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# Slavery and Justice in the Free North

New York's Black Activists, 1831-1841

James Wallace-Lee  
Swarthmore College  
Spring 2017

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## Introduction

On February 25, 1837, the *Weekly Advocate* printed the resolutions of a public meeting that had been held by some of New York City's most prominent black ministers earlier that month. At the meeting, three petitions were presented, and the meeting's participants resolved to collect signatures for these petitions and present them to the state legislature in Albany. In particular, one of these petitions urged the legislature to "pass laws for the more effectual abolition of Slavery in the State of New York."<sup>1</sup> Given that slavery had been abolished in the state of New York a full decade earlier, the presentation of this position, without explanation and alongside two other straightforward petitions for legal change, is striking. Black New Yorkers did not understand slavery to be over, a decade after its legal end.

A week later, on March 5, 1837, banks and firms in New York and across the country began to fail.<sup>2</sup> Over the next several months, the country experienced a financial panic, and in May of 1837 banks in New York suspended specie payments. The Panic of 1837 was followed by a financial recession that lasted for much of the next decade and left Americans wary of the conspicuous role that capitalism now played in their lives. Wealthy white abolitionists, like all those whose fortunes were tied to the health of the American economy, suffered enormous losses. But abolitionists also emphasized that slaveholder's greed for land and slaves had played a role in the panic. A recent historian has argued that "what the Panic of 1837 revealed in especially painful fashion were the imbrications of supposedly free financial markets with the

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<sup>1</sup> "Public Meeting," *Weekly Advocate* 25 February 1837.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013), 95.

foul violence of slavery that were normally invisible and that many outside the South preferred to pretend did not exist.”<sup>3</sup>

If, a week before the first whispers of the Panic of 1837, black New Yorkers were calling for the “more effectual abolition of slavery,” then the “foul violence of slavery” was not invisible to them at all. Rather, black New Yorkers experienced the violence of slavery daily, and understood it as such. And before thinkers in the wake of the Panic of 1837 began to naturalize capitalism – indeed, before wage labor markets were ubiquitous in the country – black New Yorkers charged that capitalist exploitation was at the root of both Southern slavery and its correlates in the North.

What black activists were beginning to uncover as they found links between the experiences of black people in the North and South was the system that Cedric Robinson called “racial capitalism.” Arguing that Western society was already thoroughly racialized by the time that capitalism began to emerge, Robinson explained that as “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> Racial capitalism refers to this development. What racial capitalism meant for black New Yorkers was that slavery was one form of racial violence that helped to produce a particular social order. Capitalism relied on the elaboration of social difference, and so black New Yorkers’ experiences of racial violence and economic exploitation were fundamentally tied to the experiences of enslaved blacks in the South.

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: Georgia UP, 2012), 300.

<sup>4</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2000), 4.

Robinson accompanied his exploration of the historical development of racial capitalism with an equally in-depth exploration of the history of black radicalism. Robin Kelley describes the black Marxists that Robinson wrote about as intellectuals who “tried to grapple with the historical consciousness embedded in the Black Radical Tradition.” In the century before Robinson began his work, black radical intellectuals looked to the intertwined histories of slavery and capitalism as they attempted to understand their present moments. For Kelley, these thinkers did not create the black radical tradition, rather, they “found it, through their work and study, in the mass movements of Black people.”<sup>5</sup> The black New Yorkers who are the subject of this thesis did not see their work in this way – they could not engage with Marx and indeed did not need to to understand their historical moment. Rather, black abolitionists in New York City represented a small and constrained but still collective movement of black thinkers who made arguments about and focused their activism on slavery, capitalism, and history. This thesis is an exploration of the intellectual and ideological world of black New Yorkers in the first decade after slavery’s legal end in their state. It is an attempt to understand how black New Yorkers related to and understood racial capitalism in the 1830s.

This thesis, like the petitioners who met in February of 1837, contests the “liberal claims that slavery is over and that political freedom has been fought for.”<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe argues that these claims have permeated the historiography of the abolitionist movement, and that studying the archives of liberalism will allow us to uncover the genealogy of the liberal notion of freedom. Certainly, abolitionists, black and white, fought for freedom in this liberal sense; they argued that all blacks should enjoy a political personhood in common with whites. But, as Manisha Sinha

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Kelley, foreword to *Black Marxism* by Cedric Robinson, xv.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, “History Hesitant,” *Social Text* 33.4 (2015): 89.

reminds us, thinking about racial capitalism should focus “our discussion of emancipation in the very specific radical tradition” that Robinson described. Sinha urges us, “when we write new histories of slavery and capitalism,” to revive “both the history and the ongoing political project of black liberation.”<sup>7</sup> Black New Yorkers hoped that slavery would be abolished in the laws of their country. But this alone was not freedom for them. Ordinary black New Yorkers held sometimes quite radical views on the meanings (and limits) of freedom and emancipation. Their thought and activism is, properly, part of the “ongoing political project of black liberation.”

Two strains of historical work inform this project. First, in the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> century civil rights movement, historians began to study black community, seeking to find the cultural roots of black identity and the historical precedents of racial activism. Often motivated by a desire to uncover early strains of black nationalist thought, community historians have opened up the field of black intellectual history. Ordinary acts of building community were often deeply telling of the ways blacks thought about race and politics. But in focusing on specific and geographically-defined communities, these histories have sometimes let readers to believe that blacks’ experiences in the North and South in the antebellum period were a world apart. Certainly, there were core differences between societies with slaves and those without. Still, black New Yorkers could not fully separate their understandings of their own experiences of racism and exploitation from those of slaves in the South.

A renewed scholarly interest in the intertwined histories of slavery and capitalism has done much to correct this understanding. The simultaneous study of slavery and capitalism is not new; Eric Williams’ 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery* looked at slavery as an economic

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<sup>7</sup> Manisha Sinha, “Reviving the Black Radical Tradition,” in *Race, Capitalism, Justice*, ed. Walter Johnson and Robin Kelley (Cambridge: Boston Review, 2017), 70.



institution in order to suggest that slavery ended as industrial capitalism took root in Britain and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The most recent work on slavery and capitalism “highlights the material and ideological convergence of capitalism and slavery in the dynamic emergence of long-distance markets for financial securities, agricultural commodities, and labor power.”<sup>9</sup> The technologies and ways of managing Southern slavery suggest that it was a modern institution, not a precapitalist one, and a closer look at the operations of Northern finance reveals that capitalists could profit in many ways from the insuring, financing, and selling of slaves’ bodies and labor. The best recent work on slavery and capitalism has taken as a starting point the dual status of slaves as person and commodity and gone on to ask after “the ways enslaved people ... recalled and responded to their monetary value throughout the course of their lives.”<sup>10</sup> What has been less explored is the way free blacks were still, because they were black, always living as both persons and potential commodities. Histories of slavery and capitalism have largely not considered the possibility that free blacks in the antebellum era understood the links between slavery and capitalism. Yet black New Yorkers not only called attention to these links, they went on to argue that their own experiences of exploitation were also a product of the interdependence of slavery and capitalism.

Black New Yorkers developed a critique of racial capitalism that meant that every aspect of their activist and community organizing work was also part of the fight against slavery. This was especially true in the decade immediately following the legal end of slavery in New York.

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1944).

<sup>9</sup> Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, “Slavery’s Capitalism,” Introduction, *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2016), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017), 2.

Walter Johnson, commenting on both recent historiography and the present activist landscape, has observed that the “discussion of justice in the United States today is inseparable from the history of slavery.”<sup>11</sup> Black New Yorkers likewise did not separate their own efforts to pursue justice from their understanding of slavery as a historical phenomenon. Blacks understood slavery and prejudice to be a result of the recent history of slavery, and, knowing that slavery was a form of economic exploitation, turned their critiques of slavery and prejudice into anti-market activism. In this way, they forwarded a notion of justice that included not only the liberal notion of freedom but an acknowledgement of the history of racial capitalism.

Lisa Lowe writes that “the history of slavery and freedom must also be concerned with understanding the conditions in which the concept of freedom emerged and was contested and, moreover, how the desire for promised freedom came to discipline and organize varieties of social subjects, which include those enslaved, those enfranchised, and those not or never to be, who are nonetheless represented as free or recruited to identify with this rubric of freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Following this guidance, it is important to acknowledge the many ways that the radicalism of black New Yorkers’ thought was also constrained. Blacks in antebellum New York were represented as free after 1827, and they were enfranchised in small numbers for a time (and for a price). It is important, then, not to overstate the radicalism of their thought. Free blacks in the antebellum period were deeply influenced by the ideals of the American Revolution, and often articulated their demands for justice and liberation as demands for the recognition of citizenship

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Johnson, “To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice,” in *Race, Capitalism, Justice*, ed. Walter Johnson and Robin Kelley (Cambridge: Boston Review, 2017), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Lowe, “History Hesitant,” 89.

and rights.<sup>13</sup> The desire for promised freedom, in the context of the transition to capitalism, was also in part a desire for capitalist accumulation, as this was one of the promises of the Revolution. Juliet Walker writes that, “despite their lack of political or civil rights, antebellum black lived in an age of ‘expectant capitalism.’ Moneymaking was pervasive, and antebellum blacks were not immune to the attraction of business or the profits that could be earned by establishing a business enterprise.”<sup>14</sup> Free blacks correctly believed that gaining wealth, and with it, economic independence, would help them limit the harm of white supremacy. But they also sensed that they could not eliminate it altogether. Black New Yorkers took pragmatic steps towards economic independence and political freedom, but they also looked further than this in the fight against racial capitalism.

New York’s free blacks were constrained in other ways as well. On the level of ideology, black New Yorkers had to avoid making critiques of Northern capitalism in ways that resembled the arguments of proslavery ideologues. In particular, as much as they wanted to draw attention to the links between Southern slavery and Northern capitalism, they could never elide the difference between the two, since to do so would be to suggest that there was nothing to be gained by abolishing slavery. Proslavery ideology, and inflammatory abolitionist rhetoric, on the other hand, could incite violence, and so black New Yorkers were careful to pick their battles. In the latter half of the 1830s, black New Yorkers lived with the raw and recent memory of the riots

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<sup>13</sup> Joanne Melish writes that, “to people of color, Revolutionary natural rights and antislavery rhetoric clearly promised an unambiguous state of freedom identical to that of persons who had never been enslaved. Slaves anticipated that once they were emancipated, they would be *free*, not merely ‘freed.’ To them, Revolutionary rhetoric promised not only autonomy but also prospects for civic participation and even leadership.” Joanne Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Juliet Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1998), 162-163.

of July 1834, which over four nights destroyed dozens of black churches, businesses and homes. The threat of violence was real and immediate in New York, and it is difficult to measure the degree to which this threat impaired black organizing and intellectual thought. Finally, emergent capitalism further threatened the ability of black New Yorkers to organize and and theorize, since abolitionism and activism were costly endeavors. Economic precarity characterized blacks' organizational experiences throughout the antebellum era.

Though free blacks in New York were always constrained by white supremacy and capitalism, the city was nonetheless a rich place of interaction between racial capitalism and black intellectual thought and political action. Slavery's legal end in 1827 was the culmination of a protracted process of gradual abolition that began in 1799. A free black community had taken root long before 1827 – though New York's slave population was also substantial after the American Revolution – and had a rich network of schools, religious organizations, and entrepreneurial efforts that were run by and catered to black people. Well before emancipation, New York also had an active and influential community of abolitionist whites. When the New York Manumission Society created the African Free School in 1787, they were in effect creating several generations of black leaders in New York, as the school's graduates went on to become the city's black ministers, businessmen and activists.<sup>15</sup> By the 1830s New York City also housed two prominent abolitionist organizations: the *Colored American* and the New York Committee of Vigilance. The *Colored American* began as the *Weekly Advocate* in 1837, a newspaper founded by three black ministers who promised to be a Christian voice for black abolitionism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004), 132.

<sup>16</sup> This thesis is in some ways an extended literary study of the *Colored American*; that paper is the most sustained source of information on the thought and activism of black New Yorkers during the period it was published. The *Colored American* on its own is worthy of more

The paper quickly changed its name to the *Colored American* and was distributed widely until it published its final issue in 1841. In 1835, the New York Committee of Vigilance met for the first time in pursuit of a “practical abolition.” For this interracial group of abolitionists, practical abolition meant freeing slaves who were brought to New York and preventing kidnapers from bringing blacks in New York to slavery in the South. The Vigilance Committee was an early iteration of the Underground Railroad, and its focus on fugitive slaves brought the antislavery fight close to the lives of black New Yorkers. New York City was a city of prolific and educated free blacks who understood that slavery was always relevant and insisted that it be proximate.

New York was also one of the centers of the market revolution, a term that Charles Sellers used to describe the social transformations that accompanied increases in the quantity and distance of capitalist exchange.<sup>17</sup> In New York, the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 vastly increased the amount of goods and people that could flow through the state, and an economic boom followed. The market revolution unsettled older local networks of exchange, and the expansion of wage labor markets altered the city’s social landscape. New York City was quickly becoming a center of economic exchange, and this fact brought it closer to the South and to the institution of slavery even as it gradually abandoned that institution within its borders.

In the chapters that follow, this thesis outlines the relationships black New Yorkers had with capitalism in the North, and then explores two different instances of consumption that

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scholarly attention; for four years it was a significant part of what R.J.M. Blackett has described as the “well-oiled and pretty efficient propaganda machine” that free blacks used to expose “the shortcomings of American society and to reeducate potential allies to approve and accept the condemnations leveled at slavery and discrimination.” R.J.M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 13.

<sup>17</sup>, Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991).

linked these experiences to the South: blacks' consumption of leisure and of domestic goods, and Southern slaveholders' acquisition of slaves in the North. Taken together, these chapters argue that much of the reform activism of black New Yorkers can be understood as opposed to market capitalism, and that this opposition was itself constrained by market capitalism.

Chapter One, "The Spirit of Slavery," looks at the ways black New Yorkers developed a specific idea of "prejudice" that connected their experiences of white supremacy to slavery and economic exploitation. Contrary to historians who have argued that "prejudice" was a market-based concept that did not understand the ways capitalism hampered black freedom struggles, the activism of black New Yorkers in the name of combatting "prejudice" was quite often ideologically opposed to market capitalism. Further, this activism was always also calculated to bring about the end of slavery, a connection that further bolstered the economic critiques at the heart of black activism.

Chapter Two, "Money and Influence," takes the example of the free produce movement to explore the economic rationale behind black respectability politics. The free produce movement argued that abstention from the goods produced by slave labor would both build black wealth and deny slavery the capital it needed to survive. When black reformers sought to police the personal lives of other black New Yorkers, then, they were hoping to control their economic activities. They did so knowing that the way blacks spent their money could be either useful or damaging to the fight against slavery. Respectability politics provided a framework for understanding black consumers' role in the market economy, and black reformers hoped to leverage their economic position against slavery.

Chapter Three, "The Frail Tenure of Liberty," considers the practice of kidnapping and black New Yorkers' responses to the distressing uptick in kidnappings in the 1830s. Black New

Yorkers understood kidnapping as an issue of economic justice, and they challenged the ties between Southern slaveholders and city officials that permitted the practice. The Vigilance Committee's direct confrontation of kidnappers was one of the most effective ways of challenging both Southern slavery and the market economy that supported it. But the Vigilance Committee's public tactics made it vulnerable, and a costly libel suit exposed the economic precarity of black abolitionist organizations and the difficulty blacks in the city had of presenting a unified front. Black New Yorkers were personally threatened by Northern capitalists' interest in Southern slavery, and opposing this alliance could be costly.

This thesis hopes to uncover the ideological work that black New Yorkers did as they sought to advance their own communities and end slavery. Black activists understood the scope and nature of their experiences of racialized, economic exploitation more than scholars have fully recognized. They articulated their hopes for a fuller freedom than the law could give them. To more fully understand the interconnectedness of slavery and capitalism, we must look at the experiences of free as well as enslaved blacks. Their experiences of capitalism were closely related to slavery. And they understood the way their own lives intersected with slavery in ways that are still insightful.

