

Haiti In-Print: The Impact of the Early Black Press on Northern African American Social Reform, 1797-1838

Vivian Tang

On April 6, 1828, *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States declared: "The last half century will be regarded as a period in which changes the most interesting, and occurrences the most remarkable in the history of man have happened. – And the revolution of St. Domingo, which developed the resources and aroused the energies of a people deemed but a step above brute creation, is not the least remarkable and interesting."¹ Since the late eighteenth century, Haiti has occupied a dominant place in the African American imagination. As the only successful slave revolt in world history and the second anticolonial movement in the western hemisphere that culminated in the establishment of the First Black Republic, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was a watershed event in transatlantic history. After some of the most exploited slaves in the Atlantic World seized control of France's richest colony, they permanently abolished chattel slavery and declared all citizens black.² While many white Americans at the time saw these revolutionary events as "a very hell of horrors," African Americans looked to Haiti as a source of black pride, an example of self-liberation, and the manifestation of democratic ideals that had yet to be achieved in the United States.³ Thus, Haiti was frequently invoked in antebellum black discourse.

While the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the American South was directly manifested in the form of slave revolts and institution of draconian laws, its effects on the North were more gradual and inconspicuous. However, historians have generally dismissed Haiti's role in the political and social development of northern black communities in the early nineteenth century.⁴ More specifically, they have overlooked the Haitian influence on African American social reform which centered on racial elevation through self-help, particularly education.⁵ Black leaders encouraged their communities to "uplift" themselves to conditions of respectability as early as the Revolutionary era, but the transatlantic influences on racial elevation and its connection to early black nationalism have remained

¹ J, "Haytien Revolution," *Freedom's Journal*, April 6, 1827.

² Peter Wirzbicki, "'The Light of Knowledge Follows the Impulse of Revolutions': Prince Saunders, Baron de Vastey and the Haitian Influence on Antebellum Black Ideas of Elevation and Education." *Slavery and Abolition* 36, no. 2 (2015): 278, accessed 15 February 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144038X.2014.941184>.

³ Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Haiti. The Haitian Pavilion Dedication Ceremonies Delivered at the World's Fair, in Jackson Park, Chicago, Jan. 2d, 1893" in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents*, eds. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon (New York: Routledge, 2010), 206.

⁴ Sara C. Fanning, "The Roots of Early Black Nationalism: Northern African Americans' Invocations of Haiti in the Early Nineteenth Century" *Slavery & Abolition* 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 61.

⁵ Frederick Cooper, "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-1850." *American Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (December 1971): 604.

largely unexplored. The establishment of the early black press in New York City during the late 1820s and 1830s not only transformed the newspaper into a primary tool for social reform, but also offers historians a cultural medium to investigate how northern African Americans engaged with Haiti and racial uplift in meaningful ways.

The early black press was not an anomalous development in African American social reform and activism, but rather a result of black community building over the past few decades. Since the 1790s, free black northerners invoked Haiti for racial uplift and identity formation. This rhetoric was characterized by a juxtaposition between a commitment to democratic idealism and exposing the nation's fundamental hypocrisies – namely, the paradox of slavery and freedom. The establishment of black newspapers including the *Freedom's Journal* (1827) and *Colored American* (1837) was part of that legacy of activism but also signaled a movement towards a (trans)national black political consciousness. By the late 1820s, African Americans were divided on the prospect of racial equality in the United States. For some, a growing identification with Haiti led to a black nationalist separatism that ultimately manifested in a Haitian emigration movement. For others, it strengthened their conviction of remaining in the United States and fighting for abolition and citizenship rights. In both cases, Haiti's image as an independent black state continued to resonate with the free black community.

Although the early black press was established in the late 1820s and 1830s, its ideological origins stretch back to the late eighteenth century and beyond the United States. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slavery was largely abolished throughout the North. Nevertheless, African Americans did not possess basic citizenship rights including equal opportunity, civil liberties, or safety. In addition to discrimination and segregation that determined their place of residence and employment prospects, threats of kidnapping and unfair imprisonment were prominent community issues.⁶ In response, African Americans established a network of independent community organizations including schools, fraternal and mutual aid societies, and churches that fostered a growing black political consciousness.

Prince Hall was the leader of the African Masonic Lodge in Boston, one of the prominent black community institutions dedicated to mutual aid, education, and protest. As a veteran of the Revolutionary War, Hall recognized that American victory did not bring racial equality, but still expressed a democratic idealism that was characteristic of African American rhetoric at the time; he believed that American values of liberty and equality “could eventually become viable for people of color, in the true spirit of the foregone Revolution.”⁷ Importantly, Hall extended his democratic revolutionary rhetoric to include the Age of Revolution, which began with the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions in the late eighteenth century, continued with the Latin American Wars of Independence in the 1810s and 1820s, and ended with the Revolutions of 1848.⁸ In particular, he

⁶ Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 14.

