –

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[25] From the *Colored American* Aug 29, 1840, in BSC, 6.

[26] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840 in BSC, 15.

[27] "Address of the New York State Convention of Coloured Citizens to the People of the State," by Austin Steward and others, in *Anti Slavery Reporter*, June 30, 1841 in BAP reel 4 fr. 5957.

> can he even with reason anticipate – their ever being in like manner appreciated and rewarded?[28]

By the 1840s, the answer to Willson's question frankly appeared to be no. If anything, at times, white prejudice against elite African Americans appeared to have increased. As several students of the period have noted, northern white expressions of anti-black sentiment grew markedly in the antebellum era, and such expressions had initially buttressed the northern black elite's argument for individual self-improvement as a means toward collective racial elevation.[29] Perhaps even more disturbing to the black elite was the possibility that rather than simply improving their political and social condition, self-improvement efforts often seemed to exacerbate white antipathy. Frederick Douglass made this point in an 1850 issue of the *North Star*.

> Thousands of colored men can bear witness to the truth of this representation. While we are servants we are never offensive to the whites, or marks of popular displeasure.... We repeat, then, that color is not the cause of our persecution....It is, as we have said, an intense hatred of the colored man when he is distinguished for any ennobling qualities of head or heart.[30]

Samuel Ringgold Ward made a similar point in an editorial in *The Impartial Citizen*, a short-lived abolitionist newspaper. He wrote that while "poor whites" attacked African

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[28] Willson, Sketches, 112.

[29] Several scholars address the issue of rising racism in the antebellum North. For example see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery*, and George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

[30] *North Star*, June 13, 1850. Douglass continued by saying, "We have been often dragged or driven from the tables of hotels where colored men were officiating acceptably as waiters: and from steamboat cabins where twenty or thirty colored men in light jackets and white aprons were frisking about as servants among the whites in every direction. On the very day we were brutally assaulted in New York for riding down Broadway in company with ladies, we saw several white ladies riding with *black servants*. These servants were well-dressed, proud looking men, evidently living on the fat of the land – yet they were servants. They rode not for their own, but for the pleasure and convenience of white persons. They were not in those carriages as friends or equals." Douglass wrote this piece after being assaulted by a group of white men in lower Manhattan for riding in the company of "ladies."

Americans physically, elite whites chose a less violent approach to emphasize their disdain for "elevated" African Americans. He wrote:

> If from among the mass of persons they crushed, one dares to raise his head above the common level, and take himself to books, letters, learning; determined to be a man, and by patience, industry, energy and perseverance, acquires some means of usefulness, *how piously* the pro-slavery whites...rush away from their own Literary Hall, or Meeting House, rather than pollute their sanctified ears, or un-starch a litter of their would-be dignity, by listening to a black man! "He is out of his place!"... "Niggers can't rise here:" say the learned, the religious, the refined. "Go to Hell, you nigger!" say the less refined, less religious, and less learned, *in the very same spirit*.[31]

In was in this context that young African American men and women began reevaluating their belief in the efficacy of individual self-improvement as a strategy to promote political change. In the previous decade most spokesmen for the northern black population had consistently argued, as the delegates to the Pennsylvania State Convention did in 1841, that:

> It is a mistake to suppose that there is any prejudice against mere *color*. Gentlemen and ladies, distinguished alike for their learning, their virtues, and their taste, have articles of dress, furniture, and equipage, of black, and every variety of color. Indeed, a full suit of black is universally considered the most rich and magnificent that can possibly be worn. Hence prejudice is not against *color*, but against *condition*: therefore improve the condition, and you destroy the prejudice.[32]

But now, spokesmen and women for the northern black population began rejecting the prevailing assumption of the discourse of the 1830s: that it was the degraded condition of

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[31] *Impartial Citizen*, April 11, 1849 in BAB reel 5 fr. 1057.

[32] *Proceedings of the State Convention of the Colored Freemen of Pennsylvania, Held in Pittsburgh, on the 23d, 24th, and 25th, of August, 1841, for the Purpose of Considering their Condition, and the Means of Its Improvement*, in BSC, 115.

African Americans that fed the prejudices of white northerners.[33] Noting that "when he is drunken, idle, ignorant and vicious," Frederick Douglass wrote, "'*Black Bill*' is a source of amusement: he is called a good-natured fellow." And clearly connecting badges of degradation like "drunkenness," "idleness," and "ignorance," to occupational status, Douglass continued:

> ["Black Bill"] is the first to touch his hat to the stranger approaching the hotel, and offer his service in holding his horse, or blacking his boots. The white gentleman tells the landlord to give "Bill" "*something to drink*," and actually drinks with "Bill" himself! – While poor black "Bill" will minister to the pride, vanity and laziness of white American gentlemen—while he consents to play the buffoon for their sport, he will share their regard. But let him cease to be what we have described him to be – let him shake off the filthy rags that cover him – let him abandon drunkenness for sobriety, industry for indolence [*sic*], ignorance for intelligence, and give up his menial occupation for respectable employment – let him quit the hotel and go to the church, and assume there the rights and privileges of one for whom the Son of God died, and he will be pursued with the fiercest hatred. His name will be cast out as evil: and his life will be embittered with all the venom which hate and malice can generate.[34]

These were the sentiments animating the delegates to the1848 Pennsylvania convention, when they wrote, "our political elevation is more depending on the improvement of the white man's heart than on the colored man's mind." And they ended their "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of Pennsylvania by saying:

> Finally, brethren, in conclusion we cannot part without again admonishing you that you must not fail to battle with the *demon* of *complexional* INTOLERANCE

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[33] "In the views of almost all black leaders, self-improvement would benefit the race in a twofold manner." First, elevated blacks would force whites to rethink their prejudices, and ultimately grant blacks civil rights. Secondly, "Self improvement would in itself raise blacks from degradation. Degradation was ignorance, intemperance, menial jobs and improper conduct." Cooper rightly notes that the first point implies that white prejudice was a black problem, not a white one. Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 617. The growing sophistication in black consciousness during the 1840s was reflected in the reevaluation of this color versus condition argument. Young, *Antebellum Black Activists*, 170-171.

[34] *North Star*, June 13, 1850.

> FIRST, and let the subject of our *condition*, follow, for unless you pursue this course our labours will prove fruitless.[35]

As men and women educated and socialized in institutions designed to facilitate intellectual, moral, and material self-improvement, members of the northern African American elite continued to believe in a fundamental premise of elevation ideology: that ignorance, poverty and intemperance were badges of degradation, and individuals both could and should make the effort to "elevate" their behavior and character to meet a level of respectability.[36] Thus, despite the fact that delegates to the New York State Convention of 1840 would demand political recognition by proclaiming, "we are not satisfied with our present condition in the state," they could still agree that "improvement and elevation...is the universal sentiment among us."[37] In fact scholars have noted the continuing importance of self-improvement rhetoric in their public discourse.[38] By using a word/phrase frequency analysis to interpret convention proceedings, R.J. Young discovered that the number of resolutions calling for "elevation" actually increased from

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[35] *Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Pennsylvania, Convened at Harrisburg, December 13th and 14th, 1848*, in BSC, 132.

[36] Frederick Cooper wrote, "Race pride and racial solidarity coexisted with conventional moral values. The paradox is most evident with Martin Delany...he laid much emphasis on racial solidarity and self-help, denounced white oppression and suggested schemes for emigration. Yet no one believed more strongly than Delany in the morality of white America: industry, frugality, abstemiousness, the need for a practical education, careers that would be 'useful' to society as a whole. Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 616-617. There is no paradox here. Racial solidarity and bourgeois value systems were never a contradiction, particularly for those raised in that defined racial progress in terms of the bourgeois value systems of their time and locale.

[37] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, BSC, 15.

[38] A survey of the black newspapers of the period also indicates a continuation of the trend to discuss the importance of individual self-improvement efforts. For example, Douglass' *North Star* continued to include pieces on "Elevation" that detailed the best ways for individuals to work toward a "intellectual and moral elevation," and promote "frugality and industry." See *North Star*, May 4, 1849 and April 27, 1849. Cooper argues that, "the views that were first spelled out in *Freedom's Journal* continued to be of great importance over the next two decades. Although leaders became increasingly involved in campaigns against slavery and discrimination, especially in the 1840s, whenever they spoke of bettering the living conditions of the free blacks, it was generally to exhort blacks to overcome their ignorance, conquer the temptations of the bottle and behave industriously and respectably." He includes Frederick Douglass, David Walker, H.H. Garnet, and Pennington in this characterization. Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 608, 609.

the 1830s through the 1850s.[39] And Cooper rightly points out that later conventions continued to discuss issues of "education, temperance, and the need to learn the mechanic arts."[40]

However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the emphasis placed on the task of individual self-improvement changed dramatically. While delegates continued to believe in self-improvement, they now saw it as part of a larger strategy for change, and suggested that African Americans use "moral and intellectual cultivation as a means through which we may be able to enlist the advocacy of our friends and influence the minds of our opponents."[41] Though spokesmen continued to advocate self-improvement in the black press and the pulpit, in the settings of conventions, the discussions of education, temperance and religion were now introduced after discussions of suffrage and citizenship, and given far less time in the official minutes than they had been in the conventions of the 1830s. Thus, in the Indiana State Convention of 1851, the delegates began by proclaiming their status as citizens, and demanding the rights due to them on the basis of the Constitution before affirming the importance of self-improvement.[42] At the same time, delegates began redefining the language of elevation to reflect the shifting priorities of the emerging generation. Young's own word/phrase

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[39] Young, *Antebellum Black Activists*, Table 1, 211-215.

[40] Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 610.

[41] Pennsylvania State Convention, Harrisburg, 1848 in BSC, 132.

[42] *State Convention of the People of Color of the State of Indiana*, August 9, 1851, BSC, 177. The President's (John G. Britton) "Address to the Gentlemen of the Convention" illustrates the way they prioritized their issues. He said, 1) "As Americans we are entitled to all the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizenship as other citizens, according to the letter and spirit of the Constitution of the United States." 2) "We are deprived of these inherent rights, set forth in the Declaration of Independence, and confirmed by the Constitution of the United States; they are taken from us and conferred upon foreigners that come into their country. 3d. Industry, Education, and Temperance should claim the undivided attention of each delegate in this Convention."

analysis confirms this transformation, for resolutions for political rights and suffrage increased dramatically as the principle means to achieve collective racial "elevation."[43]

In many ways, the increasing emphasis on citizenship rights heightened the association between the rhetoric of elevation and the rights of African American men. As we saw in the previous chapter, northern African American men, irrespective of their position on woman's rights, conceptualized the suffrage and citizenship rights as natural manhood rights. While some men thought those rights could be extended to women, all could agree that in their present state, they were rights that fundamentally belonged to male citizens who fulfilled their obligations to the state. This is why, when petitioning state legislatures for the right of suffrage, African American spokesmen reminded their legislators, "WE ARE MEN" asking for "no peculiar privileges," or "extraordinary prerogatives," but merely "those common and yet exalted faculties of manhood."[44] In essence, in a climate where "universal" suffrage meant white manhood suffrage, African American spokesmen were asking that the racial particularity be removed from the application of this universal right.

This emerging definition of elevation through the acquisition of political rights again helped to obscure African American women's participation in antebellum black political culture. Statements like, "we want social and civil rights--to be respected and treated as men and Christians, and we want no more" left little space for African American women.[45] In fact, women's attempts to participate in traditionally male

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[43] Young, *Antebellum Black Activists*, Table 1 pgs. 211-215.
[44] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, BSC, 22-23.
[45] *Colored American*, July 7, 1838.

concerns were not always viewed favorably by men. In 1840, the *Colored American* informed its readers that in respect to the upcoming New York State Convention at Troy:

> The delegates are not going there merely for comfort, but burdened with their people's wrongs, they are going to work hard with a view to their release; and man can do more work abroad without his wife than with her...We hope, therefore, as the wives will not go with the view of doing business, that they will consent to remain at home, while husbands go up to work hard and do business...Brethren, come then but without your wives."[46]

And some African American men apparently found African American women's participation in petition drives troubling as well. One Poughkeepsie resident wrote to the Colored American for clarification on the issue asking: "Shall Women Sign our Petitions?" The writer reasoned that, "the females suffer a part of the grievances, and labor under many disadvantages" along with African American men. On these grounds he suggested that African American women, "being the aggrieved with us, certainly ought to have the right to petition also to have these grievances removed." But unsure of the propriety of this opinion, he concluded, "This is my opinion of the matter, however, I may be mistaken, and therefore write for information. And I hope that some one who properly understands the matter, will explain on the subject." Though Charles B. Ray responded affirmatively in his reply to the letter, saying, "Sign the petitions? Yes, if they wish to," he too remained unsure about the appropriateness of the action. He ended with a moderate endorsement of female political participation, saying, "Our policy may not be thought to be the best, and it may not be; still, we say again - sign the petitions - yes, if they wish to."[47]

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[46] *Colored American*, August 7, 1841.

[47] *Colored American*, November 13, 1841.

Despite the limitations of convention, African American women consistently expressed their political convictions by involving themselves in traditionally male political arenas, concerns and organizational efforts. Over strong community censure, Maria Stewart had earlier claimed the public speaking platform as an appropriate tool for African American women concerned with improving the position of northern and southern blacks alike.[48] And in the 1840s and 50s, other African American women followed suit to community acclaim. Though they rarely signed requests for black male suffrage, African American women joined men in petitioning state legislatures for the removal of other discriminatory legislation, and the abolition of slavery.[49] In addition, local women's organizations helped to cover the costs of renting the church or hall for black male conventions. Individual women also made plans to attend men's conventions, and observe the proceedings. In a letter to Angelina E. Grimke, Sarah Forten, asked,

> Do you know whether the Ladies have fixed on the time for holding their Convention? Do you not think it would be best to hold it the day before the men's meeting – for most of us would be desirous to be present at both meetings...There will probably be a large delegation from our Society. The sisters propose going but not as Delegates...[50]

Though Forten's letter most probably refers to an upcoming interracial AAS convention, her letter is instructive. For she writes that though she and her compatriots intended to attend the male convention, "the sisters propose going but not as Delegates."

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[48] Stewart violated gender ideals in 1832, when fired by religious and anti-slavery zeal, she began delivering public addresses stressing self-improvement, elevation, and divine redemption to Boston audiences. See chapter two of this dissertation.

[49] For example, in 1837, a petition to repeal the laws authorizing slavery in New York State contained the names of 271 female alongside 605 male New York City residents, while a similar petition from the city of Brooklyn contained the names of 92 women and 140 men. The petition for a law granting trial by jury those arrested on suspicion of being fugitive slave contained the names of 272 female and 489 male New Yorkers. The petition for the right of suffrage was intended for male signatures only. *Colored American*, March 11, 1837.

[50] Sarah Forten to Angelina E. Grimke, Philadelphia, April 15, 1837 in BAP, Reel 2, fr. 1918-1920.

Like Forten, other elite African American women rarely transgressed the bounds of acceptable behavior in the period. Evidence suggests that African American women attended the black national and state conventions of the 1840s and 1850s in considerable numbers. The previous admonitions for women to remain at home notwithstanding, the minutes of the 1840 New York State convention described "numerous" spectators, "both of male and female" who remained "in attendance morning, afternoon and evening," and "manifested no less interest than the delegates themselves."[51] Perhaps this is why the delegates ultimately enlisted men and women in their fight for the privileges of citizenship, saying, "we call for the exertion of the entire people. We call upon age...upon youth...upon that portion of the people whose influence is tender, gentle, and benign – we call upon the women..."[52]

Ultimately, the state and national conventions began acknowledging and celebrating women's contributions and their presence at proceedings. In 1841, the Pennsylvania State Convention delegates passed a resolution thanking "the ladies" for their presence during the convention. Moreover, the record noted that during the closing hymn, "the voices of the ladies, who crowded the gallery, unit[ed] with those of the men from below, producing an effect which to be appreciated must have been heard."[53] Similarly, the publishing committee prefaced its publication of the minutes of an Ohio State Convention noting:

> The weather was very cold, and the hall where the session was held was cold, but the ladies, God bless them! cheered us with their smiles, and wishes and

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[51] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, BSC, 6.

[52] New York State Convention, Albany, 1840, BSC, 16-17.

[53] Pennsylvania State Convention, Pittsburgh, 1841, BSC, 112.

> approbation, and for which I thank them, not for myself alone, but for the millions with whom I am identified in suffering and wrong.[54]

In fact, women's participation as virtuous, quiet, observers and supporting players helped to underscore the African American male claim to American male prerogatives of enfranchisement and give legitimacy to the cause.

The Radicalization of Northern Black Political Culture

In December of 1840, Thomas Cole wrote a letter to the *Liberator* that reflected the ideological shifts taking place in northern black political culture. He told the editor,

> We must take a more comprehensive view of our condition, and everything that relates to our highest and best good. We must study politics for ourselves, and place ourselves in a condition where our influence will be felt wherever we have the right to exercise the political franchise. Then, and only then, will equal justice be meted out to us.[55]

His letter clearly reflected the growing desire for citizenship rights and the suffrage, but in addition his language highlighted a growing concern about the independence of northern black communities. Over the following decades, black spokesmen asserted the importance of defining the terms of their own political agenda, and creating the institutions that would help them succeed.[56]

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[54] *State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Ohio, held in the City of Columbus, January 21st, 22d, and 23d, 185?* in BSC, 318.

[55] Thomas Cole letter printed in *Liberator*, Dec 18, 1840; Carter G. Woodson, ed. *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C. Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc. Lancaster: Lancaster Press, Inc., 1926), 73.

[56] The emphasis on independence led to renewed arguments for regional and national black newspapers. Martin Dann correctly notes the presence of several men connected with black newspapers as prominent participants in the conventions in the decade preceding the Civil War. He also suggests that their presence "may account for the importance placed on black papers by the conventions and their sponsorship of them." Martin E Dann, *The Black Press, 1827-1890: The Quest for a National Identity*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 17. I would argue that the importance placed on newspapers, through certainly

Several scholars have noted that this belief in independent action infused the spirit of the conventions of the 1840s and 50s.[57] Many attribute that independence to a growing sense of despair over the intransigence of white racism both within and outside of the antislavery movements.[58] But scholars who view the increased emphasis on independence as a reaction to the racism of northern whites underestimate the important role separate black institutional life played in molding the political consciousness of the new generation of African American spokesmen.[59] For the new generation of black leaders, the increased commitment to black controlled "national" institutions was less a function of disappointment in their white allies performance, than the outgrowth of their upbringing in black-controlled local institutions and organizations. In some ways, they saw themselves breaking with the patterns established by the previous generation, as William Wells Brown pointed out in an 1847 lecture at the Female Anti-Slavery Society in Salem, Massachusetts. Brown said:

> I look to the rising generation. I expect that the rising generation will liberate the Slave. I do not look to the older ones. I have sometimes thought that the sooner we get rid of the older ones the better it would be. The older ones have got their

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enhanced by the presence of newspapermen, drew instead from a desire to elevate themselves by pressing their own political agenda.

57 Howard Bell, in his Survey of the Black Convention Movement pointed to the 1841 Convention in Troy, New York as a benchmark for "firsts" in northern black conventions. Aside from its emphasis on obtaining the suffrage and petitioning the state legislature, Bell sees this convention "as the first of the Negro conventions on record to declare its independence of white meddling. In this respect it is the harbinger of a new age in Negro thought and action. After that date they might incur Garrisonian criticism, but they were never again bothered with a swarm of whites to influence action from the convention floor." Howard Holman Bell. *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 66.

58 The Peases persuasively argued that white abolitionists often failed to recognize their own racism, even as they campaigned against southern slavery. "Whites recognized two distinct problems." First, end slavery. Second, eliminate prejudice. "Yet, though they undertook this dual commitment, they often had racial attitudes similar to those of their less committed neighbors." Jane H. and William H. Pease. *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 5.

59 The Peases make a good case that white abolitionists neither understood nor appreciated northern black separatist efforts for civil rights. Pease and Pease, *They Who Would Be Free*, 12 – 16.

> old prejudices, and their old associations, and they cling to them, and seem not to look at the Slave or to care anything about him.[60]

But ultimately, the African American leaders socialized in these institutions began to extend the self-improvement philosophy to argue that African Americans, as a group, bore the primary responsibility of campaigning for, and winning civil and political rights. Samuel Davis of Buffalo made this point in the National Colored Convention of 1843, when he asserted the importance of self-determination, and asked his fellow delegates,

> From what other source can we expect that help will come? Shall we appeal to the Christian community—to the church of our own land?...We cannot, therefore, look to her for help, for she has taken sides against us, and on the side of slavery. Shall we turn to either of the great political parties of the day!... No, they are but the slaves of slavery, too.... Shall we then look to the abolitionists, and wait for them to give us our rights?... But if we sit down in idleness and sloth, waiting for them, or any other class of men to do our own work, I fear it will never be done. If we are not willing to rise up and assert our rightful claims, and plead our own cause, we have no reason to look for success. We ourselves, must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights, or we shall never enjoy that boon. It is found only of them that seek.[61]

Saying, "we must put forth our own exertions. We must exert our own powers. Our political enfranchisement cometh *not* from afar," spokesmen would begin popularizing a new motto to signify their new political orientation: "Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not, Who would be free must strike the first blow!"[62]

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60 Quoted in William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered Before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, at Lyceum Hall, November 14, 1847*, in BAP Reel 5 fr. 0522.

61 *Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens*, Buffalo, 1843, 6, 7, in *NNC*.

62 New York State Convention, 1840, Albany, BSC, 15, 16. During the New York State Convention of Colored Citizens, at Albany in 1840, Henry Highland Garnet, Theodore Wright and Charles B. Ray wrote an "Address to the Negroes of New York," that began with a scriptural proverb: "Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not, Who would be free must strike the first blow?" After 1840 this would become the motto for many newly forming antislavery societies. Joel Shor rightly notes that in 1840, such a "blow" signified more direct pressure for citizenship rights. But by 1843, such a "blow" would "would actually urge the slave to resistance." Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 38-39.

Armed with this new sense of independence, African American spokesmen increasingly followed the pattern established by the New York State convention in 1840, and began demanding their political rights on the basis of their citizenship, their past military service, the country's republican ideals, and their basic rights as men. Male spokesmen continued to base their claim to the right of suffrage on their sex, saying, A man's *right* to vote is as sacred as his right to hold property. Because I am a *man*, and a voluntary subject of government, my right to vote is *mine*, as much as any other man's, though I am black.[63] African American men also emphasized their gender-based role as political figures by acting as delegates in the settings of state and national conventions.

The new generation of African-American spokesmen and women also demonstrated a growing intolerance for patterns of northern white racism, from the benign to the vicious. The black press increasingly recounted and protested the more egregious and potentially dangerous public incidents of racism, like public assaults on Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, or the Brooklyn schoolteacher Elizabeth Jennings. And while the previous generation of spokesmen, particularly those from Philadelphia, had deferred to the opinion of white antislavery activists on many matters, those of the younger generation preferred to expand their networks amongst black allies, and reproach white abolitionists for their own racism. As early as 1838, Benjamin Roberts privately chided the Reverend Amos A. Phelps in a letter for what he saw as "a combined effort on the part of certain *professed* abolitionists to muzzle, exterminate and put down the efforts of certain colored individuals affecting the welfare of their colored

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[63] Samuel Ringgold Ward letter in the *Albany Patriot*, December 16, 1846.

brethren."[64] But when Henry Highland Garnet received criticism from the prominent white Garrisonian abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman for his 1843 *Address to the Slaves*, he voiced his displeasure publicly in the pages of the *Liberator*, saying:

> I have expected no more from ignorant slaveholders and their apologists, but I really looked for better things from Mrs. Maria. W. Chapman, an anti-slavery poetess, and editor *pro tem.* of the Boston Liberator. I can think on the subject of human rights without 'counsel,' either from the men of the West, or the women of the East. My address was read to but two persons, previous to its presentation at Buffalo. One was a colored brother, who did not give me a single word of counsel, and the other was my wife; and if she did counsel me, it is no matter, for 'we twain are one flesh.' ...