This thesis attempts to describe a broad range of actors who in fact never shared a common ideology. Still, the term "activist" is useful, and New York's black activists, loosely defined, are the subject of this work. Manisha Sinha describes the "diverse membership" of the abolitionist movement as one "which gave rise to cooperation as well as to creative conflict across rigid lines of race, class, and gender that characterized early American society."<sup>18</sup> Following Sinha, then, black activists in New York were those leaders who worked to end

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<sup>18</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 2.

slavery, either through overt participation in the abolitionist movement or through focuses on community, like education or employment, who nonetheless combatted slavery as they did that work. To put so many black New Yorkers under the single term “activist” is to elide some differences. It is safe to say that most of these activists were radical abolitionists, in the sense that they, following William Lloyd Garrison, sought an immediate end to slavery and the granting of citizenship to blacks in the U.S. (unlike colonizationists, who sought to end slavery by removing blacks to another country). But historians have helpfully made other distinctions. Black abolitionists are often categorized as either nationalist, seeking autonomy, independence, and a separate racial identity; or as assimilationist, seeking to integrate with white society, becoming political equals and erasing racial difference. In reality, however, these distinctions are not always easy to make, and black activists in New York City borrowed fruitfully from both strains of thought. Historians have also focused on the antebellum black “middle class” or even the “elite,” in New York and elsewhere, to emphasize that the reform-oriented Christians who fought slavery also aspired to wealth and status. These people were often educated or performed skilled labor, and the activism of respectability is most closely associated with this middle class. Black workers, as Elizabeth Pryor points out, “also had a political consciousness and desired liberation, but did not necessarily believe that an adoption of middle-class respectability would deliver them from their poverty or social ostracism.”<sup>19</sup> Leslie Harris has described in detail the complex processes of class formation among black New Yorkers from the city’s colonial beginnings to the Civil War, and this thesis does not attempt to address class divisions in the same way.<sup>20</sup> Instead, in focusing on the written output of those explicitly concerned with ending

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Pryor, “The Etymology of Nigger: Resistance, Language, and the Politics of Freedom in the Antebellum North,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 36.2 (2016): 239.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*.



slavery, this thesis focuses on the middle class while also arguing that they worked in close proximity to black workers and that black workers were equal participants in the development of antislavery ideology in the city. Class tensions were, however, present, but it is difficult to discern a divergence of ideology within the written output of the city's black activists.

Finally, it is important to observe that the black activists whose words are recounted here were almost exclusively men. It has been altogether too easy for historians of antebellum black politics to focus exclusively and without comment on men, though women were active participants in the activist traditions of petitioning, meeting collectively, and assembling in public, and they were rank and file members of many antislavery organizations. But the limiting of formal education and access to printing and publishing, at the very least, meant that "the black public sphere had a masculine idiom." In New York, black "community leaders were groomed in a sociopolitical culture of manhood" that focused on the individual man's character and his relationship to the community.<sup>21</sup> This culture of manhood had more to do with the political aspirations of black New Yorkers than the various strategies they followed. As was true across the urban North, black activists "generally equated the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality, however it was carried out, with black manhood."<sup>22</sup> Manhood was indeed relevant as blacks opposed both slavery and capitalism. Slavery and the wage system both structured families in particular ways, and black men understood their responsibilities to their families in strict religious terms. Black manhood was further tied to wealth in a capitalist social world, and

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York UP, 2005), 124.

<sup>22</sup> Darlene Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, "Black Men's History: Toward a Gendered Perspective," in *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, ed. Darlene Hine and Earnestine Jenkins (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 31.

so economic precarity and aspiration had a gendered component as well. Slavery and capitalism both deeply influenced what it meant to be a politically active free black man in the antebellum and market North.

## Chapter One: The Spirit of Slavery

The 1830s were a pivotal moment for black New Yorkers. In the midst of both an expansion of organizational activism on behalf of free blacks and a renewed focus on abolishing slavery, black activists in the city hoped to make clear that their activism was always abolitionism. Working to improve the lot of free blacks was part of the work of antislavery, since it demonstrated the viability of legal freedom for blacks. But black activists also understood that the exploitation of slaves and free blacks were closely related, and that whites in the North and South colluded to profit from this exploitation. Black activists conceived of Northern “prejudice” in ways that leaned on the values of capitalism and the market revolution, but their concept of “prejudice” also understood economic exploitation to be market based. As such, black activists provided an account of black poverty and economic exploitation that was a deeper critique of capitalism than its reform-oriented strategy or rhetoric would suggest. At the same time, their most far-reaching critiques of slavery and capitalism were constrained because, superficially, they resembled proslavery arguments about the similarities between slavery and the exploitation of wage labor. Black activists focused on the labor struggles of black workers as often as they could in the fight against slavery, while still being careful to avoid equating slavery and the plight of free black workers. This is not to say that New York’s black activists achieved a class solidarity that embraced the intellectual and manual labor of black workers; as Leslie Harris has shown, it was not until the 1840s that black activists in New York turned to labor as a political identity and a pragmatic way of approaching reform.<sup>1</sup> Still, black activists’ analyses of slavery and Northern “prejudice” shared an ideological basis that centered education and employment as

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 218.

a labor-based approach to ending slavery and the constraints it placed on free blacks in the North.

In the first decade after the legal end of slavery in New York, black activists continued to build community, as they had done for decades, creating a number of organizations devoted to the city's free blacks. This institutional tradition in the city dates back at least to the founding of the New York African Society in the 1780s. African societies were numerous in the early national period, and they expanded the reach of the city's black churches in order to create community and organize politically. Early on, these institutions focused on building wealth within the community and attempting to head off the structural violence that could emerge from economic precarity. The New York African Society for Mutual Relief, founded in 1808, was an enormously popular example of this work, and inspired many similar efforts to consolidate members' wealth.<sup>2</sup> By the 1830s, a number of literary and benevolent societies emerged alongside these organizations, reflecting a reform impulse that was growing throughout the North.<sup>3</sup> Though blacks in the city were united by the recent history of slavery, there was an enormous diversity in the goals and focuses of their activism.

Also in the 1830s, abolitionism across the North found a new urgency. In 1829, David Walker published his *Appeal ... to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, a pamphlet that became the "most effective statement" of black radicalism in the era.<sup>4</sup> In less than a hundred pages, Walker urged readers to take an active stance against slavery, indicted the liberal "benevolence"

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Wilder, "'The Guardian Angel of Africa': A Financial History of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, 1808-1945," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 26.2 (2002): 67.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Wilder, "New York City: Civic, Literary, and Mutual Aid Associations," in *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations*, ed. Nina Mjagkij (New York: Garland, 2001) 516-18.

<sup>4</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 205.

of moderate whites, linked the plight of free blacks to the “wretchedness” of slavery, and insisted that blacks should pursue freedom and justice in the country they had “enriched ... with our blood and tears.”<sup>5</sup> On this last point, blacks in New York City came together with delegates from Philadelphia, Maryland, Delaware and Virginia to announce their opposition to colonization in what they described as the “First Annual Convention of the People of Color” in 1831.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they aligned themselves with “radical” abolitionists who called for the immediate end of slavery and the granting of citizenship rights to blacks living in the country. Most black activists renewed their focus on citizenship and manhood rights,<sup>7</sup> but at the same time other abolitionists eschewed political action or shifted their focus on colonization. The increasing popularity of black radicalism in the 1830s was accompanied by a fracturing within the abolitionist movement that made New York’s black activism both more urgent and more precarious.

The shift towards radical abolition in the 1830s has sometimes led historians to overlook the everyday organizational life of blacks in New York. A variety of organizations with different aims continued to thrive, even as prominent activists began to commit themselves more fully to abolitionism. The comparative paucity of attention given to the local activism of black New Yorkers, then, stems from the fact that, increasingly, this local activism was explicitly abolitionist. In the 1830s, black activism, whatever the primary cause, was also intertwined with abolitionism, and organizers understood the connection between their work and the goal of

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<sup>5</sup> David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America: Third and Last Edition* (Boston: David Walker, 1830), 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour* (Philadelphia: 1831).

<sup>7</sup> Walker’s *Appeal* was addressed to the “coloured citizens of the world” and insisted that black men were “MEN and not *brutes*”. “Manhood rights” became a popular way of describing the political freedom and equality that blacks sought. Walker, *Walker’s Appeal*, 35.

ending slavery. In some sense, this was inevitable, since every black organization that emerged in the 1830s shouldered the dual burden of working for free blacks and demonstrating to proslavery advocates that blacks could thrive outside of slavery.

The First Annual Convention of the People of Color in 1831 inaugurated a Colored Conventions Movement that grew and united blacks across the North in the following decades.<sup>8</sup> In this first meeting, which included five delegates from New York, the delegates focused on the moral improvement of free blacks, underscoring the importance of “education, temperance and economy” and devoting a large portion of their time to planning a college for the intellectual and vocational education of young black men.<sup>9</sup> Despite this primary focus on free blacks, they positioned themselves among the various antislavery organizations of the day and prayed “that the shackles of slavery may be broken, and our sacred rights obtained.”<sup>10</sup> Six years later, in 1837, three prominent religious leaders came together to establish the *Weekly Advocate* (later, the *Colored American*), the second and at the time the only black newspaper in the city. As a paper “devoted to the moral improvement and amelioration of our race,” the editors promised to advocate temperance, “Universal Suffrages and Universal Education.” Though these were classically reformist causes, they were also radical stances, since they proposed that all men were fit to vote and receive education. Further, though these causes focused on the city’s free blacks, they were intended as abolitionist causes, calculated to hasten “the speedy arrival of that period, when Light and Liberty shall be seen and felt in every section of this wide spread continent.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Howard Bell, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno, 1969). The minutes reprinted in Bell’s text, along with those of many other conventions, are also available at [coloredconventions.org](http://coloredconventions.org).

<sup>9</sup> *Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention*, 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> “Our Undertaking,” *Weekly Advocate* 7 January 1837.

Black activists did not see the plights of free and enslaved blacks as separate causes. Rather, they saw their activism on behalf of free blacks as also activism against slavery, noting in the *Colored American* that “the best argument which a northern man can urge for the abolition of slavery at the South, is the exhibition of a flourishing and happy community of free blacks.”<sup>12</sup>

Aware that proslavery ideology wanted to paint free black communities as failures, black activists faced increased scrutiny on their lives to demonstrate that blacks could and should be free. The scrutiny that proslavery advocates devoted to the lives of free blacks meant that black leaders wanted to advertise the morality, education and economic success of their most prominent ministers, scholars and entrepreneurs. It also meant that they had to provide an account of the widespread suffering of working blacks in a city that was abandoning its poorest. The new market economy made it harder for working blacks to find employment and prevented New York’s blacks from keeping their wealth within their community. Black leaders sought to simultaneously ameliorate the conditions of poor blacks and to explain their poverty as the result of white supremacy rather than black inferiority. Patrick Rael has argued that black activism in this period often adopted the values of the market towards these goals, “embracing the bourgeois value of ‘respectability;’ which promised to both uplift individual African Americans and place white Americans in a position whereby they would be directed by their own market interests to relinquish prejudice.”<sup>13</sup> By linking their arguments for moral and educational elevation to the end of black poverty, black leaders placed faith in the market economy to uplift economic actors based on merit, hoping that this elevation would subsequently stem the economic harm of white

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<sup>12</sup> “From the New York Observer,” *Colored American* 18 March 1837.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Rael, “The Market Revolution and Market Values in Antebellum Black Protest Thought,” in *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789-1860*, ed. Scott Martin (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 15.

racism. To the extent that they embraced market-based strategies for reform, black activists could not challenge the economic exploitation at the harm of white supremacy. Yet, contrary to Rael's argument, in fighting on behalf of working blacks as they fought against Southern slavery, New York's black activists insisted on the dignity of black labor and voiced a theoretical and moral opposition to the market economy.

Black activists did not see labor itself as degrading, even as they focused on respectability as a counter to the "degradation" of blacks in the North and South. Writing about black chimney sweeps in New York in the early national period, Paul Gilje and Howard Rock describe the ways even the most disrespected laborers organized themselves politically in ways that followed the values of the American Revolution. This example of "the desire of a group of aspiring African Americans to claim the rights of citizenship" highlights the ways blacks insisted that their work was valuable and dignified.<sup>14</sup> In the *Colored American*, one "Mechanic and Farmer" condemned the "false dignity" of a "young lady boasting that she never labored... as though ignorance of these matters was a mark of gentility."<sup>15</sup> Blacks were unable to survive without working, and in distancing themselves from the degradation of enslavement they did not attempt to distance themselves from work.

If black activists treaded carefully on the issue of black poverty and labor because they feared that it would contribute to the proslavery argument that blacks could not be free, they also were also wary of their proximity to proslavery when they critiqued the exploitation of free black laborers. Black activists always argued that the values of white abolitionists mandated that they address economic exploitation in the North. But at the same time, proslavery advocates argued

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilje and Howard Rock, "'Sweep O! Sweep O!': African-American Chimney Sweeps and Citizenship in the New Nation," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51.3 (1994): 530.

<sup>15</sup> "False Dignity," *Colored American* 18 March 1837.



that Northerner capitalists exploited workers in ways that might be worse than slavery.<sup>16</sup> In an editorial entitled “What is American Slavery?” the *Colored American* attempted to carefully navigate an intermediate position, arguing that abolitionists should oppose economic exploitation in the North while insisting that Southern slavery was in fact demonstrably worse and categorically different.

what are the essential principles of AMERICAN SLAVERY? Is it cruelty of treatment? We have many instances of cruelty exercised by parents towards children; by masters towards apprentices; – yet such treatment is not Slavery. Does scantiness of food and clothing constitute Slavery? How many of our citizens are obliged to fare poorly, and have scarce sufficient to protect them from the inclemency of the weather; yet they are not slaves. Is it to be compelled to labour without wages against the inclination? If this be Slavery, then are the convicts in your jails and penitentiaries, slaves.<sup>17</sup>

Opposing slavery was a task that required not only the demonstration of black respectability in the North but also one that attempted to end the conditions of slavery that persisted where and when abolition had already begun. But veering too near proslavery ideology could be dangerous. The popularity of proslavery ideology not only made the abolition of Southern slavery more difficult, it threatened freedom in the North. In New York, proslavery thought influenced the judges and jailers who aided slave kidnapers, and anti-abolitionist sentiment could erupt into violence as it did in July of 1834.<sup>18</sup> Black activists hoping to address economic exploitation were

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<sup>16</sup> In the 1850s, the sociologist George Fitzhugh argued that economic exploitation was necessary and that Northern “wage slavery,” motivated by capital’s tendency to exploit free labor, was a crueler form of exploitation than Southern slavery. Though his extreme argument came later, it was “basically derived from those of the theorists who had preceded him and had been developing a general defense of slavery for decades.” Drew Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981), 18.

<sup>17</sup> “What is American Slavery?” *Colored American* 12 August 1837.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 194-198.

doubly constrained by those who saw black poverty as indicative of racial inferiority and by those who saw Northern exploitation as indicative of the superiority of slavery.

Blacks activists nonetheless chose to address black poverty, hoping both to oppose what they saw as immoral behavior and to explain its causes. Especially for those who placed a premium on moral reform, it was important to condemn “vices” like intemperance and gambling, and it was less important to distinguish between poverty, lack of education, and what they saw as moral failings. The *Colored American* published excerpts from a speech by S.S. Jocelyn, a white minister and abolitionist, for whom it could not “be denied that vast amount of ignorance, vice, and misery, exists in this city.” He argued that “it is no part of real friendship, to hide the causes of human wretchedness, but to point them out and also their remedies.”<sup>19</sup> Certainly, when those remedies were moral reform and education, black and white laborers alike embraced the values of the market rather uncritically. But because black reformers also sought to end slavery by demonstrating a respectable example of black freedom, they could not afford to write off the black poor as irredeemable or as moral failures.

