MODERNIZING "DIFFERENCE": THE POLITICAL MEANINGS OF COLOR IN THE FREE STATES, 1776-1840

James Brewer Stewart

As the decade of the 1830s opened, people living in the states "north of slavery" found themselves facing unprecedented dangers and opportunities that resulted from rapidly accumulating racial tensions. As crises multiplied, headlines of that time (even in generic form) conveyed their enormity and potential for violence—Nullification Spirit Sweeps South Carolina—Jackson Demands Cherokee Removal—Slaves Revolt and Murder in Southampton County Virginia—Walker's *Appeal* Found Among Southern Negroes—Garrison Demands Race Amalgamation— Abolitionists Gather Women and Negroes in Promiscuous Assemblies—Mobs Attack Negro Neighborhoods. At no previous time in the history of the "free states" did so many racially charged events overtake one another in such rapid succession. Never before were assumptions about the proper dynamics of "race relations" so suddenly and so heavily questioned, revisioned, and defended. Only during Reconstruction, or later still, during the post-World War II Civil Rights Movement, would people experience trauma more drastic than that which swept the free states in the late 1820s and early 1830s. And only in these much more recent struggles would the trajectory of history so suddenly open similar possibilities for democratic change, for brutal repression, and for new political understandings of what skin color differences ought to mean.

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This essay seeks to explain what deeper historical developments led the North to this sudden conjuncture in the late 1820s and early 1830s, what its specific dynamics were, and how its long-term influence reshaped and reinforced the power of "race" to define the modernizing political culture of the free states before the Civil War. Before this watershed moment, from 1790 until around 1830, society in the North, though suffused with prejudice, nevertheless fostered a surprisingly open premodern struggle over claims of "respectability" and citizenship put forward by many social groups, and particularly by free African Americans. This effort to achieve respectability, in turn, stimulated deepening internal and external divisions among people of differing skin colors, and finally promoted the unprecedented interracialism of a nascent immediate abolitionist movement. By the opening of the 1830s, the compounding effect of these volatile contests had frayed the social fabric of free states to the point of disintegration. Then came Walker's *Appeal*, Turner's insurrection, South Carolina's nullification crisis, and, above all, Garrison's *Liberator*. When this publication announced that abolitionists—black and white, male and female—were embarking on a crusade for racial equality, the impact of this extraordinary venture transmuted the North's accumulating racial tensions into a general crisis that exploded into mob violence across the free states.[1]

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[1] I wish to thank the following colleagues and friends for their critical contributions to the development of this essay: Dickson D. Bruce, Peter Hinks, James O. Horton, Lois Horton, Carol Lasser, Joanne Pope Melish, Michael A. Morrison, Gary Nash, Rich Newman, George Price, Patrick Rael, Jean Soderlund, Clay Steinman, Dorothy C. Stewart, Ronald Walters, and Donald Yacovone. It is also important to acknowledge the influence of the burgeoning scholarship on racial "formation," with its emphasis that meanings of skin color difference involve shifting ideological formulations and social relations. In this regard, the title of this article, "Modernizing Difference," registers the idea that the role of race in the political development of the early republic is best understood as a set of rapidly evolving, conflicting ideological expressions by specific social groups over at least three decades that heavily determined the development of the North's two-party system and of the abolitionist movement as well. For discussions of this theme and methodology in current historiography, consult David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, UK, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class, Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1990); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and the North, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, 1998); Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, UK, 1997), 225-97; Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morton Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 1982), 143-78. As regards the present issue, consult the introductory essay by Roediger that addresses the specific pertinence of cultural studies scholarship on race to the history of the early republic: "The Pursuit of Whiteness: Property, Terror, and Expansion, 1790-1860."

By the late 1830s, as the mobs dispersed African-American neighborhoods and the beleaguered victims began to rebuild their lives, views of racial order had changed dramatically for practically everyone in the North. The abolitionists' first struggles to secure racial equality had instead spawned an unprecedented upheaval among the vast majority of whites in the free states that solidified into an unmovable political consensus of highly ordered white supremacy. "Color lines" that had hitherto been so sharply contested around conflicting claims of "respectability" now had become indelibly drawn. Nearly impossible to revise, they were buttressed by a system of democratic white politics premised on the modern assumption that "nature" had always divided "black" and "white" as inferior and superior, and always must. By the mid-1830s, just as the nation's system of mass participation two-party politics began to take hold, this harsh new spirit of modern racial essentialism was becoming all-pervasive. It obliterated in turn earlier relationships based on deference and "respectability" while profoundly reshaping the fundamental outlooks of even those who would continue to struggle for racial equality. In all these respects, the white North had emerged into an age of racial modernity, an era much more closely resembling the white supremacist tyranny of the late nineteenth century than the inter-racial contestation and alliance-building of the decades between 1776 and 1830. Moreover, protest movements contesting this new state of affairs much more resembled the racial activism of the twentieth century than they did those of the postrevolutionary era. How this crisis developed, why it concluded as it did, and what its implications were for the North's sectionalizing political system are the questions this essay seeks to answer.

