# LIBERIA IS NOT A PLACE FOR ME:

# National Colored Conventions and the Dissemination of Black Identity in the 19th Century Jack Miller

During the 19th century, prior to the legal emancipation of enslavement in the United States in 1865, Black Americans organized themselves and held their own political conventions. These conventions, which would later go on to style a historical movement now referred to as "The Colored Convention Movement," operated as one of the first uniquely Black political spaces in the United States. These conventions provided Black citizens a space to discuss things central to and focused on their own community. By doing so, they helped catalyze the formation of a Black American identity. This identity was disseminated to the larger nationwide community through various reports and recordings, which generated nationwide discussion. These discussions in turn influenced the conventions' internal discussion, resulting in a unique symbiosis of convention and populace.

#### Introduction

In 1863, as he was motioned towards the office of President Lincoln, Frederick Douglass was surely thinking (as he later recalled in a newspaper article) about Lincoln's address to the Committee of Colored Men, delivered in 1854. Nine years earlier, President Abraham Lincoln, for the first time in the nation's history, invited free Black men to a meeting in the White House to discuss the future of Black people in America, as well act on behalf of the American executive system, to demonstrate an act of good faith towards the Black community. Lincoln's plan, to Douglass's chagrin, was nothing original or even all that honest. He revealed in his address that he continued in the footsteps of a long line of American political figures which perceived Black Freemen as a stumbling block for the young country; something that would without a doubt need to be removed. "Nevertheless, I repeat..." Lincoln's distinctive voice would have rung out amongst the all—Black committee,

"Without the institution of Slavery and the colored race as a basis, the [Civil] war could not have an existence." To Douglass, like many, this first meeting represented

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Douglass, Frederick, "The President and His Speeches," *Douglass' Monthly*, September, 1862.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln and Terence Ball, "Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men," in *Abraham Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 143.

less a mutually beneficial discussion of the racial future of America and more a continuation of white separationist rhetoric.<sup>3</sup>

When Douglass later wrote about this meeting, he reflected on what could have caused a man with such a supposedly honest character to fall in with such a hypocritical camp—turning from his platform, which some at the time perceived to be an anti—slavery form of Republicanism, to what Douglass now described as "the genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred…" Now, in 1863, Douglass found himself alone in the White House, ready to petition the President on account of the Black soldiers fighting for the Union to receive pay equal to the salaries of their white counterparts. Douglass was prepared to argue for the Black citizen's place in the Union and counter the separationist arguments Lincoln had previously made.<sup>5</sup>

As the White House aides opened the door and Frederick Douglass was ushered inside, the two men clasped and shook hands. The lifelong relationship they formed was characterized as tenuous and often highly critical—yet, at its core, sympathetic. The shifting ideas of the future of Black America, which Douglass continued to bring up to Lincoln, was emblematic of discussions happening in the larger Black community throughout the country. At places like National Colored Conventions, ideas were circulated and debated as Black Americans, no longer white enslavers, would contextualize their own newly legalized identity as citizens and their future within and without the confines of the United States.

The Colored Convention Movement, while being a popular area of study among historical scholarship (especially in recent years), has not often permeated beyond the walls of academia and into the public's conception of American history. It appears that these radical meetings have somewhat faded from the public's perception of 19th century Black history. 6 This fading from the public view fits within the larger omission of Black history and Black contributions that has plagued the American education system. Continuing to deny Americans this critical facet of 19th & 20th century history only serves to reinforce the racist idea that the Colored Conventions were an unimportant blip taking place before and after the larger white American Antebellum era; this altogether stripped them of their radical reality as incubators for ideas of human liberation. These conventions, which were held both at the national and local level, began in 1830 and originally provided Black freemen the opportunity to develop and debate ideas about what it meant to be Black in America during the 19th century. These conventions, which predated even the American Anti—Slavery Society, were initially offered only to those who had escaped from enslavement but, over time, they became a space for larger swaths of the Black

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Douglass, "The President and His Speeches."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Douglass, "The President and His Speeches."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Lincoln and Ball, *Abraham Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches*, 144—45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship," in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Collette Chapman—Hilliard et al., "The Difference Black History Knowledge Can Make: A Consideration of Psychosocial Influences" in *Perspectives of Black Histories in Schools*, ed. LaGarrett J. King (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing Inc., 2020), 231.

community to interpret their identity, hold discussions, and debate ideas of Black nationalism, patriotism, and elevation.<sup>8</sup> By the inception of the first convention in 1830, a census organized by the Clerk of the House of Representatives reported that the total population of Black freemen in America was 319,576 individuals. This can be compared with the total enslaved population, listed in the same census report as 2,009,050 people. While this report doesn't consider formerly enslaved people who freed themselves, the 1830 convention was certainly made up of a microcosm of a microcosm of the Black community.<sup>9</sup> Within these uniquely Black—run spaces (which were unique for the period), many anti—slavery minds convened to debate and articulate a roadmap for the future of the diasporic African population in America and to combat discrimination as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The radical ideas that were mediated there provide not only insight into the past of Black activism, but also contain a spark which can be used for the future liberation of other oppressed groups.

In the year of the National Colored Convention's creation, northern Freemen were wholly underrepresented within abolitionist circles. White leadership within these groups tended to take a paternalistic view of their involvement with the enslaved population. It was often difficult for white abolitionists, especially among politically progressive whites, to shift their understanding of enslavement from the theoretical realm to a practical method of abolition. <sup>11</sup> For northern Freemen, this was a heavily personal issue they faced in their day—to—day existence. <sup>12</sup> By operating within the Colored Conventions, Freemen in the north were able to take stock of their community, their resources, and in many cases, their shared history. Doing so allowed them to focus on practical emancipation strategies, as well as discuss future paths for the Black individual in America.

Scholarship pertaining to these Colored Conventions is relatively recent within the field of mainstream American history, especially in circles outside of academia. While great amounts of scholarship have been produced on individuals involved with the conventions, such as Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth, very little has been written about the movement itself until Hugh Davis, a professor of History at Southern Connecticut State University, wrote a 2011 foundational work on the subject: We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less: The African American Struggle for Equal Rights in the North during Reconstruction. The following year, the University of Delaware launched an interdisciplinary research hub, The Colored

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, ed. *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Clerk of The House of Representative, Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census Showing The Number of Free People, The Number of Slaves, The Federal Representative Number, and the Aggregate of Each County of Each State of The United States (Washington D.C.: Duff Green, 1833), 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Hugh Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less the African American Struggle for Equal Rights in the North during Reconstruction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, "Progress," in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, ed. Nikole Hannah Jones et al. (New York: Random House, 2021), 427.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Kendi, "Progress," 8.

Conventions Project (CCP), which aimed to further expand the scholarship surrounding these conventions. <sup>13</sup> The CCP has quickly become the leading resource on the Colored Conventions, having produced scholarly research, inclusive learning models, museum displays, and an extensive, accessible, and free—to—use electronic archive that holds documents pertaining to the conventions. <sup>14</sup> This work has culminated in a 2021 book of essays, edited by Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Patterson: *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, was compiled by the CCP. Drawing from a wealth of scholars using interdisciplinary research from areas of history, anthropology, and sociology, the compilation used methods of literary and statistical analysis to expand upon this critical moment in American history. Their work argues "[that] clearly, 'freedom' meant more than just the end of slavery—postbellum conventions document the continuation of this tradition."

