

The Black Press

*New Literary and
Historical Essays*

edited by
TODD VOGEL

PN
4882.5
.B59
2001



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

For Karen

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The black press : new literary and historical essays / edited by Todd Vogel

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8135-3004-0 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8135-3005-9

(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. African American press—History. I. Vogel, Todd, 1959–

PN4882.5 B59 2001

813.009'12—dc21

2001019292

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Chapter 1

ROBERT S. LEVINE

Circulating the Nation

*David Walker, the
Missouri Compromise
and the Rise of
the Black Press*

DAVID WALKER'S *Appeal*, published in three editions between September 1829 and June 1830, is generally regarded as one of the most influential and explosive black nationalist documents authored by an African American. Urging the slaves to "kill or be killed,"¹ Walker has gained a reputation for militancy, even though much of the *Appeal* is concerned with countering white racial prejudice and developing strategies for black empowerment in the United States. Whether viewed through the lens of black militancy or black uplift, it is fair to say that Walker has emerged, in Sterling Stuckey's words, as the "father of black nationalist theory."² But what exactly is that theory, and how is it presented? We can begin to answer these interrelated questions by considering a passage in Article I of the *Appeal*. Walker remarks: "I saw a paragraph, a few years since, in a South Carolina Paper, which, speaking of the barbarity of the Turks, it said: 'The Turks are the most barbarous people in the world—they treat the Greeks more like brutes than human beings.' And in the same paper was an advertisement, which said: 'Eight well built Virginia and Maryland Negro fellows and four wenches will positively be sold this day, to the highest bidder!'" (12–13). More is going

on in this passage than Walker's obvious attack on the hypocrisy and blindness of southern enslavers. In discussing his newspaper reading, Walker positions the *Appeal* in relation to what could be termed the newspaper print culture of the 1820s. It is worth noting that the newspaper is southern, a portion of which Walker in effect now circulates in the North and then recirculates nationally in this appropriated and ironic form. Throughout the *Appeal* there are numerous references to northern and southern newspapers, and I argue in this essay that central to Walker's black nationalist strategies in the *Appeal* is an effort to achieve a circulation of his text rivaling that of the nation's increasingly sectionalized newspapers. For Walker, black nationalism was a matter of circulation, and in *Appeal* he sought to achieve a national circulation with a national (and even international) black voice—a voice, it must be emphasized, that exists in print.

In his invaluable *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*, Peter P. Hinks argues that the "*Appeal* issued from a well-established tradition of black antislavery and religious oratory."³ Although I would not want to deny the important influence of those traditions on the *Appeal*, this essay focuses on the close relationship between the rise of the black press and the publication of Walker's *Appeal*. Walker and other black activists regarded print, rather than oratory, as promising to link together the disparate and scattered black communities of the early republic. Significantly, Walker served as an authorized subscription agent of John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish's *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American newspaper, and he continued to demonstrate his commitment to the African-American press by working as an agent for *The Rights of All*, a short-lived newspaper edited by Cornish between May and October 1829. The *Appeal* appeared shortly after the demise of *Rights*, as if Walker were attempting to carry on the mission of that journal by circulating his own call for black uplift and resistance. Circulation as a desideratum, material practice, and ideology were also central to the debates of 1819–1821 on Missouri. The Missouri Compromise led to a refashioning of not only American nationalism in relation to issues of section and race but also the American press. The early black press, and Walker's *Appeal*, creatively responded to these developments.

Briefly, the Missouri controversy of 1819–1821 revealed that be-

neath the surface of the celebratory national rhetoric generated by the War of 1812 and its aftermath lay sectional and racial tensions that threatened to fracture the Union. For when the New York congressman James Tallmadge, Jr., proposed amendments to the Missouri statehood bill that would have banned entry of additional slaves into Missouri and the remaining territories of the Louisiana Purchase, a furor erupted in Congress. The subsequent debates of 1819–1820, highly polarized by sections, forced congressional leaders to address issues of territorial expansionism, sectional identity, and the ideological foundations of the government. Was the Constitution an antislavery document, or did the three-fifths clause commit the nation to slavery in perpetuity? In March 1820 with the help of Henry Clay a compromise was achieved: Maine was admitted as a free state and Missouri as an unrestricted state, and slavery was banned in the territory of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30'. But sectional tensions remained, and controversy flared again in November 1820 when Missouri proposed a constitution that would have excluded free blacks and mulattoes from entering the state. In 1821, the Congress, again with Clay's help, approved a rather vague compromise in which it was agreed that Missouri's constitution would not impinge on the rights of U.S. citizens.

Although the immediate controversy on Missouri came to an end, the debates of 1819–1821 intensified the conflict between proslavery and antislavery forces, raised new questions about the problematics of borders on both the state and national level, and engaged Americans in the ideological challenge of rethinking the meaning of the American Revolution and reconsidering broad issues of citizenship.⁴ The debates also generated a tremendous amount of print. As the press historian Carol Sue Humphrey notes, "Missouri's application for statehood in 1818 sparked a major debate over the status of slavery in the United States, and the press provided a major mechanism for communicating the various arguments." That process of communication and dissemination contributed to two significant developments: the founding of several hundred newspapers and the increasing sectionalization of those newspapers. Among the newly created newspapers were Philadelphia's antislavery paper, the *National Gazette and Literary Register*, and Charleston's proslavery paper, the *Southern Patriot and Commercial Advertiser*. Whereas earlier newspapers were closely tied to

particular parties, which sometimes crossed sectional lines, newspapers around the time of the Missouri crisis came to reflect, as David Paul Nord notes, "the disaggregation and decentralization of the country."⁵

As the increasing sectionalization of newspapers makes clear, lurking beneath the glories of Clay's nationalistic "American System" were unresolved questions of territory, nation, race, and citizenship, particularly in relation to Missouri's proposed constitution prohibiting free blacks and mulattoes from entering the state. Henry Clay's compromise on Missouri's constitution, which asserted that no law shall be passed that excludes citizens "from the enjoyment of any of the privileges and immunities to which such citizen is entitled under the Constitution of the United States," allowed Congress to avoid having to address the issue of blacks' citizenship and the implications of the Constitution's three-fifths clause.⁶ Were free blacks citizens of the United States? Did they have the right to circulate from state to state? Did they have any rights at all? These are some of the large questions addressed in the post-Missouri Compromise writings of David Walker and other free blacks of the period.

Born in the late eighteenth century in Wilmington, North Carolina, David Walker was a free black who, sometime between 1815 and 1820, made his way to South Carolina, where he may have participated in Denmark Vesey's 1822 slave conspiracy. That conspiracy was inspired, in part, by the debates on Missouri. In the main trial record, "An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina" (1822), Charleston's legal authorities emphasized the role of print in fomenting the insurrectionism of Vesey and his accomplices. For example, the Report's prefatory "A Narrative of the Conspiracy and Intended Insurrection" declares that the "number of inflammatory pamphlets on slavery brought into Charleston from some of our sister states, within the last four years . . . furnished him [Denmark Vesey] with ample means for inflaming the minds of the colored population of this state; and by distorting certain parts of those speeches, or selecting from particular passages, he persuaded but too many that Congress had actually declared them free, and that they were held in bondage contrary to the laws of the land." As one of the recruited (and eventually executed) blacks affirmed to the court, Vesey's coconspirator Monday Gell recruited blacks

by reading newspaper accounts of antislavery speeches by northern congressmen: "THE PRISONER stated that Monday read daily the newspapers, and told him that Congress was going to set them free (alluding to the Missouri question); he said, to hear about that carried him to Monday's." If, in fact, Walker was in South Carolina during the time of this ultimately aborted conspiracy, he would have learned of the importance of print not only in radicalizing but also in linking blacks as part of a shared community.⁷

