


Freedom's Journal: The First Step Towards a Collective Black Consciousness

Emma Stave 

Introduction

Freedom's Journal was the first periodical published by free slaves during the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States of America; a statement which in itself points to a subject worthy of notice, especially considering the knowledge most of us possess about the extremely complicated nature of race relations in the United States. Yet, as noted by several scholars including Jacqueline Bacon and Gordon Fraser, who have themselves studied the *Freedom's Journal*, this historically significant periodical has practically been completely overlooked in academia as well as in mainstream culture. In researching the periodical, it has become clear to scholars that the periodical has been a forerunner of many of the more generally acknowledged newspapers such as the *New York Times*, and that it has been pivotal in establishing journalistic conventions, elements of which persists to this day. Some scholars have intensely tried to account for the more historical aspects of *Freedom's Journal*, whereas others have emphasized certain aspects of the literature – fiction as well as non-fiction - featured in the periodical. Others still have singled out a particular aspect to focus on such as the method of distribution. In this article, I will attempt to bridge the knowledge presented by various scholars on different aspects of *Freedom's Journal* with information that can be obtained by examining the periodical's contents, by asking the following questions: What kind of rhetoric was employed by the editors of the periodical, and similarly by other contributors? In what ways did *Freedom's Journal* distinguish itself from other contemporary periodicals? How were the African American women depicted in the periodical, and what was their role in the black communities? What impact did *Freedom's Journal* have on antebellum America? Did the periodical in spite of its short lifespan leave a lasting impression on the American society? And is it possible that we might learn something from the periodical in the present?

In this article, I argue that the periodical *Freedom's Journal* successfully contributed in creating a collective black consciousness by using a distinctive type of rhetoric emphasizing a collective ethos

amongst the African Americans. A collective ethos which expanded beyond geographical borders, temporal limitations, prevalent gender stereotypes, and burgeoning class distinctions within the black population. A collective ethos that strengthened opposition towards slaveholders and the colonization movement. Furthermore, I suggest that the periodical and the values it promoted had a lasting impact on the American society, as it successfully united the African Americans and established a rhetorical tradition within African American communities.

Freedom's Journal: The first African American newspaper

The first issue of *Freedom's Journal* was published on Friday the 16th of March 1827 in New York City. Initially, the weekly paper was edited by two free born African Americans: Samuel E. Cornish, pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church in New York City, and John B. Russwurm, a graduate of Bowdoin College. In September 1827 Cornish resigned from his position as senior editor, leaving Russwurm in charge of the periodical. *Freedom's Journal* was distributed in the North as well as in parts of the South – across 11 states in total – as well as in Haiti, England, and Canada. It is estimated that the periodical had more than 800 subscribers including both African Americans and white Americans; a figure which is based on the number of subscribers *Freedom's Journals'* short-lived successor the *Rights of All* had in 1829 (Bacon, "History" 1-6). Bella Gross argues that "there must have been many more" people who subscribed to *Freedom's Journal* than there were to the *Rights of All*, as "quite a number of the old subscribers refused to subscribe to the *Rights of All* because of their disappointment in the management of [*Freedom's*] *Journal*" (249-50). In other words, because some subscribers did not agree with the direction ultimately taken by *Freedom's Journal* in the wake of Cornish's resignation and Russwurm assuming sole editorship of the periodical, the total amount of subscribers is likely to have been smaller for the periodical's successor the *Rights of All* which was edited solely by Cornish.

Whether there were in fact 800 subscribers is difficult to determine, but either way, by modern standards, it seems as though the periodical's print run was exceptionally small. Yet Jacqueline Bacon's research on the subject suggests that it was a quite common size of circulation for any newspaper at the time ("History" 7). Furthermore, it has been suggested by scholars that the important thing to note is not the number of subscribers, but rather the amount of readers, as "actual readership was probably considerably wider than circulation figures suggest" because it was common for people to share their copies with others (Hutton 15). In addition, organizations such as the Colored Reading Society, public

libraries, and a number of schools either subscribed to or were given copies of the periodical, which generated readership beyond the registered number of subscribers (“History” 6-7).

The columns of *Freedom’s Journal* contained both domestic and foreign news, correspondence, opinion pieces, editorials, literary pieces including poetry as well as continued narratives, and advertisements. Furthermore, it contained information that had bearing on the daily life of African Americans, such as marriage- and death announcements, reports of crimes perpetrated against African Americans, and notices about the successes of distinguished African American people. Frances Smith Foster suggests that the “early [African American] periodicals tried to offer a smorgasbord of the practical and pedantic, scholarly and serviceable, informative and diversionary; in other words, they tried to unify the various states” (358). Jacqueline Bacon notes that most of the original material seems to have been written by African Americans with the exception of few articles written by white authors. Furthermore, she notes the common practice of reprinting material from other periodicals (“History” 8). Importantly, original content was always preceded by the banner ‘For the Freedom’s Journal,’ which was significant because “periodicals of that time commonly exchanged subscriptions and routinely reprinted material with little or no acknowledgement of sources” (Foster 352).