"In the mean time," he concluded, "be assured that there is one black American who dares to speak boldly on the subject of universal liberty."[65] In a similar vein, in an editorial in his journal the *Impartial Citizen*, Samuel Ringgold Ward chastised well-intentioned abolitionists for proclaiming "You'll all be white, in Heaven," and "Your soul is as white as any body's" to African Americans. "Five sixths of the human race are of a dark complexion," he retorted. "Who told you, that God will change the complexions of a vast majority of His children, [to] accommodate the prejudices of a little handfull on the American continent?" [66]

How disaffected they became with their white allies varied considerably according to regional differences, political persuasion, and the audience a given African American would address. For example those from Pennsylvania and older African Americans often continued to stress interracial work and moral reform. Those from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania who were closely tied with the Garrisonians also spoke out against separatism, some even rejecting the issue of political rights, which violated

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[64] Benjamin F. Roberts to Amos A. Phelps, June 19, 1838, handwritten letter in BAP Reel 2 fr. 0499.
[65] Garnet to Chapman, in *Liberator*, Dec 3, 1843; Woodson, *Mind of the Negro*, 195.
[66] Samuel Ringggold Ward editorial in *Impartial Citizen* April 11, 1849 in BAP Reel 5 fr. 9690.

the Garrisonian belief in the efficacy of moral suasion.[67] When speaking to white audiences, or writing in Garrison's *Liberator*, black letter writers spoke more often of their friends and partners in the antislavery struggle. In these settings, those who disagreed with the new direction of black political thought could safely vent their frustrations.

> In relation to the committee in Albany, or any other committee emanating from the 'Colored Convention,' it is impossible that I should enter into any communication on this subject with them inasmuch as I believe the convention to have been too narrow in its views, and to have been based upon a *violation of the same principle* to enforce which it assembled together. In other words it called a 'caste convention' in order to abolish caste. On this ground, I gave the convention my hearty opposition so far as this city was concerned in getting up the same: as Mr. Ray and the Central Committee are probably well aware: and in this opposition I was supported by nearly one half of the meeting called in New York City to discuss the propriety of a convention, early in August last.[68]

But ultimately, despite these tensions within the black leadership over the best ways to effect change, the discourse in the period leaned decidedly toward a new sense of independence.[69] Samuel Ringgold Ward gave voice to this trend when, writing in the *Impartial Citizen*, "A depressed people cannot be elevated by any other than themselves.

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67 "Those Negro leaders who had been rained in abolitionism by Garrison began to accept his views: in many instances it took years of reassessment to abandon these views. That is why men such as Garnet, Cornish, Wright and Charles B. Ray were to become the vanguard of black abolitionism, ahead of the more moderate Frederick Douglass, William C. Nell, Robert Purvis, William Wells Brown, Charles Remond, and William Whipper." Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 33.

68 Feb 8, 1841, NYC James McCune Smith to James G. Birney, handwritten letter in BAP Reel 3 fr. unknown, p 503 doc 1938.

69 The idea of black independence became a major area of debate in the period. While the evidence suggests that most black male leaders approved of cultivating an individual independent spirit, some disagreements arose over the extent of collective racial independence. Scholars have often cast these debates as differences between African Americans who supported nationalism and emigration, and those who supported immigration and assimilation. Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation in its present form, the evidence suggests that such characterizations are far too schematic. Differences in region, political, religious, and abolitionist organizational affiliations shaped the ways that African-American leaders interpreted and discussed the contemporary black condition and the means for improving it. These differences occasionally erupted into public verbal attacks, defamation, and bitter enmity, as in the cases of Douglass and Delany, and Douglass and Garnet. But in doing so, those engaged in the rhetorical battles never failed to cast themselves as the ones most interested in "elevating" and improving the black population, and their opponents as contributors to racial degradation.

Others may remove burthens, [*sic*] plead their cause, afford them facilities, and cheer them with smiles and encouragement, – But more than this they cannot do." And although Ward remained a staunch proponent of individual self-improvement and moral suasion as the best means to challenge the institutions of slavery and northern racism, he believed that "if the colored people did not decree and achieve their own elevation, they never would, never *could* be elevated."[70]

In addition to expressing their desire for political rights, and their growing sense of independence with the same rhetoric of "elevation" that had previously meant self-improvement, northern black men and women also began moving the issue of slavery to the front of their political agenda. Their increasing concern with anti-slavery efforts reflected changes in the nature of American slavery. As the older generation of African American leaders passed away, much of the lingering optimism in black political culture began to die with them. For by 1840, the hope for the natural progression of emancipation had faded. Instead, the new generation of African Americans grew to adulthood in a time when southern abolitionist efforts had long disappeared. Instead, the slave-based economy of the South continued to thrive, with the prices of cotton and slaves growing considerably. Moreover, the institution itself appeared to be expanding. White settlers were moving the plantation economy farther to the west, and consequently, increasing numbers of enslaved African Americans were being sold from the upper South states of Virginia and Kentucky to meet the rising need for labor in the plantations of the deep South and old Southwest. And finally, the most prominent members of the planter class seemed to have a stranglehold on the federal government, even to the point of

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[70] Samuel Ringgold Ward writing in *Impartial Citizen*, March 14, 1849 in BAP Reel 5, fr. 1003.

silencing the anti-slavery petitions traditionally read on the floor of the House. One observer noted that the life in the North did not necessarily shield African Americans from these trends. He wrote to the *North Star* in 1850 to say "The Southern slave-driver has become more bold and daring since the passage of the slave bill. Every city and town in the North is infested with these men, and the colored people can no longer meet in religious worship, without discovering the man-stealer in their midst."[71]

The importance of anti-slavery in the northern black political agenda also increased apace with the visibility of African American women, whose activism was increasingly tied to the growing antislavery effort. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the early 1830s, local black women's organizations began expanding their circle of influence beyond their own community needs, and contributed to an increasing variety of causes in the antislavery movement. In 1847, William Wells Brown wrote to Samuel May in praise of the African American women of New Bedford who organized a sewing circle to raise money for the American Anti Slavery Society. He wrote,

> I...am more and more convinced of the propriety of invoking the aid of females to the slave's cause.... Nothing looks more cheering to me than to see a circle of women working with their own hands for the redemption of their enslaved countrymen. And why should they not labor for the downfall of slavery? Are not more than a million of females driven daily to the sugar, the cotton, the rice and tobacco plantations of the South? Are they not denied the marriage rite?[72]

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[71] Letter from L. Tilmon to the *North Star*, October 3, 1850. Not only was the institution of slavery flourishing and expanding by the 1840s, but the political debate over the expansion of slavery had grown increasingly heated over these decades as well. Some of the areas where the African American leadership congregated were hotbeds of political antislavery activism, and the debates over political abolitionism, and the formation of the liberty party were aired among black Americans as well as white ones. With the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the fervor of black antislavery activism increased.

[72] *Liberator*, September 3, 1847, in BAP Reel 5, fr. 0467.

By the 1850s, campaigns such as the one undertaken by the Ladies of Whitestown, New York, who "forwarded two barrels of clothing" to help Canadian refugees in August of 1851, were quite common.[73] Because of Garrisonian abolitionists' progressive stance on woman's rights issues, African American women found themselves increasingly participating in anti-slavery organizations alongside men. Organizations like the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society, formed in 1853, which held that "any man or woman subscribing to the principles of this Society," shall "become a member," proliferated during the period, and male participants doubtless carried the aggressive abolitionist spirit to the male conventions of the day.[74]

Women weren't the only new prominent "official" participants in black public life. Fugitive slaves from the South became increasingly important figures on the lecture circuit, while their writings began dominating black public discourse. William Wells Brown, one of these men himself, pointed out that, "In our own country, there are men who once held the plough, and that too without any compensation, that are now presiding at the editor's table."[75] As they became well known in white anti-slavery circles, they simultaneously became increasingly important figures in the black communities in which they lived, and brought a new sense of urgency to black abolitionism.[76] Northern blacks increasingly praised "self-made" and "great" men like Henry Bibb, who began life "an

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[73] *Voice of the Fugitive*, Aug 13, 1851, in BAP Reel 7, fr. 0051.

[74] *Official Proceedings of the Ohio State Convention of Colored Freedmen Held in Columbus, Jan 19th-21st, 1853* in BAP Reel 8 fr. 0101.

[75] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Oct 2, 1851 in BAP Reel 7, fr. 0124.

[76] Joel Schor suggests this in his biography of Henry Highland Garnet, he argues that "educated fugitives" were the "newly emerging leaders" of the northern black population. "These men had escaped by their wits and had learned to tell hard new truths about slavery and discrimination; they would now propose original solutions for destroying the decadent institution" Schor's characterization of this group is an accurate one, though he is stretching to include Garnet in this group, for his association with slavery really existed through his relationship with his parents who fled with him and his siblings to New York City when Henry was still a child. Moreover, Garnet was raised in the institutional life of black New York. Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 4.

ignorant slave," but "by his own powers," became "an educated free man" who "left a name that will not soon fade away."[77]

Under these circumstances, the issue of slavery moved to the forefront of black political culture in the 1840s and 50s. The black and abolitionist press now devoted significant space to fiction and first hand accounts that portrayed the evils of slavery. The issue also began to be highlighted in state and national conventions, where it was once only briefly mentioned. One man wrote to the *Voice of the Fugitive* to suggest that a truly national convention be held in Canada West, "the American Canaan," and include

> hundreds of volunteer delegates from the south who would most certainly be welcome, and if not formally deputized by the enslaved millions behind them, should at least represent them and be entitled to sit as honorary members.[78]

At the same time, black debating societies also added slavery-related questions to the classical subjects they traditionally debated. For example, in 1851, the Young Men's Debating Club of Sandwich, Canada West invited the public to attend their debate on the question, "Which would be the most expedient, an immediate or a gradual emancipation of the American slaves?"[79] Later that year, the same society debated the question, "Which has been the greatest evil in the world, human slavery, or intemperance?" While members of the previous generation may have at times suggested the former, as Steward did in his 1827 emancipation day address, this time, the tenor of the conversation had changed completely, and the anti-slavery advocates carried the day. According to Henry Bibb, "It is a hard matter to maintain one side of this question before an audience, nine-

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77 Brown continued, "There are few characters more worthy of the student's study than that of Henry Bibb." Brown, *Black Man*, 87.

78 *Voice of the Fugitive*, July 16, 1851 in BAP Reel 7, fr. 0003.

79 *Voice of the Fugitive*, Sep 29, 1851 in BAP Reel 7 fr. 0122.

tenths of whom are fugitives from slavery, whose prejudices are strongly against the system of slavery."[80]

Ultimately, however, despite the fact that African American women helped to move the anti-slavery issue to top of the northern black political agenda, the rhetorical strategies employed by male leaders in black anti-slavery circles tended to cast the degradation caused by slavery as a specifically male problem. As we saw in the previous chapter, the relationship between nineteenth-century American concepts of citizenship, property ownership and manhood rights shaped the parameters of the northern free black critique of slavery in the 1820s and 1830s. In his analysis of the evils of the institution, for example, Austin Steward wrote, "I have often heard fugitive slaves say, that it was not so much the cruel beatings and floggings that they received which induced them to leave the South, as the idea of dragging out a whole life of unrequited toil to enrich their masters."[81] For free black spokesmen, as with many other nineteenth-century American men, property rights included the right to wield authority as an independent head of household with the power to protect and make decisions for one's dependent wife and children. Enslaved African Americans, they reminded their audience, lacked this fundamental manhood right as well. J.W.C. Pennington described the situation in this way:

> Whatever may be the ill or favoured condition of the slave in the matter of mere personal treatment, it is the chattel relation that robs him of his manhood, and transfers his ownership in himself to another. It is this that transfers the proprietorship of his wife and children to another. It is this that throws his family history into utter confusion, and leaves him without a single record to which he may appeal in vindication of his character, or honour.[82]

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80 *Voice of the Fugitive*, Sep 29, 1851, BAP Reel 7, fr. 0122.

81 Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 107.

82 James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, xii.

In contrast, Austin Steward explained, "No Englishman, however poor, destitute, or degraded he may be, but he owns himself, his wife and children..."[83] The *Colored American* demonstrated the connection between these concepts when it printed "A Few Plain Questions for Plain Folks," in its columns. The piece asked:

> Can a slave marry without his owner's consent? If so, quote the law: give chapter and verse.
>
> Can a slave prevent the sale of his wife if the owner pleases? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave, with impunity, refuse to flog his wife with her person all exposed, if his owner pleases to command him? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave obtain redress, if *his master* deprives him of his goods? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave attend either public or private worship, without the risk of punishment, if his master forbids him? If so, quote the law.
>
> These are plain questions, which every slave owner knows can only be answered in one way.
>
> When, then, any individual gets up to tell you how well the slaves are treated, or how happy under such circumstances slaves may be, tell him that he insults your understanding, that he outrages your republican feeling, and that he dishonors God.

The item was signed, "A Husband and a Father," further underscoring the relationship between republican and manhood rights.[84] And in 1844, James McCune Smith summed up the black anti-slavery argument in a letter to the New York Tribune, saying, "The slave has no right to his own person," and "the slave has no right to his own wife."[85]

For northern black spokesmen in the 1840s and 1850s, while the institution of slavery dehumanized and brutalized the enslaved population in general, the institution

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[83] Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 327.

[84] *Colored American* April 1, 1837.

[85] James McCune Smith letter to the *New York Tribune* reprinted in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 1, 1844.

degraded African American men in particular by denying them the male rights of independence and property ownership. But were free black men much better off living in the North? By the 1850s, many black spokesmen would begin to argue that they were not, and begin proposing even more radical masculine means to combat the degradation of American slavery.

Conclusion

Because of the rise of the new generation, and the political context of the time, black political culture began to take on a new cast in the 1840s. First, the emerging generation of spokesmen began infusing the rhetoric of elevation with new meanings that reflected their upbringing, the spirit of the age, and their paradoxical position in northern society. A new emphasis on independence emerged, while demands for immediate abolition, and political rights moved to the forefront of the northern black political agenda, all under the rubric of "elevation." In short, the northern black leadership eschewed support for individual self-improvement as the path to political elevation and instead began framing the concept of collective racial elevation as a state that could be achieved only through the abolition of slavery and the acquisition of civil and political equality. In doing so the framed themselves as leaders of a larger black community that included men and women, slave and free.

Ultimately, while the new generation maintained the older ideas of proper behavior, and a belief in the inherent benefits of individual efforts at moral, material and intellectual self-improvement, they also created a new political culture that was more independent, more committed to racial unity, and one that welcomed certain forms of African-American women's participation. By the 1840s, sentiments such as those expressed by one delegate to the National Convention of 1848 who proclaimed:

> We are one people—one in general complexion, one in a common degradation, one in popular estimation.—As one rises, all must rise, and as one falls all must fall. Having now, our feet on the rock of freedom, we must drag our brethren from the slimy depths of slavery, ignorance, and rum. Every one of us should be ashamed to consider himself free, while his brother is a slave.... [86]

had become standard discourse in northern black public culture.

By 1850, despite various personal and ideological differences amongst northern black spokesmen, a clear consensus in African American political culture had emerged. The members of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society expressed these new sentiments succinctly in the preamble to their organization's constitution. They wrote:

> Whereas, three millions of our brethren and sisters are yet in bonds; and Whereas, in the free states, the colored man is only nominally free; and Whereas, the elevation of the colored man must depend mainly upon himself; and believing that by union we can better attain the liberation of our brethren in bonds, and the elevation of the Colored American, half free, we hereby agree to form ourselves into a State Society.[87]

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[86] *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, September 6, 1848,* NNC. 18.

[87] *Ohio State Convention of Colored Freemen, Held in Columbus Jan 19th – 21st, 1853* in BAP Reel 8 fr. 101. The Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society was one of the few organizations that allowed membership of men and women on an equal basis. There would be more such local, state, and national organizations formed during the 1850s, but they continued to remain in the minority when compared to gender segregated organizations.

These political sensibilities would continue to shape the political activism of northern blacks through the Civil War and beyond, even as some contemplated more aggressive challenges to the systems that oppressed them.

Chapter Four

Redemption

Origins of Redemption

As the issues of citizenship and slavery took center stage in black political culture, a new sensibility began to shape the public rhetoric and behavior of black spokesmen and women. The emerging discourse of "redemption" captured the spirit of the new generation of elite northern blacks while it simultaneously shaped the nature of their political efforts. Less a strategy, like self-improvement, or goal like collective racial elevation, redemption emerged as a reinterpretation of black attempts to end slavery, attain the rights of republican citizenship, achieve independence, and define the historical place of Africans and their descendants in the West.

The concept of African redemption can be traced back to the eighteenth century where it first appeared as a religious concept drawing scriptural authority from passages in the Bible. Exodus, with its story of Moses and the Hebrew deliverance from bondage in Egypt, provided a special form of sustenance to African Americans both North and South. But in addition, northern free blacks in particular armed themselves with the

prediction in Psalm 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God." For northern free blacks, this particular passage signified to them that slavery would come to an end, prejudice against them would cease, and peoples of African descent would rise in rank and status around the world.[1] By combining the two Biblical references, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century black orators and theologians agreed that God himself would "redeem" the oppressed, perhaps by sending a human agent like Moses to deliver them from bondage. At the same time, he would not fail mete out terrible justice to those who had disobeyed his commands by committing the sins of enslaving and violating their fellow human beings.[2] For example, in 1861, a contributor to the *Weekly Anglo African* typified the rhetorical use of this belief system when he condemned a Virginia law mandating the enslavement of the state's free black population. From the pages of the paper, he cried out, "Oh! God of the oppressed, Thou who didst deliver Thy persecuted people from the hands of the Egyptians, come down once more we pray Thee, and with the plague of blood smite and deliver!"[3] Not surprisingly this religious interpretation remained popular in various northern black circles throughout the antebellum era. The pages of the *Christian*

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[1] Albert Raboteau argues that though northern and southern African Americans continued to interpret the Exodus story as a prediction of their divine racial destiny, it was specifically northern free blacks who focused on Psalms 68:31 in an effort to understand their past and create a sense of promise for their future. See Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 41-43; and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22-23.

[2] While some early nineteenth-century black orators and theologians expressed this hope for the future in the more pacific, millennial language of the early nineteenth century – noting that enslavement violated the brotherhood of humanity – others preferred to emphasize the potential power of divine retribution. Peter Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*. (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 174-175.

[3] *Weekly Anglo African*, April 6, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0450.

Recorder, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in particular, continued to reflect these popular beliefs.[4]

It was this same Afro-Christian belief in divine retribution and "redemption" from slavery and prejudice that formed the core of the speeches and writings of Maria Stewart in the early 1830s. Stewart, claimed as a feminist, abolitionist and black nationalist by a variety of scholars, is also noted for being the first American woman to give public addresses to audiences of men and women. Throughout her short public speaking career, Stewart repeatedly returned to the passage in Psalm 68:31, and peppered her political speeches and writings with Biblical imagery and verses from other books in the Bible, including Proverbs, and Revelation.[5] Believing wholeheartedly in the imminence of divine redemption, Stewart exhorted her northern audiences to, "sheath your swords, and calm your angry passions. Stand still and know that the Lord he is God." She urged them to turn their attention toward the task of improving the moral, mental, and material status of the race by focusing on individual efforts at education, thrift, and godliness. As for redemption from slavery and northern racial proscriptions, Stewart reminded her audience, "Vengeance is his [God's], and he will repay." She continued, "Fret not yourselves because of the men who bring wicked devices to pass" for, "they shall be cut down as the grass, and wither as the green herb."[6]

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[4]David Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 10.

[5] For a discussion of the religious imagery in Stewart's writings, see Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), 14-19. Richardson notes Stewart's use of passages in Psalms, Matthew, Isaiah, Romans, Luke, Philemon, Ezekiel, Revelation, Judges, Esther, Ephesians, Proverbs, and the Book of Revelation.

[6] Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which we Must Build," in *The Liberator*, October 8, 1831; reprinted in Richardson, *Maria Stewart*, 28-41. Richardson cites Luke 16:19 and Psalms 37:35 as the Stewart's Biblical sources for this particular passage.

Though the Afro-Christian interpretation of African redemption through divine retribution remained popular in black Christian circles throughout the antebellum era, one African American proposed a variation on the theme that added an element of human agency to the concept. In his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, first published in September 1829, David Walker called for African Americans to act on their own behalf and redeem themselves from degradation in all its forms. Like Stewart would three years later, Walker exemplified the prevailing belief in the necessity of moral and intellectual self-improvement, reminding his readers, "to let the aim of your labours among your brethren, and particularly the youths, be the dissemination of education and religion."[7] According to one historian, above all, Walker wanted "the opportunity for his people to participate fully without obstacle in the expanding free labor economy and the culture of Protestant moral improvement." Thus, he "repeatedly called for the educated of the black communities to bring literacy, religion, and political awareness to the uneducated and discouraged."[8] But at the same time Walker denounced slavery and racism in strident and explicit terms, and invoked the specter of a slave insurrection as a man-made manifestation of divine retribution for white America's sins against her darker brothers and sisters. "I assure you," he wrote, "that God will accomplish it – if nothing else will answer, he will hurl tyrants and devils into *atoms* and make way for his people. But O my brethren! I say unto you again, you must go to work and prepare the way of the Lord."[9] "Now I ask you," he wrote, "had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife and dear little children? ... It is no more

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[7] *David Walker's Appeal*, (1830; Reprint, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993), 50.
[8] Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 108 and 105.
[9] *David Walker's Appeal*, 50.

harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty."[10]

Historians have long been struck by the tone and content of Walker's *Appeal*, agreeing about its uniqueness, and disagreeing over its meaning, typicality, and popularity amongst the black population.[11] The *Appeal* created a storm of interest in its own time as well. The pamphlet went through three printings and revisions between September of 1829 and the spring of 1830, and William Lloyd Garrison published nine articles on the *Appeal* in *The Liberator* between January and June 1831.[12] Many appreciated the pamphlet for its denunciation of slavery. When reverend W. Paul Quinn addressed his Pittsburgh audience on "The Origins, Horror, and Results of Slavery," he inserted four pages directly from the *Appeal* into his text.[13] Others may have appreciated the *Appeal* for its call to arms. It circulated throughout the South in 1830, and may have contributed to Nat Turner's uprising in 1831. But some black Americans denounced the pamphlet for its spirit of violence. In a letter to the *Liberator*, one man pointed out his reasons for disapproving of the work, while simultaneously suggesting its popularity in certain African American circles. "Leo" wrote:

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[10] *David Walker's Appeal*, 46.

[11] Peter Hinks argues that David Walker's *Appeal*, was "one of the single most important works to issue from an African American in the antebellum era." See Hinks, *Awaken my Afflicted Brethren*, 236. Pease and Pease, call Walker's work, "the logical climax of discontent," and argue that, "the *Appeal* was atypical of its time in tone, goal, and focus." See Jane H. and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 26. Meanwhile, Wilson Jeremiah Moses argues that despite the fact that the *Appeal* was directed to the "Coloured Citizens of the World," "its most striking passages are its warnings specifically addressed to whites. It was an extreme example of the jeremiadic tradition written by a man who thought of himself as an American speaking to other Americans." See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. Penn State University Press, University Park, 1982, 46.

[12] Hinks *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 113.

[13] Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 115.

> I am aware, sir, that I differ very widely from many of those with whom I stand intimately connected; for some of them are so infatuated as to believe it an inspired work....We are forbidden, by high authority, to do evil that good may come. Why then cast this firebrand so injudiciously among the stubble? Behold its injurious effects! In many of the southern states, the free people of color enjoyed some privileges and good situations, which not only afforded them the means of support but also of education – so that the rusty mind was daily becoming bright, and its brilliancy beaming forth to the destruction of prejudice. These privileges are now taken away.
>
> I am opposed to the pamphlet, therefore in the second place, because I believe it to be at the bottom of the recent enactments of severe laws in the southern states, such as are too notorious to be mentioned.
>
> There is no man among us who is more sensible of his political degradation than I am; but at the same time, I am unwilling to resort to any *dishonorable* means of deliverance – such as Walker points out.[14]

For Stewart, a friend of Walker's, there was no such dishonor in Walker's message. When Stewart delivered an address at the African Masonic Hall three years after Walker's mysterious death, she invoked Walker's memory by asking her audience, "where is the man that has distinguished himself in these modern days by acting wholly in the defence [*sic*] of African rights and liberty? There was one, although he sleeps, his memory lives."[15] But in a climate where spokesmen advocated elevation through self-improvement, and with Walker's own death, his expression of redemption failed to achieve popularity among the leaders of black political life during the 1830s.

An aspect of Walker's version of redemption often lost in the debate over the text during the 1830s, was his reinterpretation of recorded history. Walker pointed out deficiencies in the common understanding of history, and cast Africans as important

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[14] "Leo" of Philadelphia, Jan 21, 1831 in the *Liberator*, Jan 29, 1831; Carter G. Woodson, ed. *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C. Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc. Lancaster: Lancaster Press, Inc., 1926), 223. Emphasis mine).