Freedom to the 19th century Black American meant more than the abolition of slavery; while slavery was formally abolished in 1865, the National Colored Conventions continued to meet until the beginning of the 20th century. Within these post—emancipation conventions, Black leaders continued to push for a tangible freedom within the Black American reality, one which Black Americans continue to fight and die for to this day.

The CPP, as an accessible archive for convention documents, contains a multitude of longstanding and recently uncovered primary source documents. It does not, however, contain the various newspapers of the period which reported on the proceedings of these conventions. Newspapers such as the *Emancipator and Free American, Colored American, North Star*, and *Freedom's Journal*, among a multitude of others, have been preserved and extensively archived by organizations such as National Archive and the Library of Congress. The CPP, though it is an incredible free resource, does not extensively observe the ways in which these conventions and newspapers interacted with each other. Dr. Jim Casey, in a 2021 interview, stated that "there is, at present, a need for collective scholarship pertaining to the ways in which postbellum Black newspapers (especially in the South) envisioned the Colored Conventions to their readership." <sup>15</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> This paper owes its wealth of information, in a large part, from the years of labor given by those working on the CCP. Without their herculean dedication to archiving this information this work wouldn't be here. I would like to emphasize one of their five guiding principles at the core of their work, to be kept in mind while reading this paper.

<sup>&</sup>quot;We affirm the role of Black people as data creators and elevate the ways in which Black conventions generated data and statistics to advance, affirm and advocate for Black economic and organizational success and access. We also recognize that data has long served in the processes and recording of the destruction and devaluation of Black lives and communities. We seek to avoid exploiting Black subjects as data and to account for the contexts out of which Black subjects as data arise. We seek to name Black people and communities as an affirmation of the Black humanity inherent in Black data/curation. We remind ourselves that all data and datasets are shaped by decisions about whose histories are recorded, remembered, and valued."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> "Introducing the Colored Conventions Project," Colored Convention Project, accessed November 30, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey, "P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey, 'The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century' (UNC Press, 2021)," October 18, 2021 in New Books in African American Studies, produced by New Books Network, podcast.

In turn, this portrayal greatly influenced the ideas and concepts that were discussed and disseminated by these conventions. A multi—source reading, which takes into account the ways in which all of these primary sources interacted with each other, is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how these gatherings collaboratively shaped a shared identity around Black citizenship. This research analyzes this growing Black identity both from internal convention proceedings and those which remained outside of its physical boundaries.

Hugh Davis's work focuses on how outside sources, newspapers, and recorded speeches imagined and influenced the various Colored Conventions. Davis argues that through the lens of the conventions, the northern Black community's "experience as an oppressed and despised minority shaped a realistic appraisal of the northern political landscape" which culminated in the creation of these convention spaces. 16 Exporting convention—developed ideas to the greater Black community outside of North America was an entirely different reality. The CCP, thanks to its creation of a digital archive of official documentation produced by the conventions themselves, has developed research which uses the records and proceedings of the meetings to provide an internal perspective to these otherwise externally perceived national events. From first glance, what appears to be a group of individuals using their position and opinions to advocate for the larger Black community was a deeply democratized, populus—centered project. During a time when the process of governing was violently maintained by and for an elite group of white and landed men, these Colored Conventions provide a radical examination into a governing process that was focused on representation and who was representing them. <sup>17</sup> Leaving behind the condescending period of white abolition, Black citizens were acutely aware that Black voices, through these conventions, had become the primary voices challenging slavery and its legacy. Using both internal convention—sponsored sources, as well as Black—owned newspapers and speeches, one can begin to understand how two parts of the Black community envisioned and created each other, while also examining what ideas and debates were disseminated to the greater population as opposed to what remained as internal convention proceedings.

The Colored Conventions Movement began in 1830 as a response to growing exclusionary laws passed against Freemen in so—called "free states," especially in Ohio. The first convention, held in Philadelphia in September of 1830, was filled with Black intellectuals, ministers, writers, and other important figures within political public life. They gathered to discuss and discern their place within the burgeoning American Republic, share ideas of progress and entrepreneurialism, and advocate for civil rights, Black suffrage, and abolishing the entire system of enslavement. These conventions, which spanned seven decades, and the accounts which transcribed them offer an incredibly powerful and populist view of the issues that sat at the forefront of the 19th century Black intellectuals' psyche. Freemen's perception of the future of Black people within America, Black identity, and the continuous reality of what it meant to be a Black patriot can all be traced as they were proposed, debated, and morphed through an incredibly contentious period of American history. Looking at National Conventions held in 1830, 1855, 1864, and 1869, respectively, allows one to follow the flow of these ideas through the larger Black discourse.

Whose Mouthpiece: The 1830 Convention

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> McNeil, "P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey," 42:55.

The first National Colored Convention was held in 1830 in Philadelphia. The participants formally announced that they would speak both to and for the free people of color in the United States<sup>18</sup> Although this was the stated position, the convention was not representative of the entire Black population. By 1830, 90% of the Black population, both free and enslaved, lived in the South, an area of the country that would not begin hosting conventions until the end of the American Civil War (over two decades later). 19 The convention initially operated more as a mouthpiece for the northern, elite and intellectual Freemen rather than the two million Black Americans living in enslavement. 20 Hugh Davis writes that, "these conventions served as a forum for northern African American leaders to debate ideas, share a common racial identity, and develop measures to combat discrimination."<sup>21</sup> His emphasis on northern African American leaders reflects the lack of southern representation seen during the first few years of the conventions. It is clear that these ideas of identity developed by northern Freemen were not always extended to southern Blacks, whose lived experiences were alien to those in the North. As a mouthpiece, the National Colored Convention, alongside Black—owned newspapers such as the Elevator, advocated for the complete abolition of slavery within all legal channels.<sup>22</sup> The convention followed the format of other political conventions of its time, which began with the election of a president who presided over the various aspects discussed. Different areas of conversation were then split into committees based on topics of discussion which focused on specific issues important to the Black community during that time. A committee head was also elected, who was expected to report on the ideas each group had discussed. The 1830 Convention elected Reverend Richard Allen as their president, a devout Christian and a co—founder of Mother Bethel Methodist Church, an action which signaled the movement's adherence to a specific religiously oriented method of governance.<sup>23</sup>

A crucial reality of the conventions was that participants saw themselves as a means of upsetting the longstanding hierarchy within abolitionist circles. Newspapers, such as *The Colored American*, witnessed and recorded the paternalistic trend of white abolitionists and summarily urged Black abolitionists to push away from white abolitionist rhetoric, as it was often outside of the realm of practical use.<sup>24</sup> For example, a white—owned abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, writing on Thomas Jefferson's idea of slavery in 1832, states,

He frankly admitted that slavery was indefensible... On this subject, he evinced more sympathetic feelings and moral courage, than all the other Presidents of the United States have manifested collectively.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> "Need of Organization," *Elevator*, January 29, 1869.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, Sarah Patterson, and Jim Casey, "Introduction to The Colored Conventions Movement," Colored Conventions Project, accessed December 1, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860—1880* (New York: S. A. Russell, 1956), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 6—8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> "Need of Organization," *Elevator*, January 29, 1869.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, "Jefferson On Slavery," *Liberator*, February 25, 1832.

