"Pharaoh’s on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters"

Henry Highland Garnet and the National Convention of 1843

The national conventions of the 1840s were, to a large degree, an outgrowth of the debates about complexional distinctions. Many black leaders were torn between a color-blind appeal for moral reform and a race-based politics that addressed the specific social and political circumstances of people of color. The state conventions partly settled the matter. Much to the dismay of some white and black abolitionists, these meetings were organized around specific issues facing people of color and stood as alternative forums to the American Moral Reform Society and white antislavery organizations. The New York State Convention of 1840, for example, embraced the language of a common humanity in the context of an argument for black voting rights. The delegates maintained that without the franchise colored people would remain "nominally free." They also contended that without the political power to effect change, the community would remain in darkness and further be denied access to education and jobs.

The state conventions combined the language of the AMRS with a more direct, what I've called "outside," political program. The franchise was seen by the delegates to these conventions as a vehicle for the improvement of the conditions of African Americans. Yet, they used the moral language of the AMRS and of general abolitionism. The complicity of Christians with the evil of slavery continued to be denounced, and the
contradiction of the founding principles of the nation—the betrayal of America’s civil religion—was consistently exposed.

But more important, for my purposes at least, the state conventions served as a training ground for a new generation of African American leaders. One in particular would greatly influence the timbre of the national conventions of the 1840s: the incomparable Henry Highland Garnet. I want to examine Garnet’s “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” at the National Negro Convention of 1843 in Buffalo, New York, because his speech represents an early example of the pressing pessimism that developed among blacks of the mid-nineteenth century, an outgrowth, as it were, of entrenched racism and the pragmatic view of race of the late thirties. For lingering on the borders of the call for an immanent conversation among the oppressed was the specter of violence: the raging swell of despair in the face of repeated indifference and the demand “to strike the blow for freedom.” Indeed, because of this, Garnet’s address can be characterized as an example of what Michael Walzer calls political messianism.

MICHAEL WALZER AND POLITICAL MESSIANISM

In *Exodus and Revolution*, Walzer interprets the Exodus story as “a paradigm of revolutionary politics.” Paradigm here is understood loosely, for Exodus is not to be taken as a theory of revolution. Instead, Walzer reads the story as a broad narrative in which a range of political events can be located. In his view the classic story line of Exodus—it’s a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending—makes it susceptible to a number of uses. Contemporary militants, for example, tie the story’s linearity to ideas of progress and the hope of redemption. The story provides the model for a once-and-for-all struggle, a confrontation that, in the end, leads to the transformation of the world. Walzer identifies this politics as millenarianism, or political messianism, and claims that his reading of Exodus is an alternative to it. For him, political messianism is, to say the least, a worrisome politics.

Three characteristics of political messianism trouble Walzer. The first is its extraordinary sensitivity to and longing for apocalyptic events. This may take the form of the expectation of an imminent and inevitable end brought about by an act of God or, in its more secular guises, the fated movement of historical events: a terminus in which the people “win at last the political version of eternal life.” The second feature of political messianism is its eagerness to force the End. What’s problematic here is not the recognition of agents ready to act politically but rather that action is understood as having an ultimate purpose. As Walzer claims:

Men and women who force the End take deliverance into their own hands, and it is not from any particular evil but from evil in general that they would deliver themselves and all the rest of us. They claim divine authority for their politics and effectively rule out the requirements of both morality and prudence. When the stakes are this high, it is implausible to demand any sort of restraint. Force itself is sanctified when it is used to bring about the end of days, and so it can be used without guilt.

Moral and prudential constraints, then, are cast aside, and force is sanctified by the ultimate purposes of struggle.

Finally, political messianism lays claim to unconditionality. Victory is final. No arguments to the contrary are allowed. Subsequently, the fulfillment of the messianic mission leaves no regard for losers or any moral obligation to designated enemies. Once victory is declared, the argument, so to speak, is foreclosed. Unconditionality, then, along with the other characteristics Walzer lists, points to a crass politics of winners, quite intolerant of dissent, in which a single vision or truth grounds actions, and only those with access to that truth are capable of leadership. Authoritarianism is justified, and we end up with a worrisome politics indeed.

Walzer counters political messianism with Exodus politics: “an account [of struggle] that does not require the miraculous transformation of the material world but sets God’s people marching toward a better place within it." For him, the authentic prophetic voice of Exodus does not reside in a utopian refusal of limits, that is, in a longing for the apocalypse, a readiness to force the end, and the unconditionality of victory. Instead, the story’s propheticism is found in the recognition of our actions as occurring within history and the limitations that reality forces on us. The crucial struggle, then, is “in the wilderness—extended into the promised land itself—to create a free people and to live up to the terms of the covenant.”