But even if Walker had not been in South Carolina, the evidence suggests that he quickly came to understand the importance of print to the creation of a black nationalist consciousness. Walker moved to Boston in 1824 or 1825, and in 1826 he was initiated into the Boston order of the Prince Hall Masons. He also came to have a key role in the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA). Crucial to the evolving goals of these organizations was an effort to counter the increasing prestige of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which sought to make the United States into an all-white nation by shipping the free blacks to their "native" Africa. For Henry Clay and other members of the ACS, the Missouri debates only further revealed that blacks did not belong in the United States. In an effort to circulate these views nationally, in 1825 the ACS founded its own monthly newspaper, or journal, *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*. Walker noted in *Appeal* that he read *African Repository and Colonial Journal* "from its commencement to the present day" (69). Ironically, this particular journal demonstrated to Walker and other free blacks how print could help to develop black pride and black nationalism, for the ACS made its case for colonization by celebrating the historical greatness of Africa. As the writer "T. R." remarked in "Observations on the Early History of the Negro Race," those who "were called *Ethiopians*" helped to transform Egypt from "a state of barbarism" to "the mother of science" and ultimately "gave to Africa, and through her to Europe and America, all the wisdom of the Egyptians." Boston's blacks were influenced not only by the journal's regular accounts of the important influence of Ethiopia and Egypt on the development of Western civilization, which they took to legitimate African Americans' place in the United States, but also by the journal's efforts to achieve a national reach. In the lead editorial of the August 1825 issue, for example, the editors declared:

"It appears to be an obvious truth, that an Institution which proposes to effect any very desirable purpose, in reference to our coloured population, must act upon some principle and plan, which both the Southern and Northern States will unite to maintain."⁸ Similar desires for a national reach were among the large goals of the *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American newspaper, which began publishing in New York City in March 1827.

Edited by the Jamaican-born John Russwurm, a graduate of Bowdoin College, and the New York Presbyterian minister Samuel Cornish, *Freedom's Journal* challenged the *African Repository and Colonial Journal's* colonizationist agenda by presenting strategies for black uplift in the United States. In the inaugural 16 March 1827 issue of *Freedom's Journal*, the editors underscored just how important it was for blacks to have their own newspaper to plead their "own cause," particularly as such a newspaper would help to develop transsectional connections among its readers: "It is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy." Aspiring, as one historian puts it, "to produce a nationally circulated newspaper which would develop a sense of . . . a black consciousness, as it were, among the freemen and ex-slaves living in scattered communities," the material fact of the newspaper itself, circulating from county to county and state to state, can be regarded as a synecdoche for the black national body, which the editors imagined as a single body with "a single voice." That "voice" is very different from the oratorical voice, which simply cannot perform the same circulatory work as a newspaper. As part of their mission to create a black national body, Russwurm and Cornish attempted to develop black pride as *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* did, by printing articles that celebrated the African origins of western culture.⁹ But what I want to emphasize here is not so much the content of the various editorials and articles that appeared in the newspaper during its approximately two-year run, but rather a figure of circulation: the "Authorized Agent."

According to Hinks, four months before the appearance of *Freedom's Journal's* first issue, there was a meeting at David Walker's house of "the People of Colour of the City of Boston" to discuss the newspaper's prospects. At that meeting the participants produced a resolution pledging "to use our utmost exertion to increase its patronage." The final page

of the inaugural issue, in the lower bottom corner, lists fourteen "Authorized Agents," including David Walker, entrusted to achieve the goal of building the paper's circulation.¹⁰ Implicit in the boxed presentation of those agents, who are based in northern states and the District of Columbia, is a suggestion of their representative relationship to the relatively small subscribing body. One dramatic development of the paper through its succeeding issues is the regular, steady increase of the list of authorized agents, for the small box at the bottom of the page eventually grows to one full column; such growth was meant to imply a simultaneous growth of black readership and community.

As the editors made clear by regularly printing the list of authorized agents, the agents were gradually extending their reach into the southern states, thereby challenging the anticirculatory border politics of the Missouri Compromise. The list of authorized agents in the issue of 23 March 1827 included a new agent in Hayti; twenty-two agents were listed in the issue of 3 August 1827, including an agent in Virginia. In the issue of 14 September 1827, Russwurm informed his readers that Cornish was leaving the coeditorship to devote himself to his ministry but would continue to serve as "General Agent" overseeing the now twenty-three authorized agents. Cornish's departure may have been motivated by his dissent from Russwurm's increasing attraction to colonizationism, but he stayed on as general agent until the final issue. Perhaps as a result of his work, the list of agents continued to grow, with the most significant increases coming in the southern states: the issue of 16 November 1827 noted the addition of two agents each in Virginia and Maryland, and the issue of 11 January 1828 noted the addition of three new agents in North Carolina and one in England.¹¹

For Russwurm, the work of the authorized agents was absolutely central to the financial survival of the paper. But equally important was the authorized agents' role in extending a sense of black community beyond the borders of the northern states. Russwurm's "Prospectus" in the issue of 25 April 1828 underscored the importance of gaining new "subscribers in different parts of the country." Over the next year or so new agents continued to be added to the list, including one in Upper Canada and even one in New Orleans. By the time Russwurm makes his support for African colonization explicit, which he confirms by declaring in his farewell editorial of 28 March 1829 that he has accepted

"the expediency of emigration to Liberia," he has a total of thirty-eight authorized agents from four countries, including a number from the southern states.¹² Though Walker rejected Russwurm's colonizationism, he remained committed to the mission of disseminating a national black newspaper. In addition to continuing his work as an authorized agent, in late 1828 he began to advertise his clothing store in the paper. That advertisement also appeared in every issue of the six-month run of *The Rights of All*.

Cornish began publishing *Rights* approximately two months after the demise of *Freedom's Journal*. In an editorial in the inaugural issue of 29 May 1829, similar to his editorial in the inaugural issue of *Freedom's Journal*, Cornish emphasizes the importance of challenging African colonization and representing "the rights, & interests of the coloured population." Again, literal circulation of the paper is crucial to this agenda, and he makes a special plea to potential black readers not to "withhold [their] patronage from this publication, it being devoted to all the interests of the coloured population." Central to extending the paper's circulation throughout that populace are the authorized agents: "The first number will mostly be sent to the care of the several agents, who will please to obtain the names and residences of the subscribers, and hand them their papers." On the final page of the first issue Cornish lists thirty-two authorized agents, including David Walker. Among the thirty-one other agents are people based in Hayti, England, Canada, North Carolina, Virginia, Louisiana, the District of Columbia, and Maryland.¹³

Because of the precarious financial standing of Cornish's paper, over the next several months he paid particular attention to the role of the authorized agents in keeping the paper afloat, stating rather urgently in the issue of 12 June 1829: "The Agents throughout the country, are requested to extend the circulation of this paper." Central to his goals is a vision of blacks themselves circulating "throughout the country"; the very process of disseminating *Rights* poses a challenge to the post-Missouri conviction among white compromisers that the place for free blacks is the North (or, as the ACS would have it, Africa). In his most sustained reflection on the connection between the authorized agents and black community, Cornish remarks in the issue of 18 September 1829:

let the executive committees employ one general agent, whose duty it shall be to continue travelling from one extremity of our country to the other, forming associations, communicating with our people and the public generally, on all subjects of interest, collecting monies and delivering stated lectures on industry, frugality, enterprise &c., thereby linking together, by one solid chain, the whole free population, so as to make them think and feel, and act, as one solid body, devoted to education and improvement.¹⁴

As was true for *Freedom's Journal*, the very circulatory nature of that publicized, textualized voice is imagined as having the power to link (and create) "brethren."