[15] Richardson, *Maria Stewart*, 57. Walker died in August, 1830. Though historians have questioned the circumstances surrounding his death, his most recent biographer has found that Walker probably died of natural causes, most likely of the same strain of consumption that claimed his infant daughter's life a few days earlier. See Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren* and Peter Hinks, ed., *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), xliv.

figures in the popular historical drama of human progress.[16] Stewart made similar points in her addresses. At the African Masonic Hall in 1833, she reminded her audience, "Yes, poor despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction." But in 1833, Stewart also believed that it was "of no use for us to boast that we sprung from this learned and enlightened nation, for this day a thick mist of moral gloom hangs over millions of our race." The challenge of religious redemption and elevation through self-improvement seemed far more pressing.[17]

By the 1840s and 50s, with the educated stratum of northern blacks smarting from the pro-slavery intellectual attack on both the history and future possibilities of Africans and their New World descendants, free blacks began mounting an assault on the scholarship of racism.[18] They printed a variety of short tracts, books, and magazine and newspaper articles describing heroes of African descent throughout the world, from ancient times to their recent history. Many spokesmen and women delivered lectures about their personal heroes and heroines including Daniel Alexander Payne, who fondly recalled a lecture he gave in 1845 on "Benjamin Banneker" the "extraordinary self-taught astronomer and almanac-maker." [19] Others, like James W.C. Pennington, published

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[16] One scholar has argued for that for Walker, the prospect of armed rebellion was in fact "subordinate to inspiring deprived blacks with the word of God and with the truth about their capacities and their history." Hinks, *Awaken*, 108.

[17] Richardson, *Maria Stewart*, 58.

[18] According to one historian, "Nineteenth-century blacks needed to reclaim for themselves a civilized African past in order to refute the charge that they were inherently inferior, especially because they, by and large, assumed that modern Africans and African-Americans were less civilized than Anglo-Americans." Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones*, 43.

[19] In his *Recollections of Seventy Years*, he noted that while assigned to Baltimore in 1845, "it was my privilege to deliver a lecture on 'Benjamin Banneker,' that extraordinary self-taught astronomer and almanac-maker for Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, and Pennsylvania.....This was with a view to incite our young men to scientific pursuits, and to raise money for the purpose of erecting a monument in his honor."

histories of the ancient world in an effort to "unembarrass the origin, and to show the relative position of the colored people in the different periods among the different nations."[20]

In his text *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*, first published in 1863, William Wells Brown highlighted a variety of "great" black men and women, both past and contemporary. Like Pennington, he discussed the former greatness of the Europeans, comparing them, in fact, with the "low origins" of the Britons. He included a chapter on the ever-popular figure, Benjamin Banneker, saying "The services rendered to science, to liberty, and to the intellectual character of the negro by Banneker, are too great for us to allow his name to sleep and his genius and merits to remain hidden from the world." And he placed him in the company of historical figures who exemplified republican ideals, and artistic achievement including Crispus Attucks, Phillis Wheatley, and Alexandre Dumas.[21]

But in his choice of past heroes, Brown betrayed the spirit of the time. He included international revolutionaries, including Placido, the Havana slave and poet who

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Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888. Reprint New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), 77.

[20] James W.C. Pennington, *A Textbook of the Origin and History &c.,&c. of the Colored People.* (Harford, 1841. repr. Detroit: Negro History Press, n.d.), 3. James W.C. Pennington's text was primarily designed to answer the question, "Who and Whence are the colored people?" He argued, "we are not the seed of Cain as the stupid say." Pennington, *Textbook*, 7. "*We are properly the sons of Cush and Missaim amalgamated.*" Pennington, *Textbook*, 12. After this assertion, Pennington goes on to discuss the disprove the Hamitic curse, and discuss the achievements of the Ethiopians, the descendants of Cush. Pennington, *Textbook*, 19 – 27. He then answers the question, what can be said to account for the degradation of a people once so highly favored? "I perceive it to have been the absurd influence of their religion which first opened the way for the ruin of that people. Their grand dogma – Polytheism, was a grand error." Pennington, *Textbook*, 32. Pennington's interpretation of black history was in keeping with the black theology of the period. Many African American clergymen believed that idolatry was the reason Egypt and Ethiopia fell from power and grace. They further reasoned that perhaps God had intended the fall and misery in America would lead to Christianized, civilized blacks who would take the lead in bringing civilization and Christianity to Africa.(Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones*, 44-45).

[21] William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and his Achievements, 2d.* ed. (1865; Reprint. Salem New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1992), 51.

was published to great acclaim in England, in 1838, purchased and freed in 1842, and ultimately executed for planning a slave insurrection in Cuba.[22] He also included several entries on the heroes of the Haitian Revolution, including Toussaint L'Ouverture, who "laid the foundation for the emancipation of his race and the independence of the island," and Jean Jacques Dessalines, "The African, the savage, the soldier, the general, the president, and lastly the emperor" of Haiti.[23] Brown also included a chapter on Madison Washington, the fugitive slave who left the safety of Canada to return to Virginia and rescue his enslaved wife. Saying "Liberty is nothing to me while my wife is a slave," he led a revolt upon the brig *Creole*, and sailed to Nassau, New Providence, liberating himself, his wife, and 134 others.[24] Like Garnet had done in his *Address to the Slaves*, Brown included an entry on Nat Turner, "one whose history has hitherto been neglected, and to the memory of whom the American people are not prepared to do justice."[25]

Brown wasn't alone in the effort to cast the leaders of slave insurrections in the light of heroes. Throughout the 1850s, biographies of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser and in 1859 John Brown, replaced the biographies of Benjamin Franklin

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[22] Of Placido, Brown wrote: "As the Marseillaise was sung by the revolutionists of France, and inspired the people with a hatred to oppressors, so will the slaves of Cuba, at a future day, sing the songs of their poet-martyr, and their cry will be, 'Placido and Liberty'" Brown, *Black Man*, 88-90.

[23] Brown wrote, "When impartial history shall do justice to the St. Domingo revolution, the name of Toussaint L'Ouverture will be placed high upon the roll of fame." He wrote, "No one can look back upon his career without feeling that Toussaint was a remarkable man. Without being bred to the science of arms, he became a valiant soldier, and baffled the skill of the most experienced generals that had followed Napoleon. Without military knowledge he fought like one born in the camp. Without means he carried on the war. He beat his enemies in battle, and turned their own weapons against them. He laid the foundation for the emancipation of his race and the independence of the island. Brown *Black Man*, 105. Regarding Dessalines, Brown wrote: "The African, the savage, the soldier, the general, the president, and lastly the emperor Jean Jacques Dessalines." Brown, *Black Man* 117. "Much has been said of the cruelty of this man, and far be it from me to apologize for his acts. Yet to judge rightly of him, we must remember that he had an ignorant people to govern, on the one hand, and the former planters to watch and control on the other. Brown, *Black Man*, 116.

[24] Brown, *Black Man*, 75-85; quote from page 78.

[25] Brown, *Black Man*, 59.

that appeared a generation earlier in the pages of the *Freedom's Journal*. Thomas Hamilton's *Anglo-African Magazine* republished the *Confessions of Nat Turner* in its December 1859 issue in an effort both "to place upon record this most remarkable episode in the history of human slavery," and to allow its readers to compare the methods of Nat Turner and John Brown.[26] In his "Afric-American Picture Gallery," a series of vignettes published in the same magazine, "Ethiope" contributed descriptions of the Underground Railroad, Touissant L'Overture and Nat Turner alongside traditional American black heroes like Crispus Attucks, James Forten and Bishop Allen. But, even more interestingly, he concluded his series with a tribute to the newest ideal for the northern black population: the rebellious fugitive slave. In the form of a conversation with his subject, "Ethiope" recounted the tale of a fugitive slave named "Bill," who strangled his white pursuers in his successful effort to attain his freedom. "Bill's" justification of his actions accurately captured the spirit of the times. He belonged in the African American pantheon of heroes because he "had decided the question of [his] own liberty." Moreover, according to "Bill," since "God had implanted the principles of liberty in my bosom, both in seeking and maintaining that liberty, I had determined to remove every obstacle that obtruded itself between me and it." In language that would have made David Walker proud, "Bill" concluded, "I did, therefore, nothing more than my duty to myself, to my manhood, and to my God."[27] If northern blacks were charged with emulating the spirit of self-improvement and elevation exemplified by Allen and Forten, so now were they to emulate the spirit of "Bill" in their effort to redeem the race.

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[26] *Anglo African Magazine*, December 1859, 386.
[27] *Anglo African Magazine*, October, 1859, 324.

By the 1840s, the assertive interpretation of redemption first articulated by Walker began bubbling to the surface of black political discourse. At the 1843 National Convention, Garnet rose and gave an *Address to the Slaves* that reiterated the themes earlier expressed by Walker. Garnet declared that:

> the diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical, that promise success.[28]

And like Walker, Garnet chastised his audience for allowing their "dearest rights" to be taken from them. He told them,

> You act as though you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit, while your lords tear your wives from your embraces, and defile them before your eyes.[29]

And just as Walker had done, he continued, "In the name of God we ask, are you men?" But in addition, Garnet updated his address by paying tribute to the lives and exploits of Denmark Veazie [*sic*], "the patriotic Nathaniel Turner," Joseph Cinque, "the hero of the Amistad," and to Madison Washington, "that bright star of freedom."[30] And combining the temporal with the divine, he told them "there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood."[31] When Garnet concluded his address, "admist great applause," his audience was greatly moved. According to the official minutes of the proceedings, the "whole Convention, full as it was, was literally infused with tears."[32]

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[28] Henry Highland Garnet, *Address to the Slaves*, 93, BAP Reel 5 fr. 0547.

[29] Garnet *Address*, 96, BAP Reel 5 fr. 0548.

[30] Garnet, *Address*, 96, BAP reel 5 fr. 0548.

[31] Garnet, *Address*, 94, BAP reel 5 fr. 0548.

[32] *Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens, Held at Buffalo, 1843*, 13 in NNC.

Looking back on the events nearly two decades later, William Wells Brown, formerly opposed to the Address, described it as: "One of the most noted addresses ever given by a colored man in this country.... None but those who heard that speech have the slightest idea of the tremendous influence which it exercised over the assembly."[33]

Despite its effect when read on the convention floor, the delegates ultimately declined to adopt Garnet's *Address to the Slaves* by a 19 to 18 vote, with several abstentions. Led by Frederick Douglass, who at this point in his career continued to oppose the idea of slave insurrection and instead preferred to combat slavery through the Garrisonian tactic of moral suasion, well-known figures like William Wells Brown and Charles Lenox Remond voted to reject Garnet's address.[34] In many ways, their critique of Garnet's *Address* echoed "Leo's" critique of Walker's *Appeal* a decade earlier. Those who opposed the address belonged to two major factions: one side rejected the document on the grounds that it was "war-like," and "encouraged insurrection," the other believed that it would cause more difficulties for those who lived in areas with pro-slavery sympathies.[35]

Reservations such as these, however, could not compete in the climate of increasing militancy, and Garnet's *Address* continued to gain popularity. In 1847, he redelivered the Address at the National Convention in Troy, New York, and in 1848, to underscore his political and intellectual debt to Walker, Garnet republished an edition of Walker's *Appeal* paired with his own *Address to the Slaves*, and describing the *Appeal* as

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[33] Brown, *Black Man*, 150.

[34] *National Convention of Colored Citizens, Buffalo, 1843*, 18-19, NNC.

[35] Garnet, *Address to the Slaves*, VIII, in BAP Reel 5 fr. 0456.

"the boldest and most direct appeal in behalf of freedom...made in the early part of the Anti-Slavery Reformation."[36]

Garnet was not alone in resurrecting Walker for his direct and impassioned judgments against slaveholders, and support for armed rebellion. In 1851, Paola Brown published an *Address* based entirely on the words and the structure of Walker's *Appeal.* Brown republished almost all of the first three articles of the *Appeal*, adding a several paragraphs to Articles II and III to bring the document up to date with the events of the 1840s.[37] And in a piece devoted to the history of the Convention Movement and its founding fathers, the unnamed author (perhaps Thomas Hamilton) set the scene of the 1830s by referring to the widespread influence of Walker, "a colored man who had coolly recommended to his fellow blacks the only solution to the slave question," which remains, "the forlorn hope of freedom to-day – insurrection and bloodshed."[38] And despite his continued resistance to Garnet's *Address to the Slaves*, Frederick Douglass, perhaps bowing to public opinion, published Garnet's "Sketch of the Life and Character of David Walker" in the July 14, 1848 issue of *The North Star.*[39]

This reevaluation of redemption appealed to a generation that valued self-improvement, extolled independence, but also demanded more radical changes in American society. Moreover, the climate of racial hostility and the expansion of slavery that defined the period also influenced the movement to "make way for the coming of the

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[36] Henry Highland Garnet, *Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life, by Henry Highland Garnet, and also Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America.*" in BAP Reel 5 fr. 0545-0548

[37] Paola Brown, esq. *Address Intended to be Delivered in the City Hall, Hamilton, February 7, 1851 on the Subject of Slavery*, 1851 in BAP Reel 6 fr. 0781-0812. This is an interesting document. The author is unknown, and it is impossible to ascertain the sex of the writer from the published text,which is primarily a condensed version of Walker's *Appeal.*

[38] *Anglo African Magazine*, October, 1859, 305.

[39] *North Star*, July 14, 1848.

Lord" and embrace Walker's brand of aggressive redemption. An editorial by Henry Bibb in the *Voice of the Fugitive* summed up the external and internal factors contributing to this change:

> We have every reason to conclude that the peaceful extinction of slavery is far distant in the United States. Some of the most talented, and at the same time most influential men in the Union are firm supporters of the present system – they even advocate its extension – what then has the slave to hope for?[40]

Unwilling to wait for the chimera of gradual emancipation, black spokesmen increasingly voiced the opinion that that blacks, enslaved and free, should use the instruments at their disposal, and act as the agents of their own redemption. Henry Bibb urged his readers to take up the "motto" of "self-reliance," and remember that the:

> numbers who have escaped from bondage are rapidly increasing under free institutions, and while the blood of our murdered and enslaved brethren is crying to heaven for vengeance, let us firmly unite for the ultimate emancipation of the whole of our race...and the time may not be far distant when we shall be able both to speak and to act more forcibly.[41]

Bibb's plea for vengeance would not have seemed out of place in the discourse of the decade preceding the Civil War. For by the 1850s, the urgency in black political discourse had reached a fevered pitch. Frederick Douglass described the decade as a time when "there was no pause, no repose. Everybody, however dull, could see that this was a phase of the slavery question which was not to be slighted or ignored."[42] William Wells Brown was even more explicit, describing the period as "a new era," and "the most

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[40] *Voice of the Fugitive*, August 13, 1851 in BAP Reel 7 fr. 0058.

[41] *Voice of the Fugitive*, August 13, 1851 in BAP Reel 7 fr. 0058.

[42] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, (1892, reprint NY: Collier Books, 1962), 294.

important crisis that our country has yet witnessed...Every eye is turned towards the south, looking for another Nat Turner." [43]

Virtue, Manliness and the Gender Politics of Redemption

The support northern blacks increasingly gave to the idea of a southern slave rebellion spread throughout their print culture. In fact, Martin Delany used the idea as the basis for his unfinished novel *Blake: or the Huts of America*, which the *Anglo-African Magazine* published in serialized form between 1859 and 1862. *Blake*, set in 1853, told the story of Henry Blake, a slave who left his owner after the sale of his wife, and traveled across the South, planning a slave insurrection, and invoking the spirit of the revolutionaries of previous generations. "From plantation to plantation" he went, "sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt."[44] When Blake arrived in the Great Dismal Swamp region of North Carolina, he was met by "a number of the old confederates of the noted Nat Turner" who "hailed the daring young runaway as the

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[43] William Wells, Brown, *The Black Man*, 75.

[44] Martin R. Delany, *Blake, or the Huts of America*, ed. Floyd Miller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 83.

harbinger of better days."[45] There, in that "fearful abode" some of "Virginia and North Carolina's boldest black rebels" had resided for years. There:

> the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Veezie [*sic*], and General Gabriel [Prosser] were held by them in sacred reverence; that of Gabriel as a talisman. With delight they recounted the many exploits of whom they conceived to be the greatest men who ever lived, the pretended deeds of whom were fabulous, some of the narrators claiming to have been patriots in the American Revolution.[46]

Finally, after months of searching, Blake would reunite with his wife in Cuba, reveal himself as Carolus Henrico Blacus, the lost cousin of the revolutionary poet, Placido, and inspire the man to join him in leading a rebellion that would spread from Cuba to the southern United States.[47] In keeping with the ideals of redemption, the revolutionaries would combine their belief in divine retribution with the ideal of manly self-assertion in their rallying cry, "Arm of the Lord, awake!"[48]

Slave narratives too, began highlighting the possibility of imminent revolt. Solomon Northup, a free resident of New York State found evidence of the potential for slave uprising among the men and women he encountered after being kidnapped, enslaved, and sold to Louisiana. While in a coffle headed to New Orleans he encountered a woman named Lethe. "She had sharp and spiteful eyes," he wrote, "and continually gave utterance to the language of hatred and revenge. Her husband had been sold... Pointing to the scars on her face the desperate creature wished that she might see the day when she could wipe them off in some man's blood."[49] He suggested to his

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[45] Delany, *Blake*, 112.

[46] Delany, *Blake*, 113.

[47] Delany, *Blake*, 192-195.

[48] Delany, *Blake*, 224.

[49] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (1853. Reprint. Eds. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1968), 39.

readers that the idea of a bloody slave rebellion appealed to even more of the southern slaves he encountered. "More than once," he wrote, "I have joined in serious consultation, when the subject [of insurrection] has been discussed, and there have been times when a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance." He declined to do so, for practical reasons saying, "without arms or ammunition, or even with them I saw such a step would result in certain defeat, disaster and death, and always raised my voice against it." But despite these limitations, he felt certain, that those "who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs" are deceived, and "A day may come – it *will* come, if his prayer is heard – a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy."[50]

In "Patrick Brown's First Love," a short story published anonymously in the *Anglo African Magazine*, the narrator proposed that because "the Bible, and its religion, teaches peace, not war, to the negro." Christianity would never provide enough inspiration to serve as the springboard for a slave insurrection in the United States. He suggested an alternative impetus for insurrection through the actions of the story's protagonist, Patrick Brown. The now elderly Brown had been a slave who "in his early youth, had loved, with a mild, passionate, and boundless love," an enslaved woman named Keziah. When a slave trader attempted to seduce and subsequently to rape Keziah during their journey into the deep South, Brown repeatedly stabbed and "disemboweled" the man with his own sheath-knife. Keziah, meanwhile, though not saved by Brown, was rescued by her own innate purity and female virtue. She was found the next morning

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[50] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 190 – 191.

lying next to the body of the slave trader, "unstained by his guilty touch, with death – beautiful; oh! how beautiful! – on her virgin brow." Brown then spent the rest of his life quietly murdering each of his successive owners.[51]

The narrator of "Patrick Brown's First Love" struck a chord reminiscent of Walker when he said:

> No! religious fanaticism will never goad the slaves to rebel. But some black-bosomed Virginius, crazed at the sight of his deflowered daughter, or some flame-colored hero, maddened at the sight of the wife of his bosom outraged in his very presence, will raise his bloody arm, and kindle the wild revenge of the ten thousands, in like manner maddened; and there will be a short and bloody end to slavery.[52]

Similar cries for revenge in the name of womanhood wronged, appeared with frequency in black print culture in the 1850s. When Delany's fictional character Blake reunites with his long-lost and abused wife. he tells her, "As God lives, I will avenge your wrongs: and not until they let us alone -- cease to steal away our people from their native country and oppress us in their own – will I let them alone."[53] Like Patrick Brown's heroine. Keziah, Blake's wife Maggie also refused to acquiesce to the wishes of her owners. but rather than death, Maggie endured a succession of sales and violent beatings. When Blake ultimately locates his wife on a Cuban plantation, the once beautiful Maggie is aged, graying, and badly scarred by the beatings of her new owner, whose advances she continued to refuse. Like her husband, the reader learns, Maggie retained her honor at all costs.[54] Clearly, in the minds of Delany and the author of "Patrick Brown's First Love."

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51 *Anglo-African Magazine*, September. 1859, 286-288.
52 *Anglo African Magazine*, September. 1859, 287.
53 Delany. *Blake*, 192.
54 Delany, *Blake*, 177-192

it was women's ability to retain their virtue against all odds that made them heroines, and worthy wives for would-be revolutionaries.

By focusing on the plight of enslaved women in personal narratives, speeches and fiction, African American spokesmen did two important things. While the depictions of virtuous enslaved women underscored northern black spokesmen's general public statements about the innate virtue of African American – and indeed all – women as discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, they also provided a contrast to the growing body of white antislavery propaganda. In their public discourse, white abolitionists consistently depicted the South as a house of prostitution, that in the words of one historian, "could only be compared to other examples of utter depravity and dissolution" like Sodom, a Turkish harem, or the Five Points neighborhood of New York City.[55] Such depictions, while useful for anti-slavery propaganda, held damaging implications for enslaved African American women. For according to the tenets of Protestant Christianity embraced by northern abolitionists, those who sinned were ultimately responsible for failing to adhere to the principles of Christianity, even if they had little choice in the matter. Moreover their participation in sinful behavior continued to degrade them long after the incident took place. For female slaves, this meant that they continued to retain their immoral character, and moreover infect those around them.[56] Thus, by presenting enslaved women as inherently virtuous, northern black spokesmen counteracted the potentially damaging effects of well-intentioned white antislavery rhetoric. In addition, by placing the plight of enslaved black women at the heart of black antislavery discourse,

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[55] Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1988), 6; Ronald Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830.* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 73-74.

[56] Walters, *Antislavery Appeal*, 68-74.

black spokesmen used the specter of manhood, here interpreted as the right to protect one's women, as a rallying cry for a radicalized northern black male population.

Despite their apparent popularity with northern black audiences, and potential usefulness in galvanizing northern black men, the characterizations of idealized enslaved women who preferred death before dishonor failed to appreciate the mechanisms of control within the institution of slavery.[57] In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs used much of her personal story to illustrate the extent of the power relations that circumscribed the lives of enslaved women. Addressing her northern, bourgeois audience she explains her decision to commit what from their standpoint would be an immoral act. She wrote:

> I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.[58]

After describing her decision to thwart her owner's intentions by choosing an unmarried white gentleman as a lover and ostensible protector, she asks her female audience for forgiveness saying,

> Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another.... I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the

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[57] After discussing Martin Delany's tour of the southern states in 1839, Nell Painter notes the disconnect between Delany's descriptions of slavery and the experiences of the enslaved. She wrote, "A trip down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas in 1839, made under circumstances that are not known, constitutes a curious chapter in Delany's larger education. By his own admission Delany had something to say about everything, yet he never elaborated on his journey into the slaveocracy. Neither slaves, slaveholders, nor the institution of slavery seems to have impressed him in a concrete way. In his abolitionist writings of the 1840s all three remained abstract entities, as they would in the mind of a writer who had never observed them firsthand." Painter, "Martin Delany," in Litwack and Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 151.

[58] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 84.

> events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.[59]

Despite her self-professed "pride" ar.d "spirit," Elizabeth Keckley was unable to either retain control of her own body, or die the preferred virginal death of nineteenth century fiction. In *Behind the Scenes*, she described her own situation in one short, curt paragraph, and like Jacobs, placed the blame for her "suffering" and "mortification," not on her own lack of resolve, but squarely on the shoulders of the "peculiar institution." She wrote:

> I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man – I spare the world his name – had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I – I – became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.[60]

While popular accounts idealized the behavior of African American women, they also bore little resemblance to the reality of opportunity for most enslaved men. William Wells Brown, a fugitive and antislavery speaker, suggested as much when he described his distress at his own inability to protect female family members from sale and separation. He told his female audience:

> When I get to talking upon this subject I am carried back to the day when I saw a dear mother chained and carried off in a Southern steamboat to supply the cotton, sugar, or rice plantations of the South. I am carried back to the day when a dear sister was sold and carried off in my presence. I stood and looked at her. I could not protect her. I could not offer to protect her. I was a Slave, and the only testimony that I could give her that I sympathised with her, was to allow the tears

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[59] Jacobs, *Incidents*, 86.

[60] Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868, reprint New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), 38-39.