⁷ Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America, 1827 to 1860* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 26.

⁸ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 34.

identified with the recent revolutionary events in Haiti and acknowledged the common bonds of the African diaspora.

In 1797, Hall delivered a speech addressing the plight of African Americans and the necessity for black unity in a racially hostile environment. Noting the insults they were “daily met with in the streets of Boston,” he advocated for self-improvement as a means to combat racist rhetoric and community stereotypes.⁹ Even if African Americans lacked a formal education, this did not preclude their cultivation and exercise of reason: “thinking, hearing, and weighing matters, men, and things on your own mind, and making that judgment of them as you think reasonable to satisfy your minds and give an answer to those who may ask you a question.”¹⁰ By demonstrating their mental capabilities, African Americans could counteract their “degraded” condition in society and collectively fight against the oppression of “ignorance.” At the time, northern black leaders claimed it was the image of their race that caused white prejudice and prevented them from achieving full citizenship and participating in mainstream society. As such, the pursuit of education was a form of resistance that could fundamentally challenge these misrepresentations.

But racial uplift was not solely an individualistic endeavor – it reflected upon all people of African descent. After Hall reassured his audience that God was on the side of the oppressed, he advised patience and strategically referenced the Haitian Revolution: “My brethren, let us not be cast down under these and many other abuses we at present labour under: for the darkest is before the break of day. My brethren, let us remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren six years ago in the French West Indies.”¹¹ His message not only alludes to the transatlantic reflexivity of black elevation, but utilizes Haiti’s image to comfort the northern black community, showing how circumstances could be worse and how quickly they could change.¹² It also shows how black leaders invoked the slave revolt as a threat towards abolition and were already engaged in antislavery movements before white leaders and organizations like William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) advocated for immediate abolitionism in the 1830s. Furthermore, it suggests that racial uplift strategies were not primarily concerned with accommodating white society but linked to self-determination and processes of African American identity formation.

In many ways, the free black community’s emphasis on self-help was part of a larger sociocultural discourse in the United States throughout the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. According to Patrick Rael, “elevation ... [was] a conceptual *lingua franca* through which Americans in the antebellum North of both races expressed their values and concerns.”¹³ Although northern white leaders shared a middle-class ideology and concerns with self-improvement, many approached social reform with a paternalistic attitude. For example, antislavery organizations proposed that white reformers should

⁹ Prince Hall, “A Charge” in *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860*, eds. Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45.

¹⁰ Hall, “A Charge” in *Pamphlets of Protest*, 47.

¹¹ Hall, “A Charge” in *Pamphlets of Protest*, 47.

¹² Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 64.

¹³ Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 125.

shape and monitor African Americans' behavior. But African Americans were not simply echoing white societal values nor exclusively focused on gaining acceptance in the United States; instead, self-help was an expression of black independence. Education, then, "did not just lay the groundwork for liberty – education was freedom."¹⁴ This explains northern black leaders' preoccupation with developing their own organizations that promoted instruction such as free and evening schools, literary societies, and eventually an independent black press. Thus, education as racial uplift was a strategy that helped northern black communities confront and navigate increasing racial persecution in the early nineteenth century.

The 1800s brought new obstacles for free African Americans and signaled a further retreat from the nation's revolutionary promises. As black community institutions engendered political consciousness and its members continued to pursue educational advancement, many whites grew resentful at the perceived loss of job opportunities.¹⁵ This was reflected in heightened legal and societal restrictions. In addition to segregation and discrimination as well as threats of abduction, African Americans encountered street violence, loss of voting rights, and restrictions on physical mobility.¹⁶ For example, the Pennsylvania state legislature between 1805 and 1814 sought to pass laws that would limit black immigration into the state, force all free blacks to register for certificates of freedom, and permit black criminals to be sold as slaves.¹⁷ Moreover, the Revolutionary ideology that had furthered gradual emancipation in the northern states had generally weakened. This anti-black sentiment was exemplified in the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816, which attempted to solve the nation's "race problem" by repatriating free blacks to the colony of Liberia in West Africa.¹⁸

Despite such widespread oppression, two events in the early nineteenth century deeply resonated with African Americans: the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804 and the writing of the Haitian Constitution in 1805. As described by John Russwurm (a future editor of *Freedom's Journal*) in 1826, the Haitian Revolution already held a "conspicuous place" in the black abolitionist imagination: it had shown the world that "though slavery may benumb, it cannot entirely destroy our faculties."¹⁹ The creation of the First Black Republic on January 1 was particularly significant – it marked Haiti's entrance onto the world stage, in "rank with the nations of the earth," and exemplified the democratic revolutionary ideals that had yet to be achieved in the United States.²⁰ Since nationhood was the official language of political life during the antebellum period, Haiti's national status allowed black leaders to reappropriate a discourse of self-determination for civic

¹⁴ Bacon, *African-American Newspaper*, 103.