The premodern racial landscapes of the early republican North gave few suggestions of the monumental upheavals that lay ahead. To be clear, deep-rooted racial prejudice was much in evidence as the dismantling of northern slavery ran its tortuous course after 1776. Far too many of those emancipated remained ensnared in restrictive apprenticeships, and too many more continued their enslavement until reaching ages required by manumission laws. All found themselves being pushed into a rapidly segregating and unequal social order by strengthening customs and newly enacted statutes. Churches that had once included African Americans now isolated or expelled them. Parades and festivals that had once been purposefully multiracial affairs now proceeded for the benefit of whites

only. Court dockets and jail registers listed disproportionately high percentages of people of color.[2]

But from African Americans' perspectives, such trends fired ambitious visions even as they blighted immediate hopes. To the first generation of free African-American leaders, racial boundaries in the early republican North were detestably unfair, but it remained unproven that they could not be contested and redrawn. As a result, initiatives multiplied as the new century opened—Paul Cuffee launched an extraordinary quest to create an Africa-based, transatlantic, commercial empire. His kinsman, James Easton, developed an ambitious manual labor school for African-American youth at his foundry outside Boston. James Forten also reached outward to Africa while using his remunerative sail loft in Philadelphia to educate young black artisans. Forten's collaborator, Bishop Richard Allen, turned his single congregation into the nursery of an entire denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. New York City's John Teasman successfully promoted tax-supported schools to serve African Americans. Boston's Prince Hall dreamed of returning to Africa, but witnessed instead the spread of his idea of uniting free people of color under the banner of Freemasonry.[3]

For all the variety of their plans and visions, these early leaders drew common inspiration from the prospect of free people of color "uplifting" themselves to conditions of "respectability," an approach to securing equality that stressed patient incrementalism, strenuous self-improvement, deference from ordinary community members, and the guidance of

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[2] The literature describing the ending of northern slavery, the consolidation of free black communities, and the development of white supremacist social practices includes, James O. Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York, 1997); Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (New York, 1991); Graham Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison, WI, 1997); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia, 1988); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of a Dream* (Chicago, 1981); and Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City 1770-1810* (Athens, GA, 1991).

[3] See Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (1973, rep., Athens, 1991); George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton* (Amherst, 1999); Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Robert J. Swan, "John Teasman: African American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 12 (Fall 1992), 331-56; and Lamont D. Thomas, *Paul Cuffe: Black Entrepreneur and Pan-Africanist* (Urbana, 1986).

patriarchal leaders. Such aspirations permitted free African Americans to build autonomous institutions that nurtured their sense of themselves as both "African" and "American," and which acted as "uplifting" agencies by which they could interject their egalitarian voices into the nation's political discussions. Persuasive historical analysis, such as that presented in this issue by Joanne Pope Melish, has pinpointed the strengths and weaknesses of this approach: it was vital to giving free blacks a sense of cultural solidarity and achievement when facing a hostile white world, but it also deflected primary responsibility for improving "race relations" away from bigoted whites while conveying the fatal impression that African Americans, in their "non-uplifted" state, were, indeed, a "degraded people." But whatever the costs and gains, Cuffe, Easton, Allen, and the others had every incentive to embrace the goals of "uplift" and "respectability" as the 1800s opened.[4]

The strongest of these imperatives, to build solid communities where none had existed, compelled these early leaders to place stern demands on their neighbors, and on themselves. Progress against discrimination, they insisted, required unflagging efforts by each to "uplift" all by living lives of "respectability" by striving to embrace piety, practice thrift and temperance, comport one's self with well-mannered dignity, and seek all advantage that education offered. Far from registering "white middle class" values, the distinguished "men of color" who set forth these daunting expectations registered a distinctly premodern African-American style of Federalist-era deference politics when giving direction to their own "lesser orders." Their didactic pronouncements responded to the consequences of slave emancipation that made community-building so difficult after 1776, namely, the streams of former slaves from the North, the South, and the Caribbean that flowed into northern cities, and the hostile critiques of whites who increasingly defined these congregating free people of color as an innately "turbulent, degraded race" that merited segregation and surveillance.

In the face of these obstacles, proponents of "uplift" and "respectability" succeeded magnificently in shaping ethnically diverse groups of urban transients into enduring communities. In so doing, they automatically

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[4] See works cited in the previous note, and Gary Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison, WI, 1990), 57-87. For discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of "uplift" and "respectability" in various formulations of free African-American ideology see in the present issue Joanne Pope Melish, "The 'Condition' Debate and Racial Discourse in the Antebellum North"; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 17-91; and Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 125-54.

rebutted imputations that blacks constituted a "degraded race" by empowering those very African Americans to demonstrate cultural parity with whites of the highest attainment, to scorn "degraded" slave holders and racial bigots as inferiors, and to give the lie to those who judged all dark-skinned people by the behavior of a "degenerate" few. To live "respectably" also constituted an assertion of free African-American "manhood" and citizenship. It was a demonstration of personal independence embraced by males when protecting and directing their families, which was exactly what enslaved men throughout the South were presumably prevented from doing. Above all, "respectability" connoted the possession of the intellectual and literary skills necessary to allow African Americans to contribute their own authoritative political voices as equals to the nation's ongoing civic discussions. In sum, "respectability" initially expressed the free black elites' deepest abolitionist values.[5]

Judged by the impressive number of churches, schools, and benevolent associations they established by the 1820s, the accomplishments of these "uplifting" leaders were by any measure extraordinary, and the painstaking work of ordinary people all the more so. Yet the price that these successes exacted from many free African Americans was heavy, often requiring drastic alterations of identity and allegiance. Numerous members of "multiracial" families with bloodlines that had mixed African, Indian, and Euro-American ancestors (Eastons and Cuffes prominent among them), now chose in the name of "respectability" to identify themselves as African Americans and, as a result, to allow themselves to be identified as members of the "Negro race," a rapidly compounding aggregate of ostracized dark-skinned peoples of differing origins and genealogies. Left behind in their quests for "respectability" were indigenous traditions that had stressed communal sharing and the suppression of individualism, qualities inimical to the progressive assumptions of "uplift." The embrace of "uplift" also exacted a second, related loss, the disintegration of traditional definitions of the "turbulent rabble" that had regulated social relations throughout the eighteenth century. In this earlier setting, as Lois Horton explains in her contribution to this volume, the inclusion of dark-skinned people in the ethnically diverse "lower orders" had served to