Indeed, in the 1830s, black activists increasingly relied on the concept of “prejudice” as a way of understanding white supremacy and racism. Patrick Rael has outlined the centrality of this concept to antebellum black activism, and its connection to the politics of respectability. Prejudice, he argues, was the counterpart and hindrance to the liberal idea of “elevation” – that the (moral and intellectual) improvement of the individual would lead to success, prosperity, and status. As the “spirit of slavery,” prejudice prevented blacks from the natural process of elevation to which all reformers were dedicated.<sup>20</sup> It was important for black activists to both expose the

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<sup>19</sup> “Extracts,” *Colored American* 18 March 1837.

<sup>20</sup> Rael, “Market Values,” 22.

harm of prejudice and to counteract its sway. Black activists constantly highlighted the ways prejudice prevented blacks from obtaining work and education. At the same time, their analyses of prejudice at times seemed to endorse its logic. The notion of respectability was necessary because, “according to black thinkers, white supremacy operated by using the reality of debased black lives as evidence supporting its claims of innate and irrevocable black inferiority.”<sup>21</sup> If prejudice was based in the “reality of debased black lives,” the best way to counteract it was to remove any evidence that might suggest that blacks were inferior.

Looking at how black activists theorized white supremacy through the lens of prejudice tells us that they rooted their values in the market, but the concept of prejudice went much deeper. Prejudice was first and foremost an economic concept, since, in preventing blacks from obtaining employment and education, it prevented blacks from building wealth. In this sense, to fight against prejudice was to fight against the market forces that excluded blacks from jobs and training. Crucially, it was also a historical concept. Prejudice was not only “the spirit of slavery,” instead, it was the aftermath of the specific history of Atlantic and American slavery. Blacks understood that the economic exploitation that was produced by prejudice was a product of slavery. As long as prejudice hindered the economic advancement of free blacks, then, slavery would remain defended – an endless cycle of racialization and racial oppression. Blacks certainly operated within a moral and economic framework that followed the logic of the capitalist market, and they necessarily interacted with that market and hoped to use it to advance their causes. Still, to the extent that they understood prejudice as an economic and historical concept that was tied to slavery, their antislavery activism was also a theoretical and moral opposition to the market economy.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 31.

One of the ways black activists and intellectuals sought to understand prejudice was to look elsewhere for its presence or absence. By the 1830s, abolitionism was fixated on the desire to understand the scope and reach of slavery and emancipation. Black New Yorkers constantly referred to the example and shortcomings of British abolition, and, though they opposed colonization in large numbers, they pointed to examples of black communities in the Caribbean and in Africa to demonstrate the successes of immediate emancipation. Tours of Europe became important as abolitionists began to collaborate across borders, especially as higher education was largely closed to blacks in the U.S.<sup>22</sup> Returning from a tour of Holland and bolstered by conversations throughout Europe, the white abolitionist William Goodell gave a speech in 1837 that the *Colored American* reprinted and fervently endorsed. Drawing on examples across Europe and Asia, Goodell argued that “in countries where the colored race had not been enslaved, the prejudice against color was wholly unknown.” The editors added that “this prejudice was wholly acquired, and like other artificial states of feeling, was capable of being increased.”<sup>23</sup> Black activists also understood racial prejudice to be a direct product of slavery, and thus a specific, historically-situated, and short-lived phenomenon. Rooting all prejudice in the U.S. in its recent and present history of slavery, black activists precluded other accounts of black inferiority and demanded attention to slavery as they combatted injustice in the free North.

Just as they argued that racial prejudice emerged from the history of American slavery, black activists argued that black poverty in New York City had to be understood as rooted in the continuation of slavery until 1827. An editorial in the *Weekly Advocate* argued that the plight of

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<sup>22</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 339-380.

<sup>23</sup> “From Mr. Goodell’s Speech” *Colored American* 11 March 1837.

free blacks in the city had everything to do with history, and nothing to do with inferiority or moral failing.

Why is a larger proportion of the blacks than of the whites to be found amongst the most indigent and depressed classes, – those classes, of course, from which most crimes proceed? The answer is obvious. They have been slaves, or are the immediate descendants of slaves. With but a few exceptions, there were no free blacks in the country fifty years ago. Is it strange then, that they whose parents were so recently slaves, the most degraded, despised, and poor, and ignorant part of the community, should not have among them as great a proportion of the great, the wise, the rich and the learned, as they who are described from more favored classes, especially when we recollect that the prejudices which was always felt against them because they were slaves, has descended like a curse upon their free children?<sup>24</sup>

Black activists insisted on the proximity of slavery when they discussed racial prejudice, which “descended like a curse” to the descendants of slaves. This focus on the recent history of slavery, and insistence that slavery and prejudice be tackled together, constituted both a rebuke of racial prejudice and an urgent reminder that abolition alone was not sufficient to remedy the harm of slavery.

Blacks saw themselves as facing prejudice first and foremost when they sought to make a living, and so the practical matter of gaining access to education and employment was central to the work of New York’s antislavery activists. Theodore Wright, a black minister from New York speaking in front of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in 1836, urged listeners not to think “that we must first kill slavery, and leave prejudice to take care of itself. Why, sir, prejudice is slavery.” Finishing the work of abolition involved dismantling a prejudice that “has

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<sup>24</sup> “Free People of Color,” *Weekly Advocate* 11 February 1837.

bolts, scourges, and bars... in all the schools and colleges,” and in “the work-shop.”<sup>25</sup> Education and employment were always linked in these discussions of prejudice. At the fourth Colored Convention, held in New York City, a committee “reported that they deplore the existence of a formidable prejudice existing among the Mechanics of the country generally, against the instruction of coloured youth; and that a determined opposition to the employment of coloured workmen, on the part of Masters, and extreme reluctance on the part of journeymen mechanics, to work in the same shop with coloured men, prevails to great extent.”<sup>26</sup> Black New Yorkers’ politically free status did not change the fact that prejudice was widespread and prevented blacks from finding either work or the training necessary to do that work. Widespread prejudice, understood in these examples as a feeling shared among all whites, prevented blacks from the practical elevation that a college or apprenticeship might provide.

For these activists, prejudice was not simply a feeling but also a legal structure. Blacks were quick to point out the hypocrisy of whites in political power who spoke both of the citizenship rights of blacks and of the plight of New York’s workers while denying them rights and protection. Cornelius Lawrence, the city’s mayor from 1834 to 1837, famously denied the applications of black cartmen for licenses, arguing that it was “not customary.”<sup>27</sup> When challenged, he explained that white cartmen would resist violently to the introduction of black workers in their profession. In view of the race riots that engulfed the city in 1834, this fear was not unfounded. A fiery editorial in the *Colored American*, however, exposed the hypocrisy of

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<sup>25</sup> *Proceedings of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention* (Boston: 1836), 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention, for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour* (New York: 1834), 26.

<sup>27</sup> “An Example,” *Emancipator* 26 December 1839.

this statement from a mayor who attempted to pit black and immigrant workers against each other:

We do not believe, should the authorities license colored men as carmen and porters, there would be any serious difficulties whatever. But were the case otherwise, are not the authorities bound to see every citizen protected in his rights, and sustained in his honest efforts to get bread? – Surely they are. Any colored citizen, who with a respectful petition and recommendation in his hand, applies for license as a carman or porter, is entitled to them: and the authority which withhold them, alike violates the laws of the land, of humanity, and of God.

This editorial condemned the “spirit of injustice and slavery apparent in this inhuman measure of taking from the colored man the means of getting his bread,” and it situated black cartmen as citizens and workers, in conflict not with other workers but with a city that denied them rights and access to basic necessities.<sup>28</sup> Black activists and workers ran up against the limits of their embrace of citizenship rights, but also expected the city and state to protect them from prejudice. The spirit of injustice and slavery was one that blacks opposed in the political arena even with limited access to the vote, and they expressed their expectation that the next mayor oppose it as a way of respecting his constituents’ citizenship rights.

Prejudice influenced not only the actions of workers and of politicians, but also the economic decisions of capitalists. Recent historians have outlined the ways that “vast amounts of capital were stored in the bodies of the slaves.”<sup>29</sup> Southern slaveholders were enormously wealthy only because Northern financiers determined that this capital in bodies translated into economic power. These slaveholders were also consumers, and so Northern markets catered to them. In 1834 or 1835, as a white abolitionist newspaper reported years later, “the proprietors of

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<sup>28</sup> “Municipal Oppression,” *Colored American* 16 September 1837.

<sup>29</sup> Beckert and Rockman, “Slavery’s Capitalism,” 17.

the North River steamboats undertook to propitiate the travelling slaveholders by discharging all the colored servants on board their vessels, on the pretext that they enticed away the slaves who attend their masters on the free waters of New York.”<sup>30</sup> In this case, prejudice served the far more immediate purpose of protecting the property of slaveholders. The continuation of slavery required whites to erase and elide the relationship between free and slave labor. White capitalists and slaveholders colluded to keep these two forms of labor separate and invisible. They necessarily acknowledged the humanity of slaves here, knowing that the proximity of freedom and slavery would tempt slaves to free themselves. Black activists underscored that hiring practices were always political decisions, and that racial prejudice could be carefully calculated to protect the wealth of Northern proprietors and Southern slaveholders, as well as the health of the American slave system.

When and where blacks could find employment, they were paid less for the same work that whites did. The *Colored American* recounted an example of black man who was “always paid, (solely on account of his color) with three hundred per cent less than would be offered to any white man.” This injustice, especially because it devalued the labor of blacks in relation to white laborers, was seen as discouraging the “elevation” of blacks, and so black activists argued that this capitalist exploitation was in fact opposed to the values of the market economy. But they understood that this exploitation was not just demoralizing but violently harmful, giving examples of “several of our most talented men, who have been employed by our white brethren, and killed by the parsimony of their employers.”<sup>31</sup> The wage labor system allowed employers to exploit blacks in new ways, extracting the same labor from black and white workers while

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<sup>30</sup> “Employment of Colored People,” *Emancipator* 4 July 1839.

<sup>31</sup> “Our Friends Discourage Us,” *Colored American* 12 August 1837.



profiting from racial exclusion and exploitation. Black activists understood that prejudice did not just obstruct elevation, it also destroyed family economies and took lives.

As capitalism expanded and its forces became more abstract, blacks began to make other connections between racial and economic injustice. In one common rhetorical move, black activists began to oppose slavery on the grounds that it denied workers the wages they were owed. Though the wage relationship was a new one, it was sometimes justified biblically, as when the *Colored American* declared “the anger of God against those who ‘oppress the hireling in his wages, and turn aside the stranger from his rights.’”<sup>32</sup> In this view, slavery was the extreme version of the economic exploitation many blacks faced in the North, and this argument bolstered opposition to the two connected systems.

Still, black activists were wary of criticizing wage labor, since they risked embracing proslavery ideas about Northern capitalist exploitation. In a sense, they hoped to win the support of white laborers in the fight against slavery by decrying wage exploitation, just as proslavery advocates did. Black activists hoped that all laborers would see the “peculiar affinity” between Southern slaveholders and “the capitalists and would-be aristocracy of the North, to whom its laboring population ... hold substantially the relation of slaves to masters.” Northern capitalists, for their part, did not care “a rush for the whole matter. So they can make their cent per cent, they care not who are slaves or who are free.”<sup>33</sup> Slavery, to which Northern capitalists were indifferent, was “destructive to the rights and interest of the poor.” Black activists argued that white laborers needed to oppose slavery, just as they opposed capitalist exploitation in the North, out of self-interest. The affinity between economic power in the North and South “would have

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<sup>32</sup> “Ministerial Neutrality,” *Colored American* 19 August 1837.

<sup>33</sup> “Important to the Workers” *Colored American* 3 August 1839.

the manual laborer not only disfranchised, but sunk to slavery.”<sup>34</sup> Black activists hoped to find common ground with white laborers by drawing attention to the ways they were exploited by the system of wage labor, but they also claimed a political identity as “manual laborers” that opposed slavery in the interests of all workers.

A new form of exploitation that the market economy ushered in was the commodification of shelter and the raising of rents. Workers struggled to find housing that was affordable, and black people found this task especially difficult because their options were limited. In the 1830s, housing transformed suddenly into a commodity, and landlords reorganized housing in order to maximize profit. As Elizabeth Blackmar explains, “the power to command rents was also the power to reduce the value of wages and savings.”<sup>35</sup> Black activists were acutely aware of the relationship between the price of rent and the value of their own wealth. In the *Weekly Advocate*, the paper’s editors pleaded for subscribers, noting that “while rents have advanced full one-third, and every article of food and clothing has risen, we perform our duties for the same allowance.”<sup>36</sup> Black activists drew attention to the separation of those who controlled black wages and those who controlled their costs of living. By arguing that they were performing their “duties,” they argued that it was not a lack of industry or thrift but an inability to earn a living wage that constrained their ability to elevate themselves.

By the late 1830s black activists positioned themselves firmly against “overgrown landlords” and in solidarity with “starving tenants.”<sup>37</sup> In another editorial, the *Weekly Advocate* took these “liberal landlords” to task for charging high rents and forcing tenants to relocate. The

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<sup>34</sup> “Peril to the Free,” *Colored American* 1 September 1838.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent: 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 76.

<sup>36</sup> “To Our Friends,” *Weekly Advocate* 18 February 1837.

<sup>37</sup> “Miscellaneous,” *Colored American* 11 February 1837.

high rents in New York were neither reasonable nor accidental, they argued, but were the natural result of landlords' "habitual sin of screwing out something more ... from the hard earnings of the poor and laboring classes of Society." They presented market forces here as "over-reaching," acknowledging that "the demand vastly exceeds the commodity" without deferring to this disinterested economic justification about the naturalness of the market. Instead, they argued that blacks' rent problems were the inevitable result of "over-gorged capitalists enjoying a monopoly."<sup>38</sup> In the mid-1830s, white workers organized in large numbers in the General Trades Union, popularizing the idea that "they, the journeymen, and *only* the journeymen, had the right to judge the value of their labor."<sup>39</sup> In agreement with these labor activists, who argued that the value of labor should be determined by workers and not the market, the *Advocate* opposed the setting of rents not according "to the intrinsic, or reasonable worth of the thing sought, but to the necessities of those in quest of it." This was in fact a far-reaching rebuke of capitalism, and the authors warned that "we do not think the experiment will succeed."<sup>40</sup> Like organized white journeymen, the *Advocate* held that "faith in a natural, self-adjusting market in labor and products was absurd in a world of selfish competition, a world of capitalist robbery."<sup>41</sup> In their analyses of landlords, the *Advocate* began to suggest that the natural tendency of the market was to exploit the poor.

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<sup>38</sup> "Quarter Day," *Weekly Advocate*, 28 January 1837.

<sup>39</sup> Sean Wilentz writes that "by claiming their labor as their *own* property, by linking that definition to what they perceived as the new inequalities in the workshops, and by then asserting their exclusive rights, as wage earners to regulate their wages, the organized journeymen turned the most fundamental of entrepreneurial ideas – the very notion of labor as a commodity – on its head and threw it back at their employers. If property was indeed sacred, they reasoned, then their masters were guilty of theft, for their exploitation and plunder of their employees' labor." *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 242.

<sup>40</sup> "Quarter Day," *Weekly Advocate*.

<sup>41</sup> Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 243.

Black activists, then, understood that prejudice would not end on its own while so many were economically invested in it, and so they looked to build alternatives themselves. At least since the founding of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in 1808, black New Yorkers had worked within alternative and independent economic communities in order to protect themselves from economic exploitation. The *Colored American* itself constituted a sort of independent black economic institution, since it depended on subscriptions from abolitionists and ordinary black workers and sought to provide economic opportunities for black workers. When the *Colored American* sought to hire agents to gather subscriptions for the paper, they explained that “preference will be given to colored men” and “the best wages will be given.”<sup>42</sup> They also looked to coordinate black New Yorkers’ wealth in other ways. When rents rose, the end of a month would often mean that many blacks would suddenly be without homes. The *Colored American* attempted to coordinate black property owners and “undertake to procure good tenants for them.”<sup>43</sup> In many ways, the immediate way to address economic exploitation was to focus on economic independence, not an expectation that landlords or employers would change their ways.