Rather than advocating for abolition, *The Liberator's* writers chose to celebrate the theoretical and moral strength of white abolitionists (only, in this case, the 'celebrated individual' was himself an enslaver).<sup>26</sup> This focus on separation from white abolitionists circles allowed the Colored Conventions to operate with entirely Black voices. By not having to sanitize their message to appease a white leadership, these conventions were able to more vigorously make necessary demands on the American government, such as an immediate end to enslavement. In addition to calling for abolition, the convention demanded full equality before the law for all citizens and for private property rights to be extended to Black individuals.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, they were championing a sentiment that had been felt elsewhere in the Freemen community for years but was prevented due to white fear, even amongst the most northern progressives at this time.<sup>28</sup>

The conventions also served as a space for Freemen to argue and define what they perceived as a Black identity within the United States. Even as early in its inception in 1830, the desire to define a decisive identity and work towards a dignified Black future can be observed. For example, a discussion at the 1830 Convention advocated for the Black community to pool their funds and purchase a tract of land in Upper Canada. In a declaration to the convention, Reverend Richard Allen argues,

These considerations have led us to the conclusion, that the formation of a settlement in the British province of Upper Canada, would be a great advantage to the people of colour... It will be much to the advantage of those who have large families, and desire to see them happy and respected, to locate themselves in a land where the laws and prejudices of society will have no effect in retarding their advancement to the summit of civil and religious improvement.<sup>29</sup>

Doing so, they noted, would greatly benefit all Black people in America, both free and enslaved. An exodus to Canada would give the Black population space to develop and elevate themselves without the stifling racist policies of the United States.<sup>30</sup> This was not the first instance of Black emigration that had been proposed by this time; most prominently, the white—led, American Colonization Society (ACS) had argued years earlier for a similar project. It was obvious that the ACS, however, was developed to assuage white America's state of mind rather than promote Black advancement. Their push for Liberian emigration eventually came to be rejected by many members of the 19th century Black community; by 1904, only 15,000 individuals had chosen the path of Liberian emigration.<sup>31</sup> However, this idea of a Canadian emigration was a uniquely

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The newspaper's title bears further evidence towards the paternalism of white abolitionists. *The Liberator*, as a title, strips agency from Black community, rather offering the role of savior to enlightened, white abolitionists. This also helps their white readership feel as though just by reading they are working to lift those enslaved.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> National Convention of Free People of Colour, Constitution of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour, For Improving Their Condition in the United States; for Purchasing Lands; and for the Establishment of a Settlement in Upper Canada, also The Proceedings of the Convention, With Their Address to The Free Persons of Colour in the United States (Philadelphia: J. W. Allen, 1831), 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>Lewis Woodson, "People of Colour," Freedom's Journal, April 6, 1827.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> National Convention of Free People of Colour, *Constitution of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour*, 9—11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> National Convention of Free People of Colour, *Constitution of the American Society of Free Persons of Colour*, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Selena R. Sanderfer, "The Emigration Debate and the Southern Colored Convention Movement" in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth* 

Black idea, almost a proto—emigrationist position which reflected the soon—to be—seen ideas of Martin Delany, a later figure within the Colored Convention Movement itself.32

Martin Delany's position and its supporters came to be colloquially recognized as the "emigrationist" position. Their vision of a Black future would not be found within the States but instead could only be achieved through a wholesale rejection and migration from the culture which had enslaved them. Delany argued that Black institutions would never be prosperous unless they could successfully establish a new Black nationality outside of the United States.<sup>33</sup> "Indeed, if our superior advantages of the free States, do not induce and stimulate us to the higher attainments in life, what in the name of degraded humanity will do it?" To Delany, the answer to this question lay outside of the borders of the United States.<sup>34</sup> The emigrationists believed that an emigration policy would be more beneficial to the Black community than any emancipation or antiracist policy the convention could try to push through Congress.<sup>35</sup> This position was not ideal, and the emigrationists acknowledged this. Regardless, the emigrationists advocated for it as a preference, which, while flawed, was still better than their earlier attempts of simply trying to avoid the racial violence inherent in their day—to—day lives. This idea of Canadian emigration that sat at the center of the 1830 Convention would continue to ferment, influencing the discussions produced in Black circles both in and outside of the National Conventions for years to come.

This debate would be readily supported by Black newspapers, who had already begun floating the idea of Black emigration as they delivered news of the first National Convention throughout the larger Black community. Papers such as Colored America and Anglo—African Magazine that reported on the 1830 Canada Plan would discover that southern Blacks, both Freemen and enslaved, were much more open to the idea of emigration than those in the North.<sup>36</sup> In the South, where both racial terrorism and enslavement were still very tangible realities, the emigration debate took on a different form. Territorial separation had long been considered the best option for Black southerners; this idea typically rose in prominence alongside spikes in racial violence.<sup>37</sup> According to historian Hugh Davis, in the 30 years following the 1830 National Convention in Philadelphia, the emigrationist position, while typically spurned by the northern Freemen, would gain more traction among Black southerners and northerners alike as a result of a growing sense of alienation from the white body—politic of the United States.<sup>38</sup>

#### If Not Emigration, Then What: The 1855 Convention

Following 1830, many Black conventions continued to meet and local conventions especially became more frequent in the wake of the first convention, mirroring a growing trend of public, forum—style political debate in America at this

Century, ed. Gabrielle P. Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 286.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Sanderfer, "The Emigration," 287—290.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied With Nothing Less, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup>Martin Delany, The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, (Philadelphia: Martin Delany, 1852), Project Gutenberg.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied With Nothing Less, 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Sanderfer, "The Emigration," 287.<sup>37</sup> Sanderfer, "The Emigration," 284.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 10—11.

time. National conventions continued to be held on a relatively yearly basis, with a few interruptions due to lack of interest or location availability due to boycotts and threats of racial attacks.<sup>39</sup> By 1855, the unrest of a coming civil war could be felt throughout the Northern states.