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[5] This paragraph and that preceding it are based on James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "The Affirmation of Manhood: Black Garrisonians in Antebellum Boston," in Donald M. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: Black & White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), 128-53; Patrick Rael, "African American Elites and the Language of Respectability," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, San Francisco; and Price and Stewart, *Hosea Easton*, 3-57.

inhibit naked repression exclusively against black people, and fostered multicultural alliances among the poor of a variety of skin colors. But by the opening of the new century, these plebeian connections were beginning to unravel across the North as people of many backgrounds became increasingly caught up in a harsher regime of "race relations" in which the values of "respectability" began exerting greater influence over the minds of Anglo-Americans.[6]

For black New England's elite leaders, the implications of these developments were inescapable. Perforce, they must now undertake their own struggles for "uplift" in order to secure the future "respectability" of their (ever more stringently defined) "race." Though interracial alliances still remained, by the 1800s they involved only the haphazard patronage of individual philanthropists at the apex of the social order—elite Quakers, British reformers, and Federalist scions. Never again would support be found among a mass of poor Euro-Americans. Black Yankees, in short, had no choice but to begin pouring the resources of their "race" into programs that secured their claims to equality by "uplifting" themselves and their neighbors. Little wonder, given these circumstances, that while the Eastons, Fortens, and Allens despised this racial order, they also maintained that they could challenge and reshape it by promoting "respectability." Their impressive personal histories of accomplishment and recognition certainly suggested just how mutable "race relations" actually were and gave them little choice but to believe that a pious, energetic people could, with God's help, incrementally change those relations for the better.[7]

By choosing this course of action, free African Americans joined an intense and highly divisive race for "respectability" that set them against a formidable variety of Euro-American competitors. For white northerners from many walks of life in the early nineteenth century the claim of

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[6] See James O. Horton's "Comment" in response to James Brewer Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 18 (Summer 1998), 222-26; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 30-54; Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 68-13; and particularly, in the present issue, Lois E. Horton, "From Class to Race in Early America: Northern Post-Emancipation Racial Reconstruction."

[7] Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970), chaps. 2-3; Robert Forbes, "Slavery and the Evangelical Enlightenment," in John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery* (Athens, GA, 1998), 68-106; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, 1998), 84-118; Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994), 11-29; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 55-76, 155-70.

"respectability" came to serve similar functions as it did for African Americans. It valued and gave value to the achievements of piety, refinement, learning, and political engagement far above one's measurable economic position in a time of deepening inequality. As manufacturing, commerce, personal consumption, and class distinctions reshaped urban life in the North, so did rapid immigration from the British Isles and Western Europe. As a result, divisions grew between hard-pressed wage earners and an increasingly affluent middle class, as did ethnic tensions between long-settled Yankees and immigrants and even between newly arrived ethnic groups themselves. To assert one's "respectability" in the face of such deepening rifts meant insisting that workers and immigrants, rural no less than urban, could overcome foreign and plebean origins and claim parity with all other citizens. It also offered "ordinary" people the hope of upward mobility and republican equality, thanks to the strength of their moral character. From the wealthy, it required philanthropic effort to "uplift" the less fortunate who needed education and the benefits of sound morals in order to contribute to the nation's political life.

The race to attain "respectability," in short, seemed to promise cultural and political remedies for multiplying class divisions, ethnic conflicts, stresses of acculturation, and feelings of personal alienation. Equality was presumably attainable to all the "uplifted," whatever their occupation, income, ethnic group, or, as a Forten or an Easton would add emphatically, skin color. But as this contest unfolded it only intensified the very conflicts that it was presumed to mitigate. As a result, by the opening of the 1820s, people throughout the North found themselves engaged in ever more violent disagreements over how racial boundaries ought to be drawn to accord with conflicting claims of "respectability," citizenship, and heightening color consciousness. As Jon Gjerde explains in his contribution to this collection, this compulsion to embrace "whiteness" and "respectability" was strongly felt even among new immigrants in the rural North, people well removed from African-American population centers, but well-aware of "Indian Country" when formulating their initial claims to republican citizenship.[8]

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[8] The discussion of class formation and the ideology of "respectability" derives from Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1700-1900* (New York, 1989), 66-230; Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses and Cities* (New York, 1992), 207-447; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America* (New Haven, 1982); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); Tamara P. Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite* (New Haven, 1989); Ronald Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard*

These heightening senses of racial identity among whites and mounting inclinations among free blacks to push across racial boundaries increasingly influenced day-to-day urban life in the North in the early nineteenth century. For example, lower-class men, blacks and whites alike, now formulated understandings of the meaning of "respectability" that were very much in conflict with those of their social "betters." Plebeian blacks and whites quickly developed the habit of mixing in grog houses, cellar bistros, oyster houses, and lottery stalls, all elements of street culture that ran deeply counter to elites' "uplifting" values. Yet this was hardly a return to the interracial fraternization among the "lower orders" of prerevolutionary days. Instead, the situation fostered hostility between working men of differing skin colors over the preservation of "manly self-respect." Working class whites now exhibited a volatile ambivalence toward African-American culture when they burlesqued it in black-faced minstrel shows, even as they also patronized black prostitutes, applauded black musicians, and drank their fill in black speakeasies. Now encountering the traumas of industrial labor, these white male wage earners, many of them immigrants, feared the "blackness" of those with whom they mingled as symbolic of their own personal "degradation." Such feelings in turn spurred their desires for emotional catharsis, and became an excuse for aggressive assertions of "manly self-respect." Street corner tensions deepened as black men responded with assertive behavior of their own, which fused assertions of gendered identity with those of color.[9]

Meanwhile, on the opposite end of the social spectrum, genteel white philanthropists and public officials who espoused colonizationism also blurred racial boundaries and fostered contention over claims of male "respectability" by inviting African-American elites to join them as "gentlemen" in "uplifting" the nation's free blacks. Through their American Colonization Society they proposed to "elevate" free African Americans from oppressive white bigotry by subsidizing their voluntary emigration to the West Africa colony of Liberia. But rather than cementing biracial cooperation among gentlemanly "respectables," this proposition prompted the black elites, including those truly interested in African

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and the Boston Upper Class (Boston, 1980); Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133-56; and in this issue Jon Gjerde, "'Here in America there is neither king nor tyrant': European Encounters with Race, 'Freedom,' and Their European Past"; and James P. Ronda, "'We Have a Country': Race, Geography, and the Invention of Indian Territory."