A similar vision of black community linked (and created) by print informs Walker's one extant speech, "Address, Delivered before the General Colored Association of Boston," which appeared in the 19 December 1828 issue of *Freedom's Journal*. In the speech, Walker laments the "yet unorganized condition" of blacks in the United States and asserts that the primary goal of the Massachusetts General Colored Association should be "to unite the colored population, so far, through the United States of America, as may be practicable and expedient; forming societies, opening, extending, and keeping up correspondences." Of note here is the emphasis on written communication, the ways in which the circulation of "correspondences" would help to achieve black nationalist goals of united community. For Walker, literacy remained a key to such goals. As reported in the 25 April 1828 issue of *Freedom's Journal*, when Walker spoke to Boston's blacks on a different occasion, he "stated largely the disadvantages the people of Colour labor under, by the neglect of literature." In his MGCA address he argues similarly that literacy and printed communications can contribute to black uplift and community. The support for such a claim, he states, is best evident in southern whites' efforts to keep the slaves illiterate. He thus reports of how "a slaveholder upon finding one of his young slaves with a small spelling book in his hand (not opened) . . . beat him almost to death." Interestingly, by the end of his speech he moves from what could be termed a U.S. black nationalism to a Pan-Africanism, enjoining "the dejected, degraded, and now enslaved children of Africa . . . to take their stand among the nations of the earth."¹⁵

Border-crossing, circulation, and a tension between nationalism and transnationalism are crucial to David Walker's *Appeal*. It is therefore appropriate, as I suggested at the start, to think of the *Appeal* as taking up the mission that Cornish's *The Rights of All* was forced to leave off. Like Cornish, Walker attempts to "speak to our brethren at a distance." Such an effort to "speak" in print to distant blacks, and in this way "link[] together, by one solid chain, the whole free population," can be taken as one of the principal goals of the *Appeal*. As suggested by the evocative title of his tract, *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, Walker simultaneously sought to legitimate blacks' claims to the national narrative of the United States while at the same time developing a transnational perspective on the place of blacks in the Americas and throughout the world. But more often than not, as suggested by his opening reference to his black readers as "My dearly beloved Brethren and Fellow Citizens" (1), Walker's concerns are focused on the United States and are conceived in relation to the issues of territory and citizenship brought to the fore by the Missouri crisis and its aftermath.

The *Appeal* is best known for its aggressive response to Jefferson's racism in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), its effort to develop black pride by linking blacks to ancient Egyptians and contemporary Haitians, its hortatory calls for black uplift, and its militancy. My focus here, however, is on figures of circulation. Walker begins the *Appeal* in this way: "Having traveled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" (1). The opening presents Walker's literal circulation as a way of gaining access to knowledge and power, and as an act of transgression. For unlike the Jews enslaved in ancient Egypt, who were allowed to intermarry and circulate—"And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt" (8)—African Americans are bound either to the plantation or to particular states or regions. Thus Walker presents blacks' lack of free mobility as one of

the central aspects of their degradation: "If any of you wish to know how FREE you are, let one of you start and go through the southern and western States of this country, and unless you travel as a slave to a white man . . . or have your free papers, (which if you are not careful they will get from you) if they do not take you up and put you in jail, and if you cannot give good evidence of your freedom, sell you into eternal slavery, I am not a living man" (28).

Walker's emphasis on "free papers," or print, as a sign of freedom helps to make it clear that his subsequent attack on Jefferson less decries the man (who is dead) than the text, *Notes*, that continues to circulate and influence white Americans on blacks' supposed inferiority. Reading is presented as central to an ability to contest white racism. Responding to Jefferson's remarks on why (white) Roman slaves were able to become writers while American (black) slaves have supposedly failed to distinguish themselves in this way, Walker asserts, "Every body who has read history, knows, that as soon as a slave among the Romans obtained his freedom, he could rise to the greatest eminence in the State" (16). And he remarks, in effect, that everybody who has read U.S. laws forbidding slave literacy knows that blacks do not have similar opportunities: "Read the laws of Virginia, North Carolina, &c." (16).

That it is incumbent upon blacks to gain the skills that would allow them to interact with print is emphasized in Article II of *Appeal*, "OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF IGNORANCE" (19), for what Walker argues, echoing and revising the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, is that blacks need to recover the learnedness of "the sons of Africa" (19) who had such a large impact on ancient Greece and Rome. In so doing, blacks would simultaneously renew and build their sense of community in the United States. So that blacks might better learn history and participate in the Jacksonian marketplace, he calls for "the dissemination of education" (30). He also reprints an anecdote from a newspaper, "the Columbian Centinel of this city, for September 9, 1829," about blacks' participation in quelling a black uprising against a white master, an article which he alleges shows "the degraded ignorance and deceit among us" (23). Desirous that blacks become more aggressive toward the masters, he urges them to "read the history particularly of Hayti" (20), while at the same time condemning

whites' efforts to prevent blacks from learning how to read. In attacking whites for such practices, Walker ironically states, "No doubt some will say I write with a bad spirit" (20).

Walker's choice of the word *write* over *speak* in referring to his "bad spirit" is appropriate, for virtually throughout the *Appeal* he emphasizes the textuality of his analytical performance. Even the hyperbolic typeface—the repeated multiple exclamations, pointing fingers, and so on—are primarily intended for the reading eye. But there is an important oral dimension to the *Appeal* as well, and Hinks's argument that "Walker's *Appeal* has its roots in an oral, not a print, culture" is best supported by the relatively short Article III, "OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE PREACHERS OF THE RELIGION OF JESUS CHRIST" (35). Aggressively attacking the hypocrisy of nominally Christian preachers, Walker himself assumes the persona of a preacher lashing out against what he terms the "mockery of religion . . . conducted by the Americans" (43). After describing a sermon by a South Carolina preacher who insists on the slaves' Biblical duty to obey their masters, Walker, in the manner of a Jeremiah, concludes with an apocalyptic prediction of divine vengeance against the United States should white Americans not abolish slavery and renounce their racist ways: "I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT" (43). There is something wonderfully audacious about Walker's willingness here to appropriate the preacherly role and stand in judgment of white religious and cultural authorities.¹⁶ Although the admonitions exist in print and have a compelling presence on the page, it is difficult not to "hear" Walker's prophetic words. Even so, Walker makes it clear that he is responding not just to a sermon that he claims to have heard at a camp meeting in South Carolina but also to his own reading of southern newspapers: "They have newspapers and monthly periodicals, . . . on the pages of which, you will scarcely ever find a paragraph respecting slavery" (39).

The failure of the South and, more generally, the nation to discuss slavery in a print context replete with dissenting minority voices can be regarded as the implicit subject of the *Appeal*'s longest section, the concluding Article IV, "OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE COLONIZING PLAN" (45). For this section con-

sists almost entirely of Walker's remarks on various newspaper articles, which he puts into conversation with one another. In doing so, he makes one of his boldest interventions into U.S. public culture, as he attempts to insert a black nationalist voice, particularly as it was developing in the black press, into discussions about section, race, and nation.

My reading of Article IV is guided by recent debates on Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere. In his influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas idealizes a moment in eighteenth-century British culture when (he claims) various public institutions—coffee houses, literary societies, novels, and newspapers—contributed to the emergence of a rational, participatory public culture. In Habermas's formulation, newspapers were of particular importance in helping to develop this culture, for "the press institutionalized regular contacts and regular communication." A number of recent critics have challenged Habermas for what they allege is his elitist or hegemonic conception of the public sphere. Houston A. Baker, Jr., contends, for example, that Habermas's notion of a participatory public sphere is inapplicable to antebellum black Americans, most of whom were either socially disenfranchised or regarded as property: "Insofar as the emergence and energy of Habermas's public sphere were generated by property ownership and literacy, how can black Americans, who like many others have traditionally been excluded from these domains of modernity, endorse Habermas's beautiful idea?" And yet what Walker proposes, I want to suggest, is that we regard the black public, particularly as developed and publicized by its recent newspapers, as a constitutive part of a public sphere that is anything but monolithic. Rather, one gets the sense from reading the *Appeal* that the public sphere consists of a variety of competing publics, what Nancy Fraser has termed "*subaltern counterpublics*."¹⁷ As represented in *Appeal*, the conversational or dialogical nature of early national print culture has everything to do with the publicity and circulation of print. Such circulation can be taken as a model of the circulatory freedom that Walker desired for black Americans. Within Walker's dialogical model, then, which is not all that different from Habermas's imaginings of a productive and rational public sphere, black newspapers, and the *Appeal* itself, participate in a national conversation.