On an unusually warm day for October, another National Convention was held in Philadelphia, 25 years after the first convention. 40 By this point, the Colored Conventions had grown into a large movement. Newspapers everywhere advertised the event and surrounding businesses made quick work, setting up accommodations for the heavy traffic of convention—goers; by this time, this included those who were speaking at the conventions, their partners and children, as well as Black communities who traveled to these conventions to take part in them and the surrounding events. 41 These conventions had become the annual political event for many people. In turn, the conventions had deliberately begun to showcase many popular political thinkers over the last twenty years; people flocked to see what was considered the up—and coming generation of Black talent. Orators, lawyers, and civic and labor leaders used these conventions to hone their craft.<sup>42</sup> Present at this conference were widely famous Black intellectuals, including Frederick Douglass, Henry Garnett, and Martin Delany. 43 The massive lecture hall packed full of convention—goers was tense on this Tuesday in October as the initial call was read out by a Mr. Isaiah C. Wears, a Philadelphia native. Projecting loudly, Wears, ever the entrepreneur, used his position to advocate for the Black community to take stock of their agricultural, mechanical, and business relations and focus their efforts on their own uplift within the United States. 44 Placing emphasis on words and concepts such as "fellow—citizens," "duty," and Black elevation as an "inseparable priority," Wears led the crowded room to envision his idea of what the future of Black America looked like. 45 Historian Erica Ball argued that, by this time, the conventions had become an imagined political ritual for the convention—goers. It became a means of taking the surrounding and newly emerging middle—class political ethos and reframing it as a tool to elevate the causes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> McNeil, "P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey," 47:26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup>P. Gabrielle Foreman, Kim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, ed. *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2—4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Psyche Williams—Forson, "Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Stay?: Interpreting the Material Culture of Black Women's Domesticity in the Context of the Colored Conventions," in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 90—95.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Erica L. Ball, "Performing Politics, Creating Community: Antebellum Black Conventions as Political Rituals," in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 155—157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention*, *held in Franklin Hall, Sixth Street, Below Arch, Philadelphia, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1855* (Salem: National Standard Office, 1856), 6—8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Colored Conventions Project, "From The Stage: Isaiah C. Wears," Delegate Lecture Circuits, accessed November 30, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 3—5.

of the Black community and force white America, as well as the larger anti—Black West, to reinterpret the way they perceived Black self—sufficiency.<sup>46</sup> She states...

participants in antebellum Colored Conventions hoped they could look back on their conventions and see that [they were] more talented, a better educated, more improved and elevated people than [they] had any anticipation [they] were.<sup>47</sup>

Wears was aware of this spirit and utilized his opening speech to the fullest, claiming: ...that the *Free People of Color*, if they would disencumber themselves from whatever tends to impede their march, and remove whatever obstacles are in the way of their progress... they must take upon them the responsibility of doing and acting for themselves—of laying out and directing work of their own *elevation*. That so far from being mere aids and lookers—on, the time has fully come when they must be the guides, leaders and active operators in this great Reform.<sup>48</sup>

As the convention reconvened at two o'clock, various individuals followed Wears' lead and provided the audience with their blueprints for the Black future. One of the members who rose to speak was none other than Frederick Douglass. Douglass and his wife, Anna Murray, had been one of the political stars who helped the conventions become such a political event.

Frederick Douglass's idea of the future of Black America focused on elevating the levels of education among the African American population as a whole. To do this, Douglass recommended a myriad of options to help the Black population direct and control their own efforts, particularly their labor. 49 Douglass argued that Black Americans needed to rely on themselves in the face of increasing racial tensions, not only in America but throughout the hemisphere as well. In Douglass' autobiography, he later explained how, to the new Freemen, "The master is to [them]a stern and flinty reality, but the state is little more than a dream."50 The white America, set in stark opposition to the Black American's experience, was entirely unobtainable, even following obtaining legal freedom. Therefore, Douglass advocated that Black citizens should develop their own skills and invest in their own internal economy.<sup>51</sup> It wasn't enough for Black Freemen to be included in labor unions; if the unions themselves continued to suppress the Black individual's right to their work, then new Black—led labor unions would have to be invented. To this end, Douglass and various other orators, including Charles L. Reason of the convention's business committee, advocated for sponsoring an industrial school, opened to people of all races. Not only this, but women would be able to enroll and learn different trades alongside men, a radical idea which would continue to be denied throughout educational facilities in America.<sup>52</sup> Only through a Black trade school backed by Black trade unions would Black Americans be able to gain control of not only their economic resources, but also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Ball, "Performing Politics," 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ball," Performing Politics," 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 3—4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 339.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 18.

consolidate their political and social power—powers that the convention claimed were central to the idea of a Black manhood.<sup>53</sup>

Frederick Douglass perceived, as his speeches during this convention clearly indicate, that his idea of the Black identity lay not only by remaining in America, but also specifically by supporting the right of the brutalized Black population to claim educational resources consistently barred from them. In his closing remarks, Douglass implores the greater populous to

"Elect such a Congress, such a President, and thereby secure the appointment of such a Judiciary as will guarantee to each man, woman, and child, in the land, the right to their own persons, which the Constitution guarantees." <sup>54</sup>

Douglass, unlike Delany, was born enslaved in Tuckahoe, Maryland—an area which he noted saw incredible instances of famine and poverty. Throughout his life, he was acutely aware of the brutality the enslaved were met with during their attempts at self—education. Douglass conceived "[that] knowledge and education unfits and individual to be a slave." Because of this, he spent much of his early life seeking education through various channels. After becoming a Freeman, Douglass spent his time giving lectures to Black people, free and enslaved, throughout the country. This offered him an acute awareness of the varying conditions of the Black individual throughout America. To him, the most pressing thing, besides enslavement, keeping the Black citizens from reaching their true potential was the lack of educational resources available to the Black community.

As more formerly enslaved Blacks began to find freedom in their own hands, one of the first things they often sought was a means of obtaining an education, and specifically an education in various trades, a trend that would continue until emancipation. This continuing trend helped justify the 1855 National Convention's goals of establishing trade schools for these newly freed individuals. While the community members were hopeful, due to progress in certain areas, like the passing of The Equal School Rights Reform bill in Massachusetts, which outlawed public school segregation in name, they were conscious of all the stumbling blocks that remained before them as they strove towards true educational freedom. Historian Kabria Baumgartner theorizes that convention—goers were aware of the existence of a few friendly white advocates in the government who were warm towards government projects like Black education, but likewise understood that the governmental debates on this topic still tended to remain in the theoretical realm. Because of this, the convention sponsored their own radically progressive institution led by Frederick Douglass, and the American Industrial School, as it came to be called,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 31—32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 357.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 637.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup>Kabria Baumgartner, "Gendered Politics and the Manual Labor College Initiative at National Colored Conventions in Antebellum America" in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, e.d. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 231.

was located in northern Pennsylvania for the purpose of Black education. The school focused on providing mechanical and trade skills to its students, while also offering a background in literary study and agricultural training.<sup>61</sup> Doing so, in the eyes of many, provided the first step towards a Black future within America. At this point in time, even imagining this was in itself an act of mental liberation.