[9] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackfaced Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993); Michael Kaplan, "New York Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Male Working Class Identity," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Winter 1995), 592-617; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, chaps. 3-5.

resettlement, to mobilize their communities against the colonizationists. They denounced colonizationists in an unprecedented outpouring of pamphlets, speeches, sermons, and "indignation meetings" as "degraded" white conspirators who aimed to drive "upstanding" free people of color into exile. Here, in fact, were the first stirrings of both a formally organized elite black abolitionist movement and of a clearly identified "respectable" white opposition to it.[10]

On every social level, then, from barrooms to church meeting halls, the continuing efforts of African Americans to put themselves forward as equals provoked deepening racial resistance from whites preoccupied with their own pursuits of "manliness" and "respectability." When, for example, African-American men began staging marches commemorating their two most meaningful political events—northern emancipation and Haitian Independence—whites lampooned them in handbills and showered them with epithets and rocks, scorning their assertion that a citizen's right to the streets belonged as much to African Americans as to anyone. Even the very landmarks that bespoke the elites' successes in promoting "uplift" now served as catalysts for compounding white resentment. Whites rightly regarded the handsome new churches, meeting halls, and school buildings as both symbols of African-American communities' high aspirations and as agencies for amplifying the voices of its "uplifted" preachers, pamphleteers, and social activists. Consequently, white harassment increasingly marred Sabbath observances and school-day activities, and the buildings themselves became the targets of the earliest race riots that first erupted in the early and mid-1820s in Boston, New Haven, Providence, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia.[11]

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[10] P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York, 1967), 94-187; Hugh Davis, "Northern Colonizationism and Free Blacks, 1823-1837: A Case Study of Leonard Bacon," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 14 (Winter 1997), 553-75; George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny* (New York, 1971), 1-27; Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 196-68; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: The Abolitionists and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998), 1-35.

[11] Emma Jones Lapsansky, "'Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly*, 32 (Spring 1980), 54-79; Shane White "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History*, 81 (June 1994), 13-50; Paul J. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, 1987), 145-62; Patrick Rael, "'Besieged by Freedom's Army': Antislavery Celebrations, Black Leaders, and Black Society in the Antebellum North," unpublished paper in the author's possession.

These violent episodes, unsettling in their own right, were actually skirmishes in a sustained assault against free blacks that gathered strength throughout the North in the 1820s. In the political sphere, state legislatures took the lead, and by late in the decade every one of them had either seriously debated or passed legislation that placed new restrictions on African Americans' voting rights, legal standing, and freedom of migration. To complete this sweeping confirmation of free blacks' ever more uniform "degradation," every legislature also enacted universal male suffrage for whites—the ultimate recognition of masculine social acceptability. The popular mandate supporting this legislation expressed fully in the North's newly emerging mass print culture, where cartoonists and editors found limitless audiences for woodcuts and sketches that demeaned African Americans in nearly every manner conceivable. By ridiculing blacks' physiognomy as simian, their speech as pidgin dialect, and all their attempts at "respectability" as outlandishly grotesque, these cartoons confirmed just how forceful free African-American activists had been in pursuing their goals, how much their successes at pushing through racial barriers had unsettled public culture, and how determined whites now were to suppress all such "uplifting" endeavors. What had begun in the 1790s as a quest for equality by "uplifted" African Americans was evolving by the late-1820s into a white crusade against free blacks in general. That such a crusade licensed terrorism became obvious when whites in Cincinnati launched vicious attacks on their black neighbors in 1829, leaving several hundred homeless and driving an undetermined number into exile in Canada.[12]

Among free blacks, such horrifying events evoked an understandable mixture of fear, anger, and alienation. Some elite leaders explored emigrating to Haiti or Upper Canada. Others speculated that violence-prone white Americans must have sprung from corrupted European origins and compared them to patiently struggling blacks who surely carried the legacy of culturally superior African beginnings. Nearly all responded warmly to the passionate writings of David Walker, whose extraordinary *Appeal* was published in 1829. In it he scorned the efficacy of African-

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[12] The fullest overview of these developments remains Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (New York, 1961). See also Richard C. Wade, "The Negro in Cincinnati, 1800-1830," *Journal of Negro History*, 35 (Jan. 1954), 39-51; John M. Werner, "Race Riots in the Age of Jackson, 1824-1849" (Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1973). For a closely related analysis of these trends and their deeper meanings within the slave states, see, in the present issue, Lacy K. Ford, Jr., "Making the 'White Man's' Country White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South"; and respecting Cherokee removal, Ronda, "'We Have A Country.'"