I now turn to the matter of the intended readership base for the periodical. Knowing who the intended audience was is significant, as it affects our reading of the periodical’s contents. Cornish and Russwurm noted in their first editorial, the “interesting fact that there are FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND free persons of colour, one half of whom might peruse, and the whole be [benefited] by the publication of the Journal,” which clearly suggests that they intended for *Freedom’s Journal* to primarily have an African American audience (“To Our Patrons”). Yet Berardi & Segady, among other scholars, have suggested that literacy amongst African Americans was miniscule at this point in time, and therefore they argue that *Freedom’s Journal* was primarily aimed at a white audience (96-97). As noted by Bacon, there were many African Americans with reading- and writing skills in northern cities as well as in some southern cities during the first part of the nineteenth century. Schools, mutual aid organizations, and literary societies were all pivotal in securing the education of the African American people (“History” 7). The number of African American readers can thus be asserted as having been relatively significant.

“We wish to plead our cause”

In her research on the history of *Freedom's Journal*, Bacon examines plausible explanations for the publication of the periodical at this particular point in time; “the expediency of its appearance at this time” as the editors phrased it themselves in the section “To Our Patrons”.

The first one of these plausible reasons being what Bacon calls “the Noah thesis,” an idea put forth by I. Garland Penn in 1891, who suggested that the periodical was created as a direct response to “an Afro-American-hating Jew, [who] made the vilest attacks upon the African Americans” (qtd. in “History” 2). Bacon asserts that there are problems with the Noah thesis, because “by emphasizing the attacks of one particular editor, we run the risk of decontextualizing Noah’s racist rhetoric” (“History” 2). In other words, by placing Noah’s racism at the center of analysis, we risk diminishing the racism that was generally prevailing at the time.

As an amplification of the Noah-thesis, it has been suggested by some scholars that *Freedom's Journal* was developed in response to the popularity of the colonization movement amongst white Americans or, similarly, in response to the increasing power of slaveholding interests in the United States. While Bacon similarly contends that “it is true that African Americans wished to have a forum to respond to bigoted rhetoric,” she at the same time provides a warning, as she notes that “it is reductive to suggest that racism was the *primary reason* the periodical was created,” as “this assumption diminishes the agency of those involved in creating the paper” (“History” 3). In this conception, the motives behind the publication of *Freedom's Journal* are to be found within the African American community, and not owed to various exterior circumstances.

Overall, there was a strong sense that the African American population had been misrepresented in the press. The editors stated, “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly” (“To Our Patrons”). In other words, the editors sought for the periodical to become the mouthpiece for the African American population. Bacon argues that several communal efforts were made leading up to the publication of *Freedom's Journal*: that “a social infrastructure” was created during the 1820s that could support a national newspaper (“History” 4). According to the editors, the newspaper was founded with the expressed ambition of advancing “the moral, religious, civil, and literary improvement of our race” (“To Our Patrons”).

The scholars who have studied *Freedom's Journal* in the past have had a tendency to narrowly focus on one of these possible reasons behind the decision to initiate the publication of an African American newspaper; an understanding which according to Bacon undermines the radical potential of

the periodical. She suggests that the periodical should be seen as part of a larger change within the journalistic climate in the 1820s during which several minority groups found their voice through print. Besides from the periodical currently under investigation, the period also brought on the first Native American newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix* (1828), as well as the first newspaper that advocated the rights of the working class, the *Philadelphia Journeyman Mechanic's Advocate* (1827). By extension industrialization played an important part in the tendency for marginalized groups to express themselves through print, as paper became a more common commodity which made the production and distribution of these newspapers more easily available (“History” 4). Cornish and Russwurm themselves were clearly aware of the lucrative economic prospects of entering into the newspaper business, which they noted in their “Prospectus,” “Experience teaches us that the Press is the most economical and convenient method by which [community improvement] is to be obtained.”

Changing the game: Journalistic ethics

It has been well-documented by scholars such as Jacqueline Bacon, Frankie Hutton, and Frances Smith Foster that African Americans were pioneers in terms of employing a more objective type of writing in their publications, which in the case of *Freedom's Journal* meant that the newspaper encouraged debates, and put great effort into presenting and examining both sides of a given case regardless of the editors' initial stance on the issue. Bacon suggests that “[i]n their encouragement of the free expression of opposing views in Freedom's Journal, Cornish and Russwurm were in advance of many of their white counterparts.” She notes that “[b]efore the 1830s, mainstream newspapers were expected to be partisan and to promote party interests rather than to provide a forum for examining various sides of an issue,” (“History” 9), while African American editors, according to Frankie Hutton, from the onset represented a notable exception to this established journalistic convention by advocating a press that was “nonpartisan” and promoted “fairness and truthfulness in reporting,” which consequently made these editors “harbingers of responsibility and ethics in the operation of their newspapers” (Hutton 36-43). *Freedom's Journal's* editors themselves stated,

Our columns shall ever be open to temperate discussion of interesting subjects. But in respect to matters of religion ... we would not be the advocates of any particular sect or party. In the discussion of political subjects, we shall ever regard the constitution of the United States as our polar star. Pledged to no party, we shall endeavour to urge our brethren to use their right

to the elective franchise as free citizens. It shall never be our object to court controversy, though we must at all times consider ourselves as champions in defense of oppressed humanity. (“Prospectus”)

Frances Smith Foster similarly places *Freedom’s Journal* within an established tradition of more objective reporting, which she asserts to have begun with the periodical *Publick Occurrences*, which was published in Boston during the seventeenth century, albeit that she argues that this periodical was more promptly subject to censorship than many of its successors including both *Freedom’s Journal* and the *New York Daily Times* soon-to-be the *New York Times*. *Publick Occurrences*, *Freedom’s Journal* and the *New York Daily Times* all “illustrate a similarity of avowed objectivity among early newspapers and magazines and a shared belief that objective (or apparently objective) reporting will make people think and behave more constructively about themselves as individuals and as fellow citizens” (Foster 350).

