

The Same Old Debate  
by  
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When I played on the marching band in high school and college, there was a marching activity that was called "marking time". This meant that we were high stepping in the same place-not moving forward. In some respects, this can be applied to AUSA (Afrikans from the United States of America) since our Ancestors were kidnapped and brought to these shores in chains. We've been having many of the same debates for more than 200 years. What are these debates? Read on.

The late Dr. Anderson Thompson, a brilliant scholar-teacher from Chicago once asked a very interesting question. To paraphrase his question, he asked what did the Afrikans who were kidnapped and brought to America want to be? His friend and co-worker, Dr. Jacob Carruthers, actually asked the question more specifically, did these kidnapped and enslaved Afrikans want to be Afrikan or American?

Sure, I will concede that these Afrikans wanted to identify with their ethnicities (I hate the word "tribe") more so than something called Afrika. However, after being forced to live in the dark, dank, stinky and filthy underbelly of the slave ships (many with names like "Hope", "Fortune" and even "Jesus of Lubeck"), they came to realize that despite their different languages and customs, they had something in common, their skin color, facial features and a similar deep cultural structure. This ultimately defined their Afrikanness.

For the first two and maybe three generations, they wanted to go home and be Afrikans. Only after then did the desire to become American emerge in some.

As time passed, Northern non-enslaved Afrikans would meet at various places in the "free" states to discuss issues of the day, including how they could best improve their condition and the condition of their enslaved brothers and sisters. As an aside, I am reluctant to call them "free" because they really weren't. They were, as my brother, the late Joe E. Benton used to say, loose as in a habitat but not really free (are AUSA truly free today?).

These meetings were called the National Negro Convention Movement. The National Negro Convention Movement occurred during a period in nineteenth century America in which meetings of unenslaved,

mostly men occurred in order to discuss and debate issues important to AUSA people of that day. This movement lasted from 1831 to 1864 and featured many of the dynamic speakers of the day, such as Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, James Forten, William Whipper, Charles Bennett Ray, Lewis Hayden, Charles Lenox Remond, Mary Ann Shadd and William Still.

The first meeting was held in Philadelphia on September 15, 1830 at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church. Approximately 40 AUSA from nine states attended. There were two women present (Elizabeth Armstrong and Rachel Cliff). Richard Allen, the Founder and first Bishop of the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church was instrumental in organizing the first meeting. The main topic dealt with the question of all AUSA emigrating to Canada. Interestingly, Canada later fell out of favor as a destination because of the racism of white Canadians and the belief that AUSA had rights as citizens of the US that were owed them. Other sites of the dozen meetings included Ohio, Buffalo, NY, Troy, NY, Cleveland, Ohio, Rochester, NY and the last meeting was held in Syracuse, New York. It should also be noted that state meetings were also held in New York, Kansas, Maine, Pennsylvania, Indiana, New Jersey, Louisiana, Michigan, Ohio, Maryland, Illinois, Connecticut, Massachusetts, California and Iowa. Several meetings were held in Canada also.

There were many significant debates between Nationalists and Integrationists/Assimilationists over a variety of topics.

The Nationalists were frustrated by the argument favored by Frederick Douglass and most of the white abolitionists of the day that "moral suasion" would win out among the slaveholders and eventually defeat the slave system. Douglass like his white mentor, William Lloyd Garrison favored "moral suasion", feeling that eventually the immorality of slavery would be realized by slaveholders and that these slaveholders, realizing the evil of their ways, would repent and free the Afrikans that they enslaved. Douglass also accepted the Garrison philosophy of nonviolence.

It is important to note that even though these white abolitionists were against the institution of slavery and wanted to abolish (end) the “peculiar institution” of slavery, most of them felt that white people and “white culture” was superior to the Afrikans and their culture and that Afrikans were uncivilized brutes. They pressed even harder after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 which effectively made it lawful to return AUSA who had escaped to the North to enslavement if captured.