American "uplift" without militant self-transformation, condemned colonization in unusually sweeping terms, and called for black people to defend their rights by force when necessary. The angry African Americans in several cities who protested the recapture of fugitives by hurling paving stones at whites obviously saw matters much as Walker did. Torn between the questionable alternatives of armed resistance, quiet submission, or self-exile, free blacks in the North faced a terrible impasse as the 1830s opened.[13]

Given these circumstances, the sudden appearance in 1831 of a militant white abolitionist movement must have seemed a godsend to free black leaders for, as crises deepened for free African Americans, racial tension erupted nationally as well. In South Carolina, militant planters courted civil war when they demanded the right to "nullify" on behalf of slavery. A massive slave insurrection in Jamaica, Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia, and the discovery of Walker's *Appeal* in the possession of southern blacks stimulated premonitions among whites of an impending race war. As James Ronda reminds us in his contribution to this issue, President Andrew Jackson's crusade to remove the Cherokee Nation linked racialized state coercion with mass expulsion in an unprecedented fashion. To African-American activists and white abolitionists, this only cast the American Colonization Movement in a still more ominous light. Little wonder, therefore, that when Garrison and his associates, encouraged by activist African Americans, pledged to unmask that society, to promote equality for the North's free blacks, and to demand slavery's immediate abolition, the black elite responded enthusiastically. Yet in light of the increasingly volatile, gender-focused racial contentiousness of the late 1820s, compounded now by nullifiers and insurrectionists, it is impossible to imagine any event more disruptive than the sudden appearance of a biracial abolitionist movement that included women as well as men. Never before had struggles over racial boundaries and the masculine attributes of "respectability" carried such potential for violence as they did in 1831, when white Garrisonians invited people of all skin colors and both genders to crusade to "uplift" the free black community in the North and hasten the end of southern slavery.

Viewed from this perspective, the white men who mobbed abolitionists and terrorized black neighborhoods until the latter 1830s should be

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[13] Peter Hinks, *To Awake My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistence* (College Station, PA, 1997); Bruce Dain, "Haiti, Egypt and Early Black Racial Discourse in the United States," *Slavery and Abolition*, 14 (Dec. 1983), 139-61.

understood as having been absolutely correct when decrying their victims as racial "amalgamationists." For these new white abolitionists, "respectability" constituted a highly charged interracial imperative that black and white reformers, female as well as male, must collaborate to "uplift" northern African Americans into a racially inclusive middle class. This, they maintained, was essential to their overarching goal of obliterating caste oppression in all of its forms. To the men of the African-American elite, on the other hand, the prospect of an alliance with fellow "Christian gentlemen" such as Garrison, Lewis Tappan, and William Jay relieved their terrible impasse. Here, with unprecedented white assistance, was a unique opportunity once again to take action against white supremacism while recommitting their communities to the quest for "respectability."[14]

Whatever their motives, white and black abolitionists shared the revolutionary belief that African Americans had every right to speak the harshest truth to their "unregenerate" oppressors and to "rise" to social equality as rapidly as possible. For this reason African-American authors were heavily featured in white abolitionists' publications, an abrupt and unprecedentedly forceful intervention by African Americans into the nation's "marketplace of ideas." Meanwhile, white reformers also made unprecedented interventions by becoming deeply involved in renewed African-American campaigns of community "uplift" that blossomed in the early 1830s. They eagerly welcomed African Americans into their rapidly multiplying antislavery societies and roundly denounced "colorphobia" among whites as supremely sinful and ignorant. But to the vast majority of northern white men in this already-polarized racial order, the very idea that blacks and whites of both genders would presume to "elevate" free African Americans to equal middle-class status and dictate morality to Euro-Americans "beneath" them meant unspeakable "degradation." As prominent colonizationists, leading politicians, and ordinary day laborers prepared for mob action, it was clear to all but the abolitionists themselves that their entrance into the highly contested race for "respectability" guaranteed the rapid suppression of the movement.

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[14] Stewart, "Racial Modernity"; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, 1969), 78-125; James Brewer Stewart, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Challenge of Emancipation* (Arllington Heights, IL, 1992), 40-74; Richard Newman, "The Transformation of American Abolitionism: People, Tactics and the Changing Meaning of Activism from the 1780s to the 1830s" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, Buffalo, 1997); James Huston, "The Experiential Basis of the Northern Antislavery Impulse," *Journal of Southern History*, 56 (Nov. 1990), 609-41; Mary Hershberger, "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle Against Indian Removal in the 1830s," *Journal of American History*, 86 (June 1999), 16-40.

A survey of the antiabolitionist violence that tore through practically every major northern city and so many smaller towns amply confirms this truth. In nearly all of these thoroughly studied events, mob activity from 1831 to 1838 was triggered initially by a highly visible action that abolitionists regarded as part of their "respectable" promotion of African-American "uplift," but which whites of all classes abominated as degrading racial and sexual "amalgamationism": proposals for manual labor schools for black youths in New Haven, Connecticut, and in Canaan and Dover, New Hampshire; attempts to establish academies for young African-American women in Canterbury, Connecticut, and in Cincinnati and Zanesville, Ohio; the "promiscuous" gatherings of abolitionists of both races and genders in public meeting halls in Boston, Utica, Pittsburgh, and New York City; and the "amalgamated" funding and leadership involved in building Philadelphia's Free Speech Hall. Equally predictable were the specific targets of mob action—abolitionists of both races and genders whose pretenses to "respectability" had to be violently obliterated, and African-American neighborhoods, those magnets of "vice" and "debasement," where racial boundaries and white identities had been contested and compromised far too long.[15]

The complementary roles played throughout the rioting by white men on opposite ends of the social order were also consistent. As urban workers tore into black neighborhoods and shut down abolitionists' meetings, prominent businessmen, politicians, and editors, many of them colonizationists, condemned the abolitionists as instigators of the riots, deploring only the mobs' "excesses." As abolitionists remarked at the time and as modern scholarship has since confirmed, the lower-class "tail" of

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[15] The generalizations developed here regarding the importance of gender as well as racial antagonisms follow works that have carefully studied specific instances of anti-abolitionist and anti-free black rioting in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. In addition to Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Antiabolitionist Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1971), 20-155; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 107-110; and Lott, *Love and Theft*, 28-29, 131-35; consult Susan Strane, *A Whole-Souled Women: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York, 1990); Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of the Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia, 1991), 43-55; Margaret Hope Bacon, "By Moral Force Alone: Antislavery Women and Non-Resistence," in Jean Fagin Yellin and John Van Horn, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, 1994), 285-90; John Runcie "'Hunting the Nigs' in Philadelphia: The Race Riot of August, 1834," *Pennsylvania History*, 39, (Apr. 1972), 187-218; John M. Werner, "Race Riots in the United States in the Age of Jackson," chaps. 3-4; Kerber, "Abolitionists and Amalgamators," *New York History*, 48 (Jan. 1867); and Kaplan, "New York Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Male Working Class Identity."