Female voices in *Freedom’s Journal*

Another way in which the periodical distinguished itself from its contemporaries was by including literary works by female authors. It was quite uncommon during this period for female authors to publish unless under a (male) pseudonym. Meanwhile, it could be argued that the female authors whose literary works were published in *Freedom’s Journal* were still somewhat anonymous as their contributions were usually published leaving out their surname. However progressive the possibility of revealing female authorship might seem for the time, it should still be kept in mind that none of the non-fiction pieces featured in *Freedom’s Journal* appear to have been written by females, which could indicate that female authorship was openly acknowledged when the overall purpose was to entertain, but not if the goal was to enlighten.

However, it is still possible that the African Americans’ perception of women differed in a constructive way from that of the rest of antebellum America. Yet this is highly doubtful according to Stefan Wheelock, who argues that African American women were subject to a “domestic double standard.” When attempting to contribute to the public debate, he asserts that there were two ways in which women could be perceived by their male counterparts: as sexualized objects or as being on the verge of the masculine, and thus in risk of losing their femininity, which was considered unseemly (Wheelock 78).

By contrast, Kimberly Blockett argues that women were important actors in terms of sustaining the communities dedicated to literacy, and the training of “future orators and leaders.” She suggests

that the communities were “originated by black men who were frustrated by the racist exclusions and paternalistic attitudes of the few societies in the North that were integrated,” but “within a few short years, the vast majority of new societies were organized by black women.” Finally, she asserts that in the period from 1828 to 1840 there were at least forty-two literary organizations in the Northern parts of the United States, “most of them female societies” (Blockett 123-24). In other words, it seems that women were important actors in terms of realizing the kind of communities imagined by the founders of *Freedom’s Journal*.

Frances Smith Foster suggests that in spite of their marginalized position in society as individuals, African American women as a collective exercised great influence over the contents of periodicals like *Freedom’s Journal*. In fact, some male readers eventually began to feel that the female influence on the contents of the periodical had become too strong. “Benedick” for instance writes in a letter published in *Freedom’s Journal*:

I have of late heard many complaining of your columns being so much devoted to ‘Love Ditties.’ ... I think it is nothing more than justice to dedicate a few columns of your excellent Journal to the amusement and instruction of the ladies ... [but] I cannot perceive what attraction political affairs have for them, what matter is it to them who is President, what do they care about the Tariff, if it do not change the marriage laws, the silk trade, or the importation of Leghorn hats. (“Woman”)

Benedick evidently assumes that women would have no interest in the more political pieces published in *Freedom’s Journal*, because he perceives such pieces as being beyond their level of understanding. Benedick’s contribution clearly demonstrates that there was an air of toxic masculinity surrounding African American women at this point in time, but perhaps more importantly it provides us with knowledge about a fairly overlooked demographic group: namely, the African American “ladies,” who “dressed fashionably in silks and Leghorn hats, and were quite aware that their luxuries, if not their necessities, were directly affected by international affairs.” Benedick demonstrates, clearly inadvertently, that some African American women actually had “sufficient understanding of politics, economics, and law to consider how they affected their marital rights and well-being” (Foster 355).

The issue published on the 1st of August 1828 which featured Benedick’s letter expressing his frustration about the increasingly “feminine” contents of the periodical “must have seemed to him a

summer's nightmare" as it was abundantly filled with this type of "feminine" content (Foster 356). Adding to injury, Benedick's letter was included among the marriage announcements and columns containing the words of frustrated bachelors desperate to win the attention of their object of affection; a seemingly strategical placement which reveals that either the letter was intended to be humoristic, or the editors sought to underline its ridiculous sentiments by featuring it in between just the type of articles it so strongly refuted.

It is significant to note that "[b]y 1827, when public education for men was scant and for women almost nonexistent, enough *African-American* women could and did read newspapers that their interests affected the papers' content" (Foster 355). The newspaper was not under any direct obligation with respects to featuring the so-called "feminine" content, which in turn indicates that it was done intentionally to include women into the community.

Self-improvement and moral reform: The antithesis of revolution and collectivity?