The *Appeal's* final section focuses precisely on the national conversation about the American Colonization Society's (ACS) project of colonizing the free blacks to Africa. Those plans, announced at the December 1816 founding of the ACS, were reported in the Washington, D.C., newspaper the *National Intelligencer*, one of the preeminent newspapers of the day. According to Frank Luther Mott, during this time "all papers based their news of the government on the reports of the *National Intelligencer*." In his journalistic Article IV, Walker proves no exception to this practice, for he quotes several times from the 24 December 1816 report on the ACS in the *National Intelligencer*.¹⁸ Walker's conception of his own (black) nationalism may well have emerged as a response to this now republicized newspaper discussion. Walker asserts that Clay and others formulated "a plan to get those of the coloured people, who are said to be free, away from among those of our brethren whom they unjustly hold in bondage, so that they may be enabled to keep them the more secure in ignorance and wretchedness, to support them and their children, and consequently they would have the more obedient slaves" (47). As Walker develops his analysis of the newspaper account of the meeting, it becomes clear that the colonizationists' plan is of a piece with that of the Missouri legislators: to curtail the circulation of ideas among free and enslaved African Americans and thereby undercut the possibility of cross-sectional, national unity among blacks. Throughout his discussion, he underscores the textual dimension of his response to the ACS: "I shall now pass in review the speech of Mr. Elias B. Caldwell, Esq. of the District of Columbia, extracted from the same page on which Mr. Clay's will be found" (51). Like Clay, Caldwell talks of the importance of denying blacks knowledge, of keeping them in "the condition of brutes" (52), and Walker goes on to describe the *National Intelligencer's* report of John Randolph making a similar plea to separate the educated free blacks from the uneducated slaves.

Immediately following the discussion of the article from the *National Intelligencer*, Walker prints excerpts from a letter by Philadelphia's Richard Allen, the noted founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which excoriates the racist work of the ACS in denying blacks' claims to U.S. citizenship. Significantly, Walker cites as his source for Allen's letter the 2 November 1827 issue of *Freedom's Journal* (56); and

after reprinting selections from the letter, he once again reminds his readers of its source: "I have given you, my brethren, an extract verbatim, from the letter of that godly man, as you may find it on the aforementioned page of *Freedom's Journal*" (58). To some extent, the battle of words between Allen and the ACS is presented as part of a newspaper war, or public debate, which actually had not received much attention until (re)publicized by Walker in *Appeal's* Article IV. In his *Freedom's Journal* letter, Allen asserts African Americans' rights to U.S. citizenship in no uncertain terms—"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" (58). Walker echoes Allen's criticisms, presenting blacks as even more legitimately of the land than whites: "America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our blood and tears" (65). Walker then invokes "the language of the Rev. Mr. S. E. Cornish, of New York, editor of the Rights of All," in asserting that any black who (like Russwurm) supports the agenda of the ACS "should be considered as a traitor to his brethren" (67), and he offers his resounding support for *Rights*. Without acknowledging the recent failure of that newspaper, he makes an "appeal" for "circulation": "Let me make an appeal brethren, to your hearts, for your cordial co-operation in the circulation of 'The Rights of All,' among us. The utility of such a vehicle conducted, cannot be estimated. I hope that the well informed among us, may see the absolute necessity of their co-operation in its universal spread among us" (67). The circulation of the paper, and by extension of an imagined black community, would serve the national ends of the thrice-stated "among us" of this proclamation, thereby countering the separatist program of the ACS and the anticirculatory politics of the Missouri Compromise.

After attacking the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* for belittling blacks' claims to U.S. citizenry, Walker makes his final reference to a newspaper near the end of the *Appeal*, when he urges his readers to "see my Address, delivered before the General Coloured Association of Massachusetts, which may be found in *Freedom's Journal*, for Dec. 20, 1828" (71). The very idea of "seeing" a speech once again underscores the crucial place of print in an age of oratory, for without print that speech would not have circulated beyond the confines of the

Colored Association. The reference to what for many would have been a rather obscure speech also points to the role of black newspapers (and Walker's tract) in publicizing black perspectives and making those perspectives integral to the public sphere. As Nancy Fraser remarks in her revisionary critique of Habermas, "the concept of a counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes a *publicist* orientation. . . . After all, to interact discursively as a member of a public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas."¹⁹ The very processes of dissemination can be taken as central to the *Appeal's* project of widening the arena of participatory democracy and thus central as well to the text's emancipatory potential.

Circulation, dissemination, and publicity were not only textual thematics but also material strategies of the *Appeal*. As W. Jeffrey Bolster and others have documented, Walker developed a number of tactics for circulating the text outside of Massachusetts. One of his most effective was to deploy free black seamen as his "Authorized Agents" in the South. Bolster explains, "From the used-clothing store that he operated on Brattle Street, near the Boston wharves, Walker buttonholed sailors and asked them to spread his message. It was no coincidence that the *Appeal* circulated first in seaports." In the wake of the Missouri debates and the Vesey conspiracy, some southern states incarcerated black sailors during their visits, though many of these sailors continued to have exchanges with the free and enslaved blacks of port cities. By the time of the third edition of the *Appeal*, southern efforts to ban Walker's tract had intensified. In North Carolina, authorities were particularly cognizant of circulation as an issue; in attempting to halt the text's distribution by approving "An Act to prevent the circulation of seditious publications," they adopted anticirculatory regulations reminiscent of the Missouri Constitution. As part of its revised "Free Negro Code," the legislature voted to quarantine black sailors, to forbid the entrance of other free blacks into the state, and to make it illegal for North Carolina's free blacks to return to the state should they choose even temporarily to cross its borders.²⁰

In a footnote to the final edition of *Appeal*, Walker rhetorically queries southern policing efforts: "Why do they search vessels, &c. when entering the harbours of tyrannical States, to see if any of my Books

can be found, for fear that my brethren will get them to read. Why, I thought the Americans proclaimed to the world that they are a happy, enlightened, humane, and Christian people" (72). He supplies his own answer: "But perhaps the Americans do their very best to keep my Brethren from receiving and reading my 'Appeal' for fear that they will find in it an extract which I made from their Declaration of Independence, which says, 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,' &c. &c. &c" (72). That fear of a revolutionary rearticulation of the Declaration speaks to lingering fears raised by the debates on Missouri, in which northern congressmen, as Glover Moore observes, "invoked the concept of natural law and the most famous American document which expounded it—the Declaration of Independence—to sustain their . . . positions." The assertions by some northern congressmen, as reported in northern newspapers, that the Declaration was a document mandating freedom for all helped to inspire Denmark Vesey to conceive of his conspiracy in American Revolutionary terms; those speeches also further inspired northern free blacks to mobilize their antislavery and antiracist efforts. Precisely such invocations of the Declaration during and immediately following the debates on Missouri led Thomas Jefferson, who himself had originally publicized the Declaration in various colonial newspapers, to assert that there was nothing in the Declaration that challenged the states' powers to determine their own sovereign actions.²¹ Walker's debate with Jefferson in *Appeal* can thus be read as yet another aspect of that tract's waging of a newspaper war.

Walker's decision to conclude *Appeal* by quoting Jefferson's foundational Declaration brings us back to the question of the relationship between Walker's politics of print and his politics of black nationalism. Anticipating Benedict Anderson's notion of the connection of newspapers to the formation of the nation, Walker's politics of (black) nationalism champions the circulation of black texts and views that circulation as central to linked efforts to develop black citizenship and community. An inevitable result of what Stuckey terms "Walker's disregard for geographical barriers," however, is that circulation can be viewed simultaneously as both a tenet of and a challenge to the nation, particularly at those moments when the *Appeal* suggests Walker's larger hemispheric concerns about the "coloured persons" (63) of the

West Indies and South America. With his final remarks on the failure of the United States to live up to its founding ideals, Walker brings the focus back to the situation of African Americans.