urban white society worked easily with those at its "head" as both rich and poor whites drew from the cathartic violence an unprecedented sense of their brotherhood as *the* dominating "race." Theirs was a profoundly heightened activist identity that quickly expressed itself at the ballot box as well as in the streets.[16]

In retrospect, it seems all but inevitable that the abolitionists' drive for racially "respectable" inclusiveness would be overwhelmed by the growth of modern, white supremacist two-party politics. The spread of mob violence and the development of the second party system quickly linked rioters, their apologists, party spokesmen, and voters in common electoral purposes. Historians have long recognized the close relationship between the rise of universal white manhood suffrage and the systematic suppression of free African-Americans' rights. As part of this process, they have also stressed the northern Democratic party's success in the 1830s in uniting its northern constituents through endorsements of bigotry and mob activity. Less understood, but equally important, was the northern Whigs' transformation of colonizationism from a poorly funded voluntary association into a major component in their party's ideology of "race." Throughout the early and mid-1830s, while many free state Democrats endorsed racial violence, northern Whig editors and party leaders generally mixed condemnations of abolitionist "amalgamationism" and working class "mob rule" with praise for the temperate statesmanship of Henry Clay, Edward Everett, and Daniel Webster, colonizationism's most prominent political spokesmen. In 1840 and 1844, when the national Whig party nominated presidential candidates, it was no accident that its choices were planter/colonizationists William Henry Harrison and Henry Clay.

By adopting this strategy, northern Whigs found an effective means of distinguishing their positions on issues of slavery and "race" from those of northern Democrats while satisfying fundamental rules that both parties obeyed—intersectional harmony and white supremacist solidarity. Though some Whigs like Clay believed deeply in voluntary emigration, most in the North who endorsed colonization were simply contrasting their party's new distinctive formulation of white supremacist politics to that of their

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[16] For sources pertinent to this paragraph and the one preceding it, see Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing"*; Linda Kerber, "Abolitionists and Amalgamators," 28-39; Lott, *Love and Theft,* 63-88; Kaplan, "New York City Tavern Violence"; David Grimsted, "Rioting in its Jacksonian Setting," *American Historical Review*, 77 (Apr. 1972), 361-97; Dale Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT, 1986), 39-68; and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 14-95.

Democratic opposition by stressing that free African Americans, ideally, should be "sent back to Africa." Their own allegiance to "whiteness" thus established, northern Whigs were free to attack their free-state Democratic opponents in sectional terms by condemning them as "tools" of southern planters because of their promotion of riots and their support for suppressing antislavery petitions in Congress. These tactics, however, did not undermine their party's unity, since southern Whigs appreciated the deeper support for slavery and white supremacy that underlay them, as well as the fact that they strengthened the party's overall performance against the Democrats in national elections.[17]

Despite this approach, the Whig party had to accommodate the supporters of maverick politicians such as John Quincy Adams and Joshua R. Giddings, who genuinely did hate slavery and its incursions on "northern rights" and who were truly disturbed by the plight of dark-skinned Americans. Soon too, strong criticisms also surfaced from a handful of antiabolitionist northern Democrats like Benjamin Tappan who nevertheless despised "aristocratic" slave holders and advocated the rights of their "chattel laborers" to freedom. In this respect, two-party racial politics ultimately stimulated authentic disagreements over the status of African Americans that wove themselves into conflicts over slavery's westward expansion. But in the meantime, the Democrats' blunt appeals to "white manhood" and the Whigs' more polished espousals of colonization conveyed identical conclusions regarding the newly modernized political meanings of color in the North. No matter how estimable their qualities or accomplishments, free African Americans had to be denied their claims of equal "respectability" and to be treated categorically as an "inferior race." Voters, in turn, had to express their party allegiances in terms of "white identity politics," rejecting all that was symbolized by

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[17] For analyses of the Whig and Democratic parties, slavery, colonization, white supremacy, and partisan loyalties that inform this paragraph and the one preceding it, see Leonard L. Richards, "The Jacksonians and Slavery," in Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 99-118; Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* 8-10,18, 29, 87, 114-22; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (New York, 1980), 18-37, 165-80; John M. McFaul, "Expedience vs. Morality: Jacksonian Politics and Slavery," *Journal of American History*, 62 (June 1975), 24-39; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics in the Antebellum Republic,* Vol. I, *Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge, UK, 1995), 323-50; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), 17-33; James Brewer Stewart, "Abolitionists, Insurgents and Third Parties: Sectionalism and Partisan Politics in Northern Whiggery, 1836-1844," in Alan Kraut, ed., *Crusaders and Compromisers: Essays on the Relationship of the Antislavery Struggle to the Antebellum Party System* (Westport, 1983), 26-43.

both "abolitionism" and the possession of dark skin. Considering these precedents, it is little wonder that in later years northern free soil ideology and white racial bigotry were so often to become intertwined in the political crises leading to civil war.[18]

As their travails continued into the later 1830s, Garrison and his white associates also developed a quite new and unmistakably more modern understandings of racial identity and the political meaning of skin color. During the height of racial violence, all agreed that their crusade could no longer sustain its struggle for black "respectability." Especially in urban areas, abolitionists' efforts of racial "uplift" abruptly halted. The "moral bankruptcy" of their own white "race" caused these reversals, they now concluded; the sins of black enslavement in the South had now been shown to be powerfully reinforced by equally heinous crimes of politically mobilized whites throughout the free states. And as Garrison and his white coworkers reflected further, they also understood how deeply alienated they had become not only from the unrepentant slave holders in the South, but also from the vast majority of their fellow northern whites.[19]