Frederick Cooper argues, in his journal article, that the main objective of *Freedom's Journal* was that of self-improvement among the free slaves rather than abolitionism or fighting for civil rights. He notes that implicit in the view that self-improvement would be key in terms of raising the African American people was "the notion that prejudice was a black problem - caused by their own deficiencies - rather than a white problem - the result of deeply ingrained biases and an oppressive social system" (617). He suggests "systematic analyses of disenfranchisement, school segregation and other discriminatory laws and actions [to have been generally] absent" (607). Cooper's claim seems correct in so far as the subjects of slavery, abolitionism, and civil rights are relatively rarely explicitly mentioned in the editorial content of *Freedom's Journal*, but disregards that all of these issues are clearly present in the subtext of most everything published in *Freedom's Journal*. As Kimberly Blockett notes, "the literature produced by free blacks of the nineteenth century, whether or not its subject was slavery, could not escape the context of enslavement. Slave ships, auction blocks, fugitives, and insurrections all served as an omnipresent backdrop" (116). Similarly, the struggles for civil rights of the recently emancipated African American population also served "as an omnipresent backdrop." By suggesting that the African American writers were not really capable of articulating a genuine criticism of the society that had perpetrated immense injustices against them, Cooper makes the African Americans publishing in *Freedom's Journal* seem completely devoid of revolutionary spirit, and of the urge to fight their former

as well as current repressors. Kimberly Blockett presents a very different view of the African Americans, as she suggests:

[F]ree blacks wrenched control of their literate expressions away from benevolent, and often paternalistic, whites. The act of publishing, independent of abolitionists, was an act of violent resistance – giving voice to those whom the country would prefer be seen, as in the spectacles of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Thomas Gray’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), and not heard. (117-18)

In other words, Blockett views the act of publishing independent of white Americans, and thus asserting the right to represent themselves, as the single most powerful expression of the African American population’s resistance towards white America. The editors of and contributors to *Freedom’s Journal* exercised the right to publish, and the right to express their opinion without actually being granted access to these civil liberties. Gordon Fraser similarly suggests that neither *Freedom’s Journal* nor its successor the *Rights of All* “promoted radicalism”, but importantly they “both promoted black unity” (270).

Stefan Wheelock argues that the ideas of self-improvement or self-determination advocated by *Freedom’s Journal* built upon sensibilities from the Enlightenment, which stressed that “equality and a shared humanity, individual and political agency, [rests] upon the individual’s capacity for reason.” Similarly, collective efforts to educate and “morally improve” the African American population were founded on the notion that “[i]f black writers could demonstrate, in a fairly sophisticated way, their capacity for literary expression, then they verified black humanity and equality and exposed proslavery arguments as spurious and unjust” (Wheelock 71).

Cooper notes that the editors of the periodical had far better circumstances than many other African Americans did at this point. They were educated, they were resourceful, they were, as noted by Cooper, “members of an elite” (623). As noted in the beginning of this paper, both Russwurm and Cornish were well-educated and resourceful men, which might indeed have meant that they were living under privileged circumstances far superior to those of most blacks at the time. However, it is not unusual, in fact it might even be considered common practice, to let the strongest members of a given population speak for its weakest members. In suggesting that they were members of an elite, there is the implicit accusation that they were removed from the troubles of their peers, and that they were

thus somehow not qualified to represent the black population as a whole. Blockett suggests that “these individuals [clearly] understood that they were in no way representative of the masses, [but still] they were often in the inevitable, yet highly contentious, position of speaking for them, a marginalized and oppressed majority of African Americans” (117).

In addition to pointing out the black leaders’ distinctiveness by noting their “elite status,” Cooper ascribes these leaders with seemingly selfish motives by suggesting that the emphasis on what he calls “white middle-class values” was sustained in order for them to “maintain their own position within the black community and to enhance their status within American society as a whole” (624). Yet the columns of *Freedom’s Journal* are abundantly filled with pieces expressing concern for, and interest in, their free as well as enslaved “brethren.” As noted by Fraser, the distinctive way in which the periodical was distributed also enforced solidarity, as both “*Freedom’s Journal* and *The Rights of All* were distributed to places in which free African American populations lived alongside slave populations, and the newspapers were consumed by communities of literate readers and often nonliterate auditors” (274). Thus, it seems that the sense of community that existed between African Americans might indeed have been stronger than any burgeoning class distinctions.

Cooper suggests that “the crusade for moral reform” demonstrated “a wholehearted acceptance of the moral values of white middle-class America” (616). Yet moral reform could just as easily have been inspired by the black church, an institution which had a very strong presence in black communities at the time, and arguably more immediate relevance to the formation of a black population. Kimberly Blockett suggests that “the black church [was] the institutional base for the intellectual, political, and social movements of the black middle class” despite many of the issues being dealt with having an increasingly secular nature (125). Cooper’s interpretation of the motives of black leaders during the early nineteenth century describes the African Americans as practically trying to mimic white Americans, but the way in which the African American communities were organized - be it religiously or educationally - was highly distinguished from any white communities at time. The way in which Cooper portrays the African Americans and their rising communities deprive them of agency; an agency which may indeed have been intact. One of the main purposes behind the publication of *Freedom’s Journal* was arguably to provide the African Americans *with* agency, and for them to establish a collective ethos that would validate, in the minds of the general public, their contributions to discussion on issues that could potentially greatly impact their lives such as colonization.