¹⁵ Bacon, *African-American Newspaper*, 19.

¹⁶ Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 63.

¹⁷ Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 65.

¹⁸ Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 160.

¹⁹ John Browne Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Hayti" in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents*, eds. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon (New York: Routledge, 2010), 168.

²⁰ Russwurm, "Conditions and Prospects," 165.

engagement and resistance.²¹ The issuance of the Haitian Constitution, reprinted in newspapers and widely circulated throughout the Atlantic, reinforced these connections for African Americans. First, it revealed that Haiti's system of government – with an executive, legislative, and judicial branch – closely resembled the United States. Second, it declared “black” a politico-ideological category that solidified a racialized national identity. Lastly, its *written* set of rules followed the tradition of French and American governments.²²

Notably, writing was central to contemporaneous debates over slavery. Influenced by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking, writing was considered “a visible sign of reason.”²³ Among the arts and sciences, it was the most striking evidence of “genius” such that “blacks were ‘reasonable’ and hence ‘men,’ if—and only if—they demonstrated [such] mastery.”²⁴ Under slavery, the Haitians “showed neither spirit nor genius,” however, freedom restored their dignity as “men” and revealed the capacities of the race; the Haitian Constitution was a direct testimony of racial uplift and intellectual abilities.²⁵ The dissemination of the first black republic's constitution solidified African Americans' recognition of writing as a tool of freedom during the early nineteenth century – a medium through which they could demonstrate their humanity and capacity for “progress” in Western discourse. According to northern black reformers, this would elevate the race and prove the logic of racial equality in the United States.

The establishment of the early black press in the late 1820s and 1830s was part of such tradition of African American activism. At the height of racial persecution in the 1800s, the first black editors continued to express a pro-American idealism centered on a faith that national institutions would embrace people of color and racial uplift could serve as the primary vehicle for realizing their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.²⁶ The creation of an independent black press was not simply a response to racist attacks, nor an anomalous development in African American protest, rather it represented the cumulative efforts of black community building over the past few decades. By the late 1820s, northern black communities had reached a certain maturity, developed trans-local connections through community organizations, and identified common objectives.²⁷

The first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, embodied that legacy of democratic idealism and growth of black political consciousness. In their 1827 inaugural issue, the founders Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm declared the U.S. Constitution “our polar star” and reinforced the notion that “all men are equal by nature.”²⁸ This fundamental optimism informed their view of racism in the United States, which they attributed to a public discourse centered on black degradation, especially the slander of

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 3.

²² Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 65-67.

²³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes” in *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9.

²⁴ Gates, Jr., “Writing ‘Race,’” 8-9.

²⁵ Russwurm, “Condition and Prospects,” 168.

²⁶ Hutton, *Early Black Press*, 26.

²⁷ Bacon, *African-American Newspaper*, 41.

²⁸ Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, “Proposals for Publishing the Freedom's Journal: Prospectus,” *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827.

African Americans in white newspapers. However, the introduction of an authentic black voice would allow African Americans to take control of the way they were represented and thus liberate the community from discrimination. The first issue of *Freedom's Journal* states: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick [sic] been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us dearly."²⁹

Indeed, black writing could establish a channel of communication with the national public.³⁰ Along with showcasing their literary skills, writing allowed northern African Americans to participate in civic debates and articulate their specific concerns; moreover, it signified a political gesture in which "the calamities of our enemies [were] refuted by forcible argument."³¹ For example, one of the major issues confronting free blacks in the late 1820s was ACS's aggressive efforts to send them back to Africa. In March and April 1827, *Freedom's Journal* published a two-part editorial addressing a white preacher in Newark who espoused racist rhetoric in support of ACS. The clergyman claimed that free blacks were "idle, ignorant, and depraved," as evidenced by the number of "coloured convicts ... in jails and penitentiaries," and could never attain respectability in American society.³² Since they would remain in "moral and intellectual bondage" in the United States, it would be unbeneficial for them to remain in this country.³³ In response, Cornish and Russwurm denounced these inaccurate characterizations and affirmed the majority of the free black population did not fit these descriptions, citing that black paupers constituted 1 in 185 of the total black population whereas white paupers were 1 in 115 in the city's almshouses.³⁴

In addition to repudiating these types of claims, the first black editors worked to expose the nation's racist foundations. According to them, even if there were more blacks than whites in prisons, this did not prove their debased character: "the colored man's offence, three times out of four, grows out of the circumstances of his condition, while the white man's, most general, is premediated and vicious."³⁵ In other words, African Americans' degraded status was not a result of their color (biological characteristics), but rather their enslaved condition (due to societal racism). As Jacqueline Bacon explains, it is reductive to assume *Freedom's Journal* was only created as a defensive measure – to respond to the racist rhetoric of certain individuals or organizations; instead, the creation of a black newspaper was part of larger community-directed efforts promote self-determination and collective identity. In their "Prospectus," Cornish and Russwurm reinforce the link between education and racial uplift:

An education is what renders civilized men superior to the savage: as the dissemination of knowledge is continually progressing among all other classes in the community: we deem it expedient to establish a paper ... for the moral, religious, civil and literary

²⁹ Cornish and Russwurm, "To Our Patrons," *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827.