> to flow freely down my cheeks; and the tears flowing freely down her checks told me that my affection was reciprocated.[61]

Henry Bibb, the editor of the *Voice of the Fugitive*, voiced his own horror at standing by and watching his wife "shamefully scourged and abused by her master" and alluded to "female virtue trampled under foot with impunity" in his published narrative.[62]

But despite their personal experiences as men once trapped by the institution of slavery, both acquiesced to the conventions of the day when addressing their northern black audience. Upon learning that his wife Malinda had been "living in a state of adultery with her master," and been sold "for the above purposes at a high price" after Bibb's own successful escape. Bibb used a chapter of his narrative as a space to condemn her for failing to live up to contemporary feminine ideals. He wrote:

> From that time I gave her up into the hands of an all-wise Providence. As she was then living with another man, I could no longer regard her as my wife. After all the sacrifices, sufferings, and risks which I had run, striving to rescue her from the grasp of slavery; every prospect and hope was cut off. She has ever since been regarded as theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife, for she was living in a state of adultery, according to the law of God and man.[63]

Bibb then contrasted Malinda with his new wife, *nee* Mary Miles of Boston, who was his "bosom friend, a help-meet, a loving companion in all the social, moral, and religious relations of life."[64] Though he briefly expressed sympathy for Malinda's condition, by saying, "Poor unfortunate woman, I bring no charge of guilt against her, for I know not all the circumstances connected with the case," he clearly viewed her as the

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61 William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered Before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, at Lyceum Hall*, November 14, 1847, in BAP Reel 5 fr. 0520 –0521.

62 Henry Bibb, *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1850; reprint New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 43, 44.

63 Bibb, *The Narrative of Henry Bibb*, 189.

64 Bibb, *The Narrative of Henry Bibb*, 191.

agent of her own degradation, who in his words "voluntarily" relinquished their marriage bond.[65] His interpretation of his wife as a willing adulteress reflected the belief systems of many middle-class northern Protestants of the period. For white and black abolitionists alike, individuals remained responsible for their sins, whether enslaved or not.[66] In keeping with the discourse of the day, Bibb became the true victim of slavery, for it was he who was "plundered" of his "dearest rights" when "his wife [was] tyrannically snatched from his bosom by a slaveholding professor of religion," and "finally reduced to a state of adultery."[67]

Brown, meanwhile, less "wronged" by the institution of slavery than Bibb, simply peppered his speeches with representations of idealized male and female slaves, who preferred to murder their dependants rather than see them further brutalized by slavery: "What has the brother not done, upon the Slave-plantation, for the purpose of protecting the chastity of a dearly beloved sister?" he asked. "What has the father not done to protect the chastity of his daughter? What has the husband not done to protect his wife from the hands of the tyrant?" The idealized slaves so popular with northern black audiences continued to act nobly by preferring to die or to kill before allowing

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[65] Bibb did not do this solely out of mean-spiritedness. Despite many of the more radical critiques of slavery and racism that northern blacks contributed to abolitionist thought, northern blacks continued to believe that even when acting under force and compulsion, men and women remained responsible for their actions and behavior. David Walker made this point in the Appeal, and Henry Garnet reiterated it in his Address to the Slaves. Garnet wrote, "The divine commandments, you are in duty bound to reverence and obey. If you do not obey them you will surely meet with the displeasure of the almighty." And again, "The forlorn condition in which you are placed does not destroy your moral obligation to God." Garnet, *Address to the Slaves*, 92-93 in BAP Reel 5, 0547.

[66] In *The Black Image in the White Mind*, George Fredrickson noted that white abolitionists "were Christian moralists first and sociologists of slavery second," and for them "a sin apparently remained a sin whether it was forced on the individual or not." Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, 35. Reform-minded blacks clearly shared the same assessment of sinfulness, despite their more intimate knowledge of the power relations that defined the institution of slavery.

[67] Bibb, *The Narrative of Henry Bibb*, 189, 192.

themselves or their wives, sisters and daughters to be dishonored. In Brown's description:

> The mother has taken the life of her child, to preserve that child from the hands of the Slave-trader. The brother has taken the life of his sister, to protect her chastity. As the noble Virginius seized the dagger, and thrust it to the heart of the gentle Virginia, to save her from the hands of Appius Claudius of Rome, so has the father seized the deadly knife, and taken the life of his daughter, to save her from the hands of the master or of the Negro-driver.[68]

There is little historical evidence to suggest that enslaved mothers, fathers and brothers, murdered their daughters and sisters to save them from losing their chastity at "the hands of the Slave-trader," "Negro-driver," or "master."[69] Still, it is clear that the image of manhood asserted rather than denied remained an affecting one to a male audience frustrated, and increasingly outraged by their inability to force systems of government to recognize their right to civil and political privileges as citizens of the United States.

Revolution

By the 1850s, northern African Americans were convinced that they lived in a period of crisis. But while white Americans may have been primarily concerned about the possibility of disunion either as something to be avoided, or as a necessary break with evil, northern blacks welcomed the coming cataclysm as a divinely sanctioned aspect of their redemption. In an editorial on American Slavery appearing in the *Voice of the*

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[68] William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered Before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, at Lyceum Hall*, November 14, 1847, in BAP Reel 5 fr. 0520 –0521.

[69] An unusual, but highly publicized case includes the 1856 case of the fugitive Margaret Garner, who slit her daughter's throat before being captured and returned to slavery with her surviving children.

Fugitive, the writer argued, "but it matter little to the slave whether the Union remains entire, or whether it should be shivered into ten thousand fragments – his condition could not be worse than it is – and in the turmoil consequent on revolution, he has at least a chance for liberty."[70] William Wells Brown agreed, "Thirty years' free discussion has materially changed public opinion in the non-slaveholding states," he wrote, "and a negro insurrection, in the present excited state of the nation," he continued, "would not receive the condemnation that it did in 1831. The right of men to the enjoyment of freedom is a settled point; and where he is deprived of this, without any criminal act of his own, it is his duty to regain his liberty at any cost."[71]

At the same time they welcomed the prospect of slave insurrection, they grew increasingly apprehensive about their own prospects as American citizens. With the passage of a new, more stringent fugitive slave law in the Compromise of 1850, the violent conflict and possibility of the extension of slavery into Kansas, and the Dred Scott decision of 1857, the institution of slavery denied their claims to citizenship, and the right to live as free men and women on American soil. For them, neither elevation through self-improvement nor forthright appeals to republican manhood principles had secured for them the abolition of slavery, black male enfranchisement, civil rights, or equality of citizenship. Thus, though the 1850s were clearly a period of crisis for all northern blacks, spokesmen at times articulated the crisis in as a crisis northern black masculinity.

As several scholars have noted, the rhetoric of the period captured the sense of crisis in the air. For example, Cooper argued that "1850 marked the end of a period of

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70 *Voice of the Fugitive*, Aug 13, 1851, in BAP Reel 7 fr. 0058.

71 Brown, *Black Man*, 74. Regarding Nat Turner Brown wrote: "If the oppressor is struck down in the contest, his fall will be a just one, and all the world will applaud the act," 75.

rising self-confidence and the beginning of an era of crisis."[72] And David Blight describes the period as one of discouragement and powerlessness.[73] However, the rhetoric of the period contained more than simple disillusionment and despair.[74] Though we can make case for a rhetoric of despair when discussing the speeches and articles written for white abolitionist audiences, such as those given by the representative black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass,[75] we can not make the same case for all spokesmen and women. For, when speaking amongst themselves in the 1850s, this sense of disillusionment did not take the form of a defeated despair. Rather, the undercurrent of frustration and potential violence clearly burst forth in angry rhetoric, as open calls for redemption through rebellion and revolution; in other words, physical demonstrations of their agency and manly virtue.[76] Even Frederick Douglass moved in this direction when speaking among African Americans in the period.[77] By the 1850s, the redemptive revolutionary spirit they championed was not limited to the prospect of slave insurrection, but called for northern black men to embrace the possibility of revolution, and prepare themselves for a battle to liberate their brothers and sisters in chains. On

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72 Cooper, "Elevating the Race," 604.

73 Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989, 3.

74 The Peases see black separate organizations as a consequence of white racism and misunderstanding. Even the mutual aid societies and churches formed in the late 18th century are viewed as reactive. Pease and Pease, *They Who Would be Free*, 19. Later their desire to emigrate would be perceived as total discouragement. Pease and Pease, *They Who Would be Free*, 20.

75 Blight has pointed out that most of Douglass' work was directed to a white audience, and he provided this audience with a positive representation of the black population, both enslaved and free. Blight, *Douglass' Civil War*, 45.

76 The Peases argue that "the rhetoric of revolt reached its peak with the Dred Scott decision of 1857... the Supreme Court ruling reduced all American Negroes to a rightlessness and impotence little different from that of slavery." Pease and Pease, *They who would be Free*, 240. Clearly the rhetoric of revolt began to intensify in the previous decade. But as the Peases' suggest, the denial of citizenship rights and Dred Scott decision crystallized the anger of the previous decade.

77 This tendency to support the possibility of slave insurrection was far more popular with black abolitionists than white ones. David Blight, *F. Douglass' Civil War*, 95.

March 5, 1858, John Rock told his audience at Faneuil Hall in Boston, "sooner or later the clashing of arms will be heard in this country," he warned, and then "150,000 freemen capable of bearing arms, and not all cowards and fools, and three quarters of a million slaves, wild with the enthusiasm caused by the dawn of the glorious opportunity of being able to strike a genuine blow for freedom, will be a power that white men will be 'bound to respect'".[78]

During the two decades preceding the Civil War, African American spokesmen increasingly invoked the language of battle to describe their actions. Unlike white abolitionists who invoked biblical imagery of divine retribution, black spokesmen combined the spiritual with the temporal much like Walker had done in 1829. For example, in their report on the state of the black press, James McCune Smith, George B. Wilson, and William H. Topp tapped into the spirit of the national convention of 1847, and used the imagery of battle to express their belief in the importance of a national black press. They wrote,

> Of the means for the advancement of a people placed as we are, none are more available than a Press. We struggle against opinions. Our warfare lies in the field of thought. Glorious struggle! God-like warfare! In training our soldiers for the field, in marshaling our hosts for the fight, in leading the onset, and through the conflict, we need a Printing Press, because a printing press is the vehicle of thought—is a ruler of opinions...
>
> The first step which will mark our certain advancement as a People, will be our Declaration of Independence from all aid except from God and our own souls. [79]

In a similar vein, after reading the call for the upcoming 1853 national convention in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, James B. Vashon was moved to write to the paper, urging communities to chose their delegates, create community reports for the meeting, and "go

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[78] Quoted in Bethel, *The Roots of African American Identity*, 20.

[79] *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored people, and their Friends, held in Troy, New York, on the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th, October, 1847*, in NNC.

to work immediately, as there is no time to be lost." He then ended his letter with a call to arms, saying:

> Then let us put our armor on, and with the sword of truth, go to battle for freedom, and by the help of the God of the oppressed, we will slay both of those hydra-headed monsters—the American Colonization Society and the Fugitive Slave Act; and I hope to see their old mother, the child of the devil, (slavery,) wounded in the conflict, on the 6th July, 1853.[80]

Not insignificantly, Vashon also invoked the spirit of the French Revolution by signing his letter, "Yours for Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity."[81] After 1848, spokesmen and women pointedly celebrated the triumphs of democratic movements abroad, at the same time that they recounted the successes of slave revolts in the new world. They also pledged themselves to aid others if necessary. Coverage of the brief crisis in Haiti elicited responses expressed in the language of redemption. "Volunteer" wrote:

> Listen! We want our rights. No on is going to *give* them to us, so perforce we must take them. In order to do this, we must have a strong nationality somewhere – respected, feared....We can make of Hayti the nucleus of a power that shall be to the black, what England has been to the white races, the hope of progress and the guarantee of permanent civilization....Let us prepare, then, to aid Hayti in the coming struggle, with our sympathies, our fortunes, and our lives. Contribute arms and hands to bear them.[82]

"A Colored Farmer" sounded a similar theme when he wrote:

> The true measure of manhood is the fidelity and promptness with which the heart responds to the nobler impulses of our nature...Is it not better, if needs be, to die and go to God, up from the field of battle, contending for our rights, than to drag out dastard lives in whining, whilst crouching like dogs beneath the hand that smites us for demanding them?....Hayti is the key of the position of the colored race on this Continent, and must be held by us at all hazards. If she falls, our

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80 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 10, 1853 in BAP Reel 8, fr. 0294.

81 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 10, 1853 in BAP Reel 8, fr. 0294.

82 *Weekly Anglo African*, April 13, 1861 in BAP Reel 13, fr. 0461.

> hopes of the overthrow of slavery and the progress of our race, are retarded indefinitely. To the Rescue, then! To the Rescue! [83]

George Lawrence Jr. noted that the *Anglo African* received many such communications.

Even those who advocated mass emigration conceded that a full-blown revolution against the "slave power" was preferable, but because of the logistics involved, simply impractical at the time. They argued that

> Revolution is the boldest and probably the most glorious alternative, it is the right of the colored Americans, and if they could count man for man with their oppressors, if they could have free communication with each other so as to insure concert of action, and if their was but one day in the year that every slave could call his own, on such meager conditions alone, without any of the advantages of civilised warfare we would say strike! ... But we have not either of the three meager conditions referred to above, to count upon in the sacred cause of Revolution, and therefore, Emigration is our alternative.[84]

With the increasing importance of military, or martial spirit came an growing interest in the military history of African Americans. Texts such as William C. Nell's "Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812" were praised in the black press, and spokesmen hoped to circulate such documents to educate the northern black populace about the history of black martial valor.[85]

Those who preferred to prepare for revolution at home rather than pursue elevation abroad, began taking steps to support their rhetorical trends. According to Bell, by 1851 convention delegates were considering arming themselves in Illinois and New York – for "racial defense." "In New York there was a demand by one Henry W. Johnson, in 1851 that Negroes learn military tactics 'for defense of their country, if not

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83 *Weekly Anglo African*, April 13, 1861 in BAP Reel 13, fr. 0461, 0462.

84 From the *Minutes and Proceedings of the General Convention, for the Improvement of the Colored Inhabitants of Canada, held by adjournments in Amherstburgh, C.W., June 16th and 17th, 1853*, (Windsor, C.W.: Bibb & Holly, 1853): in BAP Reel 8 fr. 0303.

85 "The facts in Mr. Nell's work are not generally known. Let us spread them by aiding the circulation of this work, and confirm them by collecting all others we can." in *Aliened American*, April 9, 1853 in BAP Reel 8 fr. 0219.

for themselves. In addition, the same gentleman talked of carving out empires and of marching with drawn swords. Moreover, the convention at which he was speaking recommended the formation of military companies for defensive purposes."[86] In towns and cities in the northern states, black men began joining together, arming themselves, and where possible even drilling in the city streets. Most seem to have sprung up independently of state sanction, as did the Attuck Blues in 1854. On July 4, 1855, the "Attuck Blues, the first Colored Military Company ever organized in Cincinnatti [*sic*], turned out in full dress parade, to celebrate the first anniversary of their organization."[87] Sometimes they petitioned the authorities for permission to create such companies. For example in Boston, sixty-five men petitioned the state legislature for permission to form an independent African-American military company, not only to defend the state of Massachusetts, but also to "place us in a position that we may command respect."[88] Acutely aware of the contemporary ideological connections between concepts of citizenship, suffrage, manhood and service in the militia, the Boston petitioners based their request on their rights "as men," who were "proud of, and conscious of the inherent dignity of manhood: as men, who, knowing our rights, dare, at all hazards, to maintain them."[89]

Given the conventions of the day, African American women did not assert a claim on these particular rights in the black public sphere. But African American women did contribute to the discourse of battle. Women, too, contributed to the discourse of battle.

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86 Bell, *Survey*, 120.

87 *Provincial Freeman*, September 8, 1855 in BAP Reel 9, fr. 0824.

88 *Our Rights As Men. An Address Delivered in Boston, Before the Legislative Committee on the Militia, February 24, 1853, by William J. Watkins, In Behalf of Sixty-Five Colored Petitioners, Praying for a Charter to Form an Independent Military Company*, (Boston, 1853), in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Negro Protest Pamphlets* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 11.

89 *Our Rights As Men*, 4.

Though they did not claim the privilege of warfare for themselves, they positioned themselves as race patriots, now ready to sacrifice their fathers, husbands, and sons. The members of the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Delaware, forwarded an address by their spokeswoman, Sara Stanley, in appreciation of the efforts being made by the male delegates to the 1856 Ohio State Convention. "Press on!" she urged them. "Manhood's prerogatives are yours by Almighty fiat." And after enumerating the importance of Republican principles, the violation of their rights in the North, and the enslavement of their brethren in the South, she positioned free black women as supporters of any violence that may come.

> It was a Spartan mother's farewell to her son, "Bring home your shield or be brought upon it." To you we would say, be true, be courageous, be steadfast in the discharge of your duty. The citadel of Error must yield to the unshrinking phalanx of truth. In our fireside circles, in the seclusion of our closets, we kneel in tearful supplication in your behalf. As Christian wives, mothers and daughters, we invoke the blessing of the King, Eternal and Immortal, "who sitteth upon the circle of the earth, who made the heavens with all their host," to rest upon you, and we pledge ourselves to exert our influence unceasingly in the cause of Liberty and Humanity.

Finally, she offered her society's encouragement and support by using the rhetoric of battle. She urged the delegates to, "be courageous: be steadfast: unfurl you banner to the breeze – let its folds float proudly over you, bearing the glorious inscription, broad and brilliant as the material universe: *'God and Liberty!* "[90]

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[90]An address presented by Wm. Harris, in behalf of the: Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Delaware, Ohio during the *Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men, Held in the City of Columbus, Ohio, January 16th, 17th, and 18th, 1856,* BSC, 313.

Conclusion

During the decade preceding the Civil War, northern black men and women increasingly drew upon the rhetoric of redemption. Both women and women used this rhetorical strategy, though they did so in different ways and with different consequences. Men focused on the redemptive power of expressions of martial virtue on the battlefield, while once again, African American women positioned themselves as supporters and legitimators of the cause. At the same time, male spokesmen built their calls for redemptive violence on a rhetoric of manhood denied and female virtue violated. And they cast themselves as messianic leaders in this process.

At the New York State Convention 1850, the delegates composed "A letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery." In it they encouraged slaves to escape to the north by pointing out of the benefits of elevation they had received saying, "We get wages for our labor. We have schools for our children. We have opportunities to hear and to learn to read the Bible...Some of us take part in the election of civil rulers..."[91] But more importantly, they highlighted the change in popular sentiments saying:

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[91] *Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention*, New York, August 22, 1850, in BSC, 44. In his recent study, *The Black Hearts of Men*, John Stauffer credits Gerrit Smith, writing in his "black voice," with the authorship of this letter. However, the published records of this interracial convention of radical abolitionists credits a committee of fugitive slaves including J.W. Loguen, James Baker and E. L. Platt with authorship of the address. Passages of the letter would be repeated in subsequent black conventions.

> When the insurrection of the Southern slaves shall take place, as take place it will unless speedily prevented by voluntary emancipation, the great majority of the colored men of the North, however much to the grief of any of us, will be found by your side, with deep-stored and long-accumulated revenge in their hearts and with death-dealing weapons in their hands. It is not to be disguised, that a colored man is as much disposed, as a white man, to resist, even unto death, those who oppress him. The colored American, for the sake of relieving his colored brethren, would no more hesitate to shoot an American slaveholder, than would a white American, for the sake of delivering his white brother, hesitate to shoot an Algerine slaveholder. The State motto of Virginia: "Death to Tyrants;" is as well the black man's, as the white man's motto. We tell you these things not to encourage, or justify your resort to physical force, but, simply, that you may know, be it to your joy or sorrow to know it, what your Northern colored brethren are, in these important respects.[92]

They ended saying, "Be prayful—be brave—be hopeful. 'Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.'"[93] Just as the Cuban free black class would lead the enslaved to victory in Delany's vision of *Blake*, so would northern black men fight to redeem themselves and their brethren from the degradation of the bondage of slavery.

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however, suggesting that the words resonated with black delegates. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 163-164.

92 *Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention*, New York, August 22, 1850, in BSC, 45.

93 *Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention*, New York, August 22, 1850, in BSC, 47.

Chapter Five

The Meaning of the Civil War

Introduction

Near the conclusion of *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup told his audience, "there are not fifty slaves on the shores of Bayou Boeuf, but would hail with unmeasured delight the approach of an invading army."[1] Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, expressions such as these, along with explicit calls for redemption through revolution, permeated northern black political discourse. While those in the pulpit continued to assure their readers that divine retribution was at hand, others used the setting of conventions, and the space of print culture to lend support to the prospect of slave insurrection, and assert the war-like capabilities of northern African American men. Some scholars have been quick to dismiss the significance of these rhetorical trends, arguing that though the rhetoric was, "clear in fiction and easy in oratory," the popular hope for a redemptive "revolution and insurrection never came in fact. Nowhere in the

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[1] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (1853; Reprint. Eds. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1968), 190.

North was there a population density of Negroes sufficient to sustain race war – even had the inarticulate been ready to respond to its rhetoric."[2]

In the opinion of many northern blacks, however, revolution did come in 1861. In an editorial called "The Coming Hour" A contributor to the *Weekly Anglo African* expressed his interpretation of the national crisis by using the rhetoric that had defined black political discourse for two decades. He vowed, "Better be a DEAD MAN, than a live slave! Better die fighting, than live to *breed* children for the shambles!" And he invoked the French Revolution, saying, "Rather, say we, ten 'Reigns of Terror' than one year of bondage! Better a thousand gullotines [*sic*], than one fugitive returned. Let the Union *go* to pieces, if the slaves go free."[3] And perhaps in a testament to the military companies formed in the previous decade, northern black men felt prepared to back up their rhetorical threats with physical action. Four days before the first shots of the war were even fired, Levin Tilmon of New York wrote to President Lincoln saying, "if your Honor wishes colored volunteers, you have only to signify."[4]

Once the Civil War began, African Americans throughout the North began taking steps to participate in the liberation of their enslaved brothers and sisters. In Boston, free blacks immediately met in Leonard Grimes' Twelfth Baptist Church, in a meeting William Wells Brown found to be "crowded as he had never seen a meeting before." There the men present resolved to organize themselves into "drilling companies" to prepare for service and the women resolved to "go as nurses, seamstresses, and warriors

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[2] Jane H. and William H. Pease, *They Who Would be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 250.

[3] *Weekly Anglo African*, April 13, 1861 in BAP Reel 13, fr. 0464.

[4] Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., 1956, reprint 1966), p. 2.

if need be."[5] In cities like Providence, New York City, and Philadelphia, African American men formed themselves into more drilling companies in preparation for battle. And in Washington D.C., and Cincinnati, Ohio, organized groups offered their services as guards for the city.[6] In the May 1861 issue of his newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*, Frederick Douglass voiced his interpretation of the Civil War,

> Slaveholders have in their madness invited armed abolition to march to the deliverance of the slave.... The American people and the Government at Washington may refuse to recognize it for a time; but the 'inexorable logic of events' will force it upon them in the end: that the war now being waged in this land is a war for and against slavery.[7]

Echoing the sentiments of many northern black spokesmen, he continued, "LET THE SLAVES AND FREE COLORED PEOPLE BE CALLED INTO SERVICE, AND FORMED INTO A LIBERATING ARMY, to march into the South and raise the banner of emancipation among the slaves."[8]

Throughout the 1860s, northern African Americans would continue to interpret the national conflict, and their role in it, through the religious and political framework they created in the institutions of black public culture. The spokesmen and women for northern black churches, schools, voluntary associations, and conventions would interpret the Civil War as the crucible for their redemption, and they would use these institutions to facilitate the process. Ultimately, as the emancipation of southern slaves and the

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[5] Benjamin Quarles, *Negro in Civil War* (New York: De Capo, 1953), 26, 27.

[6] Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 6; Quarles, *Negro in Civil War*, 24-29.

[7] *Douglass' Monthly*, May 1861.

[8] *Douglass' Monthly*, May 1861; Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, v. 3; Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 4. In *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, David Blight sees this rhetoric as evidence of Douglass' millennial belief in divine retribution and faith in the possibility of a new republic built on equality. David Blight, *Frederick Douglass Civil War Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 73, 87. However, his rhetoric should also be seen as a part of the use of redemption rhetoric in black public culture.

battlefield heroism of African American men satisfied their collective need for redemption, northern black spokesmen would again turn their energies toward the task of elevation. Some would renew their demands for the manhood rights that characterized their understanding of freedom: equality of citizenship, and the right to vote.

Retribution

From the earliest days of the Civil War, northern black spokesmen voiced their opinion about the meaning of the conflict. Reflecting back on his interpretation of the war, Frederick Douglas concluded that, "from the first, I, for one saw in this war the end of slavery, and truth requires me to say that my interest in the success of the North was largely due to this belief."[9] In the consensus that emerged, spokesmen agreed that the national crisis bore the stamp of divine retribution for the national sin of slavery, and Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne issued a letter reflecting these sentiments, "To the Colored People of the United States" in the early days of the war. "Men, Brethren, Sisters," he wrote.