Cooper argues that the African American leaders’ struggle for self-improvement, and the fight for abolitionism is mistakenly taken to be the same by scholars on the subject, but if the one was done

in order to facilitate the other, they must be inextricably linked. Furthermore, he suggests that the free blacks in the North were too exhausted by a social system “which left them oppressed and degraded” to actively participate in the abolition of slavery in the South, and thus concludes that “[t]he idea of self-improvement was of far more relevance to their lives than the crusade against slavery. Above all, slavery was out of their control. Self-improvement, on the other hand, was a goal they stood a chance of realizing” (620). The editors themselves wrote on the subject of slavery, “Our situation is one of equal responsibility and interest: the further decrease of prejudice, and the amelioration of the condition of thousands of our brethren who are yet in bondage, greatly depend on our conduct. It is for us to convince the world by uniform propriety of conduct, industry and economy, that we are worthy of esteem and patronage” (“Philanthropy”). In a sense, the editors assert that they are a kind of test-case; that if their emancipation is perceived as having been successful, this will inevitably bring on “the amelioration of the condition” of those still enslaved.

In a way, Cooper provides the refutation of his own argument, as he states that the “[b]lack leaders were working out their own ideas and courses of action to meet concrete problems, but they operated within a particular intellectual and political context” (623). Cooper concludes his article by stating somewhat contrary to his previous argumentation that “[t]he self-improvement organizations - benefit, literary and temperance societies, churches and newspapers - that were formed in black communities and proliferated in the 1830s helped pave the way for political action.” In other words, he suggests that the black communities were governed by the realization that “[p]olitical action demands more than a belief that society is unjust. It requires leadership, organization and self-confidence” (Cooper 619).

It seems as though Cooper generally mistakes the cordial demeanor of the editors of *Freedom's Journal* as a sign of submission; rather it appears to be a thoroughly well-thought-out plan devised by African Americans to antagonize their antagonists without risking living up to the prejudice about blacks being inferior and much too emotional to speak for themselves. When exploring contributions made by colonialists to *Freedom's Journal*, it furthermore becomes clear that politeness was part of a journalistic convention. A high level of formality seems to have been a prerequisite for contributing to the public debate about issues such as colonization.

The debate over colonization in *Freedom's Journal*

The ACS versus the African Americans

The fact that the writers of *Freedom's Journal* were indeed capable of criticizing the injustices perpetrated by their society, and that they valued objective debates, becomes increasingly clear when examining the debate featured in the periodical between the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its opponents including – at least initially - both Russwurm and Cornish.

On the subject of colonization “Subscriber,” who wrote on behalf of the ACS, asserts that, “The promoters of colonization have confidently believed, they should not only bless degraded Africa, but gradually revolutionize public sentiment in this country in regard to the condition of our coloured population” (“Colonization Society”). In the section above, the editors of *Freedom's Journal* assert that they are a kind of test-case for emancipation; that if their emancipation is viewed as having been successful, then their “brethren” will similarly be liberated. In “Subscriber”’s contribution, it is clear that sending free blacks to Liberia indeed is a test to see if they will become civilized; and that the result of this experiment will define the future of blacks in America.

In response to the claims put forth by the ACS, “Clarkson” writes on behalf of the African Americans: “The advocates of the colony at Liberia are endeavouring to acquire support, by representing in the first place, the total unfitness of our free coloured people to rise from their present ignorant condition and debasement in this country; and depicting in glowing colours, the future civilization and mental advancement of a whole continent through this establishment” (“ACS no. IV”). Clarkson, among other contributors in *Freedom's Journal*, skillfully pointed out the fatal flaw in the ACS’s argumentation: essentially, the members of the ACS suggested that the unalienable rights the African Americans wished to obtain were indeed obtainable, just not in the United States. Thus, the end-goal of the colonization movement, “black removal from the United States, seemed identical [in the eyes of African Americans] to the desires of virulent racists and proslavery activists” (Blockett 125).

“Kennedy,” (John H. Kennedy) as a representative of the ACS, writes in *Freedom's Journal* that the explicit racism expressed by certain members of the organization, should be viewed merely as the expressed views of a few unfortunate members rather than representative of the organization as a whole: “A good cause ought not to be injured in our estimation ... [because] individuals befriend it on selfish principles” (“ACS no. II”). Scholars of whiteness have noted that “this common rhetorical strategy allows whites to ignore the fundamental, structural nature of racism in American society - thus enabling it to continue” (“Acting as Freeman” 67). On one hand, Kennedy denounces the racist members of the ACS, but on the other, he does not explicitly deny that these are an integrated part of

the organization. Instead he “portrays the racists among the ACS as anomalies, a sort of unfortunate fringe element, ignoring the fact that white privilege and power are integral to the ACS’s plans and propaganda” (“Acting as Freeman” 67).

“Investigator” similarly to Clarkson states that, “Any plan which implies our brethren or their descendants, inferiority, or carries with it the idea that they cannot be raised to respectable standing in this country ... is wholly at war with our best interests, and we cannot view the Advocates of such sentiments, in any other light, than that of enemies, whatever their principles may be.” In his contributions to the periodical, “Investigator” makes it clear that not only those who explicitly convey their racist views, but similarly those who “from the press and the pulpit” describe the “degradation of the coloured population” are responsible for “increasing prejudice” and in “retarding the cause of emancipation” (“Colonization Society”). These statements clearly suggest that the free blacks did not accept the explanation offered by the ACS-members; that racism was only “an unfortunate fringe element.”

Communicational double-bind: American slaves or African freemen?