³⁰ Cornish and Russwurm, "Proposals for Publishing the Freedom's Journal: Prospectus," *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827.

³¹ Cornish and Russwurm, "Publishing the Freedom's Journal."

³² Cornish and Russwurm, untitled editorial (part I), *Freedom's Journal*, March 30, 1827.

³³ Cornish and Russwurm, untitled editorial (part I).

³⁴ Cornish and Russwurm, untitled editorial (part II), *Freedom's Journal*, April 13, 1827

³⁵ Cornish and Russwurm, untitled editorial (part II).

improvement of our injured race. Experience teaches us that the Press is the most economical and convenient method by which this object is to be obtained.³⁶

The publication of a national newspaper would facilitate “the diffusion of knowledge and raise [the black] community to respectability” and rehabilitate the image of the race in U.S. society.³⁷ Prior to the late 1820s, African American writing may have enjoyed local or translocal circulation but was rarely disseminated to a wider audience. With the inception of *Freedom’s Journal*, African American activism acquired a national dimension and became integrated into the central organ of nineteenth century politics: the press. Cornish and Russwurm were among the first black editors to deliberately utilize “the wide-reaching discursive power of print media” for racial elevation.³⁸ In addition to providing its readers with a rhetorical lessons through weekly polemics, the newspaper frequently (re)printed articles and speeches on the value of education and included ads for intellectual clubs and schools. Furthermore, it served as a medium to assert powerful counternarratives by documenting black abilities and successes and circulating these positive images to “uplift and vindicate people of color in the true spirit of American democracy.”³⁹

Following Benedict Anderson’s connection between print-capitalism and the development of national consciousness, one might conclude that black newspapers were essential to creating an “imagined community” and common discourse among African Americans. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined political community whose “members ... will never know most of their fellow members ... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” that is limited, sovereign, and communal.⁴⁰ Considering language is utilized to root a nation, the origins of black nationalism can likewise be traced to the early black press which successfully established “a medium of intercourse between our brethren of different states of this great confederacy.”⁴¹ The four newspapers that constituted the early black press – *Freedom’s Journal*, the *Colored American*, the *Rights of All*, and the *Weekly Advocate* – circulated very widely within and beyond the antebellum United States, including Michigan, Maine, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Maryland, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, Virginia, Canada, Britain, Jamaica, and Haiti.⁴² “Print carried black voices through space,” making readers aware that their daily concerns were shared in different cities and enabling “a broader national community to see African American arguments.”⁴³ However, Anderson’s work does not adequately consider the racial aspects of nationalism nor the

³⁶ Cornish and Russwurm, “Proposals for Publishing the Freedom’s Journal: Prospectus,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.

³⁷ Cornish and Russwurm, “Publishing the Freedom’s Journal.”

³⁸ Charlton W. Yingling, “No One Who Reads the History of Hayti Can Doubt the Capacity of Colored Men: Racial Formation and Atlantic Rehabilitation in New York City’s Early Black Press, 1827-1841.” *Early American Studies* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 317.

³⁹ Hutton, *Early Black Press*, xiv.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6-7.

⁴¹ Cornish and Russwurm, “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.

⁴² Yingling, “Capacity of Colored Men,” 322.

⁴³ Rael, *Black Identity*, 4.

transnational influences on antebellum black discourse, specifically the Haitian Revolution and the newly-independent Haiti.

By the late 1820s and 1830s, Haiti played a crucial role in northern black political discourse. While African American reformers had previously called upon their country to fulfill the revolutionary promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and negotiated a pan-African identity (the idea that all people of African descent should be unified due to common origins, interests, and futures), their faith in the United States and identification with Africa began to decline.⁴⁴ As racial tensions escalated, the ACS reinforced the permanence of black degradation on the public mind: “The African in this country belongs by birth to the very lowest station in society; and from that station he can never rise, be his talents, his enterprise, his virtues what they may . . . they constitute a class by themselves – a class of which no individual can be elevated, and below which, none can be depressed.”⁴⁵ This led many African Americans to question the possibility of freedom and equality in their native country, especially if they continued to be restrained by a white majority, which strengthened the idea that only an independent black state could actualize their desires for political and social freedom. Here, Haiti served as a Black Atlantic model – a beacon of hope for all people of African descent – and even an alternative site of emigration.