“AN ADDRESS TO THE SLAVES OF THE UNITED STATES”

Henry Highland Garnet’s address of 1843 poses an interesting challenge to Walzer’s conception (and by extension my conception) of Exodus politics
and political messianism. Garnet rejected Exodus as a model for political action, claiming that it induced slaves and freemen a passive gradualism in which the group, like the children of Israel, waited for providential deliverance. His speech also contained all of the characteristics of messianism that Walzer finds troublesome. But Garnet's address entailed a possible attraction of messianism that Walzer, to some extent, ignores: the existential pain that drives people to force the End. This drive is not so much the result of a longing for the apocalypse or an unconditional victory as it is the outcome of psychological and physical scars and bruises resulting from repeated indifference—people simply refusing to suffer any longer (and this need not be imagined in terms of ultimate purposes, but may be the source of the messianic attraction).

Garnet's readiness to force the End—that is, his call for a general slave rebellion—was based on a pragmatic view of race shaped by an ironic use of moral reform that took seriously the cycle of existential pain and unrest that penetrated deeply the lives of African Americans, slave or free. Each of these features can give us a better understanding of Garnet's address, particularly in relation to the prevailing issues and themes of the moment. Like most of the black men and women around him, Garnet was messianic with regard to America's willingness to end slavery and racism. The peculiar institution thrived, proslavery arguments were everywhere, and the new science of race was fast becoming hegemonic. But unlike most of his fellows, Garnet was ready to force the End in the face of white America's indifference to black suffering and its support of the evil of slavery.

Yet, just one year before his address in Buffalo, Garnet disavowed the use of violence to end slavery. Before the National Liberty Party's convention in 1842, Garnet stated:

I cannot harbor the thought for a moment that [the slave's] deliverance will be brought about by violence. No, our country will not be so deaf to the cries of the oppressed; so regardless of the commands of God, and her highest interests. No, the time for a last stern struggle has not yet come (may it never be necessary). The finger of the Almighty will hold back the trigger, and his all powerful arm will sheath the sword till the oppressor's cup is full.13

There seemed a glimmer of hope that the nation would live up to its stated ideals. But what would bring Garnet to the "militant despairing" of the black condition in 1843? Why would he lose faith in America's ability to hear the cries of the oppressed and become messianistic about the possibility of American democracy flourishing?

Several factors probably influenced Garnet's messianic outlook. In the previous chapters I mentioned the growing acceptance and influence of the new science of race in American life. Many proponents of slavery embraced the language of science to justify the peculiar institution and their entrenched racial prejudices. Such views were becoming hegemonic in the 1840s, and by midcentury they were the accepted norm. The value-neutral domain of science, in effect, legitimized the institution of slavery and the widespread belief of innate differences between the races. Another factor was the 1842 Supreme Court decision in Prigg v. Pennsylvania, in which the Court upheld the fugitive slave law of 1793, clearly stating that the government had the right to maintain slavery. Coupled with the expulsion of U.S. Congressman Joshua Giddings from the House of Representatives in 1842, for his antislavery stance14 and the growing rift between white and black abolitionists over political tactics, the national climate for racial redress was decidedly hostile. Apparently, the oppressor's cup was full, and the country would move only with agitation, in particular the resistance of millions of slaves locked in the dark prison of oppression. This became the basis of the 1843 address in Buffalo.

A pragmatic view of race—the recognition that social and political conditions make racial solidarity an important political and social strategy—frames the 1843 address. Garnet opened with an acknowledgment of such bonds and a deep sadness over the persistence of slavery: "Your brethren of the North, East, and West have been accustomed to meet together in National Conventions to sympathize with each other, and to weep over your unhappy condition."15 For Garnet, the occasion of the address or, more generally, the convention movement, was the result of the disaster experienced by all African Americans, the experience of slavery and the dark shadow the institution cast over the nation. These individual experiences justified imagining those who have lived them as members of a nation, as a collective audience with interests and aims.

This imagined community was strengthened by the recognition that so-called free men and women in the North were slaves as well. Like the concurrent freedom celebrations, Garnet understood freedom as partially proleptic, a description of circumstances to come. Blacks in the North could not claim freedom for themselves, for an identification between the slaves in the South and the quasi slaves in the North, through the social heritage of slavery and the persistence of discrimination, bound them to-
gether. “Years have rolled on, and tens of thousands have been borne on streams of blood and tears, to the shores of eternity. While you have been oppressed we have also been partakers with you, nor can we be free while you are enslaved. We, therefore, write to you as being bound with you.”