Black activists also hoped to create long-term ways of securing black wealth in independent institutions. Throughout the 1830s, one of the most popular forms of economic activism among both white and black reformers was the planning and promotion of manual labor schools for young black men. The manual labor system was popular among white middle-class reformers because they worried that the middle class no longer valued physical labor. Black activists encountered this attitude, but largely did not have to worry that blacks were losing touch

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<sup>42</sup> “Agents Wanted,” *Colored American* 14 January 1837.

<sup>43</sup> “Homes, Homes,” *Colored American* 15 April 1837.

with work; still, the appeal of the manual labor system was for black and white reformers the allure of turning boys into proper men. This system appealed to black and white moral reformers at the same time as it offered vocational education to free blacks. Though it was never intended as primarily vocational, “the dual nature of education (manual and mental) inherent in the structure of the manual labor system” came to be understood as “a way around the exclusion of free black male workers from skilled apprenticeships in the North.”<sup>44</sup> In their focus on manual labor schools, black activists placed little faith in the ability of the market to uplift black workers. Instead, they saw them as a path towards independence from the market, as when the fifth Colored Convention explained the “necessity of encouraging manual labour schools, where our youths may acquire the necessary arts, and afterwards become proprietors of establishments, and impart encouragement and instruction to others.”<sup>45</sup> If prejudice explained the roots of economic injustice, the practical ways in which it was addressed were not hopeful that the market would promote justice. Black activists’ attempts to build independent manual labor schools suggest that they took market ideas and remade them as anti-market critiques.

The anti-market critiques that black abolitionists made had additional currency as abolitionist arguments simply because of the ways black activists and intellectuals understood racial and economic exploitation. The *Colored American*, unlike white abolitionist newspapers, “assumed that its readers would accept that slavery undergirded northern as well as southern trade.”<sup>46</sup> When they critiqued Northern capitalism, then, they also argued against slavery. Their discussions of the practice of speculation had a characteristically moral shape to them, as when

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<sup>44</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 177.

<sup>45</sup> *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour* (Philadelphia: 1835), 16.

<sup>46</sup> Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837*, 146.

they described the economic activities of financiers as “rash and senseless adventures.” But they understood that this rashness did actual harm when its value rested in the bodies of slaves. The “system of commercial gambling,” they explained, made “desperate throws at the risk of others.”<sup>47</sup> Arguments like these hinted at the harm that was inherent in the expansion of the market economy, and blacks argued further that economic ruin, as in the Panic of 1837, was the natural result of the sin of northern investment in slavery.

At the same time, black activists had to distinguish these arguments from those of figures like John Calhoun, then a senator from South Carolina (and before that Vice President to Andrew Jackson) and a vocal proslavery advocate. Calhoun, according to the *Colored American*, argued that, “by the contrivance of stocks, banks, and other devices of the law,” Northern labor and capital became “the slaves of each other.” The paper’s editors agreed that “the workmen are the slaves of the manufacturer, because he may diminish their wages below the point of adequate support,” and they cautioned that Calhoun would sanction the expansion of slavery “should capital ever be able to wield enough power.”<sup>48</sup> Still, in the face of these arguments, they were forced to articulate a preference for the “mutual dependance” of free labor. Even as black antislavery activists found an enemy in the Northern market economy, they knew that it was the immediate and pragmatic alternative to the greater evil of Southern slavery.

Black activists did not make a distinction between antislavery and community activism. Instead, they rooted local and national struggles in a notion of racial unity and a shared experience of economic exploitation. The market economy provided the ideological foundation of black activism and its theories of white supremacy and black elevation. But at the same time,

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<sup>47</sup> “Mercantile Life” *Weekly Advocate* 7 January 1837.

<sup>48</sup> “Aristocracy of Wealth,” *Colored American* 1 April 1837.

blacks made connections between slavery, prejudice, and white capitalist exploitation that made their reform activism at once of the market and against it. The market economy was a tool through which black activists hoped to end slavery and prejudice; at the same time their strategies involved critiques of the market. At the same time, they focused on a specific understanding of prejudice in order to clarify the ways that slavery and capitalism exploited black people without arguing, as supporters of slavery did, that slavery and wage labor exploited workers equally. Prejudice was an economic concept and a historical one, since it prevented blacks from building wealth and existed as an aftereffect of (and alongside) slavery. Black activists combatted prejudice, which excluded them from jobs, education, housing, and equal pay by creating their own alternatives to participation in the market economy. As the market economy expanded, it became harder for black activists to know it, yet they began to oppose both landlords and financiers on the grounds that they exploited the poor. Viewing this exploitation as tied to the exploitation of slaves, they suggested that the market economy was necessarily exploitative, and that racial prejudice relied on and was fueled by economic incentive.

## Chapter Two: Money and Influence

Antislavery in the 1830s was one cause among many in the middle-class world of antebellum moral reform. For many reformers, slavery was a “social evil” in the same way that the growing vices of urbanizing New York (intemperance, gambling, illicit sex) were. These problems were moral in two senses: reformers conceived of them as the result of moral failings, and they believed that their own moral behavior and influence were ways to address these failings. In an era of changing understandings of “separate spheres,” these movements for moral reform took pains to constrain the role of women in their families while simultaneously giving their private lives political importance. The Market Revolution was accompanied by an ideology that separated the women and the home from the market, but it also highlighted the ways private lives were filled with economic actions, from the ways young people spent their money on leisure to that most private act of shopping. Antislavery politics that focused on respectability, then, focused on the private lives of black people because they saw these lives as imbued with political meaning. But more than simply ascribing outsized importance to the moral behavior of free blacks, black abolitionists understood that blacks continued to interact with capitalism in their private lives. To live a moral life that was committed to antislavery, blacks had to oppose slavery as economic actors in the market North.

The example of the Quaker-led free produce movement suggests that the activism of respectability was more political than many historians have imagined. The free produce movement urged buyers to avoid lending their financial support to institutions that supported slavery, and in doing so linked the personal act of private consumption to the larger political institution of slavery. The fact that many black activists embraced this movement suggests that they saw themselves as powerful political actors in their capacity as market actors. Since the



electoral franchise had a high property requirement for black New Yorkers, and because buying decisions were metaphorically compared to the act of casting ballots, black activists' embrace of respectability politics opened up the avenues through which blacks could wage political war against slavery, rather than limiting the realm of politics to the personal and ineffectual.

Recent historical work has revised our understanding of respectability politics as an expansive political project, rather than a narrow set of restrictions on private life. As Erica Ball has shown, respectability politics underscored, but were not distinct from, the everyday activism of large segments of urban free black communities. Respectability activists shared their values among others and in private, rather than directing them from the elite to the masses in public displays for the sake of whites; and they were more properly a "personal politics" that pervaded every aspect of black activists' private lives.<sup>1</sup> Ball demonstrates that blacks sought "to live an antislavery life," and in doing so urges us to consider the political implications of their thought and action in religion, family and the market. And that market was indeed central to the importance of respectability politics in the era. Carol Faulkner argues that "the market revolution brought new urgency to the moral policing of the home" as products changed hands many times before they ended up in the home. As the market revolution reconfigured the roles of men and women in the home and at work, it "compelled women to do business with slavery."<sup>2</sup> Respectability activism was not divorced from the political world, instead, it was a product of the new social order of the market revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: Georgia UP, 2012), 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Faulkner, "The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.3 (2007): 386.

Black reform's embrace of respectability politics shared many of the gendered understandings of reform and vice that permeated white reform movements of all kinds. By the 1830s, reformers focused almost exclusively on the spiritual and moral needs of the poor, abandoning an emphasis on material support. In this way, reformers could see poverty as related to but not the underlying cause of a number of vices. Gendered notions of "influence," a key term in black and white reformers' writings, explained both the causes of spreading social ills and their solutions. Reformers hoped to harness the positive power of female influence, which relied on the "private regenerative quality of womanhood" as a means of regulating and reforming others.<sup>3</sup> But while they acknowledged that "female influence is powerful," they knew too that it could "be exerted either for good or evil," as an article in the *Weekly Advocate* put it.<sup>4</sup> Influence also explained how vice spread in the city, as reformers worried about "men's ability to tempt, deceive, entice, or corrupt other men, and thereby undo the influence of a woman's piety and her moral compass for their lives."<sup>5</sup> Black respectability politics in the antebellum period understood vice and reform in spiritual and individual terms, and so they were interested in regulating gender as well.

The importance of "personal politics," in view of this notion of influence, was a challenge for black manhood as well. When, following David Walker, violence and confrontation were gaining popularity as rhetorical ways of waging the fight against slavery, it seemed to some black activist men that "their reform actions jeopardized their standing as men."<sup>6</sup> When black activists focused on the spiritual lives of others or on the private economic decisions

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006), 2.

<sup>4</sup> "To the Females of Colour," *Weekly Advocate* 7 January 1837.

<sup>5</sup> Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 107

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

they made, they worried that they were abandoning the fight for manhood rights in a way that was unbecoming of their duties as men. At the same time, their constrained roles within their families made the policing of domestic activities a necessity, since, above all, the non-respectable actions of women would reflect poorly on the manhood of their husbands. This, too, was an effect of the market revolution, which for white families “threatened women’s traditional place in the republic by giving them access to consumer goods and undermining Quaker and Puritan belief in austere simplicity.”<sup>7</sup> To open up the political implications of personal politics, then, was also a way of maintaining the political order of the home and restoring the masculine striving of overt political action to the politics of respectability.

Black activists approached the activism of respectability like they approached all activism – knowing that it was part of the struggle against slavery. Blacks enlisted a number of arguments in order to explain the importance of moral improvement to antislavery activism. Historians have highlighted the importance of the white gaze in some of these arguments. Reform movements were not necessarily antislavery, and proslavery advocates could use the same notions of vice and social evils to malign black freedom. Proslavery sentiment was not a distant threat to southern slaves but an immediate threat in the free North, since it caused the city to be more tolerant of slave kidnapers and could even erupt into violence as it did in 1834. Blacks believed that female influence was necessary “to disabuse the public mind of the misrepresentations made of our character; and to show to the world, that there is virtue among us, though concealed; talent, though buried; intelligence, though overlooked.” Abolition, for black activists, could not be accomplished without moral reform, and indeed, “in any enterprise for the improvement of our people – either moral, or mental, our hands would be palsied without

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<sup>7</sup> Faulkner, “The Root of the Evil,” 386.

woman's influence."<sup>8</sup> Respectability was a crucial way of demonstrating the viability of black freedom.

Just as pressing was the need to win the support of sympathetic and wealthy whites. Throughout the 1830s white patronage was crucial to black activism, a fact that both constrained black politics and alienated some working whites. Still, this connection made much of the institutional work of black activism possible, from funding black papers to founding black schools. Blacks who emphasized respectability realized their precarious economic position and sought to secure financial support from whites. When a white-run newspaper, the *New York Transcript*, proclaimed that "the colored population are becoming intolerably base and wicked," the *Weekly Advocate* was quick to respond. They worried that this perception had "a direct and fatal tendency – not only to increase a spirit of mobocracy... but destroy those feelings of philanthropy" which supported the *Advocate* and other black antislavery efforts. Crucially, the *Transcript* understood the "wickedness" of blacks to be a product of poverty, which in turn was understood as the personal failing of being "either too indolent to labor, or too improvident to retain any part of their earnings." While black activists rebutted this claim by fighting for and providing jobs for free blacks, they also felt urgently that blacks needed to work hard and save money to ensure the patronage of wealthy whites. Further, they were able to urge respectable behavior without blaming blacks who failed to live up to these expectations. Countering the *Transcript's* charge that poor blacks were "criminal," the *Advocate* argued that the the police and the public should instead focus on the "midnight assassin or Kidnapper," a claim that connected this conversation about black poverty to one about the encroachment of slavery in the North.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "To the Females of Colour," *Weekly Advocate*.

<sup>9</sup> "Awful Calumnies," *Weekly Advocate* 14 January 1837.

Black activists encouraged respectable behavior as one of many ways of fighting slavery, not least because it encouraged sympathetic whites to give their efforts financial backing.

Still, the gendered nature of respectability made it also an antislavery politics that blacks practiced in their private lives. Erica Ball has argued that respectability was far more than a “public strategy” undertaken for its “potential positive impact on white audiences.” Instead, the antebellum black middle class, “like their elite and middle-class white counterparts, sought to act in a respectable manner in private as well as in public.”<sup>10</sup> Respectability was understood, for both blacks and whites, as an important cultural marker of proper manhood and womanhood. For black reformers, then, it was impossible to imagine a notion of respectability that existed only in public. When the personal politics of black reformers extended to their private lives, it was still understood, in both moral and practical terms, as opposed to slavery.

One of the strongest ways that personal politics supported antislavery politics was in theorizing and guiding blacks’ economic activities. Certainly, respectability politics was not an exclusively economic concept: one newspaper article warned against the many avenues of vice at which young black men were purportedly “injuring their health, wasting their money, and acquiring immoral habits.”<sup>11</sup> Preventing money from being wasted was one of several goals for black respectability politics. Still, the imperative to save money was important, and it manifested in characteristically gendered ways. Respectability politics embraced a domestic notion of family that in part assigned different economic roles to men and women. As Henry Hemphill, a character in an advice column, put it to his wife, “it’s my business to bring money into the house,

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<sup>10</sup> Erica Ball defines the antebellum black middle class as those “aspiring men and women looking for more ways to ensure that their behavior matched their sense of themselves as virtuous and respectable.” Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> “Literary Societies,” *Colored American* 5 October 1839.

and yours to see that none goes foolishly out of it.”<sup>12</sup> These bourgeois ideas about the middle-class family took on a different tone as antislavery stances, however, especially when black activists considered the impact of slavery on families.<sup>13</sup> The gendered nature of the respectable family was understood as both the restoration of a social order disrupted by slavery and a base on which to build the wealth that sustained black freedom despite persistent exploitation and prejudice.

Of course, for these reasons, black activists were all the more concerned with policing the economic activities of young men and women who did not live within these familial roles. Erica Ball has shown that black “conduct writers offered a series of economic and moral objections to urban forms of leisure, often blurring any distinction between the two critiques.”<sup>14</sup> Leisure, which encompassed a number of public spaces including the tavern, the theater and the gambling house, was doubly troubling because these were public, anonymous spaces (where, in particular, men and women interacted) and because they were places where money was spent unwisely, in the eyes of these reformers. Attached to these ideas about leisure were parallel recommendations about the material goods people spent their wages on. Black activists hoped that black people would wear homespun clothing rather than spend money on “perishable finery,” the inexpensive clothing and jewelry that was becoming increasingly popular as more blacks gained access to this part of the market.<sup>15</sup> The ways people spent their time in public places and their money on public appearances worried black activists, who saw in these activities both a threat to respectable gender performance and a way that blacks could lose the economic base from which

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<sup>12</sup> “Thrift,” *Colored American* 16 June 1838.

<sup>13</sup> Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life*, 62-108.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> “Appearance,” *Colored American* 1 December 1838.

to build community and fight slavery. Black activists not only spoke against these two issues simultaneously, they saw a link between the spending of time and money and their larger moral and political commitments.