In their opening editorial, Cornish and Russwurm describe African Americans’ specific relationship to Haiti: “If ignorance, poverty and degradation have hitherto been our unhappy lot, has the Eternal decree gone forth, that our race alone, are to remain in this state? . . . [T]he establishment of the republic of Hayti after years of sanguinary warfare; its subsequent progress in all the arts of civilization prove the contrary.”⁴⁶ Not only did Haiti represent an example of self-liberation and provide incontrovertible evidence of black intelligence, social responsibility, and self-rule, but also the equivalent capacity to join dominant society. For some, Haiti offered racial advancement without seceding from America or returning to Africa – “a chance to compete in the same hemisphere as western nations on an equal footing.”⁴⁷ For others, it presented a refuge from discrimination and embodied a nascent black separatism that seemed increasingly viable. African Americans’ identification with Haiti extended the imagined black community beyond national borders and situated them within the broader matrix of the Black Atlantic. Unlike their former affiliation with Africa, which neglected specific identities within the African diaspora, Haiti’s history represented a culmination of political autonomy and signified the transatlantic character of black identity.

This was reflected in a general renaming of the race from the predominant “African” to “colored.” While free blacks previously identified with Africa and their institutions commonly adopted “African” in their titles (e.g. African Masonic Lodge, African Free School, African Methodist Episcopal Church, etc.), its usage became increasingly

⁴⁴ Yingling, “Capacity of Colored Men,” 318.

⁴⁵ William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization: An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles and Purposes of the American Colonization Society Together with Resolutions, Addresses, and Remonstrances of the Free People of Color* (Massachusetts: Garrison and Knapp, 1823), 136.

⁴⁶ Cornish and Russwurm, “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.

⁴⁷ Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 63.

problematic. For instance, it offered colonizationists and other racist groups the language to argue that black people were not entitled to American rights and freedoms; this marginalized the free black community, reinforced the denial of their U.S. citizenship, and justified their dislocation to Africa. Thus, black leaders advocated for a different name in the 1830s: “colored,” whose variations included “colored people,” “people of color,” and “Colored American.” As a relatively new and legally undefined racial category, “colored” was free of derision and its history offered a respectable alternative to the now-stigmatized “African” name. Notably derived from the French term *gens de couleur* (which literally translates to “people of color”), it was used in St. Domingue and throughout the Caribbean to denote an intermediate class of free mulattos who stood between white colonizers and darker-skinned slaves.⁴⁸

By resignifying themselves as “people of color,” northern blacks consciously aligned themselves with the rebels of the Haitian Revolution and situated African descendants within a transatlantic framework. In addition to demonstrating a growing awareness of other members in their imagined community, the adoption of “colored” invoked a black abolitionist radicalism. For free African Americans, the revolution’s significance went beyond ending slavery; their identification with the revolutionary rebels, who instituted the only example of immediate abolition before the 1830s, reflected a radical drive towards self-determination.⁴⁹ Black leaders’ application of “colored” to all people of African descent – rather than its historical usage for a group of mixed-race elites in St. Domingue – constituted a desire for racial unity throughout the diaspora. The black abolitionist, David Walker, employed such rhetoric in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which urged readers to take an active role in fighting their oppression. Drawing on “Hayti, the glory of blacks and terror of tyrants,” he argued that whites had proven to be an “unmerciful, avaricious, and blood-thirsty set of beings” so people of color could not simply plead their own cause – they must demand it (even if violence becomes the only recourse).⁵⁰ Through “colored” rhetoric, Walker underscored the shared experiences of slavery and racial oppression in the Americas, and the necessity of an aggressive struggle for freedom like the Haitian Revolution.

In the context of antebellum nationalism, this “new” racial identity illuminated the problem of black statelessness. Because only national status granted the right of political autonomy in the nineteenth century, African descendants lacked the power to advocate for their rights in the international arena: “Identified as belonging to no country” to “no people, race, or nation,” they had been “accounted as aliens and outcasts” and thus been “denied their citizenship, and the benefits derivable therefore.”⁵¹ However, northern African Americans’ identification with Haiti – the island state underpinning their ideas of nationalism – transformed the problem from statelessness to diplomatic recognition. While France acknowledged Haitian independence in 1825, the United States continued its policy

⁴⁸ Rael, *Black Identity*, 102.

⁴⁹ Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 34.

⁵⁰ David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston: David Walker, 1830), 24.

⁵¹ Rael, 219.

of non-recognition until 1862.⁵² This strengthened the South's pro-slavery ideology and threatened self-determination for all people of color. As a result, northern black activists began to premise their uplift strategies within a nationalist paradigm, with many channeling their reform efforts towards the goal of national liberation. Thus, Haiti's image did not merely allow people of color to imagine themselves as part of a (trans)national community, but also helped them construct an identity that could support an independent black state. For these reasons, African American and Haitian leaders were mutually invested in the first black republic's internal development which would merit their inclusion in family of nations.