While Douglass's speeches and philosophy surrounding education as a means of securing the Black identity were met with wholesale acceptance and excitement, both to members of the conventions as well as the Black population, it was often discussed in conjunction with the emigrationist arguments presented at earlier conventions. In the north, many Black leaders believed that education and community control of a Black economy was the best means of social and political uplift. However, this was a lesser seen position among southern Black citizens. Throughout the 1850s, and especially towards the latter half, as America began to see the rumblings of a civil war, arguments promoting Black emigration continued to be presented and hotly debated.<sup>62</sup> Even Douglass, who would continue to oppose this emigrationist view, recognized Haiti as a future home for Black people mistreated in America, especially following the Dred Scott Supreme Court Case decision as southern racial violence spiked rapidly.<sup>63</sup> These ideas, which continued to be debated, were much more profound and developed than any white-led organization's emigration rhetoric at this time. Unlike the ACS, Delany and the other Black emigration leaders saw Africa as a place where they could engage both in government and day—to—day life, free of racial discrimination. This was unlike the ACS's position, which historian Dr. Selena Sanderfer argued was attempting instead to create an ethnostate while at the same time forcing Christianity on native Africans. The Black emigrationists, rather, saw their future in Africa as mutually beneficial.<sup>64</sup>

The debate for the location of the future for the enslaved and their descendants continued to be debated, both in convention meetings and through the individual writings of various Black thinkers. One topic that continued to be universally agreed upon by these various thinkers was the use of Black—owned and edited newspapers as a means of conveying ideas like emigration throughout the Black population. 65 One of Frederick Douglass' newspapers, Frederick Douglass's Paper, was assigned by the convention as the official organ to disseminate information to the greater population. <sup>66</sup> Frederick Douglass's Paper, however, was not the only newspaper reporting on the National Colored Convention at that time. Since the original convention in 1830, newspapers throughout the country had taken stock of the goings—on of these conventions and reported them to their readers, Black—owned and white—owned, North and South, and Republican and Democrat, as each paper offered their own accounts and retellings. It comes as no surprise that many were filled with racist observations and various other bigoted opinions. The Georgia Journal and Messenger, a widely—read Georgian weekly paper, when reporting on a later convention in 1865, claims that the convention—goers simply ate oysters in idleness

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Baumgartner, "Gendered Politics," 230.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 11—12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Sanderfer, "The Emigration Debate and the Southern Colored Convention Movement," 286.
<sup>65</sup>Benjamin Fagan, "The Organ of The Whole: Colored Conventions, The Black Press, and The Question of National Authority" in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 195.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 35.

and that "a disinterested observer... [should] advise them to stick to their work, behave themselves, honestly, soberly, and quietly...attend to matters they understand." However, by studying the various Black—owned newspapers of the time which covered these events, one can begin to see the way that information was disclosed to the greater public and in turn how the idea of the Black future was shaped.

Just as the conventions provided a place for well—educated, predominantly northern Freemen to congregate and discuss issues of importance within the Black community, newspapers served the purpose of showing how Black citizens, outside of these events, understood and imagined the conventions themselves. Both understandings are crucial to tracing ideas of Black identity and community, as they provide various accounts that reinforce both concepts. These newspapers contained their own biases and heralded their own ideas, some not even promoted during the NCC, to their readership. For example, *Freedom's Journal*, a newspaper publishing prior to the 1830 Convention, advocated strongly against emigrationist logic, both recognizing that America was a land deeply punishing for the Black individual and yet still encouraged their Black readers to love their country with a strong and sublime passion as a means of obtaining their freedom and equality.

Frederick Douglass's Paper's coverage of the 1855 convention is incredibly informative. Another crucial function these papers served was to accurately report the back and forth that took place at the conventions. Those officially publishing the convention pamphlets were acutely aware of the importance of their reporting. Because of this, these documents often excluded the internal debate and conversation, choosing instead to present a sanitized and shortened version of the proceedings.<sup>70</sup> While this aspect isn't necessarily unique to these conventions, the outward presentation of these conventions were critical to its success; especially facing an overtly racist population. This can be seen as official documents released by the NCC about the 1855 conference show little to no signs of Black emigration being discussed; newspapers that reported on the conference speak to the opposite. A reporter even conceded "[that] many at this convention in 1855 talked without much thought," referencing those advocating for Black emigration. 71 The paper then goes on to imply that this emigration position was met with much opposition during this 1855 convention and, although the idea was discussed, it was often disregarded—many in the crowd chose to focus rather on Douglass and the Business Committee's work to establish a Black trade school. Frederick Douglass's Paper makes a clear note of this and fixates itself on the ideas presented by the paper's founder. Due to the overwhelming support received from the NCC on this position, it praised the convention, calling it an incredible success that "doubtless provided a very positive effect" due to the speakers being acutely aware of the importance of their positions.<sup>72</sup> The paper helped gather support throughout the country about the central role that Black education should play in Black liberation. For those who had grown weary of watching the idea simply be kicked around as a theoretical exercise, papers like Douglass's provided context and reassured the Black community that issues of education were on the forefront of Black leadership.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup>W.M. M. Browne, "Another Colored Convention," *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, October 5, 1869.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Fagan, "The Organ of The Whole," 200.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> "Anecdotes of Patriotism" Freedom's Journal, March 21, 1828.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> McNeil, "P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey," 31:44.

<sup>71</sup> Ethiop, "The National Convention," Frederick Douglass's Paper, October 26, 1855.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Ethiop, "The National Convention."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Fagan, The Organ of The Whole, 201.

As the 1855 conference concluded, as speakers and reporters would have been occupied taking frantic final notes, an address was made by an unnamed speaker to "all the people of the United States." In this address, the speaker again detested the horrific acts of slavery seen throughout the country, as well as gathered all of their fellow Black citizen's voices onto their shoulders to reaffirm the reality which was so often denied by white America—that the Black Americans are people, not things. The colored conventions, he attested, were a monument to that very fact. They urged, almost prophetically, for the American government to free the enslaved within this country and that the continued lack of rights for Black people in America would soon lead to a dislodgement of rights for all people in the near future. Few listening from the stands could have foreseen that the next National Colored Convention would be held in 1864 and that their demands, to an extent, would have been met. When the convention met again, the enslaved Black Americans would be legally free.

#### Codifying the Black American: The 1863 Convention

With the arrival of the Civil War and the heightened tensions throughout the country that accompanied it, the National Convention would not meet for almost ten years. But, following Lincoln's passing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, their meetings reconvened. Again, in October, in Syracuse, the National Colored Convention met for the first time in an America in which all Black citizens were legally free; this theoretically meant that all Black citizens could now engage in these conventions. This meeting would be even more intensely focused on the idea of articulating a Black future now that the principal demand of the convention had been met. It is critical to note that, unlike white—led emancipation organizations, which concluded their meetings following the formal emancipation of the enslaved, the CCP continued to meet, further proving the Black community's adherence to the ideas of human equality it had consistently championed.<sup>76</sup> Frederick Douglass was elected president at this 1863 assembly, and the body itself consisted of many incredibly progressive individuals, all professing their radical vision of the future.<sup>77</sup>

The convention was unanimous in its assertion that, while slavery had been made illegal in the United States, there was still an incredible threat to their population—justice had come much too late. It is recorded in the official meeting records that "Mr. Douglass was not unmindful of the hopeful side of the question, but felt that we were safest when we knew our danger." This hesitant hopefulness more than likely reflected a larger view within the entire Black population. In the South, an area with fewer (but growing) numbers of delegates sent to the National Convention and local Colored Conventions faced unique hardships not traditionally seen at Northern Conventions. In the South, racial terrorism was systematically conducted in and around these conventions, making it difficult for Black leaders to meet, let alone

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> National Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the Colored*, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> McNeil, "P. Gabrielle Foreman and Jim Casey, 57:35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men; held in the City of Syracuse, N.Y; October 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1864; with the Bill of Wrongs and Rights; and the Address to the American People* (Boston: J.S. Rock and Geo. L. Ruffin, 1864), 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 14.