The most direct connection between black wealth and black political power was the issue of access to the vote. Though the state of New York placed property restrictions on all its voters, black men voted in varying numbers in the state's first four decades. By the 1820s, however, emancipation was imminent, and in 1821 the property restriction for black men was raised to the high bar of \$250, while it was simultaneously lowered for white men.<sup>16</sup> While the influence of voting blacks nearly vanished, it remained an important goal for activists. Black activists at times even suggested that the particular situation of disenfranchisement in New York required a greater focus on personal behavior than would otherwise be necessary. One article in the *Colored American* argued that "if, indeed, there were no reasonable object for which we might save our odd cents, then we might do with them as we liked. But there is an object for which we should deny ourselves all except the necessaries of life, ... and that object is the Elective Franchise."<sup>17</sup> Blacks could only be powerful as a voting block if large numbers of ordinary people put together substantial wealth. Wealthy white abolitionists like Gerrit Smith at times focused on giving land to blacks so that they would qualify for the vote, but, for the most part, potential black voters needed to build this wealth themselves.<sup>18</sup> In this view, voting was the larger goal that permitted black activists to delve more deeply into the personal lives of black people as a strategic, rather than moral, decision.

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<sup>16</sup> David Gellman and David Quigley, eds., *Jim Crow New York: A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship, 1777-1877* (New York: New York UP, 2003), 73-200.

<sup>17</sup> "Appearance," *Colored American*.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 223.

Blacks understood their everyday lives to be full of political decisions. Aware that their lives were scrutinized by proslavery advocates, evaluated by progressive whites, and important to other blacks in the city, black New Yorkers hoped to imbue their personal lives with antislavery. The way to end slavery, as the *Colored American* put it, was to “LIVE DOWN prejudice.” By telling black men to “give your mite, prudently demean yourself, and establish a character for Colored Americans,” these black activists hoped that their readers would connect their everyday efforts to save money and act morally to the larger antislavery struggle.<sup>19</sup>

The free produce movement was one movement that took as a basic principle the need to “live down” slavery. Beginning in the 1820s, the movement enjoyed varying degrees of popularity during the antebellum decades.<sup>20</sup> Originally a Quaker-led movement, it urged consumers to spend their money on products that were not made by slaves. Whether speaking of sugar soaked with the blood of slaves or clothing that contained the fibers and dyes made by slaves, advocates of free produce emphasized the labor that corresponded to their spending and argued that consumer decisions could be made ethically or unethically.<sup>21</sup> This movement, while never widely popular, had a significant presence in New York by the late 1830s, and black

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<sup>19</sup> “What Can We Do for the Poor Slave?” *Colored American* 24 June 1837.

<sup>20</sup> The classic treatment of black abolitionists’ involvement in this movement is Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), 74-76. For more recent investigations of the free produce movement, see Faulkner, “The Root of the Evil,” and Julie Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2016). Faulkner demonstrates that free produce activists called for immediate emancipation before Garrison did; Holcomb explores the interracial and international dimensions of the movement over two centuries.

<sup>21</sup> Julie Holcomb notes that the rhetoric of “manhood rights” and of free produce shared a vocabulary about the political significance of black bodies. “Rather than contamination of domestic goods, African blood, sweat, and tears became the means by which blacks would claim civil and political rights.” Holcomb, *Moral Commerce*, 131.



activists and entrepreneurs embraced its ideas and attempted to incorporate it into their antislavery activism.

The ideology of this movement is revealing in what it suggests activists understood about the market and its relationship to their political goals. More than appealing to moral purity, free produce movement advocates reasoned that abolition would be possible if only they could “take the profit out of slavery”.<sup>22</sup> For these activists, the market was a political arena in which consumers had considerable power. This arena, as Lawrence Glickman argues, was not inherently moral. Instead, for free produce advocates, “the market was a neutral vessel that reflected the morality of its actors.”<sup>23</sup> More than this, activists sometimes argued that the quality of goods was a product of the moral nature of their production. An advertisement for a free produce store in New York sought to “prove the superior advantages of free labor,” though activists also argued that they would buy free produce goods even if they were of lesser quality.<sup>24</sup> In every respect, advocates of this movement argued that conditions of labor reverberated through the market. Blacks understood not only the political significance of the market but its capacity to inflict economic harm on people of color. For this reason, when reformers focused on moral education and improvement, they also saw this as a way of stemming the harm of an immoral market.

The flipside of the ways black activists acknowledged their political power as consumers was an admission that they were guilty of supporting slavery if they did not abstain from the

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<sup>22</sup> Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012), 23. *Buying Power*'s first chapter, “Buying for the Sake of the Slave,” places the free produce movement as pivotal in the long history of consumer activism because it was the first movement to conceive of consumer behavior as explicitly political.

<sup>24</sup> “Stores for the Productions of Free Labor,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation* 277, November 1832.

goods it produced. By making slavery proximate, this argument bolstered activists' claims that freedom had not yet been achieved in the North. An article in the *Colored American* explained concisely that "the guilty responsibility of slaveholding, rests with the consumer of slave produce."<sup>25</sup> This accusation of guilt had several functions. First, it highlighted the complicity of Northern whites who colluded with Southern slaveholders in economic ventures. Second, it compelled consumers to political action, since they were implicated in slavery. Finally, it offered an immediate course of action – abstaining from slave produce – as a way of engaging in antislavery politics. Together, this was a powerful way of connecting the everyday economic relationships of Northerners to southern slavery.

For black activists, abstaining from the products of slave labor was a political cause not unlike other approaches to ending slavery. Many blacks who were unable to vote found a political voice elsewhere – in where they spent their time and money. One article urged fellow "Manufacturers, Mechanics, And Laborers" to make their voices heard in several avenues:

Let us firmly resolve not to support any man as a candidate for office or station, possessing influence in the decision of the important question, be his other qualifications what they may, who is not the unequivocal, uncompromising advocate of equal rights. Let us worship at no altar, enter no temple where he who officiates as minister is the apologist for oppression. Let us abstain as much as possible from the use of the product of unrequited labor.<sup>26</sup>

Whether blacks were able to support political candidates through the vote or not, they understood that their support needed to be given wisely. In this sequence of recommendations, personal decisions about religion and spending were likened to the act of voting, though the author was

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<sup>25</sup> "Consumers of Slave Products," *Colored American* 22 April 1837.

<sup>26</sup> "To The Manufacturers, Mechanics, And Laborers of The United States," *Colored American* 11 May 1839.

aware of where greater “influence” lay. And in specifically addressing laborers, this article emphasized that all those who earned wages and had money to spend also had political power; that their wallet functioned in the absence of a ballot.

Free produce advocates not only spoke against purchasing slave goods but also necessarily recommended that consumers buy free produce. Accordingly, whenever interest in free produce rose, new stores emerged. Black entrepreneurs who sold free produce were heralded as abolitionists both because they enabled others to spend their money in opposition to slavery and because they were engaged in the project of building wealth. And if men worried about the feminine nature of their reform efforts, the creation of independent businesses was a quintessentially masculine way of entering the public world of the market in a respectable manner. Black owners of free produce stores understood and embraced their position as antislavery activists as they sought economic gain: E. Robinson advertised his store under the title “DEATH TO SLAVERY.”<sup>27</sup> Free produce both an abstention and a source of profit for black activists.

Black abolitionists were committed to advertising free produce and other black businesses. When the *Weekly Advocate* launched, it announced its intention to “make known our various and respective occupations in life, through the medium of advertising.”<sup>28</sup> Sure enough, it was soon filled with advertisements for “good groceries”<sup>29</sup> – “sugar, molasses, coffee, rice”<sup>30</sup> and other “dry goods”<sup>31</sup> – all free from slave labor. If free produce campaigns had a 20<sup>th</sup>-century equivalent, it might be the “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns of the 1930s, which also

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<sup>27</sup> “Death to Slavery,” *Colored American* 22 July 1837.

<sup>28</sup> “To Our Friends and Subscribers,” *Weekly Advocate*, 7 January 1837.

<sup>29</sup> “L.H. Nelson,” *Colored American* 14 January 1837.

<sup>30</sup> “Free Labor Goods,” *Colored American* 15 June 1839.

<sup>31</sup> “Free Labor,” *Colored American* 15 June 1839.

evaluated consumer choices on the basis of labor issues. The *Advocate's* focus on black-owned businesses, however, was a more nationalist approach, and as the positive correlate to abstention, it might more closely resemble civil-rights era calls to "buy black."<sup>32</sup> Attempting to keep wealth circulating among black people was a way of protecting abolitionism from the economic exploitation of northern whites. At the same time, when black newspapers published advertisements they also sought to present a respectable and manly workforce. The pervasiveness of advertisements for black shopkeepers, boardinghouse keepers, and craftsmen did not align with the prevalence of unskilled labor among New York's working blacks. Still, when black abolitionists focused on the more respectable segment of this internal network of black wealth, they encouraged all black people to think of themselves as active participants in the fight against slavery.

In fact, black activists made the same sorts of economic and antislavery arguments about spending leisure time as they did about spending money on products that directly supported slavery. Nowhere was this clearer than when antislavery and respectability collided in discussions of the theater. Blacks were uniformly encouraged to avoid the theater, both because it was not a respectable venue and because blacks were segregated in the audiences.<sup>33</sup> Black men in particular were urged not to visit a place where they were likely to be solicited by prostitutes, and women were similarly encouraged to avoid a place where such a comparison could be made. The theater was a threat to the sexual values of black activists, and this alone was grounds for blacks to avoid it.

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<sup>32</sup> In 1955, Carlos Cooks urged an audience of black nationalists to "buy black" as he spoke against hair conking. William Van Deburg, *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York: New York UP, 1997), 85-92.

<sup>33</sup> Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life*, 49.

Black activists further underscored the urgency of avoiding the theater by arguing that the theater was opposed to good labor and economic productivity. The *Colored American* told “master mechanics” that their apprentices would labor well for them “except when they drop into some vice by bad company or bad sentiments.” In order to ensure their apprentices’ continued productivity, these mechanics had to “persuade them not to venture themselves an evening in the theatre, nor an hour in the place of riotous concourse, nor one moment in that house which is the way to Hell.”<sup>34</sup> Like free produce advocates, black opponents of the theater saw a connection between morality and the economic and material quality of production. Simply spending time at these places of vice might be damaging to the economic power of black New Yorkers, and subsequently, to their commitments to antislavery.

The theater was also a focus of black activists because it was notoriously proslavery in its content and sensibility.<sup>35</sup> David Roediger has called New York City the “minstrel mecca” and a place where “the proslavery cultural politics of the minstrel stage was not in opposition to, but in rough congruence with, the stance taken by the city’s mercantile elite.”<sup>36</sup> The minstrel shows that frequently took place in the city’s theaters lampooned black interest in “bobalition.” These highly gendered representations of black people by the white working class suggested that white abolitionist money and thought had corrupted urban blacks. Black men “pretended to be white” by donning expensive clothing, but their improper behavior meant that this performance was

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<sup>34</sup> “Master Mechanics,” *Colored American* 15 April 1837.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Lott’s influential *Love and Theft* argues that the white theater had a more ambivalent relationship to slavery. Though it may be true that the “tonality” of white representations of slavery sometimes “brushed against the grain of proslavery ideology,” black activists nonetheless understood the theater as a place for the dissemination of proslavery thought. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 194.

<sup>36</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 125.

unmanly. Similarly, black women were portrayed as masculine and hypersexual, and representations of sexual interaction between white and black abolitionists attempted to make abolitionism unsettling and abject. On the minstrel stage, black people were hopelessly unfit for freedom, despite the ways their dress denoted an attempt to engage in respectable behavior and politics using money earned as wages. Black activists opposed the theater because it was harmful to the success of antislavery activism.

Black activists further understood that the theater was not only proslavery, it was a proslavery *business* – and minstrelsy was commonly referred to as the “Negro business.” Roediger writes that “rubbing on blacking *was* an accumulating capitalist behavior” and that “the substantial salaries of minstrel entertainers engaged popular attention.”<sup>37</sup> Blacks knew that the theater was a business that profited off of and perpetuated proslavery sentiment. To this end, they understood that attending the theater was a way of lending financial support to this proslavery machine. Like free produce advocates, they argued that blacks could not morally consume the entertainment of the theater. Instead, they understood that depriving the theater of a paying audience was explicitly an antislavery effort.

An article in the *Weekly Advocate* entitled “Uncle Ben’s Notions” hints at the ways blacks understood their critiques of the theater in economic and antislavery terms. UBN A typical example of conduct literature, the article described a conversation between “Uncle Ben” and “two fine intelligent girls,” enumerating Uncle Ben’s “objections to [their] attendance at the Theatre.” Though black activists hoped to teach men and women alike to avoid the theater, addressing two girls underscored the sexually corrupting nature of the theater. Of course, for Uncle Ben, attending the theater was first a moral failure, as “men and women who most admire

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 119.

the Theatre, and weep nightly over the fictitious woes of some stage-hero, or shudder at the scenic representations of disgusting vices, are often found among those who have no tear of sympathy to shed for virtuous poverty and sorrow in real life.”<sup>38</sup> So much of the force of antebellum black personal politics was its ability to make slavery an immediate and proximate suffering, and so the theater’s representations of blacks in slavery and in freedom were seen as distancing audiences from the real suffering of slaves and discouraging their political action.

Then, of course, the theater was a dangerous place because of the potential for sexual transgression. Theater was a place where “woman, virtuous woman, countenances by her smiling presence, the expression of language and gestures that in the domestic circle would be considered disgusting in the extreme.” These transgressions were far-reaching. Uncle Ben warned that “through, and by the influences of Theatres our foundations were laid, and our walls were reared,”<sup>39</sup> signaling the common understanding that immoral influence spread and was likely to corrupt. If the political base of black antislavery was not free from the influence of the theater, abolitionists argued, the actual efforts of abolitionists would be ineffective.

Uncle Ben continued by discussing the history and present fact of slavery, emphasizing its importance in discussing prejudice and oppression.

Need I give you another motive for avoiding the Theatre? It is found in the fact, that you are a part of an oppressed and down-trodden people, who must no longer consent to lend our aid to foes determined to exclude us from the walks of science. Therefore our money and influence must tell against prejudice, and in favor of such friends, and such institutions as look upon, and encourage our youths to be industrious and virtuous.

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<sup>38</sup> “Uncle Ben’s Notions,” 4 February 1837.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Like other writers, Uncle Ben argued that the fact that blacks were “an oppressed and down-trodden people” made their condition unique. Like the authors who wrote that blacks might responsibly spend their money on clothing if they also had access to the vote, Uncle Ben qualified his moral objection to the theater as dependent on the fact of racial prejudice and slavery. Then, in the manner of a free produce advocate, Uncle Ben highlighted the power of “money and influence” to “tell against prejudice.”<sup>40</sup> Money was in fact a form of influence for these activists, and black activists were aware of the economic component of all opposition to slavery. Their knowledge that the theater was a profitable proslavery business only heightened the need for black money to tell against prejudice.

“Uncle Ben’s Notions” reached a climax as Uncle Ben began to express outrage that “we are giving our monied influence to Theatres, where our color and ignorance are made the subject of merriment to a heedless rabble.” The turn to the phrase “monied influence” highlights the inseparability of money from the concept of influence and power in the market economy. Should, Uncle Ben asked, blacks be spending money and time at the theater while others attempted to fight slavery? “Never! While the clanking of a single chain is heard rising upon the wings of the southern breeze” was the answer. For Uncle Ben, it was unconscionable for blacks to be spectators of sentimental or racist representations of slavery on the stage while actual slavery was quite close to the lives of many free blacks. Slavery was urgent and could not be supported through support of the proslavery theater, in fact, slavery was so close that it could be heard in the breeze. Theaters, for Uncle Ben, were “no place for people of color, claiming to be in heart sound Abolitionists.”<sup>41</sup> The widespread popularity among blacks of the abolitionist cause

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



suggests that few would not call themselves abolitionists, and that preexisting political commitments would influence black peoples' decisions to stop visiting the theater. Instead, understanding the ways their personal decisions were economic and political ones as well, ordinary blacks grappled with the economic foundation of slavery as they attempted to chip away at it day by day.