> Murmur not against the Lord on account of the cruelty and injustice of man. His almighty arm is already stretched out against slavery – against every man, every constitution, and every union that upholds it. His avenging chariot is now moving over the bloody fields of the doomed south, crushing beneath its massive wheels the very foundations of the blasphemous system. Soon slavery shall sink like

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[9] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892; Reprint New York: Collier Books, 1962), 335.

> Pharoah – even like that brazen-hearted tyrant, it shall sink to rise no more forever.[10]

One man wrote to the *Christian Recorder* to point out the, "correspondence existing between the war in the United States and the Egyptian plagues." He defined "Abraham Lincoln and not Jeff. Davis" as "the Pharaoh of the mystic Egypt (American slavery)" and he warned:

> And mystic Egypt, with mystic Pharaoh at its head, may refuse compliance to Heaven's demand; but the inexpressible tortures inflicted upon ancient Egypt, the cruelties of Antiochus to the Jews, the devastation of Jerusalem by the Roman Generals Titus and Vespasian, the bloody streets of France in 1792, will all hardly bear a comparison to what will befall this nation.[11]

Scholars have traditionally interpreted the northern black support for the war as a surge of optimism signifying a break with the previous decade's pessimism and despair.[12] But as the previous passages suggest, northern blacks expressed their support for the Civil War in terms similar to the calls for redemption that permeated black political discourse in the two decades preceding the war. Scholars have also argued that black support for the war grew from a desire to prove their patriotism to the Union and underscore their claims for citizenship rights with displays of manly virtue on the field of

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[10] William Wells Brown discussed Daniel Payne's perspective on the Civil War, and reprinted this letter, which Payne sent to the *Weekly Anglo African* after "President Lincoln's interview with the committee of colored men at Washington" in William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, 2d. ed. (1865. Reprint. Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1992), 209-210.

[11] *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1862.

[12] Scholars have traditionally interpreted the black support for as a period of optimism quite different from the "pessimism" that characterized the rhetoric of the previous decade. For example, Eric Foner characterizes this tendency when he writes, "The war produced an abrupt shift from the pessimism of the 1850s to a renewed spirit of patriotism and a restored faith in the larger society.... Emancipation further transformed the black response to American nationality, dealing the death blow, at least for this generation, to ideas of emigration. Symbolic, perhaps, was the fact that Martin R. Delany, the 'father of black nationalism' and an advocate in the 1850s of emigration, recruited blacks for the union Army and then joined himself. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 26-27.

battle.[13] But despite their continued interest in obtaining the rights of citizenship, northern blacks rarely framed their support for the war in light of national patriotism when speaking to each other. In fact, those who invoked the idea of national patriotism in African American circles primarily did so to argue against black involvement in the war. *The Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, repeatedly dissuaded northern blacks from involving themselves in the war on these grounds alone. Lending their service as soldiers in the conflicts of the past, they argued, had done little to ensure the citizenship rights of African Americans before, and it was unlikely to do so now.[14] A *Weekly Anglo-African* contributor named "Ivanhoe" agreed that the onset of the war signaled the coming of divine redemption, but he did not believe that African Americans should sacrifice their lives on behalf of the Union. Like

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[13] Scholars have traditionally interpreted the northern black response to the Civil War in two ways. They agree that northern blacks immediately interpreted the war as one to end slavery, the federal government's statements and activities with regard to the contraband notwithstanding. Some reach this conclusion by noting that "many colored men were members of the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement," and therefore, "they saw in the war fever of the North a force that would eventually compel the destruction of slavery." James McPherson, The Negro's Civil War: How the American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union, (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 12, 16. Others rely primarily on the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass. For example see David Blight, who focuses on the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass and argues, "Once the Civil War had commenced, Douglass saw greater ends in violence than cathartic effects. He wanted for all black people what he had always desired for himself: the recognition of his manhood and full acceptance into the family of American citizens." Blight, F. Douglass Civil War, 99. And while scholars have relied upon African American expressions of millennial abolitionism to explain their support for the war itself, they have agreed that northern blacks rushed to enlist in the war in an effort to demonstrate their patriotism and readiness for the privileges of citizenship. See for example, Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union and the Civil War, 1861-1865*, 2d. edition (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 212, and Benjamin Quarles, *Negro and the Civil War*, chapter one.

[14] Unlike Douglass, the A.M.E. Church's official position, as printed in the *Christian Recorder*, was not in favor of black involvement in the war. Clarence Walker sees the *Christian Recorder* taking the position that the war "was essentially a political struggle between two political parties," and "a sectional dispute over territories." The church regularly advised black men not to enlist, and based the opinion on the fact that blacks had fought for the country in previous conflict to no avail. Clarence Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 33. "To offer ourselves now," wrote the editor of the *Christian Recorder*, "is to abandon *self-respect* and invite insult." Blacks should not fight when "not only our citizenship, but our common humanity is denied." Quoted in Blight, *Frederick Douglass Civil War*, 149.

the editors of the *Christian Recorder*, he reminded his readers that black military service had done little to improve the status of African Americans in the past. He argued,

> [Our fathers] put confidence in the word of the whites only to feel the dagger of slavery driven still deeper into the heart throbbing with the emotions of joy for freedom. We are not going to re-enact that tragedy. Our enslaved brethren must be made freedmen, and the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" solemnly and religiously stipulated in the bond. We of the North must have all rights which white men enjoy; until then we are in no condition to fight under the flag which gives us no protection.[15]

Some African Americans had used similar logic to criticize the growing number of black militia companies that publicly pledged, "to protect the American Flag," and "her Union" for some time. To one critic, such declarations only proved that the participants were also "her Slaves."[16] One contributor to the *Weekly Anglo African*, using the initials R.H.V., also preferred elevation through self-improvement to military service. Men like R.H.V. believed that the war would ultimately end slavery through divine intervention. Therefore black military service was neither necessary for the successful completion of divine redemption, nor a useful antidote to white prejudice against African Americans as long as African Americans remained lacking in "the more essential qualities that make the man the citizen."[17]

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[15] *Weekly Anglo African*, Oct 19, 1861 in BAP Reel 13, fr. 0846.

[16] In 1855, one critic berated the "Attuck Blues" of Cincinnati, who on a rainy day "proceeded into the streets with their 'white pants' on," to declare "that they were ready at any time to protect the American Flag, her Union," and therefore, he continued the were no better than, "her Slaves." *Provincial Freeman*, September 8, 1855 in BAP Reel 9, fr. 0824.

[17] Declaring, "no fighting will emancipate you from prejudice," R.H.V. prescribed the standard themes of elevation through self-improvement saying, "wealth and education...will do more towards destroying that prejudice which darkens our existence than all the fighting we can effect under the most favorable circumstances." He continued by arguing "the encouragement of every pursuit of industry and education, aside from war matters, are deserving and should...meet our most vigorous and undivided co-operation!" And he ultimately revealed his own disdain for the larger black population when he continued, "That policy [of elevation]... alone can produce the requisite means to establish our claim to the respect we need...no display of military drill of hordes of unarmed or armed men, ignorant of every other necessary qualification

Keeping in mind all of these sentiments, northern black spokesmen framed their own unique response to the war. While they agreed that the war heralded divine redemption, they urged African Americans to join the Union forces only when the aims and the practices of the federal government became more closely aligned with the interests of African Americans. The editor of the *Weekly Anglo African* framed these sentiments plainly,

> Let us be prepared to fight, and ready to fight when we are assured what we are fighting for. On the ground of the highest patriotism alone, let us go forth to battle – not to save the government as it *was*, but to uphold it as it ought to be. Let no black hand lift a musket, or draw a sword, unless it be for immediate emancipation.[18]

In addition to viewing the war as a crucible for the liberation of southern slaves, northern blacks also interpreted the war as means for free men and women to aid in the process of redemption. Throughout the period, spokesmen invoked the race patriotism espoused in by the conventions of the previous decade, and urged each other to "arouse from our lethargy and arm ourselves as men and patriots against the common enemy of God and man."[19] Drawing upon the narratives, fiction, and speeches they had produced in the previous decade, they argued that military service would allow them to finally join their southern brethren in revolution against the slaveholders of the South. Their willingness to fight and die for such a cause would serve as a symbolic answer to the question black northerners had so often posed: "Are you not men?" The rhetoric of war struck a chord across social lines in the free black population. When Martin Delany addressed a crowd

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as servicable citizens will command [respect]." *Weekly Anglo African* October 26, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0854 – 0855.

18 *Weekly Anglo African* August 24, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0709.

19 *Weekly Anglo African* October 26, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0854 – 0855.

of New York City blacks, saying "let our war cry be 'insurrection,'" his "declaration was received with tremendous applause."[20]

Only when speaking to white audiences did black spokesmen cast their interest in the war in the light of national patriotism.[21] Certainly, the familiar rhetoric of "insurrection" that inspired applause in black circles would have found little support among white officials. Consequently, William A. Jones of Oberlin, Ohio wrote to Secretary of War Simeon Cameron on November 27th, 1861, he eschewed the discourse of redemption in favor of patriotic duty, saying "very many of the colored citizens of Ohio and other states have had a great desire to assist the government in putting down this injurious rebellion.... We are partly drilled and would wish to enter active service immediately."[22] Frederick Douglass, who typically relied upon the themes of patriotism and divine redemption in the wartime rhetoric he directed toward white Americans, exemplified this trend when he said, "we ask you to modify your laws, that we may enlist, -- that full scope may be given to the patriotic feelings burning in the colored man's breast."[23]

Despite the careful patriotic rhetoric that northern black spokesmen aimed toward white audiences, however, African American offers to participate in the Union effort

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[20] *Weekly Anglo African* Jan 25, 1862, in BAP Reel 14 fr. 0087. The free black population met at the Shiloh Church to hear Rev. L. C. Lockwood discuss the condition of the freedpeople living near Fortress Monroe.

[21] On the rare occasions that black spokesmen urged African Americans to respond to the crisis with a sense of national patriotism, northern blacks often failed to respond. Therefore, Frederick Douglass incorporated the rhetoric of redemption into his subsequent recruiting speeches, and as David Blight noted, "urged enlistment for the following practical ends: self-defense through learning the 'use of arms'; self-respect by proving the manhood and courage of black people: self-involvement by controlling their own destiny and making their own history; and finally...retribution against slaveholders. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 159.

[22] William A. Jones to Secretary of War Simeon Cameron, November 27, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0934.

[23] Philip Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, v. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 14. Scholars have traditionally relied on statements such as these when discussing the African American contribution to, and interpretation of the Civil War.

were routinely refused by state and federal officials. In Providence and New York City, law enforcement officials ordered African Americans to cease their drilling exercises. In Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., and Michigan, government officials refused the proffered services of African American men. And residents of Baltimore made their sentiments about black male military service clear as they attacked the sixty-five year-old Nicholas Biddle who attached himself to the Washington Artillerists. It was not his mere presence that incensed the crowd, but Biddle's "military dress."[24]

When white spokesmen enumerated the reasons for opposing black enlistment, they betrayed a greater understanding of the northern black mindset than they may have realized. African American troops would be fighting not to restore the Union, but to end slavery, wrote a *New York Times* writer. Moreover, he argued, "The man that fights in the ranks and distinguishes himself is entitled to applause and promotion." Like many other whites, the *Times* writer was opposed to "elevating" African American men in such a critical way, for once begun, where would it end? "A regiment of negroes will claim black officers," he wrote, "and will, if the qualities of command are found to exist, be entitled to them." And though he primarily betrayed his own fears about African American savagery when he suggested that if armed, black men would be determined "to exterminate the white population of the South," northern blacks were not uninterested in the possibility of symbolic revenge.[25] The editor of the *Weekly Anglo African* captured the sense of expectancy in the air when he wrote, "Colored men whose fingers tingle to

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[24] Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 6; Quarles, *Negro in Civil War*, 24-29.

[25] Quoted in Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 40-41.

pull the trigger, or clutch the knife aimed at the slaveholders in arms, will not have to wait much longer."[26]

After 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation transformed the official Union policy of the Civil War into a war to end slavery, and the federal government officially sanctioned black enlistment, northern blacks responded quickly.[27] In 1862, after the President issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, a young Henry McNeal Turner wrote from Washington, D.C. to say,

> We live in one of the most eventful periods of the world's revolutions - a period virtually speaking, that "kings and prophets waited for, but never saw".... The time for boasting of ancestral genius, and prowling through the dusty pages of ancient history to find a specimen of negro intellectuality is over.... All can now see that the stern intention of the Presidential policy is, to wage the war in favour of freedom, till the last groan of the anguished heart of the slave shall be hushed in the ears of nature's God. This definition of the policy bids us rise, and for ourselves think, act, and do.... A new era, a new dispensation of things, is now upon us - to action, to action, is the cry. We must now begin to think, to plan, and to legislate for ourselves.[28]

In 1863, the *Christian Recorder* officially reversed its opposition to black enlistment, and one man wrote, "now is the time for us to fly to arms! to arms!" wrote one man. "It is better to die warriors than to die slaves."[29]

Almost immediately, African American men volunteered for military service. Members of Cincinnati's Black Brigade traveled to Massachusetts to join the

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[26] *Weekly Anglo African* August 24, 1861 in BAP Reel 13 fr. 0709.

[27] "As soon as the Conscription Act was passed the president initiated a determined effort to recruit as many blacks as possible. If the administration expected the public to accept compulsory service as necessary, all obvious manpower resources had to be utilized." Mary Frances Berry. *Military Necessity and Civil Rights Policy: Black Citizenship and the Constitution, 1861-1868* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977),56.

[28] *The Christian Recorder* October 4, 1862.

[29] Joseph E. Williams to Elisha Weaver, *The Christian Recorder*, August 15, 1863, BAP Reel 14 fr. 1012. By 1862, Walker sees the A.M.E. church leadership's opinion changing. They begin arguing that black enlistment was needed to put down the war and end slavery. After the emancipation proclamation in 1863, the church annual conference passes a resolution calling for blacks to support black troops, though they remain unhappy about the inequity in pay. Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land*, 35-40.

Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth.[30] In New York State, where officials refused to raise any African American troops, federal authorities created a commission to raise a black regiment on November 12, 1863. By the end of January 1864, they had raised two full regiments of 1,000 soldiers. Of the estimated 9,000 men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five in New York, 2,300 enlisted within sixty days. Others had already, and would continue to leave the state to join other regiments.[31] Some may have gone to Pennsylvania, where five full regiments were mustered into service between July 1863 and February 1864. Others may have gone to Massachusetts.[32] Ultimately, both as volunteers and as conscripts, northern blacks formed 18 percent of the total number of African American soldiers.[33]

When explaining their support for black service, or their own personal decision to enlist, northern blacks invariably relied upon the rhetoric of redemption, and expressed joy at the prospect of aiding slaves striking out for freedom, and taking up arms against the society that hoped to enslave them. In January 1863, Hezekiah Ford Douglas wrote to *Frederick Douglass's Monthly*, to explain his reason for joining the army. "I enlisted six months ago," he wrote, "in order to be better prepared to play my part in the great

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30 Peter Clark, *The Black Brigade of Cincinnati: Being a Report of Its Labors and a Muster-roll of Its Members; Together with various Orders, Speeches, etc. Relating to It* (1864; Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1969), 10, 11.

31 George Washington Williams, *A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-65, preceded by a Review of the Military Services of Negroes in Ancient and Modern Times* (1888; Reprint. New York: Bergman Publishers, 1968), 116-119.

32 Williams, *History of Negro Troops*, 120.

33 "The northern states supplied 33,000 (approximately 18 percent) of the total black soldiers, and in many districts blacks served in higher proportion than whites." Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 164. Ultimately, between 180,000 and 200,000 African American men enlisted in the Union Army, roughly 10% of the total number of Union soldiers. Of these 68,178 died. 2,751 were killed in action while the rest were missing in action, or perished from wounds or disease. Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 288.

drama of the Negro's redemption."[34] In March of the same year, he characterized the mindset of those who supported enlistment in this way,

> I am quite willing to have the negro lay aside for the time being the more peaceful modes of warfare: religion, education, industry, sobriety, which I must confess has availed him but very little in the moral conflicts of the past, so far as the breaking down of a cruel and brutal prejudice is concerned, and go in on his muscle....Of one thing you may be assured, that it is the wrath of the negro, his determination to remain on the soil enriched by the blood and tears of his race for six generations, that makes liberty and Union possible. [35]

Recruiting officer Robert Forten returned from his self-imposed exile in England to the United States and explained his decision to his mother, "When now on the eve of the triumph of freedom how could I, or any other colored man in whose bosom a love of country, race, and liberty dwells, remain in a foreign land? I am come to break the bonds of the slave and aid in the triumph of liberty."[36] Though he did not enlist, Amos Beman made the connection between military service and the concept of redemption even more explicit when he proposed that Walker's *Appeal* and Garnet's *Address* be distributed among all black soldiers.[37]

Like white northern volunteers, northern black combatants in the war often described their individual service in the war effort as a time when they grew from

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[34] Edwin Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Harverd University Press, 1992), 24.

[35] *Belvidere Standard*, March 3, 1863 in BAP Reel 14, fr. 0756.

[36] He traveled to the eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia as a recruiting officer, ultimately perishing from typhoid fever. Daniel Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888. Reprint New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), 52, 53.

[37] In discussing central texts that must be distributed among the Union soldiers, he proposed: "There are some books and publications of special importance in the present crisis of our affairs, which should be in the hands of all, especially our soldiers: First that book of *facts*, by W.C. Nell of Boston, also that volume of fire, "Walker's Appeal," and "Garnet's address to the slaves" should be scattered all over the land as thick as autumnal leaves.'" Peter Hinks, To *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*. (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 114.

boyhood into manhood.[38] But spokesmen for the northern black community also expressed their participation in the war as a vindication of their sense of the collective manhood of the race, which had been assaulted both by enslavement in the South and prejudice in the North. At the same time, they also understood that black service in the Union cause underscored their demands for the rights of citizenship when narrowly interpreted as the rights of manhood. By again fulfilling a crucial obligation of male citizens -- protection of the state -- northern black men believed they had buttressed their campaign for the manhood rights of citizenship as well. And by the final days of the war, spokesmen were explicitly connecting black support for the Union cause – their phys*ic*al expression of the duties of citizenship – with their demand for manhood rights, rights interpreted specifically as the masculine privileges of citizenship.[39]

For northern black spokesmen and women, no regiments personified the sentiments of independence, martial valor, and manly virtue more than the Massachusetts

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[38] See Reid Mitchell, "A Northern Volunteer," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, editors, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43-54. Mitchell argues that during and after the Civil War, Americans "linked the transformation of the civilian into soldier and the passage of a boy into adulthood. At the minimum the relationship was twofold. First...those who lived through the war emerged at the age traditionally associated with full manhood....Second, the very ideas of man, soldier, and citizen were inextricably linked...Since coming of age means not simply becoming an adult but assuming adult gender roles – becoming a man – popular thought sometimes conflated the two transformations." Clinton and Silber, *Divided Houses*,44. In "I's A Man Now': Gender and African American Men," Jim Cullen surveys the documents produced by black Union soldiers and convincingly argues that "as the *material* conditions of their lives changed – as they joined the armed forces, were freed from slavery or both – so too did their ideological conception of themselves as men." Clinton and Silber, *Divided Houses*, 77.

[39] See Clinton and Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* for a discussion of the various ways contemporary gender ideals and practices informed the Civil War experiences of Americans. For discussions of the ways in which African American men interpreted and expressed their Civil War participation as a vindication of their manhood, see Leeann White, "The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender," and Jim Cullen, "'I's a Man Now': Gender and African American Men," both in the Clinton and Silber collection. For a discussion of the ways in which African American men connected their wartime service to their claims for civil and political rights, see James McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War*, and Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*.

Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth regiments.[40] More than simply being among the first black regiments mustered into the army, the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth regiments represented the diversity of the antebellum northern black experience. They contained African American men from a variety of northern states, and they reflected a cross-section of northern black society. The regiments included representatives of the most prominent northern black families, along with working class African Americans.[41] They included those who were born free, those who had escaped from slavery and made new homes in the north, and a few who escaped after the outbreak of the war.[42] And because Massachusetts was the cradle of Garrisonian abolitionism, the regiments symbolized black political aims and ideals to white and black Americans alike. Thus northern blacks praised the state of Massachusetts itself for being "the first to unbar the

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[40] Though northern blacks had already served and fought as volunteers in Kansas, Massachusetts became the first state to actively recruit a black regiment. Recruitment began on February 9, 1863 in the abolitionist stronghold of Boston. Though 414 men, enough to fill five companies, had enrolled by March, there were simply not enough black male residents of age in the state to fill the regiment. So prominent African Americans including Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, began to recruit for the regiment throughout the northern states and Canada. By April, over 800 men had enrolled, and by May 12, the regiment was full. William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion. His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867; Reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), 147.

[41] Frederick Douglass' sons, Charles and Lewis, were the first two men in the State of New York to enlist in the Massachusetts regiments. Douglass, *Life and Times*, 342. This closeness was reflected in a letter from Lewis Douglass to his fiancée Amelia Loguen [daughter of J. Loguen?] of Syracuse describing the missing and wounded of the regiment after the assault on Fort Wagner: "De Forest of your city is wounded," and "George Washington is missing, Jacob Carter is missing, Charles Reason is wounded, Charles Whiting, Charles Creamer, all wounded." Quarles, *Negro in Civil War*, 17.

[42] Luis Emilio noted that "Only a small proportion [of the regiment] had been slaves. Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863 – 1865*: 2d ed. (1894; Reprint New York: Da Capo, 1995), 21. Williams Wells Brown however wrote that "Many of the men in the Fifty-Fourth had once been slaves at the South; some had enjoyed freedom for years; others had escaped after the breaking out of the Rebellion. Most of them had relatives still there, and had a double object in joining the regiment. They were willing to risk their lives for the freedom of those left behind; and, if they failed in that, they might, at least have an opportunity of settling with the 'ole boss' for a long score of cruelty." Brown, *Negro in Rebellion*, 157.

door, that black men of the North may on equal terms with white men, strike simultaneously at Slavery and the Rebellion."[43]

The performance of the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth during the Union assault on Fort Wagner proved to be a watershed for northern blacks.[44] For white Americans, the courage the men exhibited as they led the charge on Fort Wagner proved that black troops could be mustered into service profitably, and thus helped to turn the tide of northern public opinion in favor of black Union soldiers.[45] But for northern blacks, the bravery of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth during the assault on Fort Wagner vindicated decades of their rhetoric about black military virtue and manhood. Northern blacks rejoiced that, their "valor and heroism at Fort Wagner" underscored their claims "that they were worthy to be freemen."[46]

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[43] At a Philadelphia meeting designed to gain volunteers and raise support for the Massachusetts 54th, the crowd approved a resolution stating that "we, the colored people of the United States, owe a duty to Massachusetts that cannot better be paid than by giving her every influence in our power in order to make the 54th Regiment, Massachusets [sic] Volunteers, a perfect success." The catalogue of praise for Massachusetts was quite extensive. One paragraph read, "Whereas, Massachusetts, true, to the instinctive principles of those Puritan Fathers, has ever been foremost in maintaining human freedom, was first in the Revolution; was first in freeing her slaves; was first in awarding to black men the acknowledgment of citizenship; was first in opening her courts of justice on equal terms to black men; was first in opening her public schools to colored youth; was first in preserving Kansas from the grasp of the slave oligarchs of the South; was the first to respond to the President's call for volunteers in defence of the national Capital when threatened by treason and rebellion; was first to send her much-loved children, those ministering angels, (the slave teachers) to Port Royal, Beaufort, Norfolk, Washington, and wherever else the slaves are congregated, thus practically carrying out the principles of true charity and Christian philanthropy; and last, though not least, is the first to unbar the door, that black men of the North may on equal terms with white men, strike simultaneously at Slavery and the Rebellion." *Pacific Appeal* May 16, 1863 in BAP Reel 14 fr. 0863.