plan a future for their communities.<sup>80</sup> While this was somewhat less of a reality that Northern convention—goers had to deal with, at the 1864 convention, racial threats were, in fact, present. Perhaps further underscoring this hesitancy that Douglass advocated for were the jeers made by men and women on the street of Syracuse the morning of the convention. Douglass' opening speech made mention of these people who, to the convention, must have been a grim reminder that while they may have been legally emancipated, they were certainly far from safety and equality.<sup>81</sup>

Reverend Henry Highland Garnet was slated to speak on Wednesday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, but declined, requesting rather to make the opening speech the following Thursday when the convention reconvened. Garnet, a firm disciple of the emigrationist logic, presented his argument the following day, which transformed the conversation to one in which emigration became the central debate that characterized the rest of the 1864 convention. On Thursday, as Garnet approached the podium, he recounted a grisly tale which had taken place the year prior,

Where demoniac hate culminated in that memorable mob. He told us how one man was hung upon a tree; and that then a demon in human form, taking a sharp knife, cut out pieces of the quivering flesh, and offered it to the greedy, blood—thirsty mob. . .82

Garnet's recounting was not meant simply as a means of reaffirming to the convention—goers of the vileness of their fellow white citizens, but to advance an idea which he referred to as a "Negro nationality," which could only exist outside the United States. The room erupted into cheers and applause as Garnet stepped down from the podium, signifying that his appeal had been well received. Many then braced themselves as the emigrationist debate made a fated return to the hall.<sup>83</sup>

Following Garnet, a speaker (and long—time opponent of his) rose in opposition; George T. Downing offered his concerns with the idea of a "Negro nationality," calling it "the child of prejudice; and its originators assert that colored man cannot be elevated in the United States; that Black men must be 'massed to them—selves,'... before they can be respected!"84 Downing was concerned that Garnet's rhetoric was simply an appropriation of ideas used by the ACS prior to emancipation. At this point, Garnet arose from his seat and threw his support behind the ACS, claiming that the work of the society was a just goal, his only issue being that the work ought to be conducted by Black people themselves rather than white Christian colonizers. 85 As Downing began to refute Garnet's support for the ACS, a shift occurred amongst the attendees. Vashon, a professor from Pennsylvania, chimed in. Speaking for the whole of the convention, Vashon "deprecated the turn which the discussion had taken."86 He advocated for harmony amongst the speakers, reminding them that their charge was to imagine a future for the millions of newly emancipated Black citizens, not to settle scores. Interestingly enough, his call for peace worked. The Christian Recorder, whose reporters were in attendance that day, lauded the harmony brought forth by Professor Vashon's reminder. The paper recorded that

<sup>80</sup> Sanderfer, "The Emigration Debate," 294.

<sup>81</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 20—21.

<sup>84</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 28.

following Vashon's words; There was generally a good feeling existing among the delegates. A number of excellent resolutions were passed at the Convention in regard to the rights of the colored man, and referring to the great importance of forming a compact and permanent union among ourselves as a people divided.<sup>87</sup> *The Christian Recorder's* readership, which had expanded during the Civil War as Black regiments brought their newspapers into southern Black communities, would thus remember the convention for the harmony and good it fostered rather than the ideological battles wrought in the early motions.<sup>88</sup>

Prior to Emancipation, the National Colored Convention served as a way in which Black Americans were able to enact the benefits of citizenship without formal recognition of it by the American government.<sup>89</sup> Now, with Black men recognized legally as citizens, the convention possessed a larger likelihood of being heard by the government. Conscious of this, the second resolution passed by the body affirmed the "unquestioning patriotism and loyalty of the colored men of the United States." Men like Garnett and Delany had fought to convince the Black population that their destinies lay outside of the bounds of the United States; Yet, in 1864, the National Convention of Colored Men, seemingly speaking for the entirety of the Black citizenship, denied that emigrationist position. The convention—goers, however, were anything but naïve. In the following paragraph, they guaranteed the complete and total resistance of their race if the Union ever attempted to reinstitute slavery. 91 Emigration was technically gone, but had certainly not been forgotten. Rather, it lay almost as a failsafe in the case that slavery reared its head again. 92 The NCC had made their position clear: the future of the Black population was intertwined with the future of America (perhaps more than any other people), but the debate remained—what would this future of Black uplift look like? One writer and orator, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, perhaps held the answer.

In the commotion of the 1864 convention, with the constant swirling debates surrounding emigration, one could almost be forgiven for missing her. Relegated to only three lines in the official convention record, Harper was introduced as "[having] spoke feelingly and eloquently of our hopes and prospects in this country." Her appearance, as well as that of her contemporary, Edmonia Highgate, at the 1864 convention is immensely significant, as it represents a shift in the way that the NCC perceived itself. The gendered demographics were shifting within the halls of the Colored Convention. Women had always held a place within the events pertaining to the NCC; historian Eric Gardner argues that these conventions themselves would have been impossible without the efforts put forth by Black women who conducted the upkeep of the domestic aspects that came along with hosting a massive national

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Elisha Weaver, "National Convention of Colored Men in America," *The Christian Recorder*, October 15, 1864.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> "Brief History of The Christian Recorder" The Christian Recorder, accessed November 30, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Ball, "Performing Politics," 164.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 33.

<sup>91</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, Proceedings, 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> It is important to note that although the NCC made its position against emigration in 1864, this conversation continued to be had and championed by local Colored Conventions especially in the south, up until the turn of the century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 25.

event.<sup>94</sup> Because of the creation of the NCC in adherence to larger political trends at the time, these conventions, for all their revolutionary thinking, continued to undervalue and under—record the contribution of the women in their ranks—particularly in their public, outward appearance. The allowance of these women to participate within the realm of the political theater rather than being relegated to tending the domestic realm speaks to a broadening of how these conventions perceived the Black American identity.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born to a free Black mother in Baltimore, Maryland, where she was, almost from the moment of her birth, enrolled in her uncle's school, where she was taught to read and write. Her mother and uncle were proud abolitionists and worked as distributors for *The Liberator*, which helped shape her conceptualization of reality. She saw her work as a lecturer and writer both as a means of reaching highly dispersed communities of Black citizens, as well as a tool to force white America to come to terms with the suffering of the enslaved Black population. Through her work in the Underground Railroad, she encountered various Black individuals from a multitude of backgrounds within the larger Black American experience—both enslaved and free. She was a prominent critic of Henry Garnet, as well as of the ACS, choosing to put her hope in the universal brotherhood of the human race. These themes can be traced throughout her authorship. In a poem titled *Home, Sweet Home*, Harper lays bare her beliefs:

Sharers of a common country, / They had met in deadly strife; / Men who should have been as brothers / Madly sought each other's life / In the land where Dixie's ensign / Floated o'er the hopeful slave, / Rose the song of freedom's banner, / Starry—lighted, long might wave. / Men whose hearts would flow together, / Though apart their feet might roam, / Found a tie they could never sever, / In the mem'ry of each home. 98

While this can be, on surface level, interpreted as a lament of the Civil War, this poem also speaks with conscious connected undertones of Harper's lifetime conceptualization, crystalized through her travels in the postwar South, of the shared brotherhood of humanity, and her staunch opposition to any and all forms of enslavement. Her ideals are based on her lived experience, of the necessity for the immediate enfranchisement of the Black American, garnered from traveling throughout the young nation. Through this immediate action, one could counter both America's insistence of chattel slavery, and what Harper referred to as, "slavery of the spirit". 99