## Chapter Three: The Frail Tenure of Liberty

Black New Yorkers were caught between slavery and freedom in a number of ways, but nothing more immediately threatened their autonomy and safety than the practice of capturing black people in the country and forcing them into slavery in the South. In 1793, Congress enacted its first fugitive slave law, authorizing local governments to seize fugitive slaves and return them to their owners. The practice was common throughout the country and throughout the antebellum period, and the law was strengthened with the more prominent Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Slave kidnapping, as abolitionists called it, was practiced in the North and the South, and perhaps no issue more forcefully impacted the lives of Northern free blacks and mobilized Northern resistance to slavery. Free blacks' legal status was always imperiled by the legality of slave kidnapping. If captured, free blacks could find the task of proving their freedom both costly and difficult. Because of this, white and black abolitionists used the term "kidnapping" to refer to both the return of fugitive slaves to captivity and the enslavement of blacks who were legally free.<sup>1</sup> The practice of kidnapping meant that slavery anywhere threatened freedom everywhere, and free blacks could never avoid the ways kidnapping made slavery an immediate and proximate injustice.

If kidnapping was the most immediate manifestation of Southern slavery in the North, it provoked the most militant responses to slavery. In New York, the black activist David Ruggles brought the fight against kidnapping to prominence in the 1830s. Historians have recently recognized his importance, not only as a forceful writer and a defiant leader, but also as an

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<sup>1</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 391.

important influence on the broader abolitionist movement.<sup>2</sup> Ruggles, born free in Connecticut in 1810, was a grocer and bookseller in New York City before he became prominent in the 1830s when he founded the New York Committee of Vigilance. The Vigilance Committee approached antislavery less as a reform movement than an active resistance, and took to the streets and the courts to expose and impair kidnapers in the city. For Ruggles, vigilant antislavery was a public and defiant performance of manhood that was quite powerful but also dangerous. It was the public and personal nature of Ruggles' activism that threatened his bodily and financial safety throughout his career; the latter part of this chapter explores a protracted libel suit which impaired Ruggles' activism and created a rift among the city's black abolitionists.

Ruggles and the Vigilance Committee pursued a "practical abolition" that not only expanded the movement's tactics but also underscored the ways that kidnapping was an issue of economic justice. Ruggles, along with both his supporters and detractors, understood vigilance to be a form of anti-market activism, and Ruggles highlighted the ways that both white workers and the state stood to profit from kidnapping. Indeed, Ruggles' vigilance activism was characterized by its constant interaction with the law, both because the carceral state aided and encouraged kidnapping and because the law could be used as a weapon against kidnapping. Despite the radicalism of his tactics, however, he worked closely with more moderate abolitionists as well. In the late 1830s, David Ruggles and Samuel Cornish, editor of the *Colored American*, formed a powerful alliance that underscored the intertwined nature of vigilant opposition to slavery and abolitionism as it was pursued through formal politics. When a libel suit placed unbearable

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Hodges' recent biography, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2010) is the first book-length biography of Ruggles; Ruggles plays a prominent role in Eric Foner's *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of America's Fugitive Slaves* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015) as one of the first participants in the Underground Railroad.

economic pressure on the two individuals and their respective institutions, the pair had a public and protracted falling out that. Ruggles and Cornish were constrained both financially and by their public performances of manhood in defiance of slavery. Abolitionists both fought against wealthy whites on behalf of blacks threatened by slavery and labored to secure independence and stability in the face of threats to their economic well-being.

The conflict between Ruggles and Cornish was also a conflict of manhood that exposed the vulnerability of masculinity in the era and the economic sustaining of abolitionism. Lois Horton and James Horton, following the categories described by Charles Rosenberg, suggest that the market revolution, which “disrupted local relationships and tied formerly isolated communities to distant economic affiliations,” gave black activists two choices for the performance of manhood. They could be either Masculine Achievers, individualist and interested in economic advancement, or Christian Gentlemen who rooted their manhood in community and spirituality. For Horton and Horton, David Walker’s *Appeal* gave blacks a third option: the ideal that E. Anthony Rotundo described as the Masculine Primitive. This third ideal focused on a physical and dominant notion of manhood rooted in confrontation and violence in defense of honor.<sup>3</sup> Ruggles’ vigilant manhood approached this third category, interested as he was in public confrontations of slaveholders and kidnapers. Ruggles had also been a businessman, and so his manhood was rooted also in economic achievement. Though Cornish was a minister who did embody a Christian manhood, he also tied his manhood to economic success and to the economic stability of his paper, the *Colored American*. Still, his spiritually-based manhood relied more

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<sup>3</sup> James Horton and Lois Horton, “Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America,” in *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, ed. Darlene Hine and Earnestine Jenkins (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 382-383.

heavily on notions of honor and chivalry, two concepts that came to define the pair's public fight.

In the 1830s, kidnapping was a newly urgent threat, both because freedom had been achieved in the state in 1827 and because the demand for slaves in the South was only growing. The economic depression that followed the Panic of 1837 could only have increased the vulnerability of black New Yorkers to kidnapping. At the same time, blacks sought legal protection from kidnapping. Two decades later, in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, kidnapping was not only tacitly sanctioned by the city – instead, the federal government mandated the city's cooperation. In the 1830s, the fight against kidnapping was enormously popular, but it involved both legal and extralegal activism in ways that would not be possible later.

Black activists emphasized that the legality of kidnapping was a threat to all freedom. One letter to the *Colored American* wrote that, “among all the atrocities of the slaveholding system, there is no one feature more abhorrent than the seizure and sale of persons known to be free.” Black people could never assume they would be understood or treated as free. Instead, if a kidnapper seized a black person and tasked them with proving their freedom, it might be “well nigh impossible to establish the fact.” Blacks might be sure to always carry proof of their freedom in public, but it was common for “the certificate of freedom” to be “violently taken away.” The legality of kidnapping, coupled with white peoples' disinterest or disrespect in black citizenship, regularly forced blacks to prove their own freedom “under disabilities of the most oppressive kind.” The author of this letter emphasized that the burden of proof was on blacks to prove their freedom, not on kidnappers to prove that they were slaves. The author urged “any man, who is not ready himself to be a slave,” to join the antislavery fight not just on behalf of

others but for their own safety and prosperity.<sup>4</sup> Kidnapping made the issue of slavery immediately relevant to free blacks in the North.

Black activists also widely understood kidnapping to be a market practice and one that threatened the wealth of free blacks. This economic argument could take a variety of forms, but at its root it understood that kidnapping protected white wealth as it imperiled black wealth. The editors of the *Colored American* issued a statement saying that they were, “as a general rule, opposed to making N.Y. a market, where the slave trader and his infamous agents can procure their price for the souls and bodies of our brethren.”<sup>5</sup> In this line of argument, slavery pushed the mechanisms of the market economy beyond their reasonable limits, and the paper’s editors painted kidnapers as economic actors who sought to exploit black “souls and bodies” for profit. In another editorial the *Colored American* stated that “We regard these Slave dealers as Cannibals, and we mention them with the same feelings as we would a gang of thieves or counterfeiters.”<sup>6</sup> Kidnapping was an economic crime, like robbery or counterfeiting, and black activists hoped that the state of New York would acknowledge its hypocrisy in permitting one activity but not the other. In this approach, activists pursued abolition by hoping to place limits on the reach of the market.

Kidnapping, as an economic crime, threatened the wealth of black people as well as the ability of black men to live up to ideals of manhood. When George Stewart, a black barber working in Brooklyn, wrote to his friends in the North from a jail in Louisiana, his story was published in the *Colored American*. Stewart’s friends gathered money and documents to prove his freedom, but without these connections he would have been sold into slavery. Philip Bell of

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<sup>4</sup> “For the Colored American,” *Colored American* 21 October 1837.

<sup>5</sup> “John Davis,” *Colored American* 27 May 1837.

<sup>6</sup> “Slavery at Washington, D.C.,” *Weekly Advocate* 14 January 1837.

the *Colored American* asked, “by what a frail tenure do we hold our liberty? ...when a freeman cannot even pursue his lawful business without being imprisoned on suspicion of being a slave, merely because nature has ‘embrowned his skin, or curled his hair.’”<sup>7</sup> Kidnapping made it impossible for black communities to build wealth when they could not pursue “lawful business.” Another story in the *Colored American* emphasized that when a man was kidnapped, he was unable to provide for his family, “who are dependant on him for their support.”<sup>8</sup> Free black men, unable to build wealth in their communities or provide for their families, could not be full men if their legal status was in question.

Proslavery advocates also understood kidnapping to be an economic issue, and so they opposed vigilance activism for economic reasons. *The Emancipator*, a white abolitionist newspaper, commented on the tendency of daily papers like the *New York Express* and the *New York Gazette* to attack David Ruggles “in consequence of the activity and success with which he has ferreted out some facts in regard to the infamous system of kidnapping that infests this city.” Proslavery advocates writing in these papers argued that the Vigilance Committee was stealing the property of slaveholders – an economic crime. Ruggles, however, was pained to follow and use the law whenever he could, a fact that infuriated some whites. When Ruggles had a kidnapper arrested in 1838, the *New York Express* came “forth with a furious denunciation of Mr. Ruggles, because his attempt to execute the law would embarrass trade.” (“Spirit of shopkeeping!” the *Emancipator* responded. “What next?”) The *Express* made clear that white capital was more important than the safety, freedom, and economic security of black people. Feeding off the distrust that many supporters of slavery had for the wealthy patrons of

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<sup>7</sup> “Slavery Depopulates the North,” *Colored American* 27 January 1838.

<sup>8</sup> “John Davis,” *Colored American*.

antislavery, the *Express* charged that “abolitionism is nothing but a pick-the-pocket business, by which traps are to extort costs, or bribes from captains and owners” of the ships that brought blacks to slavery in the South. Proslavery advocates turned the tables on activists who demonstrated that kidnapping was a form of economic exploitation, arguing that black people took advantage of antislavery sentiment for personal gain. This sentiment ran parallel to the broadsides and minstrel shows that lampooned black “uplift” by depicting black people as unable to properly use wealth or demonstrate respectable behavior. At the same time, in suggesting that the Vigilance Committee’s activities were “embarrassments of commerce,” the *Express* positioned David Ruggles and his activism as threats to market capitalism. And to the extent that Ruggles conceived of his activism as opposing the expansion of a slave market to the North, he understood his activism to be anti-market as well.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, it was whites who profited from kidnapping. Slaveholders clearly stood to gain from the imperiled status of free blacks. Their property in slaves was more secure if fugitive slaves were not protected in the North. And the fact that kidnappers did not have to prove that the black people they captured were in fact slaves effectively opened up a new market for slaves after the slave trade was abolished in 1808. But another group stood to profit from kidnapping: the kidnappers themselves. Kidnapping was not the work of wealthy slaveholders or their close partners, but instead of whites who effectively worked as day laborers to collect bounties or sell blacks into slavery. A letter to the *Colored American* lamented that the legality of kidnapping meant that “any white miscreant, who is in need of money,” could seize a free black person if they thought that they were likely to be unable to prove their freedom.<sup>10</sup> Kidnappers were white

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<sup>9</sup> “David Ruggles and the Daily Papers,” *Emancipator* 30 August 1838.

<sup>10</sup> “For the Colored American,” *Colored American*.



laborers, and the city and state of New York worked to make kidnapping a viable and profitable occupation.

On the other hand, the Vigilance Committee did not profit but instead found the work of practical abolition to be expensive. Ruggles was throughout his career a printer, and he, like the editors of the *Colored American*, depended on benefactors and subscribers to sustain his writing. In 1838 he started *The Mirror of Liberty*, a magazine that survived for only three years. The printed word was an incredibly powerful tool in the fight against kidnapping, since Ruggles could publish the names of kidnapers in order to expose them in the larger community and warn black people to avoid them. Similarly, the Vigilance Committee often relied on the readership of the *Colored American* and the *Mirror of Liberty* to write in support of the freedom of blacks for whom it was in question. This support could come from quite distant places, a fact that made the publication of stories of kidnapping doubly important for papers with a wide circulation.<sup>11</sup> Then there were the costs of legal battles, which included not only the labor of those familiar with the law but also, frequently, the payment of bail or jail fees. Kidnappers often were assisted by the jails of New York and other cities, and black activists worked hard to gather the money necessary to quickly ensure that black people would not be immediately shipped South and sold into slavery.

Black activists were constantly tasked with raising the funds necessary to ward off kidnapping. The public and personal nature of kidnapping also meant that ordinary black people were largely sympathetic and ready to assist in these cases, knowing that the victims of kidnapping could be their peers or family members. Antislavery required the economic mobilization of a large number of black people as well as the support of sympathetic whites.

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<sup>11</sup> “Reckless of All Law, Human and Divine,” *Colored American* 2 February 1839.

Though the Vigilance Committee was for the most part successful in raising funds, it was never secure and always sought to raise more money. The church was a primary source of funds for the Vigilance Committee and other antislavery organizations. When John Davis, an elderly black man, was arrested in New York City in 1837, several of black churches gathered the \$300 necessary to free him from jail. The *Colored American* noted Davis' "irreproachable moral and religious character" and argued that to do nothing would be "contrary to our principles as Abolitionists, and as Christians."<sup>12</sup> The next year, David Ruggles wrote in the *Colored American* that he was "exhausted by constant application for funds" for the Vigilance Committee. After presenting a case in which three black New Yorkers had been kidnapped and taken to New Orleans, Ruggles asked the paper's readers to "present the claims of humanity to your congregation on the ensuing Sabbath and solicit their pecuniary aid in behalf of the Committee of Vigilance, that these young men may be returned once more to enjoy liberty with their relatives and friends." An antislavery commitment, Ruggles argued, was felt "in our hearts and in our pockets," and went on to say that those who did not give money to the Committee "must have lost the image of God from our hearts."<sup>13</sup> Vigilance activism required the religious commitments of black New Yorkers to be translated into financial support for the fight against kidnapping.

The frequency with which black activists were forced to raise money to pay jail fees also suggests that the state profited, mostly at the local level, when it denied blacks full freedom. In this formulation, it is useful to think of kidnappers not only as white laborers but as part of an

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<sup>12</sup> "John Davis," *Colored American*.

<sup>13</sup> "Office 36 Lispenard Street," *Colored American* 4 July 1838.

antebellum carceral state.<sup>14</sup> Kidnappers could act as bounty hunters for Southern slaveholders, targeting individual fugitives to receive specific awards. But the state would also pay for black people if they were captured and their freedom was not proved. In 1837 a public meeting was held to gather money for Thomas Bryan, a young New Yorker who had been taken from the city to a prison in Vicksburgh, Mississippi. If the money was not collected Bryan would be sold, by the state of Mississippi, in order to pay for his jail fees.<sup>15</sup> A letter to the *Colored American* described this practice succinctly. Black men, the letter said, were, “without money, friends, or counsel,” tasked with proving their freedom from the confines of a distant jail.

Under these circumstances, it follows of course, the freedom of the man is not proved! How can it be? Neither is he proved a slave – but no matter. The State has done him some service, has seized, imprisoned, and detained him. And for this kind service the state must be paid – and how? Why, the poor victim of this civilized oppression, this canonized, yet hellish system of iniquity – must be sold to pay his jail fees!!<sup>16</sup>

Kidnapping was not extralegal or clandestine – it was “canonized.” The state compensated those who seized, imprisoned, and detained black people, and was able to compensate these people because black bodies were lucrative in the South. Slaves could no longer be taken from Africa,

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Hinton, writing about the expansion of mass incarceration in the wake of the War on Poverty, uses the term “carceral state” to refer to “the police, sheriffs, and marshals responsible for law enforcement; the judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers that facilitate the judicial process; and the prison officials and probation and parole officers charged with handling convicted felons.” The nature of incarceration in the post-World War II era differs in a number of ways: the prominence of parole and probation in modern incarceration is not mirrored in the antebellum period, and the criminalization of social welfare programs was a specific 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Still, the term draws attention to the network of kidnappers, policemen, jailers, and judges who colluded to threaten black freedom and expand Southern slavery. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015), 2.

<sup>15</sup> “Important Meeting,” *Colored American* 11 March 1837.

<sup>16</sup> “For the Colored American,” *Colored American*.

but black activists argued that a carceral state existed to create an alternative supply for the South's increasing demand for black bodies and labor.