As noted in the section above, gilded ultimatums were often proposed by the ACS-members who advocated their cause in the periodical: they inferred that the free blacks must embrace the limited options available to them in the United States, which only ostensibly seemed to differ from slavery, or they should seek to become freemen elsewhere. Consequently, “[f]or the ACS supporters writing for Freedom’s Journal, there is only one effective method for eradicating prejudice and ending slavery: colonization. They do not propose to attack racism itself or fight for equal opportunity for African Americans, nor do they propose, like abolitionists, to eliminate the system of slavery” (“Acting as Freeman” 72).

In suggesting that the best solution would be for the free blacks to return to Africa, there is the underlying notion that they must know this culture better than the American; that despite them having spent their entire lives in America, there must be some kind of residual, subconscious knowledge about their ancestral culture. A notion which points to a quite peculiar understanding of how culture is produced and reproduced that white Americans most likely would never have applied to themselves if the roles had been reversed. Several scholars including Jacqueline Bacon notices a general tendency for white spokespeople to “offer limited alternative options to people of color based not on what is best for them but on what is (ostensibly) *better than* their current situation” (“Acting as Freeman” 72).

Kennedy proposes that the only connection African Americans will have to the United States after emigrating to Liberia, will be when “the coloured merchant shall visit our shores” (“ACS no. III”). Shannon Sullivan argues that “white Americans often propose that blacks can achieve equality by acquiring material goods that can then be presented to whites, a perspective that actually perpetuates the notion of ‘black folk as property’ rather than as agents ‘who can and do offer distinct gifts to American culture’” (qtd. in “Acting as Freemen” 73). The use of the word “gifts” in this particular context seems an odd choice, but the point is to emphasize that African Americans should be viewed as capable of adding to society in ways that are devoid of monetary value as well, which they are generally not perceived as being capable of. Thus, even though slavery had been effectively abolished in the state of New York in 1827, it seems African Americans were still perceived to be a commodity rather than human beings.

Using a nation’s founding documents to critique it

The editors proclaimed in their first editorial, “To Our Patrons,” that in debates on political subjects, the Constitution would serve as their “polar star.” The Constitution also proved to be a “polar star” in the African Americans’ critique of white America. A strong rhetorical tool which African Americans frequently employed against the antagonizing members of the colonization movement was references to the founding documents of the United States. By referring to these important historical documents, they “declare[d] their Americanness and challenge[d] any exclusive definitions of nationhood and national identity” (“Acting as Freemen” 69). Secondly, they refuted claims of illiteracy and racial inferiority. Finally, they quite ingeniously tied the history of African Americans – slavery – together with the history of the United States. By doing so, they pointed out that the history of the United States could not be told without reference to slavery, and, in turn, to African Americans. In addition, they held the white Americans responsible for the words upon which their nation had been founded.

“Watkins” points out that: “[The ACS’s] members hold out the anti-christian doctrine, that justice cannot be done to us while we remain in this land of civilization and gospel light. They tell us, we can never enjoy the unalienable rights of man in this ‘land of the free, and home of the brave’; that if we desire the privileges of freemen, we must seek them elsewhere” (“Colonization”). The term “unalienable rights” refers to the Declaration of Independence, and the words “land of the free, and home of the brave” are a direct reference to the poem that was to become the national anthem of the United States, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” written by Francis Scott Key in 1814. Using “the resonant language of key American texts” provides African Americans with agency, assists in establishing a

collective ethos, and further “allows them to use their society’s own discourse to critique it” (“Acting as Freeman” 69).

The founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard Allen, similarly added to the debate about colonization with a very critical letter emphasizing the hypocrisy displayed by the colonialists:

We [the blacks] were stolen from our mother country, and brought here. We have tilled the ground and made fortunes for thousands, and still they are not weary of our services. But they who stay to till the ground must be slaves. Is there not land enough in America, or “corn enough in Egypt?” See the thousands of foreigners emigrating to America every year: and if there be ground sufficient for them to cultivate, and bread for them to eat, why would they wish to send the first tillers of the land away? Africans have made fortunes for thousands, who are yet unwilling to part with their services; but the free must be sent away, and those who remain must be slaves ... This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free.

Allen’s letter contains many essential points: first of all, he stresses that white Americans were responsible for bringing blacks to the country in the first place. As noted by Wheelock, “[i]n a subtle yet brilliant move, Allen exploits the issue of racial slavery as a way of justifying free black presence in the United States” (69). Secondly, he points out that blacks are only wanted as slaves, and that in spite of their major contributions to building the country, they still do not have any claim to it. Finally, he points out that “thousands of foreigners” emigrate to the United States every year, and that they are never met with claims about there not being enough land or enough food for them to eat. In doing so, Allen quite eloquently underlines why the ACS’s argumentation simply does not hold up. By rhetorically intertwining the history of the United States with the destiny of the African Americans, Allen makes it clear that the future of “blacks are bound up with the successes and failures of American political destiny” (Wheelock 69).

Freedom’s Journals’ Boston-agent David Walker in 1829 published his infamous pamphlet, *Appeal to the COLOURED CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, but in particular and very expressly, to those of THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA*, which similarly refers to the Constitution and the Declaration of

Independence. In fact, it was formatted in much the same way as the Declaration of Independence with four articles and a preamble; a structure which was “intended to mirror and highlight the failures of America’s two most sacred political documents, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” (Wheelock 77).