Finally, national solidarity was cemented with referential to familial bonds, for many blacks in the North were connected to slavery by relations of blood. Their parents, wives, brothers, and sisters were still enslaved in the South. For some, something personal or individual that paralleled other personal or individual stories constituted their relation to those in slavery. As Garnet acknowledged: “Many of you are bound to us, not only by the ties of a common humanity, but we are connected by the more tender relations of parents, wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters, and friends. As such we must affectionately address you.” Only after these levels of solidarity were acknowledged by Garnet did he venture to exhort the slaves to seek freedom. Each level gave voice to the experiential basis of the community, to the parallel histories among fellows who did not know each other but in whose minds lived the image of their communion.

I want to suggest that such a conception of the black community relies on a pragmatic understanding of race, not a biological one. Three years before his speech in Buffalo, Garnet delivered an address before the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. He spoke of the ties that bound him to the slave:

There is, Mr. President, a higher sort of freedom, which no mortal can touch. That freedom, thanks be unto the Most High, is mine. Yet I am not, nay, cannot be entirely free. I feel for my brethren as a man—I am bound with them as a brother. Nothing but emancipating them can set me at liberty. ... For although I were dwelling beneath the bright skies of Asia, or listening to the harp-like strains of the gentle winds that whisper of freedom among the groves of Africa—though my habitation were fixed in the freest part of Victoria’s dominions, yet it were vain, and worse than vain for me to indulge in the thought of being free, while three millions of my country-men are wailing in the dark prison-house of oppression.

This acknowledgment of ties was not premised on any conception of the “racial self” as authentic or natural, that is, as a stable identity connected with similarly biologically constituted racial selves. Instead, Garnet spoke of the conditions and experiences of people of color. Slavery and pervasive prejudice bound each one—whether slave or free—to his fellows. The invocation of common experience, sympathy, and, in some cases, “spilt blood” called individuals to speak out against slavery and to struggle for its ultimate demise. They were not the tools to hermetically seal a racial identity.

Garnet’s address to the Liberty Party Convention of 1842 illustrates this point. Garnet rejected explicitly the new racial science and its conception of inherent differences between the races. He stated:

It is maintained by many that we are to judge men by their complexion, and not by their moral worth. This spirit of caste the friends of freedom have trodden under foot; but it is not dead; it too often shows itself in our country, exerting a withering influence on those who cherish it, and chilling the heart’s blood of those against whom it is exerted. But he who is considered so offensive for the complexion his Creator has given him, has the assurance that God “is no respecter of persons”; and those who make this distinction are to be pitied for their ignorance of the works of God, and of the attributes of His character.

Race as a biological essence was not what Garnet had in mind when he spoke of the community of people of color. That position belonged to proponents of the new science. For Garnet, race marked the effects of environment or the work of God, and its invidious use to justify slavery and racism had to be rejected. It is important to note, however, that this rejection of racial science did not lead Garnet to discard racial language altogether. Unlike William Whipper, Garnet saw the usefulness of race-based politics in a society so completely structured by the concept. But it was a pragmatic understanding of race, not an essentialist one, that guided Garnet’s use of the language and his embrace of “complexionally distinct” organization.

Garnet supported the New York State Convention in 1840 and its stand for complexionally distinct organizations. He led the convening and was the principal writer of the two published addresses of the meeting: an address to the people of the state of New York and an address to the colored community. Both provide insight into Garnet’s use of race. The former rejected the new racial science, appealed to the humanity of all citizens of the state, called attention to the blood shed on the battlefields for freedom, and demanded that the state live up to the republican ideals
of the nation, all of which were framed by descriptions of black achievement. For in spite of racial restriction, Garnet argued, the black community sustained itself and, in some cases, flourished. This alone satisfied any requirements for civic responsibility.

The address to the black community took a different tone. It appealed to the community to take responsibility for its condition and to act for itself.

Colored men of New York! Are you willing that your people should longer constitute the proscribed class? Are you willing ever to be deprived of one of the dearest rights of freemen? Are you willing to remain quietly and inactively, political slaves? . . . O no! . . . Brethren, by united, vigorous, and judicious and manly effort, we can redeem ourselves. But we must put forth our own exertions. We must exert our own powers. Our political enfranchisement cometh not from afar.\textsuperscript{21}

The black community of New York was encouraged to exert itself in the name of its own liberation.\textsuperscript{22} The basis for this action was not racial essentialism but rather the choice of black persons to act distinctively in the hope that such measures would find their vindication in beneficial consequences.