Black activists attempted to point out the specific actors within the carceral state who profited from kidnapping. The same letter that decried the "services" that the state provided included an advertisement reprinted from a paper in Georgia advertising a man to be sold "at the Court House, in the county of Muskogee, for his jail fees," as the man could not prove his freedom.<sup>17</sup> The act of selling this man at a court house underscored for many black activists the collusion of the legal system and the slave system. In New York, abolitionists were well aware of the specific actors who profited from kidnapping. For three decades, Richard Riker, the city recorder, collaborated with other city officials, including Tobias Boudinot and Daniel Nash, in what abolitionists called the "Kidnapping Club."<sup>18</sup> Knowing this, *The Colored American* was proud to oppose the legal system when it supported slavery. Praising Ruggles, the paper wrote that he was "a person of most exemplary character; his enemies being judges."<sup>19</sup> Judges, jailers and policemen, as much as kidnappers, threatened black freedom and profited from Southern slavery.

*The Colored American* further charged that the nation as a whole was guilty of supporting slavery when it reprinted a lengthy letter from Sarah and Angelina Grimké. The sisters learned that, in Washington, D.C., "more than 450 persons had been confined in the public prison, a prison under the control of Congress, and regulated by its laws, for sale in the process of slave trade." They asked if Congress did not legalize this expansive domestic slave

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Boudinot claimed he could "arrest and send any black to the South." Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> "Read This," *Colored American* 14 January 1837.

trade, asking, “is no ‘price of blood’ thrown into the coffers of the nation? Somebody receives the jail fees – somebody legalized the commerce in slaves. And if Congress is not the body primarily responsible, where is the responsibility lodged?”<sup>20</sup> Black and white abolitionists charged that the nation supported slavery and profited in immediate ways from its continuation. Further, they pointed to prisons as tools that enabled kidnappers to supply the South with slaves. This allegation of national guilt had several consequences for the ways black abolitionists thought about slavery and abolitionism.

Black activists’ understanding of Congress’ complicity in Southern slavery led them to question the entire nation’s republican ideals. An editorial in the *Colored American* noted that “Free persons of colour, coming into the District are liable to arrest, imprisonment, and sold into Slavery for life, for jail fees, if unable from ignorance, misfortune, or fraud, to prove their freedom.” Those who sought to “study the contradictions of individual and national character, and learn by how wide an interval, profession may be divided from performance, should come to Washington.” Washington represented the ideals of democracy and liberty that were for many Americans a source of pride. But in supporting slavery, the District exemplified “the affinity between the democrat and the tyrant.”<sup>21</sup> Abolitionists were forced to fight against slavery on a local level, but they hoped that Congress could end slavery in the District. When they did not, black activists argued that slavery contradicted not only proslavery’s professed Christianity but its claims of national character. The limits of liberalism, as it existed in the nation’s founding, were demonstrated as the carceral state profited from slavery.

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<sup>20</sup> “Reply to Clarkson,” *Colored American* 26 August 1837.

<sup>21</sup> “Slavery at Washington, D.C.,” *Colored American*.

Because black activists understood that prisons and jails were proslavery weapons, they could simultaneously embrace the politics of respectability while dismissing popular and racist understandings of black criminality. In 1839, William Seward, the new governor of New York, penned a letter that included a statistic comparing the rates of incarceration among black and white New Yorkers. “The proportion of colored persons,” he wrote, “to that of white persons is 1 to 48. The proportion of colored persons in the State Prisons is about 1 to 6.”<sup>22</sup> Though the sociological interpretation of blacks as criminal appeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “free blacks in the colonial and antebellum eras were often defined as a race of dangerous criminals.”<sup>23</sup> The depiction of blacks as a criminal class threatened efforts to portray a respectable black populace and demonstrate that free blacks could actually remain free. But the *Colored American* carefully enumerated a series of rebuttals to demonstrate that they did not place much faith in crime statistics. In the first place, they argued, “colored people are more frequently arrested than white.”

If any one of us be seen carrying a heavy respectable looking trunk along the street, or if an officer happen to spy good furniture in our dwellings, forthwith the goods are marched off to the police office, the rightful owner thrown into “durance vile,” and an imaginary owner advertised for. The consequence is that we are arrested for all the crimes committed among us, and a few besides.

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<sup>22</sup> “Governor’s Messages,” *Colored American* 12 January 1839. This statistic was common in the antebellum North, and black incarceration rates were particularly high in cities. For a comparison, between 1794 and 1835, 85% of Pennsylvania’s black prison population came from Philadelphia, even though that city accounted for 35% of the state’s black population. Leslie Patrick-Stamp, in an investigation of the Walnut Street Jail, notes that “blacks were incarcerated at a greater rate than whites,” and that this “pattern of disproportionate sentencing remained constant throughout Walnut Street’s existence.” Leslie Patrick-Stamp, “Numbers That Are Not New: African Americans in the Country’s First Prison, 1790-1835,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119.1/2 (1995): 102.

<sup>23</sup> Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 306 note 43.

This point linked the hypervisibility of black bodies in New York City to the knowledge that whites (both the city and the “imaginary owner”) could use the carceral state to undercut black wealth and steal from black people. The *Colored American* continued, “for similar crimes, a larger proportion of convictions fall on colored, than on white delinquents.” This was true for several reasons. The day before, thirteen white men had been brought before the Court of Sessions. Ten forfeited their recognizances, which, as the paper explained, allowed them to escape “conviction by means of money.” Black activists understood the interdependence of black poverty and black incarceration. Finally, whites found sympathy from the judge and jurors, as well as from the governor, who could pardon prisoners. Blacks knew that “prejudice and political contempt” had legal consequences as well.<sup>24</sup> Black activists knew that crime statistics were unreliable, since prejudice and wealth protected whites from a legal system that profited off the backs of poor black people.

Finally, in pointing to the power that Congress and the governor had in supporting or preventing kidnapping, black activists understood that vigilance activism was necessarily connected to formal political activism. The *Colored American*’s rebuttal of the governor’s crime statistic also claimed that the disfranchisement of black voters was primarily responsible for blacks’ unfair treatment in the legal system. “If we had VOTES,” the article argued, “the impudent myrmidons of the police office would pay more respect to our rights.” Indeed, disfranchisement, more than improper behavior, led whites to prejudice and the legal and economic harm that followed from it. “Give him a VOTE, and ‘the big thievish looking negro’ will become ‘an honest man of prepossessing appearance, whom nothing but the most pressing

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<sup>24</sup> “Governor’s Messages,” *Colored American*.

necessity had compelled to take a loaf of bread to appease the calls of hunger.”<sup>25</sup> Black criminality was for these activists not a fact but a social construction, and this article chose not to rely on a politics of respectability. Blacks did not need to behave differently in order for whites to treat them as the “honest men” that they believed they already were – they only needed to be granted the vote.

At the local level, the Vigilance Committee used the same institutions that aided kidnapers – the courts and jails – to attack kidnapping. In 1838, Ruggles discovered that the three men who were shipped to New Orleans had been captured by the seaman James Dayton Wilson.<sup>26</sup> Ruggles had Wilson arrested on “the charge of inveighing and selling as slaves free citizens of the U.S.”<sup>27</sup> He urged black New Yorkers to send him evidence that the three men were free, in the hopes of convicting Wilson. The next month, Ruggles learned that Thomas Lewis had sold the men captured by Lewis in New Orleans. Ruggles had Lewis arrested, and was “ordered to find bail in \$5000, in want of which he was lodged in jail.”<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the charges against both Lewis and Wilson were dropped. Still, it is significant that Ruggles and the Vigilance Committee used the tools at their disposal – the same institutions that threatened black freedom – in the hopes that they would adhere to a fuller conception of justice and prevent kidnapping. Though eventually unsuccessful, the temporary immobilizing of Lewis and Wilson was a victory in its own right. These partial successes prevented black activists from critiquing the carceral state at a fundamental level, since they also hoped to use it towards their own ends.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Graham Hodges gives an account of Ruggles’ confrontation of Wilson to emphasize Ruggles’ defiance of powerful whites. Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 127-130.

<sup>27</sup> “Kidnapping and Arrest,” 21 June 1838.

<sup>28</sup> “Southern News and Sentiments,” *Emancipator* 16 August 1838. See also “Arrest of Lewis,” *Colored American* 18 August 1838, and “Arrest of Slave Traders,” *Colored American* 23 November 1839.



In this sense, then, blacks could not argue that a carceral state existed to profit off of black incarceration, since they argued for their rights as citizens and hoped that a state of rights and justice would acknowledge their citizenship.

Black activists took the fight against kidnapping to the state level as well. The *Emancipator* and the *Friend of Man*, two white abolitionist newspapers in New York, reprinted David Ruggles' writing to illustrate the continued presence of "Slavery in the State of New York!" They urged the "honest farmers and working men of the interior and western New York" – those whites who labored away from the city and often far from large numbers of black people – to read Ruggles' writing. Dismissing the notion that white New Yorkers outside of the city had nothing to do with slavery or kidnapping in New York City, the *Emancipator* argued that no man could "ever go to the polls again, and vote for a member of Assembly who is not pledged to a law for abolishing all slavery in the state of New York."<sup>29</sup> Black activists pushed for new laws to be considered in the state, but they largely lacked the \$250 required of them to vote. Ruggles' accounts of his vigilance activism were crucial as blacks entered the formal political arena and sought to expand their legal rights, because they could not do so without the votes of sympathetic whites.

Samuel Cornish, a minister and the editor of the *Colored American*, led a successful campaign in the late 1830s to gain legal rights for black New Yorkers. Though most blacks in the state could not vote, a wide base of black activists set out to petition the legislature to expand the

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<sup>29</sup> "Slavery in the State of New York!" *Emancipator* 6 September 1838.

legal rights of black people in the state.<sup>30</sup> A public meeting in 1837 set out to clarify these activists' demands. They settled on three goals:

- 1<sup>st</sup>. – To grant a trial by Jury to persons of color, arrested as fugitive slaves.
- 2<sup>d</sup>. – To pass laws for the more effectual abolition of Slavery in the State of New York.
- 3<sup>d</sup>. – Praying that the right of suffrage be granted to people of color on the same terms that it is enjoyed by white persons.<sup>31</sup>

The second demand later became a demand for the end of an 1817 law that permitted Southern slaveholders to bring their slaves to the North for nine months. Three petitions collected hundreds of signatures each, and were sent to Albany.<sup>32</sup> The importance of placing limitations on kidnapping, the first of these three petitions, in addition to the close collaboration between Cornish and Ruggles in both the Vigilance Committee and the *Colored American*, suggests that even as vigilance activists took matters into their own hands and sought to make abolitionism “practical,” they understood their activism to be tied to formal politics. Cornish advocated for the passage of laws addressing all three of these issues throughout his career as editor of the *Colored American*. Ultimately, he won two victories: in 1840 fugitives were granted the right of trial by jury, and in 1841 the 1817 nine-month law was repealed.<sup>33</sup>

Some of the Vigilance Committee's less successful endeavors are revealing as well. Ruggles' vigilance activism hoped to contrast the labor that slaves performed with free labor, which was compensated with wages. To this end, Ruggles argued that enslaved people should be

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Newman writes that, for free blacks in the antebellum period, petitions were a “test” of black claims to citizenship. Richard Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York UP, 2008), 147.

<sup>31</sup> “Public Meeting,” *Weekly Advocate*.

<sup>32</sup> “New York Petitions to the Legislature,” *Colored American* 11 March 1837.

<sup>33</sup> Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 386.

compensated for the labor they did in free states. In one example, a man named James Trebout was held with his wife in slavery in New York for four years. The Committee “endeavored to obtain wages for these poor people,” suggesting that they were pursuing not only the end of slavery but a reparative justice that compensated blacks for involuntary labor. Unfortunately, just as Ruggles attempted to wield the market concept of wages in this case, Trebout’s owner produced a bill enumerating the “supply of clothing, and small sums of money” that had been given to Trebout and calculated that he had paid Trebout what he was owed for his work.<sup>34</sup> The market economy was a new arena in which Ruggles could contest the injustice of slavery, but the market was just as likely to justify slavery as it was to hold free labor as superior to slave labor.

In 1838 a slave named Charity Walker asked Ruggles for his assistance in gaining her freedom along with two other men, Jim and Jesse, held as slaves in a household in Brooklyn, in an episode that demonstrated the importance of wages as a rhetorical response to slavery.<sup>35</sup> Ruggles narrated his visit to the place Walker was held captive in his magazine, the *Mirror of Liberty*, and his account is indicative of the ways he and other black activists thought about manhood, wages and slavery. Ruggles began his account by responding to C.F. Daniels, the editor of the *New York Gazette*. Daniels called Ruggles an “insolent black fellow” and lamented that Ruggles had pursued Walker’s freedom. Walker, Daniels argued, was “is entirely incapable of doing any thing to maintain herself, and will of course, become a tenant of the alms house.” For Daniels and other proslavery advocates, slavery was a benevolent system that prevented blacks from languishing in poverty. Ruggles saw a connection between this belief and the supposed benevolence of Mrs. Dodge, who Ruggles confronted when he set out to free Walker.

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<sup>34</sup> *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance* (New York: 1837), 78.

<sup>35</sup> Graham Hodges gives an account of Ruggles’ encounter with Walker, but Ruggles’ retelling of the story is rich enough for sustained commentary. Hodges, *David Ruggles, 143-144*.

Dodge, believing that she was caring for her slaves, told Ruggles that “it is a hard matter to set slaves free at the South, so we have come to the North. Jim, Charity, and Jesse are as free as any body.” Dodge’s statement exposed the danger of white benevolence, since slaveholders could claim to be acting in the best interests of black people and adhering to ideals of freedom and liberty while in fact sustaining slavery and exploiting others. Ruggles and Walker both responded to Dodge’s claim. Walker replied that “You told me to say so if any body ask me, but you beat me as much as ever, missee.” Ruggles insisted that Dodge’s benevolence meant nothing if it was not accompanied with wages, telling Charity that if Mrs. Dodge brought you here to be free, she would not treat you ill; but on the contrary, she would be kind to you, and pay you wages.” Ruggles continued: “They are as free as I am; after remaining here nine months, they have a right to demand wages for every hour’s service they have performed in your family during their residence in this state.”<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding the likelihood that Ruggles dramatized this conversation, it is significant that Ruggles saw wages as a right that black people held as long as they labored in New York.

Walker’s responses to Dodge’s professed benevolence also gave Ruggles an opportunity to comment on an alternative notion of racial justice. Dodge told Walker that, though she intended for her to be free, Walker was “subject to fits, and will suffer if you leave me.” Walker’s replied: “Yes, I know I had fits from your beating me on the head, missee.” Though vigilance activism was a performance of a virile manhood, and Ruggles made a point to emphasize the story of the woman whom he was rescuing from slavery, Walker was described not as helpless or deferent but as an able defendant and adversary of her owner. Further, Walker’s reply pointed to the ways that black activists refused the claims of Daniels and Dodge

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<sup>36</sup> *Mirror of Liberty* 1.2, January 1839, 30-33.

that blacks would be poor if they were free. Walker argued that if she found it difficult to earn wages as a free laborer, it was a direct consequence of her enslavement and the fact that she had been beaten. Slavery, not racial inferiority, made freedom difficult for blacks. Ruggles took this a step further, writing that “if Mr. Daniel K. Dodge, this benevolent ‘owner of slaves,’ and dear friend of C.F. Daniels, pays her for two years and three months services, which are justly her due under the laws of this state, she will do better.”<sup>37</sup> Dodge could not claim to be benevolent while he refused to compensate Walker for the work she had done. Further, Ruggles’ insistence on this point indicates that he saw compensation not as an act of charity but as a debt owed to black people. Justice, for Ruggles, involved not just emancipation but the payment of reparations for slavery.