In many ways, the early black press served as a vital conduit for Haiti's nation-building activities by articulating and circulating black nationalist myths. As part of their objective to spread positive news about people of color and recognition of the transatlantic reflexivity of black elevation, editors published stories that reinforced African descendants' ability to effectively lead and govern themselves. Beyond facilitating intellectual exchange, these newspapers utilized Haiti for "racial rehabilitation."⁵³ Despite their knowledge of the historic divisions between Henri Christophe's Kingdom of Haiti in the north and Alexander Pétion's Republic of Haiti in the south (1806-1820), black editors idealized its revolutionary past and intentionally communicated a more stable country to their audiences.⁵⁴ For example, *Freedom's Journal* published a three-part biography on Toussaint L'Ouverture, the celebrated leader of the Haitian Revolution, and a six-part series on the nation's formation – from its "discovery" by Columbus, through Spanish and French colonization, the slaves' rebellion, to present conditions.⁵⁵ While L'Ouverture's rise from lowly slave to respected general presented "the most incontestable proofs, that the negro is not, in general, wanting in the higher qualifications of the mind" and where people of color were free, their abilities were equal to whites, Haiti's history revealed a potential course for liberation and suggested that black people were not destined to be oppressed forever, whether in the United States or elsewhere.⁵⁶

In accordance with their efforts to prove the viability of a black state, Haitian leaders actively recruited African Americans to emigrate to Haiti in U.S. newspapers. Since Haiti's first ruler, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, offered American ship captains forty dollars for every African American they brought to his country in 1804, Haitian statesmen had consistently proposed emigration as a mutually-beneficial endeavor that would actualize black nationhood: it would repopulate the island with skilled laborers and soldiers as well as offer African Americans a refuge from U.S. racism and citizenship rights.⁵⁷ In 1818, Pétion urged black northerners to "abandon an ungrateful country" as a form of political resistance, referring to the legitimacy of the Haitian Constitution:

⁵² Leslie M. Alexander, "The Black Republic: The Influence of the Haitian Revolution on Northern Black Political Consciousness, 1816-1862," in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents*, eds. Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon (New York: Routledge, 2010), 65.

⁵³ Yingling, "Capacity of Black Men," 315.

⁵⁴ Yingling, "Capacity of Black Men," 331.

⁵⁵ "Hayti. – No. 1," *Freedom's Journal*, April 20, 1827.

⁵⁶ "Toussaint L'Ouverture," *Freedom's Journal*, May 4, 1827.

⁵⁷ Alexander, "Northern Black Political Consciousness," 59.

Open to their eyes the Constitution of our Republic and let them see in its 44th Article a fraternal hand opened to their distresses. Since they are at this day refused the title of Members of the American Union, let them come among us, in a country firmly organized, and enjoy the rights of Citizens of Hayti, of happiness and peace: lastly, let them come and show to white men that there yet exist coloured and black men who can raise a fearless front secured from insult and from injury.⁵⁸

Yet it was Jean-Pierre Boyer's unification of the Haitian republic in 1821 that solidified many free African Americans' interests in migration. In addition to these images of national stability, emigration offered an attractive alternative to colonization schemes in the mid to late 1820s. Whereas the ACS attempted to impose a national identity upon the free black population and often supported proslavery interests, Haitian emigration represented African American ideals of self-determination and independence.⁵⁹ As *The Rights of All* explained, "If any have a disposition to leave this country, why not emigrate, either to Canada or the beautiful island of Hayti ... we do not ask the Colonization Society to provide a home for us, we can do it for ourselves, when necessary, and a far better one than they have to offer."⁶⁰ Overall, Haitian emigration symbolized a vindication of black equality and a repudiation of whites' attempts to shape black elevation.

Although this first wave of Haitian emigration was largely deemed a failure by 1830, northern black leaders remained determined to fight for the black republic's international recognition. Compared to the trickle of emigration to Liberia, between 6,000 and 13,000 northern African Americans moved to Haiti in the 1820s.⁶¹ Inspired by Boyer's proclamations of fraternity, equality, and citizenship as well as the Haitian government's promises of subsidized travel expenses, fertile land, and education, Haitian emigration enjoyed widespread support throughout the north and even stimulated the creation of the Haytien Emigration Society of Coloured People.⁶² According to Reverend Peter Williams, Jr., the president of the Haytien Emigration Society in New York, Haiti offered racial redemption: "Go to that highly favored, and as yet only land, where the sons of Africa appear as civilized, well ordered and flourishing nation. Go, remembering that the happiness of millions of the present and future generations depends upon your prosperity."⁶³ Nevertheless, many newly-transplanted African Americans became disillusioned with Haiti as they encountered significant cultural differences and land

⁵⁸ "Joseph Inginac to James Tredwell, November 21, 1817" in *The Constitution of the Republic of Hayti: Hayti: To which is Added, Documents Relating to the Correspondence of His Most Christian Majesty, with the President of Hayti, Preceded by a Proclamation to the People and the Army* (New York: James Tredwell, 1818), 5.