Frederick Douglass was one of the most effective and well known of these integrationist AUSA lecturers. Because he was favored, championed and accepted by the white abolitionists, he became a celebrity and an important link from the white world to the AUSA world. Indeed, his is one of the few nineteenth-century AUSA names that we know because the people who wrote the history in books and newspapers extolled his virtues and mostly ignored other AUSA of that era, especially if they did not agree with the abolitionist theories.

It comes as a surprise to most people that Douglass was not the most popular AUSA who lived in the nineteenth century (to AUSA people). There were at least two other individuals who were at least equally popular and respected (if not more so) by the AUSA community but because of their nationalist views, they were ignored and frequently vilified by the history writers. They were Martin Delany, considered the “Father” of Black Nationalism, who we will discuss in another article and Henry Highland Garnet

Henry Highland Garnet, a fiery Presbyterian minister who with his family escaped from enslavement when he was a child, opposed Douglass at almost every opportunity.

Two of the major questions discussed were how to deal with and approach slavery and, as mentioned, whether whites should be allowed to participate in these discussions. Garnet and others favored the opinion that sympathetic whites should work with other whites to help AUSA; that they would have more influence with their own people and their presence would hinder open and comfortable

discussion among AUSA. He also favored armed resistance to slavery. Douglass favored having the presence of whites during these meetings.

In fact, Garnet's position on other pertinent issues of the time were also initially vehemently opposed by Douglass and his supporters, with the support of the newspapers like Douglass' *North Star* and William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. Interestingly, many of the positions initially expounded by Garnet and opposed by Douglass were later embraced and appropriated by Douglass.

In 1840, Garnet stated that he felt that the issue of abolition was a political issue that should be addressed by a political party. Douglass and Garrison loudly disagreed but later, Douglass publicly announced that the issue of abolition was a political one.

In 1843, Garnet made a now famous impassioned speech at a Negro Convention in Buffalo, NY endorsing the idea that the enslaved Afrikans should use violence to free themselves. Excerpts from that speech are given here:

*"It is in your power so to torment the God cursed slaveholders that they will be glad to let you go free...If the scale was turned and. black men were the masters and white men the slaves, every destructive agent and element would be employed to lay the oppressor low. Danger and death would hang over their heads day and night...You cannot be more oppressed than you have been-you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already...Let your motto be resistance! resistance! resistance!-no oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance"*

Douglass not only opposed this position at that time stating that he was *"inflexibly opposed to a resort to violence as a means of effecting reform"* but used his political influence to persuade the convention to reject Garnet's position.

His response at that convention was, *"The slave is in the minority, a small minority. The oppressors are an overwhelming majority...with the facts of our condition before us, it is impossible for us to contemplate any appeal to the slave to take vengeance on his guilty master, but with upmost*

*reprobation. Your committee regard any counsel of this sort as the perfection of folly, suicide in the extreme and abominably wicked."*

This is interesting because in many slaveholding states, at that time (including South Carolina), the enslaved Afrikans were the majority of the population

Douglass however later embraced the idea that violence would be necessary for liberation, stating:

*"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of it's many waters.... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and those will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows or with both".*

In 1849, the question of emigration divided the abolitionist movement. Douglass was against the idea that Afrikans in America should leave the country. Admittedly, the American Colonization Society was organized and comprised largely of racist white slavery defenders who wanted to require that "free blacks" be sent to Afrika so that they wouldn't upset or agitate their enslaved kinsfolk. Garnet embraced the idea of emigration for other reasons and his plan became known as the African Civilization Society. Again, Douglass initially opposed the idea of emigration and smeared Garnet in his publications yet, later embraced the idea and actually visited Haiti with the idea of inspecting it for possible emigration of Afrikans in America there. He later became the United States ambassador to Haiti.

The last meeting, in Syracuse, NY ended the movement because with the end of the Civil War and the passage of the thirteenth amendment, it was felt that AUSA would finally be fully participating citizens of the United States.

The Negro Convention Movement helped to crystallize the development of a Black Nationalist political consciousness. It is recommended that everyone read the "Call to Rebellion" speech in the 1843 meeting in Rochester, NY by Rev. Henry Highland Garnet.

We are still having these same debates and seem to be still "marking time". What's up wid dat?

Food for thought!