Nevertheless, there remains an animating tension in Walker's rhetorically canny *Appeal* and his equally canny efforts at circulating it, a tension between nationalistic notions of "our country" (65) and transnational or black nationalist notions of "[our] enslaved brethren all over the world" (29). This tension informs much African-American literature of the nineteenth century. A reconceived literary history that puts Walker's post-Missouri writings more at the center of a tradition of African-American writing will pay greater attention to such writers as Martin Delany and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, who similarly addressed connections between nationalism and transnationalism and racial and geographical borders and were similarly involved in efforts to develop a black press and community.²² Walker's (and other early national African Americans') linkage of circulation to black nationalism helped to insure the continuing importance of the African-American press to blacks' struggles for freedom in the United States.

Notes

1. 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*, ed. Sean Wilentz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 25. This text reprints the third and final edition of June 1830. All future page references to the *Appeal* are supplied parenthetically in the main body of the text.
2. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 120.
3. Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 173. Though I depart from his reading of the *Appeal*, I am indebted to Hinks's excellent study for much of my knowledge of Walker and his times.
4. The best study of the Missouri Compromise remains Glover Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953). On connections between the Missouri debates and American literary nationalism, see Robert S. Levine, "Section and Nation: The Missouri Compromise and the Rise of 'American' Literature," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 14 (1998): 223-40.
5. Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 102; David Paul Nord, "Newspapers and American Nationhood, 1776-1826," in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper*, ed. John B. Hency (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 404. Nord estimates that approximately four hundred newspapers were founded between 1810 and 1825.
6. Clay's compromise on the Missouri constitution may be found in Moore, *Missouri Controversy*, 155.
7. "An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina," in *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, ed. John Oliver Killens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 11-12, 128. On Walker's possible involvement in the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy, see Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 30-37.
8. T. R., "Observations on the Early History of the Negro Race," *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 1 (1825): 7, 8; "Colonization Society," *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 1 (1825): 161.
9. "To Our Patrons," *Freedom's Journal*, 16 March 1827, 1; Kenneth D. Nordin, "In Search of Black Unity: An Interpretation of the Content and Function of *Freedom's Journal*," *Journalism History* 4 (1977-1978): 123; "Proposals for Publishing the *Freedom's Journal*: Prospectus," *Freedom's Journal*, 16 March 1827, 4. On Egypt, see for example the three-part series "Mutability of Human Affairs," which appears in issues of 6 April, 13 April, and 20 April of the 1827 *Freedom's Journal*. For useful discussions of *Freedom's Journal*, see also Bella Gross, "Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All," *The Journal of Negro History* 17 (1932): 241-86; and Lionel C. Barrow, Jr., "'Our Own Cause': *Freedom's Journal* and the Beginnings of the Black Press," *Journalism History* 4 (1977-1978): 118-22. Good general accounts include Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America, 1827 to 1860* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), and Armisted S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997).
10. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 75; *Freedom's Journal*, 16 March 1827, 4.
11. On Cornish's departure, see "To the Patrons and Friends of 'Freedom's Journal,'" *Freedom's Journal*, 14 September 1827, 107.
12. *Freedom's Journal*, 25 April 1828, 37, and 28 March 1829, 410. The issue of 25 April 1828 also included a report on a meeting of Boston's blacks, including David Walker, which produced as one of its resolutions: "That we view the *Freedom's Journal* . . . well worthy of our unremitted exertions for its support" (*Freedom's Journal*, 38).
13. See *The Rights of All*, 29 May 1829, 2, 8.
14. *The Rights of All*, 12 June 1829, 15; 18 September 1829, 34.
15. "Address, Delivered before the General Colored Association of Boston, by David Walker," *Freedom's Journal*, 19 December 1828, 296; "Freedom's Journal," *Freedom's Journal*, 25 April 1828, 38; "Address," *Freedom's Journal*, 19 December 1828.
16. On Walker and the American Jeremiad, see Carla L. Peterson, "Doers of the Word": *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64-66.
17. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 16; Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 123.
18. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), 177.

19. See Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 124.
20. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 197. On North Carolina and Walker, see John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860* (1943; reprint, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 64–70. For discussions of other southern states' efforts to block circulation of the *Appeal*, see Clement Eaton, "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 2 (1936): 323–34; William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Walker's *Appeal* Comes to Charleston: A Note and Documents," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (1974): 287–92; and Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, chap. 5.
21. Moore, *Missouri Controversy*, 307. On the newspaper context of the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson's pro-Missouri views, see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), esp. chap. 4.
22. Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 135. For his influential discussion of nationalism and print culture, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), esp. chaps. 2 and 3. On Martin Delany and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, see Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), esp. chaps. 1 and 5; and Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

The New Face of Black Labor

Chapter 2

TODD VOGEL

ANTEBELLUM BLACK NEWSPAPERS strikingly illustrate how the editors borrowed, revised, and asserted new rules for black life in America. The editors joined many free blacks to use the mainstream's pervasive discourse of republicanism in an attempt to redefine their role in the nation. The editors brandished this discourse to punch through the web of discrimination that whites had crafted to keep them "in their place." Their aims become especially apparent when the editors write about labor. They crafted stories to recast images of blacks as mere workers or servants in a society run by whites and to thereby redefine their role in the nation. In these free black newspapers, authors used narratives of elevation—stories about getting ahead in society through work—to create an alternative social understanding about jobs and citizenship that overturned the antebellum system of privilege given to those considered "white." They broadcast their stories to a wide audience and critiqued a market economy that exploited racial division. Their lessons of elevation and tales of the elevated—at once inspiration and proof—refuted any public perception that blacks were a passive people suited only to serve, established that their minds proved as effective a tool as their muscles, and further asserted that, as people capable of considering the rights of everyone, they could participate in a republican government as full citizens. Thus, reformers of the 1830s and 1840s reworked

The Black Press in the Age of Chapter 13 Digital Reproduction

ANNA EVERETT

A significant development for African Americans and new technology has been the establishment of both local and national "Drum" lists. These Drum lists, which are essentially e-mail mailing lists, allow one African American to communicate with many others.... The result is a digital cascade of information which is not unlike the sounds of call and response delivered by the drums our forefathers used in Africa.

—R. Cadet (Conduit 1995)

I see a long road ahead.... A luta continua means the struggle continues.

—Talibah L. Chikwendu (Afro-America@: 1998)

AFRICAN AMERICANS' long-standing quest for racial equity and due process in the United States is marked by a series of epochal migrations. During slavery it was the clandestine migrations following the North Star to Canada and American cities above the Mason-Dixon line. Following the postwar Reconstruction era, African Americans migrated in large numbers to nonsouthern states in search of escape from the South's unrelenting and pervasive racial persecution. For most African Americans fleeing southern degradation and repression, northern destinations represented real-world equivalents to the scriptural promised land. More recently, however, the cumulative effects of economic stagnation in the urban Northeast, attacks on civil rights, and increasing interethnic con-

Two Exemplars

flict above the Mason-Dixon line in the wake of the racially polarizing Reagan-Bush 1980s have contributed to a notable reverse black migration southward. This return signals a sort of black acquiescence to the intractability of America's politics of privileged whiteness that erases any doubt that, indeed, the struggle continues.