⁵⁹ These debates over colonization and emigration were central to the disintegration of the *Freedom's Journal* in 1829. Convinced that African Americans faced insurmountable barriers to racial equality in the United States, John Russwurm reversed the newspaper's opposition to the ACS and followed a pro-colonialist stance until he moved to Liberia. In the same year, Samuel Cornish launched *The Rights of All* which reasserted a strong anti-colonialist position.

⁶⁰ "Hayti," *The Rights of All*, October 16, 1829.

⁶¹ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 168.

⁶² Alexander, "Northern Black Political Consciousness," 61.

⁶³ Peter Williams, *Address to the Board of Managers of the Haytien Emigration Society of Coloured People, to the Emigrants Intended to Sail to the Island of Hayti, in the Brig De Witt Clinton* (New York: Mahlon Day, 1824).

distribution issues, and returned to the United States.⁶⁴ Despite distancing themselves from the emigration movement and subsequently turning inwards to advocate for their rights at home, Haiti's image as an independent black state continued to resonate with the free black community, especially as a base of socio-political mobilization.

This complex negotiation of identities was reflected in the renaming of the black newspaper, *The Weekly Advocate*, to *Colored American* in 1837. Established by Samuel Cornish, Phillip Bell, and Charles Ray, the newspaper was the ideological successor of *Freedom's Journal* (with whom it shared a founding editor in Cornish). It sought to bolster and maintain the connections between "our afflicted brethren in the free states" and carry lessons of self-help to "redeem our character and remove our disabilities ... until our entire people, are of one heart and of one mind, in all the means of their salvation."⁶⁵ However, the *Colored American* moved beyond advocating for the abolition of slavery to claiming permanence and equal rights in the United States: "In complexion, in blood, and in nativity, we are decidedly more exclusively 'American' than our white brethren; hence the propriety of the name of our paper, COLORED AMERICAN, and of identifying the name with all our institutions in spite of our enemies, who rob us of our nationality, and reproach us as exoticks [sic]."⁶⁶ Drawing upon a transatlantic revolutionary heritage, *Colored American* also synthesized uplift with antebellum ideas of the nation to reclaim America and vindicate all people of color; northern black activists continued to fight for the success and international recognition of Haiti, which exported political and social legitimacy to their U.S. counterparts

To reclaim America, black leaders adopted a more radical and international approach to social reform in the 1830s with Haiti as a model of educational achievement. As early as 1816, Prince Saunders – a Boston teacher who emigrated to Haiti and became Minister of Education in the north – published the *Haytien Papers*, a collection of official proclamations and documents from Christophe's kingdom, as primary evidence that people of color could write sensible laws.⁶⁷ He was also involved in the creation of the Haitian education system, which he attempted to replicate in the United States because he considered African Americans' pursuit of knowledge to be a militant act.⁶⁸ By the late 1830s, northern black activists connected the country's growing sectionalism with the U.S. government's refusal to extend diplomatic recognition to Haiti, a concession to the pro-slavery South. The *Colored American* highlighted this fundamental contradiction between U.S. policy and people of color's commitment to preserving American ideals:

[It] betrays a subserviency to our national policy, *to the will of slaveholders*, which is highly disgraceful to our national character, and calls upon us as citizens of a free country, to memorialize Congress to recognize the national independence of Hayti and place our relations with it on the same footing of equality and courtesy as with other nations.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Alexander, "Northern Black Political Consciousness," 62-63.

⁶⁵ "Why We Should Have a Paper," *Colored American*, March 4, 1837.

⁶⁶ "The Title of This Journal," *Colored American*, March 4, 1837.

⁶⁷ Fanning, *Early Black Nationalism*, 70.

⁶⁸ Bacon, *African-American Newspaper*, 21.

⁶⁹ "Resolutions Adopted by the A.A.S. Society," *Colored American*, June 10, 1837.

This compelled a movement towards “interracial immediatism,” which combined the efforts of northern black activists and white abolitionists in Britain and the United States towards universal emancipation and citizenship rights; it also prompted a concerted effort to educate the black population. Here, northern African Americans activism followed the Haitian government’s educational model.⁷⁰

Since abolitionism was often co-opted by white reformers who espoused racist beliefs and attempted to dictate the parameters of activism, an independent black newspaper became an important forum for marginalized voices.⁷¹ In light of their work on suffrage and combatting stereotypes (even within interracial activist circles), northern black leaders harnessed the influence of the press to redirect advocacy towards education: “The Time has come in which education should occupy a larger place in the minds of Colored Americans, than it has heretofore done. Our views have been too limited, in respect to its importance and its kind.”⁷² Likewise David Walker asserted that African Americans’ lack of education was a function of white oppression that kept them in “eternal ignorance and wretchedness.”⁷³ However, the Republic of Haiti revealed that “ignorance and treachery ... [were] not the natural elements of the blacks, as the Americans would try to make us believe.”⁷⁴ More specifically, their education system proved African descendants’ intellectual abilities and potential to achieve civic equity. Thus, the early black press commonly (re)printed news about the development of Haitian education to disprove racist claims of black inferiority, affirm that people of color could – and have been – proper citizens who would resist slavery and reiterate the “enlightened” status of the black republic.