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[18] A convenient, highly readable overview of Whig antislavery impulses is found in Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York, 1986). See also, Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics*, 350-61; and James Brewer Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics* (Cleveland, 1970). For discussions of Democratic party expressions of extreme antislavery sentiment (rare though they were in the 1830s and early 1840s), see esp. Daniel Feller, "A Brother in Arms: Benjamin Tappan and the Antislavery Democracy," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, Lexington, KY, July 16, 1999; Sean Wilentz, "Slavery, Antislavery and Jacksonian Democracy," in Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996), 202-23; and Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 161-75. The most discerning analysis of the relationships between white supremacy, racial egalitarianism, and northern opposition to slavery's westward expansion remains Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 261-317. Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1997), contextualizes these racial themes in struggles between northern and southern politicians over conflicting understandings of the shared political traditions of republicanism. For Foner's most recent statement on issues of race, class, gender and contested definitions of freedom in antislavery ideology, see his trenchant and widely focused "Free Labor, Wage Labor and the Slave Power," in Stokes and Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America*, 128-46.

[19] The most detailed and substantial analysis of the deeper issues involved in the schisms among white abolitionists and their relationship to issues of race and white supremacy remains Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and his Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York, 1969). See also, James Brewer Stewart, "Peaceful Hopes and Violent Experiences: The Evolution of Conservative

The schisms that shattered white abolitionism in 1840 had many causes, but basic among them were deep disagreements over what these reformers believed was required of them now that they had become so self-consciously estranged from the white North. All concurred that their efforts must now be redirected to transforming the white majority's "corrupted" values, and as a result, for the first time in the nation's history, a white social movement put highest priority on wholesale ideological opposition to the northern racial prejudice of its own "race" rather than on attempting to lessen it by assisting free blacks to "rise." But almost immediately, white abolitionists also began articulating irreconcilable versions of their own "identity politics" as they disagreed over how best to challenge white supremacy in some fundamental way. As discord deepened, it became clear that their trials by violence had deeply altered their understandings of the political meanings of color in the North.[20]

To Garrison and his supporters, only a comprehensive espousal of women's rights, religious perfectionism, and nonresistance—the moral antipodes of mobs and mass parties—could inspire the transformation of "corrupted" majority values. To many of Garrison's opponents, however, it was the North's white voters, "enslaved" to the Whigs and Democrats, who must be morally liberated, and this could only be done by founding an emancipationist Liberty party. But beneath these controversies, serious as they were, lay the deeper acceptance by all parties that their overriding political challenges arose from bigoted constructions of "whiteness" that inspired mob rule and political repression within the free states. Both factions, in other words, now sought the liberation of the entire black population by overthrowing the North's newly organized white supremacist polity. No longer fixated on interracial "respectability," they were now eager to seek categorical equality for all northern blacks, "uplifted" or not, by challenging their own white "race."[21]

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and Radical Abolitionism, 1831-1837," *Civil War History*, 17 (Dec. 1971), 293-309; Stewart, "Racial Modernity"; Alan Kraut, "'Vote as You Pray, Pray as You Vote': Church Oriented Abolitionism and Antislavery Politics," in Kraut, ed., *Crusaders and Compromisers*, 179-205; and Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (New York, 1982), 43-67.

[20] Stewart, "Racial Modernity," 210-13.

[21] Vernon Volpe, *The Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest, 1838-1848* (Kent, OH, 1990); John W. Quist, "'The Great Majority of Our Subscribers are Farmers': The Michigan Abolitionist Conspiracy of the 1840's," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 14 (Fall 1994), 326-38; Alan Kraut, "Forgotten Reformers: a Profile of Third Party Abolitionists in Antebellum New York," in Perry and Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered*, 119-45; James Brewer Stewart, *Liberty's Hero: Wendell Phillips* (1986; rep., Baton Rouge, 1997), 97-145; Stewart, "Boston, Abolitionism and the Atlantic World, 1820-

For Liberty party members this objective required a concentrated effort in culturally homogenous rural areas such as Ohio's Western Reserve, western Massachusetts, and New York State's "Burned-Over District" where blacks and immigrants were few, where evangelical Yankees dominated, and where abolitionist sympathizers could be rallied to challenge the two major parties on egalitarian grounds. For Garrisonians it meant the wholesale condemnation of fellow whites of all institutions that nurtured "unregenerate" bigotry: religious denominations, electoral processes, courts of law, the constabulary, and the Federal Union itself. But whatever the particular strategy, behind it lay the white abolitionists' shared imperatives to pursue categorical equality for all black people by attacking white society for its uniform racial bigotry rather than by promoting the "uplifting" of individual African Americans.

Black activists, very predictably, adamantly embraced this agenda, and by 1840 were developing new political approaches that anticipated struggles for racial equality more familiar to our time. Utterly convinced by this time that equality could never be "respectability's" reward, African-American activists now embraced racial independence. As they did, these reformers helped to inaugurate a recognizable antecedent of the modern civil rights movement, for their stress was now on independent black leadership, mass participation, the development of distinctive black ideologies, and the importance of political coalition-building. Speaking no longer as individual exemplars of "uplift," they instead saw themselves as architects of a militant black movement that could ally with white reformers without compromising their own distinctive ends.