Discussion

The gradual dissolution of *Freedom’s Journal*

While Samuel E. Cornish’s decision to resign from the periodical was allegedly due to health issues, John B. Russwurm’s was more directly related to the issue of colonization (Bacon, “History” 11). Russwurm along with “more than a few free blacks [eventually] grew tired of waiting for the legislature to fulfill the promise of the originary documents of the United States. Determining that their American Dream would never come to fruition, some participated in organized colonization efforts and others chose independent emigration” (Blockett 125). Russwurm was part of the former category, as he chose to contact the ACS about emigration to Liberia despite passionately arguing against this exact movement in the past. In a letter written to the ACS’s administrative agent R. R. Gurley in January 1829, two months before *Freedom’s Journal* ceased publishing, Russwurm announced, “I deem it expedient to advise you, that I am on the eve of relinquishing the publication of Freedom’s Journal, with my views on the subject of Colonization *materially* changed. My reasons for this change, I shall not set forth at present. I am willing to be employed in the colony in any business, for the performance of which you may deem me qualified” (qtd. in “History” 14).

Similar to the many different suggested motives with regards to what facilitated the initial publishing of *Freedom’s Journal*, scholars have posited several plausible explanations as to Russwurm’s change in attitude towards colonization, and the declining popularity of the periodical immediately following Cornish’s resignation from the paper. Some have argued that the readers became increasingly discontent with the fact that the newspaper featured reprinted content from other newspapers instead of putting out original content, but according to Bacon’s research reprinting was in accordance with established journalistic conventions of the time, and, in addition, it was a part of *Freedom’s Journal* from its conception.

In the end, it seems Cornish’s vision for *Freedom’s Journal* in itself might have had too radical potential, while Russwurm’s had high hopes for the future of free blacks, but clearly also lacking faith in society’s ability to help manifest such a future. In combining forces, the two editors seem to have had – at least for a period of time – struck a chord with the African American population. The

periodical proved to be too radical when run by Cornish alone, as was the case with *Freedom's Journals'* short-lived successor the *Rights of All*, and too conformist in the hands of Russwurm when he was the sole editor of *Freedom's Journal*.

The “change” in Russwurm’s attitude towards society and the opportunities available to blacks in that society – which arguably could have been his attitude all along – was met with frustration not only because it disregarded *Freedom's Journal's* attempt to fight the American Colonization Society, but because it made it clear to the free slaves that even someone who had been hopeful enough about their future in the United States to publish a newspaper on their behalf advocating their need for civil rights - emancipation, enfranchisement, education, integration - could abandon all hope. According to Frederick Cooper, even the position taken by Russwurm was an integral part of imagining and creating societies in which free blacks could live: “Autonomous black institutions - even emigration to Africa - were necessary because American society frustrated the black man's pursuit of hard work, temperance and proper behavior” (605).

Lasting impact of the *Freedom's Journal*

Another feature of *Freedom's Journal* that distinguished it from its contemporaries, which some scholars have placed emphasis on, is the way in which the periodical was distributed across state- and country lines. Gordon Fraser is one such author, who believes that the periodical successfully created a “quasi-national collectivity,” or even an “emancipatory cosmology,” as it was a community “linked not only geographically but across time” (263). Given that, as noted in Fraser’s research, the postal system was not exactly reliable during the first half of the nineteenth century, and getting a newspaper across state lines could actually take several days or even weeks, the fact that *Freedom's Journal* had readership in different states is genuinely a wonder. The fact that the periodical did make it across state lines was documented by the readers themselves, as they often wrote back to the editors, who then proceeded to print the readers’ replies in the columns of *Freedom's Journal*. Thus, Fraser suggests that “*Freedom's Journal* and *The Rights of All* enabled a mobile network connecting North and South, slave and free, foreign and domestic, past and future. Couple these practices with a worldview that treats political hierarchy as changeable and in motion, and the stage was set for more radical acts of print distribution and slave resistance” (280). According to Fraser,

The central problem of imagining a black nation in 1827, or even today, is that it has none of the conventional markers of nationhood. It has no

territory, no state, and no hierarchical political organization. It is a nation of shared dispossession and affiliation across the borders of geography and temporality. Although black writers frequently made comparisons between their freedom struggle and similar struggles in Greece, Poland, or France, they also recognized that an emancipatory assemblage joined by blackness was different. Blackness was [and is] geographically mobile and temporally fluid.
(266)

There are some obvious challenges facing a community that has not been assembled through a shared nation, and those who place great value on nationhood, such as the ACS, will argue that more fluid notions of ethnicity do not give people the right to claim anything, whereas in their view nationhood might. On the other hand, a unity based on ethnicity that transpires beyond both geographical borders and temporal limitations has the potential to become revolutionary. As noted by Fraser, a community brought together by shared disillusionment is a force to be reckoned with.