Harper and Highgate only garnered a sentence in the official record of the convention and were similarly underrepresented in popular newspapers of the time. *The Christian Recorder*, looking back, simply recalled "Mrs. Ellen Watkins Harper, who is celebrated for her wonderful eloquence and powers of diction," upon meeting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Eric Gardner, "A Word Fitly Spoken: Edmonia Highgate, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and the 1864 Syracuse Convention" in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> James W. Clark, *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*, 1825—1911: A Biography (PhD diss., Duke University, 1967), 2—5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Clark, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Clark, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 125.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Home, Sweet Home," in *Atlanta Offering; Poems* (Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Inc., 1969), 26—28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Clark, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 67—68.

the poet during the convention. <sup>100</sup> The fact that the first women to speak at these conventions were such ardent proto—feminists and devotees to human brotherhood displays a widening of what the conventions perceived as Black identity. Around 1864, Harper gave lectures to newly emancipated Black citizens in the south and, like Douglass, promoted her own ideas of Black elevation via education. <sup>101</sup> Eric Gardner argued that studying Harper's lectures during the year of 1864 can offer insights to what she may have spoken about at the Syracuse convention. If this is the case, it is likely that her speech would have spoken of Black America's "dream of a full, broad, and unconditional freedom," which was built on the success of the Union, followed by the need for the new government of such a Union to continue to provide rights to even more of its citizenry, lest it slip back towards slavery. <sup>102</sup>

If the 1864 National Colored Convention solidified ideas of Black identity as unquestioningly patriotic and invested in the development of the United States, the expansion of figures and their ideologies found at the convention shows a shifting focus on what the future of Black America was to look like. Universal suffrage, not just a repetition of the ideas developed in the French Revolution across the Atlantic, but an unapologetic expansion of who is included and what the purpose of this freedom was for, was written as an undeviating aim of the NCC going forward. An address given at the end of the convention marked universal suffrage as the aim of the conventions and a development in the Black notion of what constituted true freedom.<sup>103</sup> The address also reminded the citizens that "the freedom of our race and the welfare of our country tremble together in the balance of events." The current thinking, by 1864, within Black American discourse had clearly moved away from establishing a "Negro nationality" via emigration outside of the United States in favor of conceiving of the Black experience and the Black citizen as the avatar of the American Republic.

The excitement that the newly emancipated Black Americans had by the 1864 convention, and the juxtaposition of the reality that they continued to face in the country, can be felt profoundly in the 1869 National Colored Convention. Although only five years following the convention in 1864, there is a stark difference in both tone and topics discussed. This convention, held half a decade later in January in Washington D.C, is perhaps the most well—known. Frederick Douglass was again elected president of the convention; many Americans at this time had begun to perceive Douglass as the embodiment of the NCC itself. In the years following emancipation, racial terrorism did not lessen in any measurable amount. Rather, because of racist prejudices held by various white labor unions, newly emancipated Black Americans were unable to get a foothold in the quickly shifting economic environment. Many Black workers found themselves still tied to the land they were recently freed from with no support from unions or worker's institutions. To many, the only way forward seemed to be gaining access to the resources that were provided

<sup>100</sup> Weaver, "National Convention."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Clark, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 30—31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Gardner, "A Word Fitly Spoken," 80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men*, 57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America: held in Washington, D.C., on January 13, 14, 15, and 16, 1869* (Washington D.C.: Great Republic Book and Newspaper Printing Establishment, 1869), 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Du Bois, Black *Reconstruction*, 24—26.

to the rest of America, yet continually denied to them. <sup>107</sup> In only five years following the 1864 convention, the movement would prove itself to be a bulwark for protecting human liberties.

## Liberation, No Longer Emancipation: The 1869 Convention

The convention that met in early January 1869 remained the largest NCC gathering of its time. 108 Quiet murmuring and the sounds of children were heard as the 160 delegates and their families arrived in waves on that first Wednesday, January 13th. A chosen speaker arose, known in the documentation only as Payne, and gave a powerful opening speech. <sup>109</sup> Payne refused to mince his words, choosing rather to call outright that "the man, the State, the nation that does this [withhold suffrage] is an Oppressor; and when this oppression is based upon the color of a man, or the race from which he sprang; it assumes the form of an outrage against Humanity itself and Blasphemy against God."110 After the applause died down, Payne again continued: "Now, the means of this improvement are threefold, Education, Piety, Wealth. The masses must be educated and this must be insisted on... Ever[v] man, woman and child must be urged to self—culture... and they must be kept there until a radical change shall have been made in our mode of thinking, speaking and acting."<sup>111</sup> The tone of the 1869 convention was thus set; it would unapologetically focus on issues pertaining to equal access to education and to the vote. The Elevator claimed that "This was, probably, the most important body of colored men ever convened." For the time being, it certainly was. While not all the radical ideas that were notarized by the convention made their way into the American legal system, the debate and development of these ideas was a great stride forward for humanity.

The 1869 convention placed heavy emphasis on the Black community's development apart from the structures which had already existed in white America. In order for Black citizens to get ahead in society and free themselves from the subservient position which they had been forced into, they had to focus on their own development.

This Convention hereby respectfully and earnestly petition the present Congress to transfer the property of the United States, known as the Arlington estate... for the purpose of locating a self—supporting military institute... which shall be open to all without regard to race, color or previous conditions.<sup>113</sup>

Consolidating the resources of the Black community was crucial to the elevation of the entire people, the 1869 NCC decided; no longer could the focus simply remain on desegregation, but now each member must set their sights on Black elevation. Some of the rhetoric used and the ideas presented, specifically regarding acquiring their own estate devoted to elevating themselves, is reminiscent of the 1830 convention. One main difference being that, by 1869, the NCC saw the future of Black people as entwined with the future of America—their elevation would come not through emigration but through shared community—based within the United States.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 239.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 56—57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention*, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 14—15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Agents for The Elevator, "National Convention of Colored Citizens," *Elevator*, February 12, 1869.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention*, 17.

The idea of universal suffrage, which had been discussed in the 1864 convention, continued to be another point of development among the attendees at the 1869 convention. It is entirely significant that a measure was passed at this convention to allow women to participate as delegates. This convention saw itself within the spirit of "a progressive age, and that women would yet have a vote." Miss H.C. Johnson from Alleghany was the first official female delegate, representing the state of Pennsylvania. Newspapers recognized this change and relayed it to their readership, hailing it similarly to how the Colored Convention had—that this was true to the spirit of the progressive age. 116

This National Colored Convention had, by this point, taken its own shape by reformatting the structures established in mainstream 19th century political circles; the Black community had expanded upon these structures to include persons previously left out. In this way, it mirrored another group which sprang up after the colored conventions which also prioritized obtaining women's rights in America. The American Equal Rights Association (AERA), which was founded by Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, among others, appeared on the American political stage in 1866. 117 The NCC and AREA had large overlap, speakers and delegates in the NCC often played crucial roles in the AERA, and in addition to Douglass, figures like Frances Harper and Sojourner Truth were integral members of both groups. 118 Historians Daina Ramey Berry and Jermaine Thibodeaux argue that the intrinsic success of the National Colored Conventions taught the newly emancipated population to envision their freedoms outside the contours of traditional white American political thought. 119 Observing it from this angle, the radical development of the NCC played a much greater role within the framework of American politics. The influence of the concepts championed by these conventions cannot be deemphasized. The modes of thinking and ideologies debated by these Black intellectuals influenced not just the Black community, but other oppressed minority groups barred from participation within larger American politics.