Throughout these migrations the black press has sustained African Americans, but not without setbacks and struggles of its own. Today, in some intellectual circles it seems fashionable to assign blame for the diminution of the black press's significance and other socioeconomic setbacks in the black community to integration, particularly in this post-Civil Rights era.¹ It is important to note, however, that black suspicion of integration is not an exclusively contemporary conceit. As far back as 1949, Thomas W. Young, then president of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), presciently connected integration with the "prospective death of Black newspapers."² According to *A History of the Black Press*, by Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, Young believed that "once the [mainstream white press] routinely reported the Negro's personal and group news, crusaded against injustices and inequalities, and chronicled the achievements of the race, the foundations for Negro organs 'would cease to be,'"³

By contrast, *Louisville Defender* city editor Fletcher Martin, a contemporary of Young, "saw no occasion for all Black publishers to close up shop following some long-awaited gains in civil rights, education and living conditions. 'The Negro press won't die.'"⁴ Instead, Pride and Wilson report that most black publishers were inclined toward Carl Murphy's view that extinction or "self-liquidation" was not even on the agenda. Murphy, then the publisher of his family's historic *Afro-American* chain of newspapers, expressed this counterview in his 1954 presidential address to the NNPA, wherein he proclaimed, "We have the facility to change with the times."⁵ Nevertheless, as Pride and Wilson put it, "Negro newspapers went out of business at an alarming rate throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s."⁶

What Young and Murphy's dialectic attests to is the tremendous calculated risk that the black press took on behalf of its constituency in its often successful negotiations that pushed for a more inclusive democratic reality in U.S. civil society. The enormous cost was the "liquidation" and/or erosion of influence and viability of the very black

presses that agitated for the conditions most responsible for their own demise. At the same time, it is difficult not to regard the black press's new guard as the proverbial Phoenix arisen from the ashes of the same black press old guard that it eulogizes. By 1989, one of the legatees of the historic black press, *Black Enterprise* magazine, tallied the cost of the changed order of black journalism: "The end of the civil rights era and the advent of integration appear to have spawned a generation of young black adults who are unimpressed with black papers that don't display the spit and polish of mainstream newspapers."⁷

With integration's apparent devastation of the historic black press, and the remaining presses' refusal to be forced into oblivion by mainstream and new digital media technologies, replete with high-tech "spit and polish," it is remarkable that today's black press is yet again at the forefront of a bold new migration. Only this time the migration is to the digital promised land of cyberspace. It is fitting, indeed, that Carl Murphy's own enduring *Afro-American* newspaper organization fulfilled his prophecy of adapting to the times by becoming one of the first established newspapers, black or white, to go online.

Before any meaningful consideration of the black press's online migration and digital metamorphosis can proceed, it seems necessary to address what we mean by the phrase "black press." The digital media environment has radically transformed publishing realities and produced what I call "digitextuality" (a concept that marries digital form to intertextual content). Regarding the differing communicative modes that characterize print and digital texts, George Landow and others have proffered convincing arguments for the existence of significant structural differences separating the communicative modes of print and digital media. For Landow, one key point of departure is that autonomous or stand-alone print texts normally are identified by their unified and centralized natures, whereas the hypertext structure of digital texts, conversely, is defined by a "dispersed, multiply centered network of data organized by a key feature known as electronic linking."⁸

Linking, which is essentially a computerized system enabling instantaneous textual navigation and retrieval that permits readers of digital data to jump from text to text instantaneously with the click of a computer mouse, does not simply structurally define digital information systems against the manual linearity of older print information regimes.

This digital collision with intertextuality (again, "digitextuality") compels Landow to go so far as to assert that hypertexts cause a mode of perceptual and cognitive blurring that "has a marked effect on the conception and experience of boundaries and limits."⁹ Specifically this idea of seamless digital boundary crossings of generic, disciplinary, temporal, and spatial lines (that also generate class, national, generational, gender, and the always problematic racial blurring of established norms and hierarchies) vexes any discursive engagement with would-be immutable identity categories in cyberspace. How then to define the particularities of the black press in cyberspace now that the drastically revolutionized nature of "the text," of publication, of authorship, of information dissemination and retrieval, and of the reader all signify so significant a shift in the basic terms and concepts of our topic?

The pertinence of this question becomes evident to anyone confronted with the sheer volume of sites claiming black affiliation. In fact, this problem did not manifest itself to me until I was well into my own research that required consultation with such popular search engines as Yahoo!, Lycos, Infoseek, Alta Vista, and Hotbot, among others. (These searches supplemented my investigation of such black site directories as the Universal Black Pages, Melanet, Everything Black.Com, the Afrocentric Mall, etc.) My specification of the key words and phrases, "black," "black press," African American, "African-American press," "black diaspora," "African diaspora," and so on, yielded a number of "hits" and "site" and "category matches" in the hundreds of thousands. I was, therefore, thrust into a panning-for-gold mentality. What I was prospecting for was the rare black gold of "authentic" black press websites hidden somewhere amid what I soon discovered were inflated numbers for these mainstream search engines' "category matches."¹⁰

This observation makes clear the fact that new conditions of digital reproducibility have radically altered the nature and status of black publication. The conditions of possibility that engendered the historic print black press (i.e., startup capital, expensive linotype machinery and master printers, a national and global distribution network, sales agents and paper delivery personnel) no longer represent the formidable impediments that once plagued chronically undercapitalized black press ventures. Today almost anyone with access to a computer and a modem can establish a virtual black press operation to plead his or her

own cause, as the antebellum black journalists Russwurm and Cornish advocated. Obviously these sea-changes require us to reconsider what constitutes the black press now that the age of cyberspace all but removes brick and mortar obstacles to mass publishing operations. Even more crucial, in my view, is the pressing need to grapple with a new kind and increasing level of epistemological uncertainty when interacting with a putative black press entity in the digital sphere.

One aspect of the rapidly proliferating "black" presses online is the need for researchers and consumers now to confront and acknowledge a newly expansive conceptualization of the "black press," given the increasing difficulty of sorting out actual black press entities from their online simulacra. In an effort to delimit an otherwise endless and unreliable slide of racial signification in this quest for black presses in cyberspace, it seems logical to focus our sampling on a few websites established by legitimate and prominent black press organizations.

Focusing on established black sites and their distinct modes of intertextuality shows us a promising future for the black press. For despite certain risks of identity erasure that can accompany online publication, online journalism might better fulfill some historical ideals of the black press than its traditional print counterparts. Beginning with the *Charlotte Post* (a relatively new online entrant), we can see a black press in cyberspace example that sticks close to its local print roots while using new technologies to globalize "traditional" issues. Moving on to the national forum of Afro-America@ (a pioneer in cyberspace), however, reveals a more significant departure from print media—but one that, perhaps, fulfills both "traditional" and contemporary needs of the black press even more extensively by making interactive participation instantaneous. As with other migrations in African-American history, the migration of the black press to the Internet offers promise as well as risk.

The online version of the *Charlotte Post* strongly maintains its ties to the historic black press lineage. The site uses its web-specific "About us" page to foreground its historical successes and credentials: "The *Charlotte Post* has served the African-American community of Charlotte and the metropolitan area for more than 120 years. Each week the *Post* is read by thousands of Charlotte and surrounding area residents interested in the most in-depth coverage of minority issues. For

providing this service, the *Post* has continually been awarded national and local awards."¹¹ The *Post* online includes news stories that make it easy to see that black readers continue to look to their presses, as Roland Wolseley notes, "to find out 'what really went on' when a news story about blacks breaks."¹² What is striking in a Frederick Detweiler observation about several characteristic themes found in black presses during the 1920s, is that they resonate powerfully today with themes such as: "unfair laws, discriminatory acts of whites [and] lynchings, and the positive achievements—new businesses begun, political offices gained, educational honors or progress made by individuals" (quoted in Wolseley).¹³ Similarly, in the 1950s, another scholar of the black press "published a system of classifying the contents of black newspapers. . . . First was what he called the characteristic Negro Story . . . the Lynch Story, the Protest Story aimed at Jim Crowism, and the Integration Story . . . the Black Power Story, and Separatism Story, and the Black Revolution Story . . . the Negro Angled Story: news of blacks taking part in white news events . . . The Gossip Story [and finally] the African Story" where African Americans began to identify more personally and politically with the land of their forebears.¹⁴ It is significant that any survey of black presses in cyberspace, including the *Charlotte Post* and the Afro-America@, manifests the persistence of these themes and stories mainly because the conditions that necessitate these journalistic preoccupations have not abated.

Despite its binding print-based aesthetics, the *Charlotte Post* online seems intent on creating a timely, web-oriented look. Distinguishing this site from the other black press websites is primarily its liberal use of text-related photos, navigational frames, and buttons that provide an important place-keeping function as readers surf the site, and a threaded chat/discussion feature connecting reader responses to specified topics.

Typifying this site's more interactive elements are the *Post*'s provocative e-mail discussions of both traditional and contemporary issues. During the last week of December 1998, "Should the Census Bureau Establish a 'Multiracial' Category to Allow Individuals of 'Mixed Race' to Legally Identify Themselves?" was one hot topic prompting reader response. Of the five reader posts, equivalent to "letters to the editor," all but one reject the idea of legislating a "multiracial" category for mixed race people, citing deleterious political implications.