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[45] The Union assault on Fort Wagner resulted in 1515 Union casualties. 247 of these were sustained by the men of the Massachusetts 54th alone a regiment with 600 men. In contrast, the Confederate forces saw only 174 casualties. (Quarles, *Negro in Civil War*, 17) Afterwards, new regiments were opened up until 180,000 black troops had enlisted in the Union Army. (Quarles *Negro in Civil War*, 21)

[46] *Pacific Appeal*, October 25, 1863 in BAP Reel 15, fr. 0015. Frederick Douglass wrote that, "the raising of these two regiments – the 54th and 55th – and their splendid behavior in South and North Carolina, was the beginning of great things for the colored people of the whole country." Douglass, *Life and Times*, 342. In *Freedom's Birthplace*, John Daniels wrote that the other black regiments fought honorably as well, "it was the Fifty-fourth which – as though in fulfillment of a high destiny as the first Negro regiment to take up arms after the proclamation of the Negro's freedom, and as the body of soldiers to which all who

In addition, the men's refusal to accept unequal pay reverberated through northern black circles. After promising the men enlisting in the Massachusetts regiments that they would be paid the same monthly thirteen dollar salary as white soldiers, the federal government chose to pay African American recruits only ten dollars per month, with three dollars withheld as a clothing ration. H.I.W. expressed the sentiments of the men when he wrote, "When I enlisted at Boston, Mass., Feb. 21st, 1863, I enlisted on the same terms as other soldiers - clothing, rations, and pay," only to have the paymaster "come with woe-stricken face and say they can pay us but $10 a month, and $3 deducted for clothing, which leaves us but $7 a month." "What do you think of this?" he asked. "Just let them think of Fort Wagner, James' Island, and Olustee, Florida! The men of the 54th have suffered terribly, and still they have the cheek to rest these brave men of color out of their rights"[47] One soldier remarked that if he had known they were to be paid less than white soldiers, he "would have staid [*sic*] in England when I last visited that place."[48] For these men, the inequity of pay demonstrated that "If there are any slaves, the men of the 54th are as much slaves as any."[49]

In response to the inequity of pay, members of the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth regiments exhibited more than disappointment or despair. Despite the deprivation the decision would cost their families at home, the men chose to accept no pay at all. J.H. Hall of Company B summed up their decision, saying:

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believed in the Negro's worth looked to justify their faith – won glory above that of any other Negro battalion of the war, and displayed heroism unsurpassed by any other troops, of either race." John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes*, Boston, (1914; Reprint NY: Arno Press, 1969), 76.

47 *The Christian Recorder*, July 23, 1864.

48 *The Christian Recorder*, August 27, 1864.

49 *The Christian Recorder*, July 23, 1864.

> The educated negro does not enter into contracts without knowing what recompense he is to receive or is promised for his services. The State of Massachusetts has agents in the county of Suffolk, and some one of these parties is responsible. We are fully satisfied that our debtors are solvent, and we are determined to get all we have enlisted for, when we get back to prosecute the matter, those of us, at least, who may live to come back. Twenty thousand dollars, over and above our three years, will be sacrificed by this regiment, in order that we may test the law upon this matter. We will have all or nothing. We will not tamely submit to the infliction of wrongs most foul, as did our forefathers, and go back to despondency and submission without even a single struggle...
> We, as a regiment, have bound ourselves together with one accord and as one man to protect our own rights: those rights which are now denied us should be given us.[50]

A member of the Fifty-Fifth expressed his disappointment with Massachusetts, for failing to live up to the promise of equal pay. But like many others, he preferred to be involved in the struggle for freedom. He wrote:

> we gave to Massachusetts the honor of having us enlist under her State flag - some from Indiana, some from Ohio, some from Missouri, Pennsylvania, New York State, Jersey, Maryland, Kentucky, and some from Canada... Great was the love shown by our race for Massachusetts, who flocked to her standard by thousands for the purpose of enlisting. But, for my part, if I had it to do over again, I would enlist in my own State, Pennsylvania.

He pledged to continue the fight for "the exercise of our political, free, civil, and public rights," saying, "if I should live to get home from this regiment, and the war still continues, I will join a Pennsylvania regiment."[51]

African Americans on the northern home front supported the regiments' decision to refuse their pay and joined them in denouncing the practice. "Pearl" wrote to the *Christian Recorder* in support of their boycott, in spite of the deprivation it caused the

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[50] *The Christian Recorder*, August 27, 1864. Of course, "educated" African Americans were not the only ones to complain about the disparity in pay. Freedmen in the South Carolina regiments also objected to the inequity, and threatened to strike.

[51] *The Christian Recorder*, July 9, 1864.

men in camp and their families at home. "When colored men were called to enlist," she wrote,

> some were told they would receive thirteen dollars per month and three hundred dollars bounty; others were told they would receive ten dollars per month, and no bounty, with one ration and the pay for their clothes deducted. Well, the Massachusetts regiments are complaining they do not receive their pay of thirteen dollars per month, and refuse it because it is seven, which is right.[52]

Frederick Douglass resigned from his position as recruiter over the inequity in pay. Ultimately, the Federal Government reversed its decision for the Massachusetts regiment. At the 1864 National Convention of Colored Men held in Syracuse, New York, John Rock received a round of applause from the delegates and the observers when he declared.

> Witness, if you please, the moral heroism of the Massachusetts soldiers, spurning the offers of seven dollars a month, which the Government insultingly tempted them with for eighteen months, when it was known that they were without means, and that many of them had wives at home and children crying to them for bread when there was none to give them. But they bore it manfully, and have lived to see the right triumph.[53]

The *New York Tribune* may have expressed the sentiments of many when it described their boycott as "a sublimer heroism, a loftier sentiment of honor, than that which inspired them at Wagner."[54]

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[52] *The Christian Recorder*, June 25, 1864.

[53] *National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, N.Y., 1864*, in Bell, *Colored Conventions*, 24.

[54] *The Christian* Recorder, September 23, 1865.

A New Era

For the northern black spokesmen of the Civil War generation, African-American service in the war constituted a "new era" in African American history.[55] In the many institutions of black political culture; in their conventions, their schools, their churches, their newspapers and voluntary associations, African Americans celebrated the heroism of black soldiers. When speaking about the Civil War, they invoked the battles of Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson, Richmond, and Fort Wagner, and they celebrated revolution that had taken place in their midst.

Those African Americans who wrote the official histories of black regiments for posterity also interpreted the black experience in the Civil War as a watershed in their life and history. Though they placed African American service in the war in a larger tradition of black participation and heroism in previous American wars, they interpreted black service in the Civil War as the inauguration of a new chapter in African American history. Looking back on the events of the 1860s, the historian and Civil War veteran George Washington Williams wrote,

> the part enacted by the Negro soldier in the war of the Rebellion is the romance of North American history. It was...from passive submission to the cruel curse of

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[55] Black service in the war could be tallied as follows: 200,000 black men served out of a total 797,807 Union troops. Black troops had a 35% higher mortality rate than white troops with a total of 38,000 war dead. Black regiments fought in 449 encounters with the Confederates, 39 of which were designated as major battles. Seventeen black soldiers and four black sailors received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Berry, *Military Necessity*, 84.

> slavery to the brilliant aggressiveness of a free soldier; from a chattel to a person; from the shame of degradation to the glory of military exaltation.[56]

And in his 1867 history of the war, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and his Fidelity,* William Wells Brown placed African American men's service in the Civil War in the tradition of military service and slave insurrections alike. By placing black service in the Union army in the tradition of slave insurrection, Brown cast black service in the war as the final redemptive act, and underscored the revolutionary implications of black service in the Civil War.[57]

If the campaign for citizenship had obscured the extent of northern black women's participation in black political culture during the 1840s and 50s, their activism during the Civil War remained even more hidden. Women did participate in the war effort, most in positions suitable for northern gender ideals. Some African American women created their own local branches to the Sanitary Commission, as did the women Philadelphia's St. Thomas' Episcopal Church.[58] In a variety of local organizations, they sewed banners for black regiments, sewed articles of clothing for black troops, and collected funds to help support those wives and children of soldiers fighting for the African American cause without pay. As individuals, they served as nurses and teachers in the Union camps. Charlotte Forten left her position teaching freedmen, women and

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[56] George Williams is listed on the title page as "first colored member of the Ohio legislature, and late judge advocate of the Grand Army of the Republic of Ohio." Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops,* xiii, xiv.

[57] Like Williams, Brown began the book by devoting chapters to black service in the American Revolution, and black service in the War of 1812, something northern blacks had done for decades when petitioning white lawmakers for the rights of citizenship. But after discussing black participation in America's previous wars, Brown then devoted full chapters to describing, and celebrating Denmark Vesey's slave revolt, Nat Turner's revolt, Madison Washington's heroic rescue and escape, and finally, John Brown's raid, combining citizenship and redemption seamlessly in the structure of the text.

[58] Members of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church formed the Ladies' Sanitary Association in 1863. Ella Forbes, *African American Women During the Civil War,* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 77.

children at St. Helena, South Carolina to nurse the wounded of the Massachusetts 54th after their assault on Fort Wagner.[59] And a few unusual women, like Harriet Tubman, served as spies for the Union army, while cooking and cleaning for soldiers in the camp.[60] But for the majority of northern black women, their primary role in the service of the Civil War – at least the role most often celebrated by black spokesmen – was their willingness to sacrifice their fathers, husbands, and sons for the cause of liberation, revolution and redemption. In doing so, they fulfilled the promises they had made in the previous decades of black political discourse.

While black women's contributions were duly noted in the discourse of the day, spokesmen did not frame black women's efforts as essential to the cause. While they valued women's voluntarism and willingness to sacrifice their male relatives to the war, their socialization as antebellum northerners, and two decades of black political discourse had prepared them to view men's participation in the war, as a politically vital expression of manly virtue, essential for the acquisition of male political and social prerogatives. And as we shall see, black northern spokesmen would use this interpretation of their participation in the Civil War in the political battles of the coming decade.[61]

Northern black spokesmen like Williams and Brown were not unmindful of the political implications of black service in the Union army during the Civil War. For while enlisted men were proving their manliness and virtue, facing slaveholders, and "redeeming" the race on the field of battle, civilian African American spokesmen were

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59 Quarles, *Negro in the Civil War*, 18.

60 For a full description of black women's roles during the Civil War, see Ella Forbes, African American Women during the Civil War.

61 Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation in its current state, African American spokesmen's longstanding belief in the ballot as first and foremost a manhood right, might explain the ease with which staunch supporters of woman's rights rejected the arguments of woman's rights advocates who hoped to include woman suffrage with universal manhood suffrage in the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

returning to the conventional channels they had long used in their battle for the rights of citizenship. As they organized new associations, met in state and national conventions, and submitted addresses and petitions to white lawmakers and officials, African American spokesmen reiterated their demands for the male rights of citizenship. This time, however, they added black service to the Union to their arsenal of rhetorical strategies. Some did so subtly, as William Wells Brown did in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. After discussing the black contribution to the various campaigns of the war, he made an extended case for the enfranchisement of African American men, saying:

> the fact that the negroes, by assisting the Federal authorities to put down the Rebellion, gained the hatred of their old masters, placed the blacks throughout the South in a very bad position. Now, what shall be done to protect these people from the abuse of their former oppressors?.... We answer, the only thing to save him is the ballot. Liberty without equality is no boon.[62]

Others made the case more explicitly, as a man in Mississippi did in 1865. While describing the dangers encountered by the freedmen and women in the area, a contributor to the *Christian Recorder* strengthened the standard claims for the rights of citizenship by framing black military service as an expression of national patriotism, saying:

> We want, first, complete personal enfranchisement, and then the civil franchises which indemnify an American soldier and citizen. All the ordinary privileges, without the right of suffrage, are as baseless as a shadow.... Give us the self-protective right, the elective franchise, and we will secure in the law, its makers and executors, the protection against the virulence of the body politic of the state, and against enfranchised traitors that our helplessness and political nudity require, and our labors and patriotism merit....

But he continued by invoking the particular sacrifices African American soldiers made in the war. "Will the government surrender us now?" he asked.

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[62] Brown, *Negro in the American Rebellion*, 355

> Have we ever surrendered them? Did we betray them at Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Fort Wagner, Olustee, Petersburg, or Mobile? We ask, then, in the name of our brothers and fathers, whose bones lie whitened and turfed on the American battle-fields; in the name of our wounds, still fresh and dripping, and of our wrongs, and merits, will they surrender us now?[63]

No writers made the case more explicitly or more eloquently than the men who collaborated on the documents produced at the 1864 National Convention of Colored Men. Realizing that they were "in the midst of a great revolution - a revolution bearing immediately on their disinthralment and redemption," prominent African American men chose to convene in a national convention for the first time since 1855.[64] The men who met in Syracuse, New York in October 1864 included veteran delegates long accustomed to representing their communities and their race in the convention setting. But for the first time, delegates from Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri and Louisiana also participated in the proceedings. There, under the chairmanship of Frederick Douglass, they discussed the best ways to:

> promote the freedom, progress, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement, of the entire colored people of the United States: to show that, though slaves, we are not contented slaves, but that, like all other progressive races of men, we are resolved to advance in the scale of knowledge, worth, and civilization, and claim our rights as men among men.[65]

In addition to the traditional addresses to the white and black citizens of the American population, the delegates to the 1864 Convention created the "Declaration of Wrongs and Rights," an eloquent defense of African American rights, and organized a National Equal Rights League to encourage elevation through individual self-

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[63] Article by P. Houston Murray from Natchez, Miss., June 10th, 1865. *Christian Recorder*, 1865 loc.cit.

[64] *The Christian Recorder*, September 24, 1864.

[65] *National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 9, in NNC.

improvement, and "to obtain by appeals to the minds and conscience of the American people, or by legal process when possible, a recognition of the rights of the colored people of the nation as American citizens."[66] With each of these documents, the delegates summarized the symbolic meaning of the Civil War for the generation of African Americans who had campaigned to transform their position in American society. In the "Declaration of Rights and Wrongs," the delegates enumerated each "cruelty and indignity" they suffered as African Americans, including the standard litany of complaints submitted by northern black petitioners for decades. But in addition, they reminded the members of Congress, "we have fought where victory gave us no glory, and where captivity meant cool murder on the field, by fire, sword, and halter; and yet no black man ever flinched." They then demanded, "the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery," the right to remain on "American soil," the right to "the sympathy and aid of the entire Christian world," and all "the rights of other citizens." They then continued:

> We claim that we are, by right, entitled to respect; that due attention should be given to our needs; that proper rewards should be given for our services, and that the immunities and privileges of all other citizens and defenders of the nation's honor should be conceded to us.[67]

And they concluded the document by saying: "Those are our wrongs; these a portion of what we deem to be our rights as men, as patriots, as citizens, and as children of the common Father."[68]

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66 *Preamble and Constitution of the National Equal Rights League*, in *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 36, in NNC.

67 "Declaration of Wrongs and Rights," in *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 41-43, NNC.

68 "Declaration of Wrongs and Rights," in *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 43, NNC.

In the "Address to the American People," the delegates reiterated their request for the suffrage and all the concomitant rights of citizenship based on the values of American republicanism, natural rights philosophy, and their status as men. Keeping in mind their white audience, they characterized black service in the Union army as a sacrifice made on their behalf. They reminded them that, "the warm blood of your brave and patriotic sons is still fresh upon the green fields of the Shennandoah."[69] And they requested the abolition of slavery, the elective franchise, and "one law for white and colored people alike," in "our own name," in the name "of the whipped and branded millions," in the name "of your country, torn, distracted, bleeding," in the name "of peace," and in "the name of universal justice."[70] But with flashes of rhetorical brilliance, they added their service to the Union to their strategy. "We come before you," they wrote, "altogether in new relations."

> Hitherto we have addressed you in the generic character of a common humanity: only as men: but to-day, owing to the events of the last three years, we bring with us an additional claim to consideration. By the qualities displayed, by the hardships endured, and by the services rendered the country, during these years of war and peril we can now speak with the confidence of men who have deserved well of their country.[71]

The link between African American service in the war and their claim for citizenship rights served more than rhetorical significance for African Americans. As several scholars have since noted, and white contemporaries feared, African American service in the Civil War strengthened the legal basis for black spokesmen's claims for

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69 *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 45, NNC.

70 *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 53, NNC.

71 *Address of the Colored National Convention to the People of the United States*, in *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 53, NNC.

citizenship rights, the suffrage, and assaults on discriminatory legislation.[72] Northern blacks also were well aware of this, and delegates to the 1864 National Convention made this position clear in their "Address to the People of the United States." they revealed their hand. "Formerly," they argued, "our petitions for the elective franchise were met and denied upon the ground, that, while colored men were protected in person and property, they were not required to perform military duty." "Now," they argued,

> even this frivolous though somewhat decent apology for excluding us from the ballot-box is entirely swept away. Two hundred thousand colored men, according to a recent statement of President Lincoln, are now in the service, upon field and flood, in the army and the navy of the United States; and every day adds to their number. They are there as volunteers, coming forward with other patriotic men at the call of their imperilled [*sic*] country; they are there also as substitutes filling up the quotas which would otherwise have to be filled up by white men who now remain at home; they are also there as drafted men, by a certain law of Congress, which, for once, makes no difference on account of color: and whether they are there as volunteers, as substitutes, or as drafted men, neither ourselves, our cause, nor our country, need be ashamed of their appearance or their action upon the battle-field.[73]

Such services, they argued, formed a more than adequate basis for them to claim all the rights of citizenship.

> Whether the right to vote is a natural right or not, we are not here to determine. Natural or conventional, in either case we are amply supported in our appeal for its extension to us. If it is, as all the teachings of your Declaration of Independence imply, a *natural right*, to deny to us its exercise is a wrong done to our human nature. If, on the other hand, the right to vote is simply a conventional right...we insist, that, even basing the right upon this uncertain foundation, we may reasonably claim a right to a voice in the election of the men who are to have at their command our time, our services, our property, our persons, and our lives.

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[72] Mary Berry noted, "The necessity of using black soldiers to insure Union victory led directly not only to abolition but to the civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment; indirectly it led to the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment." Berry, *Military Necessity*, 106. Eric Foner agrees. He wrote, "their service helped transform the nation's treatment of blacks and blacks' conception of themselves....For the first time in American history, large numbers of blacks were treated as equals before the law – if only military law. In army courts blacks could testify against whites (something unheard of throughout the South and in many Northern states), and former slaves for the first time saw the impersonal sovereignty of the law supersede the personal authority of a master." Foner, *Reconstruction*, 8.

[73] *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 56, NNC.

> This command of our persons and lives is no longer theory, but now the positive practice of our Government..... we claim to have fully earned the elective franchise; and that you, the American people, have virtually contracted an obligation to grant it.[74]

Over the next decade, African Americans would find themselves gaining ground in their efforts to achieve civil and political rights. With white northerners less concerned about the prospect of a northward migration of freedpeople, and annoyed by the violence white southerners inflicted upon them, and angered by their easy return to power, African American spokesmen found that their claims for services rendered in the war fell on more receptive ears than ever before. At the local level, several lawsuits to desegregate streetcars met with success. At the state level, some states passed laws equalizing public accommodations, integrating public schools, and extending the franchise to African American men.[75] And in the halls of a Republican controlled Congress, Senators and Representatives considered extending the suffrage to African American men. For the black Civil War generation, these changes were viewed as "evidence of a returning sense of justice, and an acknowledgement of our citizenship, and a tribute to the loyalty, patriotism, and devotion displayed by colored soldiers during the conflict through which the nation has passed."[76] Some could even see, "the rising sun of pure Republicanism" casting "its glimmering rays" over the "mountains of prejudice against the colored man,"

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[74] *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men, Syracuse, 1864*, 57.

[75] In 1865 John S. Rock of Boston became the first black lawyer admitted to the bar of the supreme court. In 1863 California allowed blacks to testify in criminal cases. In 1865 the state of Massachusetts passed "first comprehensive public accommodations law in American history." In 1867, the city of Philadelphia, which received national attention after refusing service to wartime hero Robert Smalls, desegregated the city's streetcars. And New York City, San Francisco, Cleveland, and Cincinnati all desegregated streetcars during the war. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 28.

[76] *National Equal Rights League Convention*, Cleveland, 1865; BNSC, 56.

and say: "we are encouraged, because we know, that the first rays of the sunlight foretell the bright meridian blaze which shines forth at noon."[77]

[77] *The Christian Recorder*, March 9, 1867.

Chapter Six

Emancipation

Consideration for the elevation of our race overrules all minor details, and urges us to habits of industry, frugality, and sobriety, and the careful cultivation of all the domestic virtues. And we are false to ourselves and to our posterity if we fail to adopt every means of improvement within our reach.[1]

--Address to the Colored People of America
National Equal Rights League Convention, Cleveland,1865

Introduction

In 1869, African American delegates traveled to Washington, D.C. to participate in a national convention that would demonstrate the black population's support for the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the measure that would extend the right to vote to African American men. Unlike the national conventions of the previous decades, however, delegates in 1869 hailed from across the country, representing the interests of blacks North and South; those formerly enslaved, and those who had long been free. Delegates arrived from New England, and the mid-Atlantic States, as well as the upper and lower South.[2] Throughout the proceedings of the convention, the delegates drew on

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[1] William Nesbit, Address to the Colored People of America, *National Equal Rights League Convention*, Cleveland, 1865, BNSC, 61.

[2] Delegates arrived from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia,

the techniques the northern black leadership had polished in the settings of previous conventions. Again, the delegates claimed the vote as "the most valuable part" of the "natural rights of man."[3] As they had at the 1864 national convention at Syracuse, they reaffirmed the suffrage as the right of those who defended the nation. And as freedmen had done immediately after emancipation, they claimed the suffrage as a male prerogative necessary for those who would head their families. They claimed the suffrage as loyal citizens who needed protection from those who would harm them. Ultimately, they agreed that their lack of access to the "privileges and franchises which are fully enjoyed by every class of our white fellow citizens" left them "an unjustly degraded people," even though emancipated.[4] In this way, they continued to demand the vote as primary ingredient in their formula for collective racial elevation.

At the same time that the delegates reiterated their longstanding claims for universal manhood suffrage, however, the addresses and resolutions of the meeting, particularly those made by members of the clergy, also hinted at the new perspectives that would characterize black political discourse in the coming decades. Bishop J. J. Moore reminded the delegates that once they were successful in "the achievement of our claims to manhood," they should turn their attention to the "self-duties," the "three great fundamentals," of "*Education, Morality,* and *Wealth.*"[5] Daniel Payne, head of the AME Church made a similar argument, noting that while acquiring the elective franchise was

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Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Louisiana, Florida and Washington D. *National Convention of the Colored Men of America*, Washington, D.C., 1869, BNSC, 349-354. The significance of this truly national event cannot be ignored. As Eric Foner argued, "the entire institutional structure established by blacks during Reconstruction, symbolized the emergence of a community that united the free and the freed, and northern and Southern blacks." Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, 100.

[3] *1869 National Convention*, Washington D.C., BNSC, 367.

[4] *1869 National Convention*, Washington D.C., BNSC, 376.

[5] J. J. Moore was the Bishop of the AMEZ Church. *1869 National Convention*, Washington D.C., BNSC, 377.

the main objective of their convention, they should not forget that after the acquisition of this right, that the promotion of "*Education, Piety,*" and "*Wealth,*" would be their primary means of collective racial elevation.[6]

This decision to emphasize the importance of self-improvement for freedmen and women did not mark a complete break with the past for northern black spokesmen. For despite the changing strategies of the previous decades, the northern black elite never abandoned its belief in the inherent benefits of an individual's efforts toward mental, material, and moral improvement. As we have seen, elite blacks raised in the institutions of the northern black community continued to believe in the inherent worth of individual mental, moral, and material improvement, even as they demanded change and debated emigration in the years preceding the Civil War. And even during the Civil War, when northern black spokesmen made their most outspoken claims on behalf of their citizenship rights, they continued to reaffirm the importance of individual self-improvement efforts for themselves, and for those freedmen and women they strove to represent.

But the Convention of 1869 did represent a new shift in the sensibilities of the generation of northern blacks raised in the institutions of black public culture. Now, while black prominent blacks of the Civil War generation continued to value moral, material, and intellectual improvement for its own sake, they now began discussing it as a specific imperative for the freedmen and women of the South. Statements made earlier at the National Convention at Syracuse in 1864 had hinted this emerging trend. Though the delegates created a National Equal Rights League, clearly designed to press for African

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[6] *1869 National Convention*, BNSC 356.

American civil and political rights. it was also intended to: "encourage sound morality, education, temperance, frugality," and "industry," among freedmen and women in particular, and "promote every thing that pertains to a well-ordered and dignified life."[7] And throughout the proceedings, while the delegates continued to emphasize the importance of the ballot in process of elevation on the one hand, when they addressed their comments to the freedmen and women of the South, they struck a tone reminiscent of the editorials and convention proceedings of the 1820s and 30s. They resolved,

> That we extend the right hand of fellowship to the freedmen of the South, and express to them our warmest sympathy, and our deep concern for their welfare, prosperity, and happiness; and desire to exhort them to shape their course toward frugality, the accumulation of property, and, above all, to leave untried no amount of effort and self-denial to acquire knowledge, and to secure a vigorous moral and religious growth.[8]

In the years after emancipation, northern black members of the Civil War generation would reaffirm their commitment to the philosophy of individual self-improvement, and take steps to inculcate the philosophy in the freed population. As self-selected patrons for the newly freed masses of African Americans, some would travel to the South to help freedmen and women develop their own institutional infrastructure, press for civil and political rights, and move toward intellectual, material, and moral improvement. Then, with the ostensible political gains of Reconstruction, northern black transplants to the South would increasingly focus their energies on eradicating what they perceived to be the moral degradation of slavery from the freed population. In the process, they would blunt the more radical demands and behaviors of the freed population, feminize their definition of morality and moral improvement, and lay the

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[7] *National Convention of Colored Men*, Syracuse, 1864, 36, NNC.