The public and masculine nature of these confrontations made Ruggles a formidable character and a strong leader, but his public profile was also a burden and a liability. Vigilant manhood involved not only confrontation and public accusation but an immaculate public character, so that Ruggles’ word could be trusted when he wrote of specific instances of kidnapping. Though Ruggles published his writings independently in many cases, he relied heavily on the *Colored American* in the first few years of its existence. The close collaboration between Ruggles and the editors of the *Colored American*, who were all ministers, indicates that Ruggles’ vigilant manhood was compatible with the respectable and Christian manhood that Cornish and his peers embodied. Similarly, Ruggles and Cornish did not represent a continuum of black strategy from nationalist to assimilationist, rather, they worked together knowing that the strategies they pursued were intertwined. Still, Ruggles’ risk-taking meant that the partnership of Cornish and Ruggles would be short-lived, since neither the Vigilance Committee

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

nor the *Colored American* had the resources to weather economic attacks in a period of economic instability. When the Vigilance Committee and the *Colored American* were together sued for libel after Ruggles accused a black boardinghouse keeper of kidnapping, the two groups fractured as they struggled to pay for legal fees and their eventual loss in court. The libel suit that ended the alliance between the *Colored American* and the Vigilance Committee demonstrated that black activists could not be both publically confrontational and economically independent and remain unthreatened.

Black activists in New York knew that writing publically against slavery was a dangerous business. The *Colored American* told the story of an “obscure but talented young man in the city of Baltimore” who, in the mid-1830s, “for using his pen against the cruelty of domestic slavery ... was mulcted in a fine, and unable to pay it, was incarcerated within the walls of a prison.”<sup>38</sup> The legal protection of the public character of other men threatened black activists who wrote and did not have money to pay the fines this writing incurred. The process of first imposing heavy fines on black people and then incarcerating them for their inability to pay was one of the enduring characteristics of the carceral state.<sup>39</sup> In imposing heavy fines, city and state governments hoped to silence black activists by threatening their already precarious economic positions.

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<sup>38</sup> “Mr. Vogelsang’s Address,” *Colored American* 15 March 1838.

<sup>39</sup> After the Civil War, Southern legislators created Black Codes to target blacks with fines for small crimes, then selling them into forced labor when they could not pay. David Oshinsky, “Worse than Slavery”: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Paperbacks, 1997), 11-30. In 2015, the Department of Justice found that the police department in Ferguson, Missouri issued arrest warrants – disproportionately to black people – “almost exclusively for the purpose of compelling payment through the threat of incarceration.” United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* (2015), 55.

Though Ruggles, in writing publically and freely, knowingly took on a risk that others avoided, he received widespread support among New York City's black activists. The *Colored American* frequently prefaced his contributions to the paper with praise, calling him "one of our most worthy and useful fellow-labourers in the common cause of Human Freedom." Importantly, the paper's affirmation of his character served to make Ruggles' writing credible. Ruggles' writing on kidnapping led the editors of the paper to pose the following:

If the statements of our brother be true, (and we have no reason to disbelieve them, nor have we ever yet seen his various allegations authoritatively denied,) we may well ask the important question, without fear of offence to any set of men, what opinion are we to form of the manners in which our Laws are administered; and what language shall we adopt in portraying the manly conduct of such characters as reside among us?"<sup>40</sup>

Ruggles' manly and honorable character gave the *Colored American* "no reason to disbelieve him." On the other hand, the *Colored American* suggested that the "manly conduct" of kidnapers was not manly at all – it was cowardly and dishonorable. Ruggles used the language of manhood to sway popular opinion against kidnapers. In order to do this, he had to perform an honorable manhood that contrasted with that of kidnapers and made his word trustworthy.

Ruggles' honorable public character and the esteem in which the editors of the *Colored American* held him meant that his writings were published in the paper with little deliberation. In October of 1837, Ruggles, "satisfied as to its authenticity and truth," reprinted a letter addressed to him in the *Colored American*. The letter, written by a man named Joseph Gavino, accused John Russel, "a colored man and seaman's landlord," of forcing "three native Africans" into slavery and shipping them to New Orleans. Russel had these men work for him without wages,

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<sup>40</sup> "Read This," *Colored American*.

taking “advantage of his own brethren, who were so ignorant of the ways in a slave country.”<sup>41</sup> Ruggles spoke to the letter’s author, and, believing his story, made this case public knowledge and worked to free the three men, as he did with the Vigilance Committee in numerous other cases. The case seemed unremarkable, except for the fact that Russell was a black man, but even this detail did not receive special attention.

Just weeks later, the *Colored American* reported that they had “been together with our publisher and proprietor, sued for libel, by Mr. John Russel.” At first they dismissed the charge of libel, arguing that “If what we published was incorrect, our columns were as open to Mr. Russell as to any other man, to contradict the statements.” The *Colored American* believed itself to be an open forum for men to discuss issues relevant to free blacks, and the charge of libel suggested that its editors were engaging in unmanly and dishonorable behavior. They charged instead that “to trouble us in our innocency is unmanly in him, and mean in any gentleman of the bar.”<sup>42</sup> It was inappropriate and unmanly of Russel to seek legal recourse when he could engage Ruggles through the printed word. In this way, these activists used a particular notion of manhood to attempt to keep political conflict in the control of their own publication rather than in the hands of judges who were likely to oppose their abolitionist commitments.

As the *Colored American* began to prepare for what would be a protracted legal battle, they sought the assistance of many people. At a public meeting they invited “sea-faring men” to share their knowledge of “the course pursued by seamen’s landlords, relative to colored seamen, who are frequently shipped from this port by unprincipled men.”<sup>43</sup> This meeting invited readers

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<sup>41</sup> “Humanity Weeps,” *Colored American* 7 October 1837.

<sup>42</sup> “We Have Been Together with Our Publisher and Proprietor, Sued for a Libel,” *Colored American* 28 October 1837.

<sup>43</sup> “Important Public Meeting,” *Colored American*.



to think about the Gavino letter as part of a larger labor struggle against the economic exploitation of black sailors. At the same time, the meeting sought to raise funds for both the Vigilance Committee and the libel suit. The *Colored American* reiterated that the Vigilance Committee was “one of the most honorable, benevolent and important institutions existing among us. It has, if possible, stronger claims on the benevolence of the Christian and philanthropist, than any other organization, save the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> For over a year, Ruggles and Cornish refused to let this public and visible fight interfere with the unity of so many different corners of the city’s black community.

In late 1838, the *Colored American* and the Vigilance Committee lost the libel suit and were forced to pay not only their lawyers but several hundred dollars to Russel. The urgency with which they requested financial support indicates that the city was eager to silence the black press. In November of 1838 the *Colored American* reported that “by paying one hundred dollars, yesterday, we obtained 20 days grace for raising the other three hundred, and saved our printing establishment from the hammer of the Sheriff.” The loss and subsequent troubles with the sheriff anecdotally demonstrate that the carceral state – in this case both the judge who ruled in favor of Russel and the city’s sheriff – sought to support slavery and kidnapping, silence the abolitionist press, and profit, if it could, from those actions. The *Colored American* called themselves “innocent sufferers” and began to refer to their fundraising efforts not as opposed to kidnapping but necessary in order to “save our establishment.”<sup>45</sup> The paper began to publish the names of benefactors, along with the amount of money they contributed, in the hopes of finding more support; the names they listed included Arthur and Lewis Tappan and Gerrit Smith, who gave

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<sup>44</sup> “Libel Suit,” *Colored American* 3 November 1838.

<sup>45</sup> “Friends, Do Not Forget Us,” *Colored American* 10 November 1838.

small but significant amounts of money just a year after they had suffered large losses in the Panic of 1837.<sup>46</sup> The paper then began to report small donations – including a gift of two dollars from a man in upstate New York – in the hopes of gathering money from working blacks.<sup>47</sup> As the paper became more desperate for funds, these stories became more frequent.

By January of 1839, the libel suit had begun to fracture the city's black activists. Not only Ruggles and Cornish but Ruggles and the Vigilance Committee began to share their conflicts to the public. These men took pains to prevent fault lines from showing. When Cornish accused Ruggles of seeking to profit from his position as secretary of the Vigilance Committee, Ruggles wrote to Cornish that he had “written to a friend to sell the last scrap of property I have in the world.” “Deeply injured,” Ruggles suggested that he would respond more publically to Cornish's accusations “were it not for the fact that there is too much personal quarreling among us.” Ruggles knew that he and Cornish were most powerful when they presented a unified front against slavery. “For the sake of the cause,” Ruggles wrote, “I bleed in silence.”<sup>48</sup> The respectable masculinity to which Ruggles adhered required that he endure injustice for a greater cause. His claim that he bled “in silence” bolstered his claim to an honorable public character even as his actions seemed to have threatened the *Colored American's* existence.

In a reply the next month, Ruggles stated that he had resigned as secretary of the Vigilance Committee, and urged readers to “suspend their opinion ... until they are furnished with a full statement of the case, by impartial and disinterested persons.” Ruggles had learned that “the libel suit would be made a personal matter to affect my reputation,” and suggested that he had no choice but to defend himself. “Though the struggle will be Greek against Greek,”

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<sup>46</sup> “Friends, Do Not Forget Us,” *Colored American* 17 November 1838.

<sup>47</sup> “Editorial Notices,” *Colored American* 12 January 1839.

<sup>48</sup> “Agent of the Vigilance Committee,” *Colored American* 26 January 1839.

Ruggles wrote, “I shall feel it my duty to meet you on the ground that you have chosen for the contest.”<sup>49</sup> Abandoning his claim that conflicts of “Greek against Greek” should not be made public, Ruggles felt that it was his “duty” to defend his reputation. Cornish’s reply, printed alongside Ruggles’ letter, used similar language to acknowledge that the two were in conflict. Cornish wrote of Ruggles’ letter that “by the above it will be seen that our old friend, David Ruggles, seeks a quarrel with us, but this he certainly now, can never effect.” Cornish thought it unmanly for an old friend to turn, however ineffectually, on the paper. Assuring readers that the *Colored American*’s editors would remain proper men through the conflict, he wrote that “we have too much chivalry about us to fight our friend while prostrate on his back.”<sup>50</sup> Cornish did not need to engage with Ruggles on the level of ideology; Ruggles was already unmanned by his financial situation, which put him “prostrate on his back,” while Cornish and the *Colored American* retained honor and status.

It was wealth that determined who had power in this public conflict. Ruggles and Cornish both accused the other of using donations improperly. Cornish headed off this accusation by accepting an invitation to give “a full account of your receipts, and expenditures,” in the libel suit. Cornish carefully prepared a list of the *Colored American*’s expenses, which included, in addition to the \$220 judgment in favor of Russel, fees for postponements of trial, court charges, and sheriff’s and lawyer’s fees. Cornish thanked donors and urged readers to consider giving more, seeing “how much we are oppressed and pushed for the balance of the unrighteous demands.”<sup>51</sup> In response, Ruggles charged that he had been robbed of his salary from the Vigilance Committee. Months later, the Committee of Vigilance determined that Ruggles had

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<sup>49</sup> “Office 36 Lispenard Street,” *Colored American* 23 February 1839.

<sup>50</sup> “By the Above It Will Be Seen,” *Colored American* 23 February 1839.

<sup>51</sup> “Donations for the Libel Suit,” *Colored American* 2 February 1839.

taken funds from the organization and severed its ties with him.<sup>52</sup> The *Colored American* and the Vigilance Committee, both initially inclined to defend and stand by Ruggles, abandoned him when they found that they had to – and could not easily – pay the costs that Ruggles’ writing had incurred. In the wake of the Panic of 1837, abolitionism was pressed for money, and New York’s black activists did not have the economic security necessary to prevent such a public conflict from being tremendously destructive. It was ultimately not a difference in ideology or strategy but the constant difficulty of finding economic support for antislavery activism that caused a rift between two of the city’s most powerful voices.

The libel suit illustrated the ways economic precarity, more than racial unity or shared struggle, dictated the political activities of black men in New York. Russel, a black man, found that there was profit to be had in aiding slavery, even though it did not win him respect or prominence in the city. His position as a boardinghouse keeper allowed him to exploit sailors who did not have a social or economic base in the city, and his denial of wages to the three men Gavino wrote of went hand in hand with his role in their enslavement. His success in bringing a libel suit indicates that he was wealthy enough to engage in this legal process, and stood to profit further from his victory. Ruggles was only able to find economic support for his activism through his ties to institutions, and so when he made the *Colored American* and the Vigilance Committee vulnerable to economic harm they silenced him. Ruggles, who was not manly because he lacked economic power, found authority in his public writings, and so when these platforms turned against him he was quite powerless. The libel suit also indicated the tendency of the carceral state to support slavery and profit from that support. Kidnapping and slavery were effectively legal in the state of New York, and this would continue to be the case as long as black

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<sup>52</sup> Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 147.

activists were economically vulnerable and unable to fight those institutions in practice or in court.

Kidnapping brought into sharp relief the ways that state violence, Southern slavery, and Northern capitalism made for a very unstable freedom for Northern blacks. Kidnapping threatened blacks every day in ways that forced them to approach abolitionism directly. Thus, while they decried the state's participation and profit-seeking in kidnapping and the expansion of slavery, they relied on assertions of citizenship, petitions to the state legislature, and the wielding of the carceral state and legal system in the fight against kidnappers. Black activists knew that the state did not recognize the rights that they were promised, but always also had to rely on those rights to protect themselves as they sought greater freedom for blacks in the North and South. Still, differences in political approaches mattered, and, when accompanied by economic precarity and the turbulence this caused for meanings of manhood, black activists found that their antislavery work made them particularly vulnerable. This economic vulnerability only heightened black activists' awareness that kidnapping was an issue of economic justice, and that fighting slavery in that form pitted abolitionists against a growing economic alliance of state, capital and slavery.

## Conclusion

Black activists in New York City brought together a wide range of ideas and strategies concerning slavery and its relation to their own economic struggles. Indeed, given the diversity of backgrounds from which black activists came together to speak out and work against slavery, it is striking that they were able to present such a unified front. The market revolution brought with it new ways of structuring society and deepening its divisions, but it also brought slavery closer to the free North. It was this proximity, and the market-based ways of understanding society and politics, that allowed black activists to think about slavery as a system that involved also their own legal freedom and economic exploitation in the North. Black activism, then, was concerned not only with history but also with finding common ground with other “colored citizens of the world.”

In centering economic struggles and the economic impact of slavery and of antislavery work, black activists suggested that there was a common economic root that bolstered slavery and Northern capitalist exploitation. Black activists understood that the economic harm of racial capitalism permeated every aspect of their daily lives, but this also suggested to them that their everyday decisions could have enormous political importance. This was the deeper and more radical undercurrent of respectability politics: the notion that, as economically exploited subjects, free blacks could fight slavery by resisting that exploitation. The twin focus on history and economics also gave black activists a deeper notion of freedom: namely, they argued that blacks were owed a debt for both their labor in slavery and for the continued economic harm that racialization wrought.

At the same time, the social and political world of the market revolution limited the reach of black activists’ most radical antislavery politics. Proslavery ideology, violence, and economic

precarity limited the everyday lives of black New Yorkers and so also prevented them from doing political and intellectual work. At the same time, the twin promises of democratic freedom and rights and economic advancement did attract black activists. These desires organized black New Yorkers in ways that manifested themselves as class division and ideological conservatism. Too, the radicalism of black activists' economic conceptions of slavery and justice rarely altered their commitment to patriarchy, and this commitment only made antislavery work more difficult.

The simultaneous presence of slavery and freedom in the antebellum North was foundational for black New Yorkers' thinking and politics. Black men in New York looked to the American Revolution, to the social world of the market, and to their own understandings of gender and family as they attempted to define and pursue freedom. As the crises of slavery, capitalism, and freedom deepened in the following decades, these notions of freedom became both more important and more contested. The dramatic and final war against slavery erased some of these more radical calls for freedom and justice. Still, as they went about the everyday work of supporting others in their community, black activists spread and acted upon ideas about a deeper justice and freedom than had been achieved anywhere at that time.

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