As a result, by the opening of the 1840s, broad-based interracial collaborations multiplied. In states where black men could vote, for example, African-American abolitionists worked with the white-led Liberty party by campaigning and casting ballots for emancipationist candidates while simultaneously helping to build abolitionist constituencies. In certain states they also joined with sympathetic whites to agitate for color-blind male suffrage and the repeal of discriminatory "black codes," activities unthinkable in the 1820s and 1830s. Coalitions also developed between African-American activists and white Garrisonians that reflected an equally modern spirit. These alliances engaged in epochal battles against segregated schools and public facilities, which mobilized black communities for sustained periods while white reformers also played prominent roles. Henceforth until at least 1861, when black and white abolitionists

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1861," in Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience*, 102-25; Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 43-126, 160-95; Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, 134-70.

worked together, it was invariably as a collaboration between members of distinct "races" united in the cause of unconditionally equal treatment for all African Americans, not as an alliance of "respectables," intent on incremental programs of melioration. Thus did abolitionists both black and white become egalitarian practitioners of modern racial politics, a fitting reversal of the essentialist white supremacist principles embraced in the 1830s by Whigs and Democrats when first inaugurating mass participation politics.[22]

Having moved in this fashion beyond the traumas of white supremacist politics, abolitionists also opened path-breaking ideological debates during the 1840s and 1850s that sustained the movement's vitality, deepened its radicalism, and documented its transformation into a recognizably modern enterprise. A simple listing of the topics that prompted their ideological disagreements goes far to suggest just how far these crusaders had evolved from their original commitments to "uplift," and just how closely their outlooks prefigured more recent struggles for racial equality: the conflicting values of racial integration and black separatism; the problems of racial bias and cultural antagonism between black and white egalitarians; the necessities and perils of pacifism and political violence; the contested positions of women, black and white, in a movement dominated by men; the multiple meanings of "Africa," emigrationism, and "pan-African" identity for African Americans; the debatable equation of the rights of citizenship with the imperatives of social justice. In the process, abolitionists clearly began recognizing some of the deeper complexities of color, gender, and cultural and class difference that David Roediger discusses in

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[22] Studies that document this crucial shift particularly well include Donald Yacovone, "The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement, 1827-1854: An Interpretation," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 8 (Fall 1988), 282-97; Richard Newman, "Black Radical Politics in Jacksonian America," paper delivered at the Annual Meeting for the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic, Lexington, KY, July 16, 1999; and more generally C. Peter Ripley, Roy E. Finkenbine, Michael F. Hembree, and Donald Yacovone, eds., *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 1-17. The most extensive study of black and white coalition-building in the name of racial integration and political equality remains Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Non-Violent Abolitionists* (New York, 1970). Other works that elucidate important aspects of this collaborative dynamic include Milton Sernett, *Abolition's Axe: Beriah Green, the Oneida Institute and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Syracuse, 1986); Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 64-5, 109, 126, 129, 152, 203-36; and James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (1976; rev. ed., New York, 1997), 127-49.

this issue when demonstrating the pertinence of critical race theory to the historiography of "whiteness."[23]

When Donald Yacovone, a talented historian of abolitionism, observed to this writer that "there is no controversy in today's struggle for racial justice that the abolitionists failed to address before the Civil War," he wisely identified why these now long-dead reformers continue to have so much to tell the generations of scholars who study them. Indeed, the abolitionists' presence has become inescapable in our historical vocabulary as we continue to struggle over the political meanings of color. On the most general level, representations of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth join those of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to dominate elementary and secondary curriculum. At the opposite end of the academic continuum, contemporary historiography, that extraordinary explosion of scholarship on abolitionism in all its varieties, now reverberates far beyond departments of history. It is a "supernova" of research and analysis radiating across the humanities that as often inspires professors of literary and cultural studies to excel in the historian's craft as it compels historians, as Roediger urges in his essay, to pioneer in interdisciplinary endeavor. In every academic setting abolitionism speaks at least as urgently to as many today as it did to the "neo-abolitionist" feelings of scholars and civil rights activists in the 1960s.[24]

In the last analysis, this contemporary sense of the abolitionists' immediacy best demonstrates just how modern their racial politics actually

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[23] For a most accessible primary source sampling of this range of discussion among African Americans, consult Howard Holman Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1840-1864* (New York, 1969). See also Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, "Black Power—The Debate of 1840," *Phylon*, 29 (Spring 1968), 19-26; Floyd J. Miller, *The Search For Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana, 1975), 90-249; and Howard Zinn, "Abolitionists, Freedom Riders and the Tactics of Agitation," in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, 1965); Yacovone's comment is quoted with his permission from a longer discussion with the author of the subject of the "modernity" of abolitionism in the 1840s and 1850s at Legal Seafood Restaurant, Copley Plaza, Boston, March 18, 1997.

[24] For instances of recent scholarship by members of departments of literature that eschew "poststructural" and cultural studies approaches in favor of almost "Rankean" efforts to reconstruct factual narrative, see Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins: From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), and Albert Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, MA, 1997). For examples of historians of abolitionism whose work crosses over into interdisciplinary approaches, see David Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, 1989); Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York, 1997); and Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*. For a useful discussion of these interdisciplinary trends, consult Roediger, " The Pursuit of Whiteness: Property, Terror, and Expansion," in this issue.

became after 1840. By the opening of that decade they had lived through the terrible process that had forged democratic white supremacy's "iron cages." While *herrenvolk* democracy was being built in the North on the wreckage of the abolitionists' hopes for immediate abolition and the "elevation" of "respectable" African Americans, their responses inaugurated an ever-compounding challenge to white supremacy even as Civil War drew closer. Moreover, they mounted these challenges, as Lacy K. Ford, Jr., makes clear in his essay, when facing a white South increasingly united by its own successful modernization of white supremacist political culture. From 1840 onward, therefore, abolitionists' immediate victories were rare and equivocal. Yet it is also difficult to deny that during this same period they did, indeed, strip white supremacism of its intellectual pretension, claims of moral sanction, and unchallenged power to shape social relations, thereby setting precedents and standards that continue to furnish some of our most compelling historical references. Had they chosen otherwise, the impoverishment of our efforts to convey the moral challenges of our history is easy to estimate. All we need do is imagine the duration of our silence.

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