Sojourner Truth, a seminal member of the AERA and other women's rights associations as well as the colored conventions, embodied this hybridized liberatory ideal that both organizations sought to foster. Truth was born enslaved but freed herself in 1826 by escaping from a plantation in New York with her daughter. Later, she worked as a recruiter for the Union army and helped resettle newly emancipated Black Americans in Washington D.C. Her idea of liberation was one unabashedly tied to the true freedom of all peoples, regardless of any factors of their existence or their identity. She remained wary of the 15th amendment (although she perceived it as a great step forward) because she saw it as a means of reproducing traditional white gendered power structures—it only freed Black men while Black women remained

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings*, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Agents for *The Elevator*, "National Convention of Colored Citizens."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 67—68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Daina Ramey Berry and Jermaine Thibodeaux, "A Convention of Grumblers!: Creating Black Texans and Reproducing Heteropatriarchy" in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 327.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Mandziuk, *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> Fitch, Pullon, Mandziuk, Sojourner Truth, 23.

subservient within these domestic superstructures.<sup>122</sup> Her work as a traveling orator had emphasized the unavoidable coming of freedom and, in a famous speech made at Akron, Ohio, Truth closed by saying,

But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.<sup>123</sup>

The future of freedom and respect would come whether those who opposed it wanted it to or not. Thus, Truth's message carried the work and beliefs of the NCC wherever it traveled.

The 1869 National Colored Convention held in it a realistic view of the state of racial struggles within the United States and, because of this, it also served as a conduit for incredibly radical discussions seldom seen elsewhere in American politics at the time. The heavy emphasis on community—driven Black work within the United States was provided as a means of countering the lack of assistance offered to newly emancipated citizens. The radical idea of universal suffrage witnessed here would continue to shape future debates of who is entitled to the right to vote. In a section at the end of the distributed proceedings, titled "Interview with the House Judiciary Committee," Messrs. Isaiah C. Weir, chairman of the committee, offers the readers a timely reminder:

Suffrage cannot be extended as a gratuity. The white men of this country should not consider that they are granting anything to us, that they are bestowing us a boon. It is no more a bestowal than if they should agree that we should eat our own victuals, wear our own clothes, go to market with our own money, pay our own debts. If they have the suffrage, they have it for their own exercise of it; if they vote upon the subject for us to have it, they only vote that they no longer stand in our way. The robber who clutches my throat on the highway and afterwards releases me, does not give me the right to continue my journey. . . . 124

Weir reminded his fellow Black citizens that, regardless of the concessions extended by the government, their time in America had not been an interlude but rather a critical part in their journey as a people. Weir insisted that Black Americans were not slaves and what they would work to gain in the future was of their own accord, asserting their indomitable humanity to an oppressor bent on dehumanization.

### Conclusion

The National Colored Conventions were a creation uniquely situated for the 19th century. The movement owed its origins to the tireless work of Black freemen who worked to carve out space for Black voices in the rigid political arenas of antebellum America. They were able to do so only by their consistent convictions to emancipation, as well as emulating convention style political rituals at the time which gave their meetings a sense of "legitimacy" to the wider American audience. Their adherence to this allowed a sliver of the American political system to be made available to Black freemen; Black freemen who had become legally "free" under the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Davis, We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less, 69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Sojourner Truth, "Speech at Akron, Ohio, Woman's Rights Convention (1851)," in *Treacherous Texts: U.S. Suffrage Literature, 1846—1946*, ed. Mary Chapman and Angela Mills (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2012), 24—25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> National Convention of Colored Men, *Proceedings of the National Convention*, 7.

law, yet continued to have access to any form of mainstream political power barred from them. These Black leaders refused to stop there; rather, from that point they were able to operate and demand liberation. Their operation originally sought, perhaps presumptively, to give a voice to the entire Black population. The ways in which they were perceived by the Black population were entirely due to newspaper recordings which conveyed the ideas of the conventions to the larger population. Convention sponsored pamphlets also worked to disseminate ideas, albeit to a much smaller, local and literate demographic. Without these two colossal sources, the conventions might not have been as effective as they were. The ideas debated, and thus the identity shaped through the debate of these ideas, would have been far less likely to penetrate into the Black population at large. At the same time, these sources had to work twice as hard as white news sources to get their information out. Not only were they tasked with reporting the proceedings, but also, justifying the very existence of the proceedings to the larger hostile society. Without this, perhaps the 19th century Black community would not have been able to coalesce around a shared conceptualization of a Black identity and future.

Two years following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass was invited to speak at the unveiling of the Freedman's Memorial Monument in Washington D.C. This memorial sought to commemorate the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed years earlier. Douglass would later record his dissatisfaction with the statue because of the ways in which it depicted "the Negro on his knees when a more manly attitude would have been indicative of freedom." The statue, referred to as *The Freedman's Memorial*, which remains in Lincoln Park to this day, set in copper the idea that the Black citizen was unable to stand on their own without a crutch—a crutch that in this case was depicted as the upright figure of the generous, white American politician—stylized as Abraham Lincoln. The status of the senerous of the generous, white American politician—stylized as Abraham Lincoln.

Douglass' speech on this day did not mention his distaste for the statue, but rather sought to memorialize and remember the entire man, honors and faults included, who was Abraham Lincoln. The relationship between these two figures was very often strained and yet, as the Civil War unfolded, Douglass had become a close personal advisor to the president. So much so that, at Lincoln's funeral in 1865, Mary Todd Lincoln pulled Douglass aside, offering him a gift of remembrance for her late husband. The golden—handled walking cane, which Douglass received in Lincoln's memory, speaks to the familiarity and depth of their relationship. 128 While no documentation exists professing the reasoning of Mary Todd Lincoln for giving this gift to Douglass, the symbolic nature of the gift challenges the paternalistic depictions of emancipation seen both at the time and today in the United States. The gifting of Lincoln's cane to Douglass challenges state—sanctioned understandings of Black identity, experience, and emancipation, which continue to exist in paternalistic works, and images such as Freedom's Memorial. Instead of not being able to stand on their own, the Black community in the 19th century stood both on their own legs, radically striving for the emancipation of Black Americans, while at the same time existing as a support, not so different from a gold—handled cane, advocating for the rights and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, delivered at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., April 14, 1876" in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Phillip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000), 616.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Douglass, "Oration in Memory," 615.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Thomas Ball. *Freedom's Memorial in Grateful Memory of Abraham Lincoln*, 1876, bronze. Washington D.C., Lincoln Park.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> "Lincoln's Cane," National Parks Service, accessed November 30, 2023.

natural equality of all peoples, regardless of any justifications of human disenfranchisement.

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