One reader sees this simply as a divisive tactic threatening black solidarity and what Gayatri Spivak terms "strategic essentialism." The chat respondent posted this concern: "I think that this movement will further divide the black population. I also think that this issue is being used as a buffer between us and white folks. After all, he is not trying to re-classify himself but if he sees any benefit (political), he will sanction it? I want those involved in this issue to think about it!" Another corroborates, adding this perspective: "I think this is and has always been a way to keep America segregated. . . . The government should spend more time and money in finding ways to end segregation because it still exists. We are all Americans!"¹⁵

The most in-your-face condemnation, however, finds troubling identity politics at the root of this dilemma: "I remember when people were proud to be 'Black' . . . [now they] want to switch. . . . [But] they too will find out, no matter how light you think you are, how dark you are . . . all the man behind the sheet sees is something to swing on the end of his rope."¹⁶ This e-mail respondent reminds *Post* readers that America's one-drop of black blood litmus test for white racial purity still has cultural currency.¹⁷ Even the only dissenting reader posts an ambivalent reply. While answering affirmatively that "mixed race" persons should be legally identified because "it is becoming harder and harder to identify persons by race," this e-mailer confuses her position by asking finally, "What would be the purpose?"

One useful purpose of the black press in cyberspace is the ease and spontaneity of e-mail submission and delivery that encourage a more democratizing ethos in both the consumption and production of journalistic discourse across the board. Whereas the expense of reams of newsprint might have curtailed the available space for publishing most reader feedback, it is conceivable that the virtual spaces of e-publication (electronic publication) are not so restricted and thus are capable of accommodating voluminous instances of logging on and weighing in.

Beyond the hot-button issues that drive most online chat interactions, the black press in cyberspace is most effective when situating contemporary cultural, economic, and technological concerns in their historically important contexts. Such is the case with a *Post* online Christmas week news story entitled "Dolls Reflect, Shape Cultural Identity," by Archie T. Clark II. At issue here is the perennially popular

Christmas gift, the ubiquitous Barbie doll. Clark's article, which revisits the issue of young black children's ongoing preference for white dolls over black ones, makes the case that even today such consumer choices are symptomatic of a persistent "lack of self-esteem and racial identity" in segments of the black community. Raleigh, North Carolina, doll merchant Kamau Kambon offered a provocative response when Clark asked him to consider whether African-American purchases of the traditional Barbie matter.

"You better believe it matters," said Kamau Kambon. Two years ago Kambon, "observed and read about consumers, some of them black, snatching up white Barbies while black Barbies remained on the shelves. He was disappointed. . . . I don't carry too many black dolls because people don't buy them. . . . In 1996 about 96–98 percent of the black dolls manufactured that year were left on the shelves and black people were buying dolls—the white ones."¹⁸ Besides confirming a suspected fiscal disincentive for reluctant white manufacturers to invest in and promote nonwhite dolls, Kambon reveals the near-impossibility of black entrepreneurs to merge sound business practices with the promotion of a "possessive investment" in black racial identity and self-esteem, despite their best efforts.¹⁹ Even blacks, it seems, are affected by what George Lipsitz calls "the possessive investment in whiteness."

Clark's investigation uses historical research into the destructive potential of identity politics in some forms of child's play. Among the historical proofs that Clark revisits are Kenneth Clarke's seminal study and Dr. Darleen Powell Hopson's 1988 replication, which led to and then reconfirmed the *Brown v Board of Education* decision. For Clark, the journalist, it is central for black families to understand that more than "beauty is at stake when a child prefers a doll of a different race."²⁰ Clark concludes by quoting Baruti Katembo, a math teacher and Raleigh community activist who started a Fourth of July celebration for local black people: "When a child owns a doll, they unknowingly idolize it and want to be like it. . . . As long as we continue to see ourselves as extensions of white people, we will be further and further removed from being able to define ourselves."

Even as Clark's article rests its argument in a historical struggle, it also indirectly supports an important new feature of black websites in an era of ever-increasing e-commerce. The new electronic marketplace

affords enterprising black firms unparalleled access to a more level economic playing field despite the emergence of global oligopolies and media monopolies with profit motives to the contrary. The web has become a place where such organizations can market black arts and other Afrocentric commercial goods, and Clark's article may inspire readers to turn to such sites for Barbie alternatives. Even if the mainstream press were to report on black youths and white Barbie dolls, it is extremely doubtful that they would angle this news in terms unfavorable to consumerism, let alone in terms of historically documented mental health issues. By foregrounding its information function in this way, the *Post* online lives up to its own published credo and its historic black press legacy.

Now, for as much as the *Post* upholds the best practices of the historic black press's uplift mission in cyberspace, one of publisher Gerald O. Johnson's planned "new features" returns us to a questionable blast from the print past. In his "What's New" page, Johnson promises to revive the cheesecake photo staples that dotted the pages of even the most venerable of black presses from around the 1920s onward. Apparently Johnson believes that *Post* readers might delight in news about a new feature: "We have added a 'beauty of the month' section. This section will profile some of Carolina's finest. Browsing this section will make you understand why nothing could be finer than being in Carolina."²¹ Given the growing popularity of so-called "voyeur sites" featuring unrestricted visual pleasure and access to the presumed everyday life experiences of young, nubile girls and women, perhaps Johnson is only guilty of employing late capitalism's e-business tactics best summed up in Wolseley's terms as, "putting in what sells."²² Regardless of motive, however, this carryover from the historic black press might be reconsidered.

Clearly the *Charlotte Post* places a premium on digital "data that is both informative and entertaining" for its black cybernauts and net-newbies, yet it still remains tethered to a visual style better suited to its print progenitors.²³ The *Afro-America*'s site, however, deploys contemporary online aesthetics, replete with graphics-rich, quick-loading splash pages, Afrocentric icons, symbols, and imagemaps ("an image that is treated by the browser as a navigational tool").²⁴ Perhaps this innovative use of technology is not surprising, given that, in 1995 when the

Afro-American newspaper began publishing online, it was the first of the established black or white newspapers to do so.

Primary among the *Afro*'s many distinctions is its design configuration. In contrast to other print newspapers whose online presentations replicate their traditional print-based looks, the *Afro*'s design features are more aligned with and attuned to the new visual aesthetics and functional imperatives of the graphics-driven, digital communicative cues of the World Wide Web. As if becoming a materialization of the ancestral Murphy's injunction to change, the *Afro-America* online is an effective digital text ("digitext") that conforms to the imperatives of today's easy-to-navigate hypertext systems. Moreover, this digitextual format allows it to best administer the multitude of tasks required of a national database for black news by centralizing information, disseminating it to readers, and publishing reader responses.

As seen during the week of 21 December 1998, the front page of the *Afro* site is a visually sophisticated, yet very understated, splash page containing text and image icons that function as the navigational gateway to the rest of the site. Somewhat reminiscent of a print newspaper's masthead, the splash page's title banner contains the text, "*AFRO-america*@" with a three-dimensional drop-shadow effect that is positioned over a cloud-laced sky background or wallpaper graphic. This virtual frontispiece is further organized around four regular topic divisions termed, "culture," "information," "history," and "kid's zone" that are affixed atop a globe-like graphic located at the center of the page. Flanking the right and left sides of this image bearing the regular topic areas are two graphic text boxes linked to the weekly content changes of news, features, information, and special topics. Across the bottom of the page are text and icon combinations entitled, "register," "site map," and "feedback." The fixed subject categories, the graphic text boxes and the icons at the bottom of the page are all hyperlinks that connect visitors to other information destinations within the site by simply clicking on the desired text or image.