[8] *National Convention of Colored Men*, Syracuse, 1864, 34, NNC.

foundation for the ideology of racial uplift that would characterize African American political thought into the twentieth century.

A Return to Self-Improvement

With the outbreak of the Civil War, northern black elites immediately positioned themselves as the patrons of freedmen and women. Though northern black spokesmen had long considered themselves partners in insurrection with southern blacks, the most vocal northern blacks displayed doubts about the freedmen and women's capacity to fend for themselves in the post-war South. Some worried about the freedmen's ability to secure the political rights and material foundation necessary for manly independence. One black Minnesota resident wrote to the *Anglo-African* to suggest, "that we of the North should look after our forsaken and unlettered brethren. They are unable to contend for their own rights, and I think that we should organize for that very purpose." He recommended that specific "leaders" including Frederick Douglass, Charles L. Remond, William Wells Brown, and J.W. Loguen press the federal government to give freedmen possession of abandoned land.[9] Other northern blacks, particularly those connected with the A.M.E. and A.M.E.Z. churches, exhibited a deep concern about the moral and spiritual state of southern blacks, and began sending northern blacks as missionaries to

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[9] *Weekly Anglo African*, February 1, 1862 in BAP Reel 14, 0101.

contraband camps and liberated territories.[10] Many spokesmen and women noted their concern about the intellectual state of freedmen and women, urging "persons of our own color," to fill "the positions of teachers" in the South, and recommending, "to the educated portion of our people the importance of seeking such positions as soon as possible."[11]

With these concerns in mind, northern blacks quickly committed themselves to defending the interests of southern freedmen and women. The male delegates to the National Convention at Syracuse in 1864 officially affirmed the northern black commitment to their southern brothers and sisters, saying, "We desire...to assure them of our co-operation and assistance; and that our efforts in their behalf shall be given without measure, and be limited only by our capacity to give, work, and act."[12] And as fugitives began flooding into Union-controlled territory, northern blacks began holding meetings to learn more about their status and needs and forming organizations to sustain them.[13]

Women took the lead in establishing groups to meet the material needs of the contraband during the war. The "first colored ladies" of Syracuse established a Freedmen's Aid Society to help the contrabands, and assist the wives and children of African American soldiers.[14] In Washington D.C., Elizabeth Keckley collected funds and

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[10]Leon Litwack has noted that northern black missionaries expected to find "a people degraded and scarred – physically and psychically – by a lifetime of bondage and in desperate need of 'regeneration and civilization.'" They saw their task as "undoing the moral depravity, self-debasement, and dependency which slavery had fostered in its victims." Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long, the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Random House, 1980), 456-457.

[11] *National Equal Rights League Convention*, Cleveland, 1865, BNSC, 56.

[12] *National Convention of Colored Men*, Syracuse, 1864, BNSC, 34.

[13] Meetings were held in New York City at Shiloh Church. *Weekly Anglo African*, Jan 25, 1862 in BAP Reel 14 fr. 0087.

[14] This particular organization periodically sent boxes of goods to the South, and in 1865, donated $100 for missionary work among the freedmen and women of Tennessee. In the meantime, they continued to assist the wives and children of the Syracuse men still stationed in the South. *Anglo African*, December 9, 1865, BAP Reel 16 fr. 0515.

used clothing to distribute among destitute freedmen and women swelling the population of the district. Other northern black women changed their organization's direction from soldiers aid to freedmen's aid after the conclusion of the war, as did the Ladies' Sanitary Association of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, who in 1866 became an auxiliary to the Women's Central Branch Freedmen's Relief Association of Pennsylvania.[15]

While some northern blacks created northern-based associations to assist their southern brothers and sisters, others chose to take more direct individual action. Beginning in 1862, northern blacks began traveling to the South as teachers, missionaries, and simple political allies. Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell and John Mercer Langston all relocated to Washington D.C. while Martin Delany worked as an officer of the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina. And Frances Ellen Watkins Harper extended her lecture circuit into the southern states after combat between Union and Confederate troops ceased. [16]

The presence of black northerners was not limited to the most prominent of the free black community. Others, particularly women who had long expressed their political consciousness by claiming the discourse of self-improvement, arrived as teachers and missionaries under the auspices of organizations such as the Freedmen's Aid Society, the

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15 Ella Forbes, *African American Women During the Civil War*, (New York: Garland, 1998), 77. Freedmen's Aid Societies appeared in philanthropic circles throughout the North in response to Thomas W. Sherman's, commanding officer of the Department of the South, 1862 request for northern aid to create a "system of culture and instruction...combined with one providing for their physical wants." Benjamin Quarles, *Negro in the Civil War* (New York: De Capo, 1953), 123, 124.

16 In his study of freemen and women immediately after the Civil War, Leon Litwack points out the presence of men like Tunis Campbell (Ma to GA), Richard Cain (VA to CT to S.C.), Francis Cardozo (S.C to CT to SC), Jonathan Wright (PA to SC), and Martin Delany (PA to SC), who all moved to the South during and after the Civil War. In an analysis of this phenomenon, Eric Foner wrote, "Reconstruction was one of the few times in American history that the South offered black men of talent and ambition not only the prospect of serving their race, but greater possibilities for personal advancement than existed in the North. And as long as it survived the southward migration continued.... As a consequence, Northern black communities were drained of men of political ambition and of lawyers and other professionals." Foner, *Reconstruction*, 286.

African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and American Missionary Aid Society. Philadelphia born Charlotte Forten traveled to South Carolina as teacher. The missionary teacher Virginia Green traveled to Davis Bend, Mississippi, looking "forward with impatience to the time when my people shall be strong, blest with education, purified and made prosperous by virtue and industry."[17] Edmonia Highgate, a resident of Syracuse, New York, traveled to Norfolk, Virginia under the auspices of the AMA before the cessation of official hostilities. By 1865, she had served as a teacher in Maryland, Louisiana, and Mississippi.[18] Others, like the fugitive Cato, simply returned to their homes to help those they had left behind expand their institutional life.[19]

As self-selected patrons for the freedmen and women of the South, these northern black transplants to the South hoped to help freedmen gain the civil and political rights they themselves had craved and demanded in the previous decades. Male spokesmen attended southern political conventions, and they incorporated freedmen into their arguments for civil and political rights.[20] William Wells Brown took special pains to do

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[17] Quoted in Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long*, 495.

[18] Shirley Wilson Logan. *"We are Coming": The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 20.

[19] Cato left Canada to fight in the Union Army, before becoming a county sheriff, and later state Senator, "one of the greatest leaders of his race in Mississippi. Octavia Rogers Albert. *The House of Bonaage, or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (1890; Reprint. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 122. "It is widely acknowledged that the Reconstruction South received an influx of black and white Northerners concerned with reshaping its moral and social life." Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth.* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 67. The A.M.E. Church sent seventy-seven missionaries to the South between 1863 and 1870. Of the seventeen for which information was available, Clarence Walker determined that twelve had been born free, with fourteen from the deep South and three northern-born. Clarence Walker. *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Amethodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 50.

[20] While many came as church missionaries and teachers, Litwack also credits them as important supporters of freedmen and women's early political efforts. Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long*, 509-510 Foner writes that "Not a few of the blacks who plunged into politics in 1867 had been born or raised in the North." Some came "south with the army; others had served with the Freedmen's Bureau, or as teachers

so in his 1867 history of black participation in the Civil War. He wrote: "The negro [*sic*] must be placed in a position to protect himself. How shall that be done? We answer, the only thing to save him is the ballot. Liberty without equality is no boon."[21] A native of Pennsylvania, the president of the North Carolina State Convention of 1865 voiced the position of the northern and southern male delegates when he said, "Three of four things were wanted" for African American men. "First, the right to testify in courts of justice. Second, to be received into the jury box....Third, the right of the colored man to act as counsel in the courts for the black man. Fourth, to carry the ballot."[22]

But in addition to fostering the political development of freedmen, northern black spokesmen and women also hoped to encourage the moral, material and intellectual improvement of the southern black population. During and after wartime, in their state, national and local meetings and conventions, these longtime participants in black political culture reinvigorated the ideology of elevation through self-improvement, and refashioned it to direct their discourse and efforts away from the northern black population and toward the freedmen and women of the South. So when the delegates to the first annual meeting of the National Equal Rights League met in Cleveland, in September 1865, they explicitly advised freedmen about "the necessity of acquiring

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and ministers employed by black churches and Northern missionary societies. Still others were black veterans of the Northern anti-slavery crusade, fugitive slaves returning home, or the children of well-to-do Southern free blacks who had been sent north for the education (often at Oberlin College) and economic opportunities denied them at home." Foner, *Reconstruction*, 286.

[21] William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, (1867), 355.

[22] Significantly, the president of the proceedings, James Walker Hood, (1831-1918) was a bishop in the AMEZ Church. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, he had been ordained in Boston, and served in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Bridgeport Connecticut, before being sent to the Union lines in North Carolina to serve as a missionary to the freedmen. Still, he used the space of the business committee report to admonish the "colored people... to secure lands and to cultivate them," to "lay up their earnings against a rainy day," and "to educate themselves and their children, not alone in book learning but in a high moral energy, self-respect, and in a virtuous, Christian, and dignified life." *North Carolina State Convention*, 1865, BNSC, 180.

property, of educating their children and themselves, and of pursuing such a course of conduct as shall be best calculated to win the respect and elevate them in the good opinion of mankind." They then extended the hand of friendship, saying "we of this League do promise to these, our Southern brethren, our utmost sympathy and support in the accomplishment of these ends."[23]

As African Americans trained in institutions designed to promote self-improvement, northern black spokesmen and women hoped to inculcate the virtues they extolled into the value systems of the newly freed population of the South. Such a perspective should not be surprising, for despite their commitment to political change, their own upbringing trained them to view aspects of black southern culture as degraded by years of enslavement.[24] As a consequence of this, they often took on a decidedly superior tone when addressing or discussing the moral habits of freedmen and women. For example, notwithstanding his own ability to adapt to the urban bourgeois North, Frederick Douglass believed that "the Negro... is preeminently a southern man" with the "careless and improvident habits of the South."[25] Former slave Bishop Daniel Payne agreed that slavery left them with "many evils among ourselves to be corrected;" evils that could be "removed only by self-development."[26]

Though they remained committed supporters of self-improvement in all of its forms, northern spokesmen and women who relocated to the South expressed a particular

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[23] *National Equal Rights League Convention, Cleveland, 1865*, BNSC, 56.

[24] According to Benjamin Quarles, the government agent in charge of the "Port Royal plantations and contrabands" informed the first group of teachers en route to the Sea Islands, "You go to elevate, to purify, and fit them for the duties of American citizens." Quarles, *Negro in the Civil War*, 124.

[25] Douglass, *Life and Times*, 438.

[26] *1869 National Convention*, Washington, D.C., BNSC, 355.

interest in assessing and reforming the moral habits of the freed population.[27] In many ways the pre-Civil War literature written by fugitive slaves prepared them to view freedmen and women as a people in particular need of moral improvement. As we have seen, northern black spokesmen had consistently used the degradation of slavery as one of their major anti-slavery rhetorical strategies. In his own narrative, J.W.C. Pennington wrote that after his escape, he had little understanding of "proper" Christianity. He wrote,

> I now began to see, for the first time, the extent of the mischief slavery had done to me. Twenty-one years of my life were gone, never again to return, and I was as profoundly ignorant, comparatively, as a child five years old. This was painful, annoying, and humiliating in the extreme. Up to this time, I recollected to have seen one copy of the New Testament, but the entire Bible I had never seen, and had never heard of the Patriarchs, or of the Lord Jesus Christ. I recollected to have heard two sermons, but had heard no mention in them of Christ, or the way of life by Him. It is quite easy to imagine, then what was the state of my mind, having been reared in total moral midnight; it was a sad picture of mental and spiritual darkness.[28]

Proponents of self-improvement had also noted the deficiencies of those members of the northern black population less inclined to embrace the individual efforts at moral improvement before the Civil War. One contributor to the Anglo African noted the "abject class" of African Americans living in the town of Easton, Pennsylvania in 1861. He wrote:

> They have neither church, school or society; no disposition to do anything, except to destroy themselves by drinking all the corn whiskey possible for them to get hold of...Why, in 1852-3, they actually thrashed a minister of the gospel who considered it his duty to tell them of their faults....Their condition is little better than were their ancestors at their emancipation.[29]

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[27] As they had in previous decades, the Civil War generation of bourgeois northern blacks continued to include temperance and fidelity to Protestant Christianity in their definition of morality.

[28] Pennington, *Fugitive Blacksmith*, 43-44.

[29] *Weekly Anglo African*, Dec 7, 1861.

Black northerners such as these served as clear examples of the price paid by those who refused to take the necessary steps to improve themselves by attaining an education and changing both their moral behavior and material sensibilities.

But despite what they interpreted as the widespread deficiencies of the black population North and South, proponents of self-improvement still agreed that slavery be held as the cause of this degradation. As Mary Ann Shadd Cary noted, it was enslavement that had "despoiled the colored man of America wofully [*sic*]" and injured "him intellectually, phys*ic*ally, morally."[30] And missionary Octavia Rogers Albert agreed, "we must confess that the moral standing of the race is far from what it should be." But, "who is responsible for the sadly immoral condition this illiterate race in the South," she asked. "I answer unhesitatingly, their masters."[31]

With slavery now abolished, they were confident that such moral deficiencies could be eradicated concurrently with material and intellectual ones. William Wells Brown made their position clear in his 1880 description of his travels through the region. "The colored people of the South should at once form associations, combine and make them strong, and live up to them by all hazards," he wrote. "All civilized races have risen by means of combination and co-operation."[32] In creating institutions, Wells suggested they concern themselves specifically with, "the formation of Literary Associations," and institutions designed to promote "total abstinence from all intoxicants."[33] As his generation had argued in the past, Brown reaffirmed the importance of material and

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30 Mary Ann Shadd Cary to Wm. Lloyd Garrison regarding help needed for the refugees living in Canada, *Liberator*, Nov. 29, 1861.

31 Octavia Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage*, 1.

32 William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home, or the South and its People* (1880; Reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 234-235.

33 Brown, *My Southern Home*, 239-240.

intellectual improvement as well. "The next important need with our people is the cultivation of habits of business," he wrote.[34] And finally, "The cultivation of the mind is the superstructure of the moral, social and religious character, which will follow us into our every-day life, and make us what God intended us to be – the noblest instruments of His creative power."[35] These concerns would continue to motivate the Civil War generation of prominent northern black transplants in the region until their deaths at the end of the century.

Freedwomen and the New Discourse on Morality

By 1869, with dramatic political gains seemingly on the horizon, northern black activists, both male and female, had learned a great deal about the moral, material, and intellectual habits and needs of the freed population. Most expressed pleasure at freedmen and women's efforts to educate themselves, achieve a measure of economic independence, and legalize their marriages. However, over the next two decades, many northern-born black spokesmen and women continued to articulate their concerns about the moral state of the freed population. Southern black religiosity failed to meet the standards of the elite northern Protestants, and the latters' arguments about the benefits of

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[34] Brown, *My Southern Home*, 241.

[35] Brown, *My Southern Home*, 242-243.

temperance failed to make a great impression upon those they hoped to convert. As several scholars have noted, the northern black missionaries who relocated to the South in an effort to recruit southern blacks for the A.M.E. and A.M.E.Z. churches quickly found freedmen and women wanting in those areas.[36] When William Wells Brown, visited a Nashville church after the Civil War, the shouting and waving, and "incoherent" sermon he encountered disappointed him a great deal. "It will be difficult," he wrote, "to erase from the mind of the negro [*sic*] of the South, the prevailing idea that outward demonstrations, such as, shouting, the loud 'amen,' and the most boisterous noise in prayer, are not necessary adjuncts to piety."[37] Missionary Octavia Rogers Albert observed that in addition to preferring "superstition" to properly disseminated Protestantism, "almost every body selling and buying on Sunday....Even among the Protestant churches we find many who disregard the Sabbath." Such behavior led her to assert,

> if missionary preachers and teachers are needed in the heart of Africa they are needed in this Southland too, among these millions of lately emancipated souls. It is true we find in the cities and towns that the colored people have schools of some sort; but, leave railroads twenty or thirty miles, and we behold the heathen at our doors. They are reared up in superstition, the same as before the war, in a great many places. They need well-educated ministers, for the blind cannot lead the blind.[38]

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[36] Northern black missionaries to the South often exhibited disdain toward the forms of religious expression favored by freedmen and women, and perceived their mission to be "one of replacing the planter's preachments and the slave's escapism with a creed of greater social and personal responsibility." Moses, *Black Messiahs*, 67; Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land*, 91.

[37] William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home*, 191-193.

[38] In 1890, Octavia Rogers Albert's interviews with former slaves in Louisiana in the 1870s and 1880s were published together under the title, "The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves." In it, Rogers gave a voice to the elderly freedmen and women in her neighborhood. They discussed the hardships they endured while enslaved, and Rogers often provided her opinions on what the freed population needed most at the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout, she consistently returned to the standard issues of early nineteenth century elevation through self-improvement. In her particular case she included Louisiana freedmen and women's embrace of Catholicism among the superstitious traits she denounced. Albert, *House of Bondage*, 61 and 57.

While northern black transplants, both male and female, continued to voice the same concerns they raised in previous years regarding the northern black population's need to avoid consumption of alcohol and adhere to the tenets of Protestant Christianity, some of the most prominent spokesmen, particularly members of the clergy, began raising a wholly new criticism of the southern black population's moral shortcomings. Arguing that the domestic organization of the freed population also left much to be desired, black spokesmen of the Civil War generation began dramatically reversing the trends of the previous decades, by expanding their concept of African American moral degradation and improvement so that it included a discussion of the domestic realm, or the world of women. The Rev. Daniel Alexander Payne, Bishop of the A.M.E. Church, had first raised the issue at the National Convention in Washington, D.C. In his 1869 convention speech denouncing the "evils" amongst the freed population, Payne reserved his most vehement criticism for the "domestic – the conjugal relations of colored Americans." After being "invaded and broken up by the *Lords of the Lash*" for generations, he argued, "we find ourselves destitute of *Mothers* – of mothers qualified to train our sons into a noble manhood, and our daughters into a noble womanhood!"[39] In a dramatic reversal of the previous decades' black anti-slavery discourse, Payne argued that the "greatest curse which slavery inflicted upon us" was the degradation of African American women, and thus, the "destruction of the home." With "home" and motherhood indistinguishable in Payne's worldview, he wrote, "No home, no mother; no mother, no home!"[40]

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[39] *1869 National Convention*, Washington, D.C., Foner and Walker, 355.

[40] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 137. By redefining the moral degradation of slavery as female degradation, black spokesmen reversed the previous decades' trends. Formerly they had argued that men were the primary victims of slavery's cruelty, because the institution deprived them of their rights to own

Payne's negative characterization of African American domestic life and female morality marked a new development in black political discourse. As we have seen, in the years before the Civil War, black male spokesmen continued to argue that women, though at times flawed, were innately virtuous beings who preferred death before moral dishonor. In fact, black spokeswomen had used the ideal of their moral authority as a springboard for their entry into black public life. But in the years during and immediately after Reconstruction, while northern black spokeswomen continued to complain about the difficulties of their southern missionary work, northern black spokesmen increasingly redefined the concept of moral degradation so that it primarily signified black female degradation, and the resulting disorganization of African American domestic life.[41] In his 1882 study *Emancipation: Its Course and Progress from 1481B.C. to AD 1875*, Joseph T. Wilson praised the educational achievements of freedmen and women, but noted:

> Slavery offered a premium for licentiousness, but had no punishment for immorality. The glory of wifehood and motherhood was not theirs. No sacred tie ordained of God between man and woman, but what was with ruthless hand torn asunder and trampled underfoot.[42]

William Wells Brown agreed, noting that the degradation of enslaved women's moral sensibilities extended even further. He wrote:

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themselves, and their labor, and to control and protect their dependent family members. Thus, they had defined self-improvement as primarily male improvement, designed to secure the blessings of manhood and citizenship rights. At the same time, they had argued that women were innately virtuous beings who consistently preferred death over the loss of their chastity. But now, the same spokesmen argued that the greatest racial degradation fostered by the institution of slavery was the moral degradation of African American women.

[41] There is a notable silence of African American women in the historical record on this point. When they discussed moral degradation they continued to discuss forms of Christianity and temperance issues. Perhaps propriety prevented them from pursuing the subject of female degradation further. But we should also consider the possibility that they did not find the emerging discourse of black female degradation appealing enough to embrace.

[42] Joseph T. Wilson, Joseph T. *Emancipation: Its Course and Progress from 1481 B.C. to AD 1875, with a review of President Lincoln's Proclamations, the XIII amendment, and the progress of the freed people since emancipation; with a history of the emancipation monument*. 1882. (Reprint. NY: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 144-145.

> When we take into consideration the fact that no safeguard was ever thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave-women to be pure and chaste, we will not be surprised when told that immorality pervaded the domestic circle in the cities and towns of the South to an extent unknown in the Northern States.... Indeed, the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man.[43]

In an address before the white membership of the Ocean Grove, New Jersey Freedman's Aid Society, Alexander Crummell made a similar case:

> Her own offspring were *not* her own. She and husband and children were all the property of others. All these sacred ties were constantly snapped and cruelly sundered. *This* year she had one husband; and next year, through some auction sale, she might be separated from him and mated to another. There was no sanctity of family, no binding tie of marriage, none of the fine felicities and the endearing affections of home.[44]

Because of these developments, "Emancipation Day" found her "a prostrate and degraded being."[45] He compared the history of enslaved women with enslaved men, and found:

> The black woman of the South was left perpetually in a state of hereditary darkness and rudeness. Since the day of Phillis Wheatly no Negress in this land (that is, in the South) has been raised above the level of her sex. The lot of the black *man* on the plantation has been sad and desolate enough; but the fate of the black woman has been awful! Her entire existence from the day she first landed, a naked victim of the slave-trade, has been degradation in its extremest forms.[46]

More importantly, as far as many of these spokesmen could see, "the virus implanted by slavery with its shameless licentiousness and lowering of the human to the brute level.

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[43] Brown, *My Southern Home*, 218.

[44] Crummell, *"The Black Woman of the South: her Neglects and Her Needs" Address before the "Freedman's Aid Society." [Methodist Episcopal Church] Ocean Grove, N.J., Aug. 15th, 1883, in* Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 214.

[45] Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 215.

[46] Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 212-213. In an 1897 letter, Crummell later wrote that he intended the speech to be "a warning as well as a vindication." 1897 letter to Mr. Bruce, reprinted in Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 88.

yet lingers in the veins of the race."[47] "Although [emancipation] has brought numerous advantages to her sons, it has produced but the simplest changes in her social and domestic condition. She is still the crude, rude, ignorant mother."[48]

If freedwomen were the ones now most in need of improvement as spokesmen argued, responsibility for the elevation of the race now rested primarily on their shoulders.[49] And in the years following emancipation, the aging ranks of male spokesmen did not hesitate to press these new interpretations of moral degradation and improvement upon their listeners. When traveling around the country as Bishop of the A.M.E. Church in 1872, Payne emphasized the importance of proper domestic education for African American women to his parishioners. In his autobiography, he noted that the subject "filled my mind and weighed heavily upon my heart."[50] In 1885 he even published *A Treatise on Domestic Education*, to spread his message to a wider audience of African American women. Though Payne offered advice in the document for African American fathers and mothers, and refers to them as co-laborers for domestic unity, one

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[47] Wilson, *Emancipation*, 144-145.

[48] Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 215.