How *Freedom's Journal* may inform the present and the future

Frances Smith Foster suggests that periodicals in the present day could benefit from taking note of their predecessors such as the *Freedom's Journal* and the *Rights of All*, because she notices a tendency for people - perhaps especially academics - to “frequent silos of the known and preferred,” which obscures knowledge “about the perspective of others even as we proclaim inclusiveness and comprehensiveness.” She finds that “[b]ack then they seem to have had a better balanced, more accurate relationship among past, present, and future, of the inextricability of words, thoughts, and deeds, of the importance of an imagined nation for effecting an actual one” (Foster 358-9).

In the present day, the best example of the kind of community *Freedom's Journal* created would be communities on social media, which similarly exceeds temporality and geography, but unlike then today the focus is not primarily on what unites people. We may take our cue about the importance of community from the editors of *Freedom's Journal* in continued endeavors to figure out race relations, and to create better circumstances for women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the material examined – both from the columns of the *Freedom's Journal* and scholarly research on the subject - clearly suggests that the editors, agents, and contributors did indeed succeed in creating a collective black consciousness, albeit for a relatively short period of time. It seems that the momentum created by the editors and patrons of *Freedom's Journal* ultimately faced challenges that the periodical itself was incapable of surviving: most importantly, the realization amongst the African Americans that the majority of the American population would not comply with their wish for full citizenship.

The debate between the American Colonization Society and the African American writers of *Freedom's Journal* clearly demonstrates that the colonization movement was motivated by something other than concern for the African Americans. The African American writers skillfully pointed out the inconsistencies in the ACS's argumentation using references to key American documents in order to display the organization's implicit racism, and the communicational double-bind it offered to the blacks.

Similarly to how the African Americans were generally victims of a communicational double-bind offered to them by a majority of white Americans, who presented them with alternatives only ostensibly better than their current situation, African American women were given no apparent alternatives to their domesticized role: in trying to create alternatives for themselves, they would run the risk of being objectified or being considered unfeminine. Yet it has been noted that women were invaluable in terms of sustaining communities dedicated to literacy, and that they were important actors in terms of realizing the true potential of the African Americans as envisioned by the founders of *Freedom's Journal*. Precisely that seemed to be *Freedom's Journal's* most important goal, and in some ways also what it achieved: to make the African Americans aware of their own true potential, and to help convince others of just that.

Works cited

- Allen, Richard. "Letter from Bishop Allen." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 34, 2 Nov. 1827, p. 133. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n133. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- Bacon, Jacqueline. "Acting as Freemen': Rhetoric, Race, and Reform in the Debate over Colonization in *Freedom's Journal*, 1827–1828." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 93, no. 1, 2007, pp. 58-83. doi:10.1080/00335630701326860. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- . "The History of Freedom's Journal: A Study in Empowerment and Community." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–20. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/3559045. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- Benedick. "Woman." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 2, no. 19, 1 Aug. 1828, p. 150. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.2/page/n141. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Berardi, Gayle K., and Thomas W. Segady. "The Development of African-American Newspapers in the American West: A Sociohistorical Perspective." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 75, no. 3/4, 1990, pp. 96–111. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/3031501. Accessed 11 Dec. 2019.
- Blockett, Kimberly. "Writing Freedom: Race, Religion, and Revolution, 1820–1840." *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr, Cambridge UP, 2011, pp. 116–133.
- Clarkson. "American Colonization Society no. IV." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 36, 16 Nov. 1827, p. 139. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n139. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- Cooper, Frederick. "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50." *American Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 5, 1972, pp. 604–625. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/2711662. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- Cornish, Samuel E. and John B. Russwurm. "Christian Philanthropy." Editorial. *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 23 Mar. 1827, p. 6. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n5. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- . "Prospectus." Editorial. *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 16 Mar. 1827, p. 4. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n4. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.
- . "To Our Patrons." Editorial. *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 16 Mar. 1827, p. 1. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n1. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- Fraser, Gordon. "Emancipatory Cosmology: Freedom's Journal, the Rights of all, and the

- Revolutionary Movements of Black Print Culture." *American Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2016, pp. 263-286, 500-501. *ProQuest*, search-proquest-com.ez.statsbiblioteket.dk:12048/docview/1805459728?accountid=14468. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.
- Foster, Frances Smith. "Genealogies of Our Concerns, Early (African) American Print Culture, and Transcending Tough Times." *Early American Literature*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2010, pp. 347–359. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27856627. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Gross, Bella. "Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1932, pp. 241–286. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/2714274. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
- Hutton, Frankie. *The Early Black Press in America, 1827 to 1860*. Greenwood Press, 1993.
- "Investigator". "Colonization Society." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 25, 31 Aug. 1827, p. 98. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n98. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- Kennedy, John H. "American Colonization Society no. II." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 28, 21 Sept. 1827, p. 110. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n109. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- . "American Colonization Society no. III." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 29, 28 Sept. 1827, p. 114. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n114. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- "Subscriber". "Colonization Society." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 24, 24 Aug. 1827, p. 94. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n94. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- Watkins. "Colonization Society." *Freedom's Journal*, vol. 1, no. 17, 6 Jul. 1827, p. 66. *Internet Archives*, archive.org/details/FreedomsJournalVol.1/page/n65. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- Wheelock, Stefan. "Dividing a Nation, Uniting a People: African American Literature and the Abolitionist Movement." *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr, Cambridge UP, 2011, pp. 66–90.