During the week of 21 December 1998, a click on the "afro news: news from around the nation of interest to the african-american community" text box connected online readers to the site's national news department. Evocative of a print-based table of contents or index structure with its three-column newspaper style formatting, this page segments

both national and regional headlines or capsule descriptions of news and information for the current week. Among the regional stories covered that week were: "Western—Black Community Celebrates Cancellation of Desmond Pfeiffer, Los Angeles, CA"; "South-Eastern—Race Relations Dim According to Study, Nashville, TN"; "National—The Booker File: Services for Boxing legend Archie Moore; Mayor Wellington sought by hitman"; "Capitol Hill—CONGRESSIONAL ROUNDUP: Thompson wants reimbursement for Espy; Jackson, Meeks sponsor bills for Supreme Court hiring; Spingarn Medal nominations accepted." Simply "click on" image maps for detailed news.

The *Afro-America* online site represents an effective and audacious amalgam of old and new technology. Put another way, the *Afro* online seems comfortably positioned astride the historical traditions of the venerable newspaper's past and its ambitious future quest for black press endurance in the age of global multimedia behemoths. Notwithstanding the site's forward-looking visual and structural formation, persistent racism results in a discursive trajectory that too often remains hobbled by the need to foreground news, information, and editorial content inflected by the racial problematic that seems little changed since Carl Murphy ran the paper at mid-twentieth century. For example, in his "Congressional Roundup" column, Washington *Afro* staff writer James Wright reports on Congressman Bennie Thompson's (D-Miss) introduction of legislation designed to lessen the financial hardship of black public servants who are victimized by power-hungry, vindictive, and racist independent counsels.²⁵ He also reports the push by African Americans in Congress to introduce "legislation to pressure Congress" and the Supreme Court to improve their hiring of minority clerks. Other national news for the week celebrates the accomplishments of community members: United Way fundraising records are acknowledged, and Rosa Parks sets the record straight about her civil rights activities at a youth gathering organized by the George Washington University. Having noted the site's all-too-familiar task of having to disabuse white Americans of the belief that African Americans have attained first-class citizenship in a new and improved color-blind society, it becomes necessary not to blame the new high-tech messenger for reporting the continuing practices of low-tech and no-tech racism that still wound the nation.

Where the site's information content parallels its progressive visual form, however, is in its domains of "Culture," "History," and in the variety of interactive opportunities made available online. In that portion of the *Afro*'s site designated as "Culture" are links to a diverse array of content including: "Community Discussions," "Weblinks to Africa," "Art Gallery," "The Polling Place," "Every Wednesday: A Weekly Culture Magazine," "Black Greeks Across the Country," and "Your Cool Links." This "Culture" domain functions to massify, instantaneously, black cultural production via global exhibition and distribution channels systematically disallowed to African Americans by the vested interests of traditional and newly constituted mass media outlets. Moreover, the *Afro*'s appropriation of the Internet's virtual gallery feature for the celebration of black art and artists speaks to the publishers' ability to seize the technology for virtual-space promotional and entrepreneurial activities that counteract African Americans' ongoing race-based exclusions in real space. In terms of interactivity, then, the *Afro-America*'s "Culture" page successfully rearticulates the necessary two-way communication process between ethnic/race presses and their constituent readerships for the changed exigencies of the new digital agora. The print model of reader-to-press interaction rested largely on a press's ability to induce reader responses to published information and then (following established gatekeeping practices) to publish selective feedback therefrom. The website, however, permits uncensored, unmediated, real-time posting to specific areas of the *Afro* site's "virtual" public or cyberspheres.

Also, the prominence of links to other sites endows these black presses with a new and important dimension not possible within the materialist strictures of print publishing. Through the hypertext link or digitextual feature of web publishing, each press offering a "drum list" on its site reinvents the traditional media wire service. Instead of sharing select and limited stories among members or subscribers, those cyberpresses featuring links (or "drum lists" as several Afrocentric sites rechristen them) to all manner of African diasporic sites become virtual global media distribution networks as site readers and lurkers are instantaneously transported to and from other national and international "black presses" in one seamless online flow. This virtual erasure of national borders and statist ideologies has the potential to strengthen

the bonds of African diasporic unity in the global struggle for liberation and self-determination in ways that no other tool of communication has yet achieved. We must wait, of course, to see if this phenomenal potential will be actualized.

In terms of the liberation struggles on the homefront, the *Afro-America*@ site necessarily must detail African Americans' routine victimization by the nation's endemic racism, particularly given the mainstream press displacement of institutionalized racist practices onto so-called "rogue elements" or isolated individuals and events in the culture. Consequently, the black press's journalistic mission rarely escapes the pull of what James Baldwin terms "protest literature." Be that as it may, one key aspect of the *Afro*'s online ability to redirect the terms of the text/reader interface is that reader responses to the news are less marginalized; instead they are welcome, instantaneous, and widely disseminated. The site's web master trusts the site's readers or "end users" to proof their writings and to abide within the code of the honor system where truth and accuracy are concerned. Once you "send" your data to the "Culture" page's domain entitled "Your Cool Links," it is automatically cybercast. This is the equivalent of network television's live broadcasts, without benefit of the three-second delay. This decidedly antigatekeeping feature of the site is in keeping with a neoidealist spirit of the Habermassian public sphere.

Clearly, the *Afro-America*@ online is a trailblazer caught up in all of cyberspace's semiotic ambiguities and vicissitudes. The site can symbolize the idea of bounding over the obstacles to progress in an eagerly awaited black future vision, or it can symbolize the recuperation of the old in new technological garb. The danger of the latter is a tendency to limit even the desire to explore the outer limits of the new digital media's unique communicative possibilities. The *Afro-America*@'s developmental trajectory follows the progressive promise of the former.

This portrait of two select historic black presses' migration to the Internet clearly reveals their commitment to continue the struggle for black political, social, cultural, and economic survival and prosperity well into the digital age.

Notes

1. See for example, Russ Rymer, "Integration's Casualties: Segregation Helped Black Business. Civil Rights Helped Destroy It," *New York Times Magazine*, 1

- November 1998, 48-50; Adolph Reed, Jr., "Dangerous Dreams: Black Boomers Wax Nostalgic for the Days of Jim Crow," *Village Voice*, 16 April 1996, 24-29.
2. Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press*, 261.
3. *Ibid.*, 261.
4. *Ibid.*, 262.
5. *Ibid.*, 263-64.
6. *Ibid.*, 246.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See George Landow, "What's a Critic to Do?: Critical Theory in the Age of Hypertext," in *Hyper / Text / Theory*, ed. George Landow (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 17.
10. Complicating the search was a plethora of listings for those black press sites that only exist as online publications. This further confirmed my need to reconceive what I meant by "black press" now that my print signifier has become entangled in the digitextual blurring of a new black press signified in cyberspace.
11. "About Us," *Charlotte Post*, 1998, <http://www.thepost.mindspring.com/about%20info/ABHME.html>.
12. Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, USA*, 2d. ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 198.
13. *Ibid.*, 197.
14. *Ibid.*, 198.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. In her article "Passing for White, Passing for Black," that discusses a 1980s legal case about a white woman who challenges the racial identity on her birth certificate, Adrian Piper explains the legal ramifications of the nation's longstanding "'one-drop' rule that uniquely characterizes the classification of Blacks in the United States even where no longer in law. . . . According to this longstanding convention of racial classification, a white who acknowledges any African ancestry implicitly acknowledges being Black—a social condition, more than an identity, that no white person would voluntarily assume, even in imagination." See Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 427.
18. Archie T. Clark, II, "Dolls Reflect, Shape Cultural Identity," *Charlotte Post*, 1998, <http://www.thepost.mindspring.com/news/com/news2%20Page.html>.
19. I borrow this concept from George Lipsitz as contained in his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
20. Clark, "Dolls Reflect," *Charlotte Post*.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Wolseley, *The Black Press*, 204.
23. John Downey, "Black Weeklies to Merge," *Charlotte Post*, 1997, 14 December 1998.
24. Vincent Flanders and Michael Willis, *Webpages that Suck: Learn Good Design by Looking at Bad Design* (San Francisco: Sybex, 1996), 25.
25. James Wright, "Congressional Roundup," *Afro-America*@ National News, Washington, D.C., 21 Dec. 1998, <>.