Despite Boyer’s declining investment in education in the late 1830s, black newspapers continued to promote Haitian schools as a source of inspiration and emulation for the free black community.⁷⁵ Noting the unfortunate state of education for African Americans such as “the three thousand children among us, out of school” who were losing the necessary means of advancement and moral restraint, the *Colored American* indicated that the Haitians, who had access to quality education, were “not as inferior to any of his fairer brethren.”⁷⁶ Though Boyer allowed Haitian schools to fall into disrepair and even be used as barracks, the early black press commended the educational achievements of his predecessor, Henri Christophe.⁷⁷ For example, they published a letter from the Haytian Abolition Society that described “no less than fifteen male and female schools in this city, also a national college, in which sciences, languages, drawing, music, etc. are taught,” that situated black intellectual development at the crux of antislavery politics.⁷⁸ Moreover, the newspapers foregrounded the ex-president’s pedagogical theory and evidence of its success: the Lancasterian system

⁷⁰ Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 195.

⁷¹ Bacon, *African-American Newspaper*, 256.

⁷² “Education of Youth,” *Colored American*, November 11, 1837.

⁷³ Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles*, 8.

⁷⁴ Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles*, 8.

⁷⁵ Yingling, “Capacity of Colored Men,” 336.

⁷⁶ “Education of Youth,” *Colored American*, November 11, 1837.

⁷⁷ Wirzbicki, “Light of Knowledge,” 281.

⁷⁸ “The Republic of Hayti,” *Colored American*, March 11, 1837.

of education and its implementation in New York City's African Free School.⁷⁹ This education model, whereby older students taught the younger ones, revealed its "civilizing" effects in the number of significant black intellectuals it produced including Alexander Crummel, James McCune Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet.⁸⁰ Such evidence of African descendants' sociocultural capital was invoked for civic inclusion in the United States.

Additionally, these newspapers solidified the relationship between Haiti and the United States to reaffirm their fight for black equality within and beyond the nation. By presenting Haitians as noble and enlightened, and their government as "one quite worthy of civilized people," northern African American leaders worked to legitimize the black republic's national status.⁸¹ For instance, the *Colored American* emphasized the hypocrisies between national democratic ideals and U.S. foreign policy: "We cannot help but notice the unaccountable policy of our Government towards Hayti ... Here is a Republic of more than thirty years standing, which has maintained its independence, without invasion or insurrection, Their Constitutions and laws, are modeled after our own – yet we have ... excuses not to acknowledge Hayti."⁸² This piece not only testified the writer-activist's civic knowledge, but extended the reasoning behind elevation to black nationalism. Alongside white abolitionists, they petitioned Congress to recognize Haitian independence more than 200 times between 1838 and 1839, and placed the issue of slavery on the agenda when a "gag rule" was in place.⁸³ For free blacks, America's formal recognition of Haiti would symbolize their country's fulfillment of their founding promises and recognition of freedom for all African-descended peoples regardless of nationality.

On March 15, 1838, *Colored American* highlighted the logic behind northern African Americans' invocations of Haiti: "No one who reads, with an unprejudiced mind, the history of Hayti ... can doubt the capacity of colored men, nor the propriety of removing all of their disabilities."⁸⁴ Although northern black leaders utilized the Haitian Revolution and the First Black Republic as a cornerstone of their social reform efforts for decades, the establishment of the early black press in the late 1820s and 1830s was central to the development of a (trans)national political consciousness. The specter of an independent black nation, which exemplified African descendants' capacity for self-rule, intelligence, and social responsibility, proved to be more than an effective counterpoint against racist attacks, but a model for black solidarity, liberation, and citizenship. As the black community faced declining prospects for equality and citizenship in the United States, some looked to Haiti as a site of emigration. Though many Haitian emigrants returned to the United States and joined the remaining free black population in fighting for civic inclusion, they continued to be deeply invested in Haiti's internal development and advocated for U.S. recognition of Haiti's nationhood due to the transatlantic reflexivity of black elevation.

⁷⁹ Wirzbicki, "Light of Knowledge," 288.

⁸⁰ Wirzbicki, "Light of Knowledge," 288.

⁸¹ "The Republic of Hayti," *Colored American*, March 11, 1837.

⁸² *Colored American*, March 18, 1837.

⁸³ Alexander, "Northern Black Political Consciousness," 67.

⁸⁴ "Republic of Hayti," *Colored American*, March 15, 1838.