[49] Scholars have pointed out a change in the way that ideas of racial self-improvement were discussed and practiced in the years after the Civil War. Linda Perkins has suggested that while pre-Civil War efforts for "Race Uplift" were essentially egalitarian, after the Civil War, "there was a noticeable shift in the attitudes toward the role of women by many members of the race," and "by the end of the nineteenth century, sexism had increased significantly among educated blacks." She finds that men were given greater access to higher education than women, and "as black men sought to obtain education and positions similar to that of white men in society, many adopted the prevailing notion of white society, of the natural subordination of women. Linda Perkins, "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women" *Journal of Social Issues* (39:3, 1983), 22 – 24. Perkins overstates her case here, for as we have seen, free black men and women both had definite ideas about their appropriate roles before the Civil War. These antebellum practices clearly did not foster educational and organizational equality as Perkins contends. And conversely, opportunities for education clearly increased for black women in the decades after the Civil War. Perkins is right, however, to point to a definite shift in sensibilities in the post-bellum years. That shift was a shift in the definition of moral improvement. While the African Americans who discussed the need for moral improvement had primarily focused on the importance of temperance and fidelity to Christianity in the first half of the nineteenth century, in the years after the Civil War, these same prominent African Americans began to refer increasingly to a lack of proper moral behavior in African American women.

[50] Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 213.

cannot underestimate the importance Payne placed on the special education of girls. Payne argued that "what the families of a race are the race will be -- nothing more, nothing less. If you corrupt the families so that they shall become ignorant, vicious, criminal, godless, you will also corrupt the race springing from them...The vices of the race will also curtail the *longevity* of the race which they represent, so that the race itself will ultimately become extinct."[51] Moreover, for Payne, though the father could aid the mother in moral instruction, it was clearly the mother who was charged with the primary responsibility of inculcating all of the moral virtues into the children of the race.[52] Therefore the future success or failure of the race now rested primarily on the shoulders of African American mothers.[53]

Alexander Crummell, came to similar conclusions about the moral status of the African American population. But he ultimately appealed to northern middle-class white women for help in improving the situation. In an address to New Jersey members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he said:

> I wish to see large numbers of practical Christian women, women of intelligence and piety; women well trained in domestic economy; women who combine delicate sensibility and refinement with industrial acquaintance – scores of such women to go South... to show and teach them the ways and habits of thrift, economy, neatness, and order; to gather them into "Mothers' Meetings" and sewing schools: and by both lectures and "talks" guide these women and their daughters into the modes and habits of clean and orderly housekeeping.[54]

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[51] Rev. Daniel Alexander Payne, *A Treatise on Domestic Education* (Cincinnati: Cranson and Stowe, 1885), 71.

[52] Payne, *A Treatise on Domestic Education*, 138-145.

[53] This is a significant departure from the years before the Civil War when spokesmen continued to emphasis the importance of male achievement as the means to collective racial elevation. It is not, however a significant departure from the rhetoric elite northern African American women had used to justify their public activism in the 1830s.

[54] Moses, *Destiny and Race*, 220.

He also asked for funds to establish an industrial training schools where the "*intellectual* training" will be "limited to reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography," and the girls will be "taught to do accurately all domestic work, such as sweeping floors, dusting rooms, scrubbing, bed making, washing and ironing, sewing, mending, and knitting" and "the trades of dressmaking, millinery, straw-platting, tailoring for men, and such like," and most importantly, "the art of cooking."[55]

In the following decades, northern black spokesmen of the Civil War generation made freedwomen's morality and childrearing capabilities central to all of their discussions of self-improvement. Brown noted that while freedmen and freedwomen spent far too much on clothing apparel, freedwomen, in particular were the primary perpetrators of this crime, for after years of enslavement "their husbands have little or no control over them, and are obliged, whether they will or not, to see most of their hard earnings squandered upon an unserviceable jacket, or flimsy bonnet, or many-colored shawls."[56] Similarly, if temperance was important for freedmen, it was even more important for freedwomen. "It is bad enough for men to lapse into habits of drunkeness....But a drunken girl – a drunken wife – a drunken mother – is there for woman a deeper depth? Home made hideous – children disgraced, neglected, and

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[55]Moses, Destiny, 222. Moses did not discount more rigorous scholastic, classical, or artistic training for the few, but instead argued for the importance of the "domestic training of the MASSES; for the raising up women meet to be the helpers of poor men the RANK AND FILE of black society, all through the rural districts of the South. The city people and the wealthy can seek more ambitious schools, and should pay for them." Moses Destiny, 223. He ended by tapping into the civilizationist discourse of the day, saying, "Up to this day and time your noble philanthropy has touched, for the most part, the male population of the South, given them superiority, and stimulated them to higher aspirations. But a true civilization can only then be attained when the life of woman is reached, her whole being permeated by noble ideas, her fine taste enriched by culture her tendencies to the beautiful gratified and developed, her singular and delicate nature lifted up to its full capacity: and then, when all these qualities are fully matured, cultivated and sanctified, all their sacred influences shall circle around ten thousand firesides, and the cabins of the humblest freedmen shall become the homes of Christian refinement and of domestic elegance through the influence and the charm of the uplifted and cultivated black woman of the South!" Moses, Destiny, 223.

[56] Brown, *My Southern Home*, 170.

maltreated."[57] But they agreed that the reeducation of freedwomen would take time and effort, for as Joseph Wilson argued: "It is too much to expect of any people that the flood-tide of immorality that has swept over the race for nearly 250 years could at once be reversed, and a new order of things be immediately instituted."[58]

In many ways, the northern black spokesmen's emphasis on inculcating the ideal northern bourgeois domestic roles they associated with improvement contradicted many of the principles with which the freed population may have organized their domestic lives. And, as other scholars have demonstrated, freedwomen initially maintained a more noticeably public role in black political life than had their northern counterparts before emancipation. While free northern black women had positioned themselves as crucial supporters of black male political struggles, southern freedwomen positioned themselves as participants. Freedwomen and children attended political rallies and conventions, joining the debate and casting votes on resolutions.[59] For example in Georgia, women formed a political organization called the Rising Daughters of Liberty Society, and stood guard at male political meetings.[60] The freedwomen of Richmond, Virginia even organized themselves into a ceremonial militia company that participated in public processions at emancipation celebrations. As scholars note, such behavior suggests an alternative vision for gender roles embraced by former slaves.[61] It also

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57 Brown, *My Southern Home*, 240.

58 Wilson, *Emancipation*, 144-145.

59 Eric Foner, "Black Reconstruction Leaders at the Grassroots," in Litwack and Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, 221.

60 Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 32.

61 Brown and Kimball, "Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond," *Journal of Urban History* (21:3 March, 1995), 307. But despite these differences in grass-roots political behavior, southern freedmen expressed their desire for the ballot as a male prerogative. They argued that as heads of families, they required political rights to adequately protect the women and children in their care. Laura Edwards notes that freedmen's status as heads of households "provided the most inclusive defense of manhood and the

underscores the differences between the gender ideals publicly embraced by northern black elites and southern freedmen and women. Thus, by conflating antebellum bourgeois northern ideals of domesticity with improvement and elevation, northern black spokesmen – particularly the clergy – undercut some of the most radical potential of African American life and political expression, and supported the growth of patriarchy in the black population. It should come as no surprise then, that in the National Convention of the Colored Men of America, held in Washington, D.C, in 1869, after a heated debate on the subject, delegates ultimately excluded a Miss H.C. Johnson from the convention, on the grounds that it was to be a political, and therefore a men's convention, rather than one to address the issue of woman's rights.[62]

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most compelling justification for full civil and political rights." Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997. . 196, 197.

[62] The decision to exclude Miss Johnson took place after heated debate. J. Sella Martin argued that they could not exclude any elected delegate on the grounds that it was a convention of men. For Martin, the Bible clearly intended "men" to include women as well as men. *1869 National Convention,* Washington, D., C., BNSC, 354.

Conclusion

While northern white Americans dealt with the national crisis brought on by the Civil War, northern African Americans used the conflict to act upon many of the needs and desires expressed during the last three decades of black political discourse. They vindicated the collective manhood of the race by exhibiting the highest form of nineteenth-century manliness: virtue upon the field of battle. By joining the Union army and battling the forces of the Confederacy, they joined their southern brethren as partners in a revolution for black liberation. And in the name of black service to the Union cause, African American spokesmen continued to press their claims for civil and political rights. By 1868, it seemed that the longstanding campaign to achieve civil and political rights would finally bear fruit. Two years after Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act in 1866, the states ratified the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed the rights of citizenship to African Americans. That same year, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment extending the ballot to African American men.

Reflecting back on the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Ohio resident, Civil War veteran and historian George Washington Williams wrote:

> The Emancipation Proclamation itself did not call forth such genuine and wide-spread rejoicing as the message of President Grant. The event was celebrated by the Colored People in all the larger cities North and South. Processions, orations, music and dancing proclaimed the unbounded joy of the new citizen. In Philadelphia Frederick Douglass, Bishop Jabez P. Campbell, I.C. Wears, and others delivered eloquent addresses to enthusiastic audiences.[63]

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63 Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops*, 422.

Whether or not freedpeople celebrated their enfranchisement with more heartfelt emotion than their liberation from slavery is certainly a subject for debate. But it is clear that for members of the northern black elite, with enfranchisement "a new era was opened up before the Colored people. They were now for the first time in possession of their full political rights."[64]

The acquisition of these rights severed as a significant watershed in the history of northern black political activism; because for the Civil War generation of northern blacks, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution appeared to be the culmination of years of speeches, conventions, petitions and various other forms of organizational activity. Therefore, despite the brutal repression of African Americans during and after Reconstruction, the Civil War generation of black political activists continued to look toward the coming days with a sense of expectancy. Like their parents had done in the 1820s and 30s, this now aging generation of northern African Americans discussed the future not just with despair, but with hope. Writing in the difficult days of the1880s, Civil War veteran and historian George Washington Williams felt compelled to end his *History of the Negro Race* on a note of promise. He wrote,

> Race prejudice is bound to give way before the potent influences of character, education, and wealth. And these are necessary to the growth of the race. Without wealth there can be no leisure, without leisure there can be no thought, and without thought there can be no progress. The future work of the Negro is twofold: subjective and objective. Years will be devoted to his own education and improvement in America. He will sound the depths of education, accumulate wealth, and then turn his attention to the civilization of Africa.

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64 Williams, *A History of the Troops*, 423.

By bringing technology and Christianity to the "Dark Continent," Africans and their descendents would continue to develop and prosper, "Tribes will be converted to Christianity; Cities will rise, states will be founded..." [65]

As in decades past, spokesmen and women of the Civil War generation continued to extol the virtue of individual self-improvement, even in the face of the difficulties of the post-Reconstruction South.[66] During and after the days of Congressional Reconstruction efforts, northern blacks of the Civil War generation continued to emphasize the importance of moral, material and intellectual improvement, this time as self-appointed patrons of freedmen and women. Into the 1880s, men like William Wells Brown continued to argue that, "The time for colored men and women to organize for self-improvement has arrived. Moral, social and intellectual development, should be the main attainment of the negro [*sic*] race."[67] But while reiterating the old philosophy of self-improvement, spokesmen in particular began placing a newfound emphasis on the inculcation of proper domesticity.

> Although freedom has brought a new order of things, and our colored women are making rapid strides to rise above the dark scenes of the past, yet the want of protection to our people since the old-time whites have regained power, places a large number of the colored young women of the cities and towns at the mercy of

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65 Williams, *History of the Negro Race*, 551-552.

66 Despite firmly extolling the principles of elevation, Brown was very aware "that there existed an intense hatred on the part of the whites, toward the colored population." (My Southern Home, 179) He noted that, "under the policy adopted by the Democrats in the late insurrectionary States, the colored citizen has been subjected to a reign of terror which has driven him from the enjoyment of his rights and leaves him as much a nonentity in politics, unless he obeys their behests, as he was when he was in slavery." *My Southern Home*, 165. Brown's solution was to focus on individual self-improvement. "Want of independence is the colored man's greatest fault. In the present condition of the Southern states, with the lands in the hands of a shoddy, ignorant, superstitious, rebellious, and negro-hating population, the blacks cannot be independent. Then emigrate to get away from the surroundings that keep you down where you are....Whether the blacks emigrate or not, I say to them, keep away from the cities and towns. Go into the country. Go to work on farms. If you stop in the city, get a profession or trade, but keep in mind that a good trade is better than a poor profession. Brown, *My Southern Home*, 246-247.

67 Brown, *My Southern Home*, 234-235.

> bad colored men, or worse white men. To save these from destruction, institutions ought to be established in every large city.[68]

Like Brown, other northern African American spokesmen would consistently argue that

> Great care must be given to the education of the Colored Women of America; for virtuous, intelligent, educated, cultured, and pious wives and mothers are the hope of the Negro race. Without them educated colored men and the miraculous results of emancipation will go for nothing.[69]

As historians have noted, black spokesmen's commitment to bourgeois domesticity and the ideals of American individualism indicated a lack of "creative prescriptions for the welfare of America's recently enslaved peasantry," and at times caused them to blunt the more radical demands and behaviors of southern blacks.[70] For example, while northern blacks had increasingly emphasized the importance of self-improvement, the southern-born and raised delegates to conventions in the South often exhibited very different concerns. For example, in the Equal Rights Convention of Virginia, June 5, 1865, the delegates first pointed out the disadvantages they faced, and asked for the suffrage as a means of protection. Then, for their black listeners, they laid out three ways to achieve elevation. First, they advised southern blacks to form associations for "the agitation, discussion, and enforcement of your claims to equality before the law, and equal rights of suffrage."[71] Second, they urged:

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68 Brown, *My Southern Home*, 218.

69 Williams, *A History of the Negro Race*, 451.

70 Foner notes that, "such talk of an individual route to advancement that eschewed political action in favor of economic self-help anticipated the fully developed conservative ideology associated with Booker T. Washington that would emerge in the post-Redemption South." Foner, *Reconstruction*, 546. Blight notes that despite Douglass' commitment to helping freedmen and women, Douglass appeared to be increasingly out of touch with their needs. Blight sees this as a result of Douglass' personal commitment to the promise of American ideals. I see Douglass as one of many black spokesmen who brought their belief in individual self-improvement efforts with them to the freedpeople of the South. David Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 195-196.

71 *Equal Rights Convention of Virginia, June 5, 1865*, BNSC, 87.

> let Labor Associations be at once formed among the colored people throughout the length and breadth of the United States, having for their object the protection of the colored laborer, by regulating fairly the price of labor; by affording facilities for obtaining employment by a system of registration, and last, though by no means least, by undertaking, on behalf of the colored laborer, to enforce legally the fulfillment of all contracts made with him.[72]

Finally, they argued:

> the surest guarantee for the independence and ultimate elevation of the colored people will be found in their becoming the owners of the soil on which they live and labor. To this end, let them form Land Associations, in which, by the regular payment of small installments, a fund may be created for the purchase of all land sales, of land on behalf of any investing member, in the name of the Association, the Association holding a mortgage on the land until, by the continued payment of a regular subscription, the sum advanced by the Association and the interest upon it are paid off, when the occupier gets a clear title.[73]

As the previous passages suggest, in this and other freedmen's conventions, southern delegates placed little emphasis upon improving the public and private behavior of themselves and those around them in their convention proceedings. Instead, they used the setting to address their desire to acquire land, and their need for political rights. When "Sergt. H. J. Maxwell, 2d Battery, U.S. Col. L.A.... made an eloquent speech, in which he struck the keynote of the occasion," he made no mention of the themes of self-improvement, and instead told his audience that:

> he was there as an American, claiming the inalienable rights of man. Life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness were his prerogatives...For these rights we labor; for them we will die. We have gained one – the uniform and its badge. We want two more boxes, beside the cartridge box – the ballot box and the jury box.[74]

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[72] *Equal Rights Convention of Virginia, June 5, 1865*, BNSC, 88.

[73] *Equal Rights Convention of Virginia, June 5, 1865*, BNSC, 88.

[74] *State Convention of Colored Men of Tennessee, Nashville, August 7, 1865*, BNSC, 115-116.

Similarly in a Freedmen's Convention held in Nashville, Tennessee in early August 1865, delegates focused on labor issues, voting issues, and their desire to participate in the legal system rather than moral, material, and intellectual self-improvement.[75]

But scholars who make the claim that northern blacks simply lacked creative solutions fail to adequately address the relationship that their post-Civil War perspectives bore to the ideals of self-improvement that formed the basis for northern black institutional life in the years before the outbreak of the Civil War. As northern blacks relocated to the South as teachers, ministers, professionals, and politicians, they simply continued to emphasize the importance of individual self-improvement and achievement as a primary path to collective racial advancement. Thus, however inadequate their proposals for reform may have been, and inadequate they certainly were in the face of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction southern society, their limited prescriptions for change should be seen as a refusal to break with their older and deeply held convictions about the power of individual self-improvement.

Decades earlier, in an 1849 piece on "Self-Elevation," Samuel Ringgold Ward had made a case for the importance of individual self-improvement to his audience. He wrote:

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[75] *State Convention of Colored Men of Tennessee, Nashville, August 7, 1865,* BNSC, 115 – 125. Some scholars have argued that the emerging leadership, particularly those educated in the institutions of northern black communities, emphasized the importance of civil and political rights over the land reform which many freedmen desired. Leon Litwack argued, "for black leadership, the suffrage issue quickly assumed a significance that rivaled the emotional investment tens of thousands of black laborers had made in the idea of 'forty acres and a mule.' Both suffrage and land came to be regarded, albeit with sharply contrasting emphases by different classes of the black population, as indispensable to freedom. Only by winning the vote, black leaders told their people, would the other aspirations they cherished have a chance for fulfillment....Political realism and the middle-class economic outlook of black leadership helped to determine the ordering of priorities. Predictably, then, the suffrage issue, not 'forty acres and a mule,' came to dominate the black conventions, newspapers, and oratory." Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long,* 531.

> We say, then, that the government may knock off every shackle, unrivet every fetter, sunder every chain, and declare every slave free, and clothe him with all that appertains to legal and constitutional equality, with all other men. Then the friends of the colored man might invite him to complete and perfect equality in the social circle, and in business relations. The school, the academy, the college, might be thrown open to his children, as freely as to all other youth. All this would be right, and nothing beyond simple right. But...If with such advantages as we have named, we chose not to respect ourselves, to abstain from the dram shop, the gambling hell [*sic*], the house of ill-fame; if we wouldn't learn to read, and acquaint ourselves with the intelligence of the day; if we would not cultivate polished manners, and refined sensibilities; if we would not fit ourselves for the society of the upright and the elevated; why, we should be just what we now are; i.e., our present position would remain, morally, what it now is. In a word, self-elevation is the *only possible* elevation.[76]

He then continued by saying:

> On the other hand, if, in the midst of our present depressions and discouragements, we shall cultivate self-respect, dignity of demeanor, refinement of manners, intelligence, morality and religion; if we shall be industrious, frugal, temperate, chaste, we shall be an elevated people, in spite of all the pro-slavery negro-hate this boasted, lying Republic is disgraced and degraded with.[77]

Ultimately, despite the promise of emancipation, these same sentiments would continue to define black political discourse and activism for African American men and women into the coming decades.

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[76] *Impartial Citizen*, March 14, 1849 in BAP Reel 5, fr. 1003.

[77] *Impartial Citizen*, March 14, 1849 in BAP Reel 5, fr. 1003.

Epilogue

From Elevation to Uplift

Beginning in the 1820s, and through the 1860s, northern African American spokesmen and women expressed their political and social concerns through the discourse of racial elevation. At times, they highlighted the importance of individual efforts toward self-improvement, and at other times, they equated collective racial elevation with the political, economic and social prerogatives of men. While women focused their rhetorical and physical energies toward creating the institutional infrastructure that would foster individual self-improvement, spokesmen increasingly focused their attention on campaigning for the rights of citizenship, thus obscuring the acceptable self-improvement efforts of African American women. In the years after the Civil War, with the campaign for citizenship rights ostensibly won, the emphasis on individual moral, material, and intellectual self-improvement returned to the forefront of the northern black political agenda, now in a form that focused on the morality of African American women.

This rhetoric of self-improvement did not die out as the Civil War generation of northern blacks passed away. Instead, the concept continued to be a central one in subsequent African American political and social developments. But by the 1890s, the

rhetoric of self-improvement came most consistently from southern locales, often from the mouths and pens of the children of former slaves. Ultimately, Booker T. Washington would become the African American most closely identified with this philosophy of self-improvement.

Though the broad contours of their arguments remained as fundamentally the same as they had in previous decades, the term "elevation" began to be replaced by the term "uplift," in the 1880s and 1890s. This shift in language corresponds with a time period that saw the definition of moral improvement transformed from one that emphasized temperance and specific forms of Christianity to one that focused improving on public and private behavior of African American women. [1]

Despite the negative implications that the rhetoric of African American moral degradation and improvement held for African American freedwomen, by the 1890s, a new generation of African American women set about reshaping the rhetoric, making it a platform for their own social activism, and ultimately and argument for their reentry into the world of male politics.[2] We can see these sentiments first expressed by Anna Julia Cooper, in a speech given before African American members of the Episcopal clergy in 1888. In a speech clearly designed as a response to Alexander Crummell's "Black

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[1] *Perkins, Linda. "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation" in Filomena Steady, ed.* The Black Woman Cross-Culturally. *Cambridge: Sheckman Publishing, 1981.*22.

[2] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham uses the phrase politics of respectability to discuss the emphasis black Baptist women placed on reform of individual behavior as a means to improve race relations in the post-Reconstruction era. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chapter 7. Also see Deborah Gray White. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore. *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

Woman of the South," Cooper agreed that African American women in particular had a "high destiny to fulfill."[3] And she said:

> We are the heirs of a past which was not our fathers' moulding. 'Every man the arbiter of his own destiny' was not true for the American Negro of the past: and it is no fault of his that he finds himself to-day the inheritor of a manhood and womanhood impoverished and debased by two centuries and more of compression and degradation...[But] weaknesses and malformations, which to-day are attributable to a vicious schoolmaster and a pernicious system, will a century hence be rightly regarded as proofs of innate corruptness and radical incurability.[4]

Cooper then claimed her right of African American women to speak for the race and press for change by drawing upon the words of a spokesman of the previous generation. She said:

> The late Martin R. Delany, who was an unadulterated black man, used to say that when honors of state fell upon him, that when he entered the council of kings, the black race entered with him; meaning, I suppose, that there was no discounting his race identity and attributing his achievements to some admixture of Saxon blood. But our present record of eminent men when placed beside the actual status of the race in America to-day, proves that no man can represent the race. What ever the attainments of the individual may be, unless his home has moved on pari passu, he can never be regarded as identical with or representative of the whole.[5]

She then continued:

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[3] She continued, "Woman, Mother, -- your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold! To trifle with it, to ignore or misuse it, is to treat lightly the most sacred and solemn trust ever confided by God to human kind. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South, by a Black Woman of the South*, (1892; Reprint, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22.

[4] Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 28.

[5] Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 30.

> Only the BLACK WOMAN can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*" Is it not evident then that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission.[6]

When Cooper published her speech in along with a series of other speeches and articles in the 1892 volume, *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South*, Cooper inaugurated a new phase in African American political discourse and activism. Throughout her volume, she argued for more educational opportunity for African American women just as elite northern African American women had done generations earlier. Using the rhetoric of "racial uplift," Cooper argued that women use their moral standing as women to carve out a more public role for themselves. But unlike the previous spokesmen and women for the black community, however, Cooper emerged as something different. She was a black woman of the South, herself. And she rose to speak for herself, freedwomen, and their daughters.

Ultimately, Cooper's publication would inaugurate a new chapter in black women's history. The next thirty years would be a period of intellectual ferment, political activism and institution-building for these daughters of the South. In the wake of the disenfranchisement of black men, and the rise of Jim Crow at the turn of the nineteenth century, African American women would use the ideology of racial uplift to support their efforts to promote the institutional growth of the black population, and in the campaign for civil rights, and women's rights. The conservatism of their approach

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[6] "Not by pointing to sun-bathed mountain tops," she wrote, "do we prove that Phoebus warms the valleys. We must point to homes, average homes, homes of the rank and file of horny handed toiling men and women of the South (where the masses are) lighted and cheered by the good, the beautiful, and the true, -- then and not till then will the whole plateau be lifted into the sunlight." Cooper, *A Voice*, 30-31.

would have its limitations, and at times highlight fault lines within the black population. But in the end, with the history of racial elevation long forgotten, calls for racial uplift would form the bedrock of African American political and social activism into the 20th century.

Abbreviations

BAP	C. Peter Ripley and George Carter, eds. *Black Abolitionist Papers*.
NNC	Howard Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864*. New York: Arno Press, 1969.
BSC	Foner, Philip S. and George E. Walker, eds. *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978.
BNSC	Foner, Philip S. and George E. Walker, eds. *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865-1900*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

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The Anglo-African Magazine
The Antislavery Examiner
The Anti-Slavery Record
Colored American
Douglass' Monthly
Frederick Douglass' Paper
Freedom's Journal
The Liberator
New National Era
North Star
Pacific Appeal
Pennsylvania Freeman
Provincial Freeman
Voice of the Fugitive
Weekly Anglo African
Weekly Advocate

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