In typical Garnet fashion, the address turned to historical example to buttress this point. Oppressed nations always fought for themselves. Their allies joined them in the fight, but the battle was theirs. And like the many men who sacrificed for the liberation of their nation, black men were urged to sacrifice for theirs.

We call upon you, then, for effort; nor for effort alone. We call upon you for sacrifice. Examine the annals of the human race, look over the face of the universe, and you will find, that whenever anything was of great worth to be achieved for man, men have been needed, and men have been willing to sacrifice their every thing—their all—yea, to give up life, for the good of their oppressed people. . . . But, we ask, if in all ages of the world, men, in view of the prostrate condition of their compatriots, and the inevitable heritage of posterity, have been willing to sacrifice everything of dear and sacred nature for the good of man, is there not enough public spirit, of patriotic feeling, among us, peeled, stricken and smitten, fleeced and

flayed, as we have been, as we now are, to induce, impel us to some sacrifice of time and money, and labor, in our own behalf?\textsuperscript{23}

The striking point of this passage is its appeal to national feeling in black New Yorkers in particular and the black community in general. Here the nation is called to sacrifice, and the people are called to act in the name of patriotic devotion. Like all other nations, the black nation in America had to act for its own freedom in light of its condition and the inevitable heritage of posterity—a theme common to Garnet's speeches.

A biological conception of race did not figure in this formulation, for Garnet's use of the language did not extend beyond the social and political relations that gave race its meaning. In other words, race language acquired its moral and political significance in the context of its use. According to Garnet, one could not step outside of these relations or contexts because one's moral duties to respond to the effects of race were shaped and formulated within them. As such, white people had certain duties with regard to the effects of racism based on their position, just as blacks did. The concept of race simply served as a tool to mark off the distinctiveness of the communities' oppression.

Sterling Stuckey reads Garnet's formulation as a kind of reduction of race to the material circumstances of black Americans: the cause of discrimination against blacks was not the color of their skin but their condition. He suggests that "Garnet's conception of the source of prejudice against blacks—formed before racism in America, some believed, had taken on a life of its own—seems strikingly modern in its possibilities for class analysis but modern also in the degree to which he underestimated racism as a force in its own right."\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps so.

Stuckey, however, makes the mistake of separating talk of the condition of black Americans from issues of racism. For Garnet, one could not talk of the liberation and freedom of African Americans without addressing the issue of race: it was a part of the condition. Moreover, most people of color of the period rejected the idea that race alone was the source of their problems. Like the convention movement he participated in, Garnet's efforts for freedom included a politics of respectability with its emphasis on temperance, education, and economic self-sufficiency. These were tools for the improvement of the community and points of departure for addressing the racial policies of the nation-state, but they were not reducible to the problem of racism.

As I discussed in chapter 6, this politics had two sorts of inflections. It
assumed a bourgeois aspiration for middle-class respectability, and it called for an imminent conversation about racial discrimination and its effects. The former argued that through education, moral living, and economic self-sufficiency an aspiring black middle class, and thus blacks in general, would improve in “rank and standing among men.” The latter called for solidaristic efforts to reject white paternalism and to alleviate, through self-critique and conjoint action, the condition of black people. To some extent, Garnet embraced both. He was an ardent supporter of moral reform but articulated it within a race-based politics and a call for black solidarity to end slavery and racism. In fact, an ironic use of moral reform in his 1843 address was a critical part of his call for a slave insurrection. Garnet spoke directly to the Christian piety of slaves and, in the process, drew on the moral language of general abolitionism. Slavery was an evil, a sin against God: “In every man’s mind the good seeds of liberty are planted, and he who brings his fellow down so low, as to make him contented with a condition of slavery, commits the highest crime against God and man.” But Garnet did not embrace Christian benevolence as the form of redress for this kind of debasement. It seems he was not very concerned about the souls of white folks.

Instead, Garnet turned religious benevolence on its head: the focus was not on the demand for proponents of slavery to forsake sin and believe in the mercy of Christ but, rather, on the duties of black Christian slaves to forsake the obstacles to obtaining the grace of God. Thus, moral reform for the slave, according to Garnet, might require general insurrection because the slave was still obligated, in spite of his condition, to obey the laws of God.

Obviously, the precepts of moral reform and religious benevolence have been used for unintended purposes here. Garnet used the dictum “to cast off sin” as a rallying cry for the ending of slavery by the slaves themselves. He appealed to the Christian fervor of the slaves and criticized them for not living up to the demands of God. Having received, in his view, God’s sanctifying grace, Garnet, like moral reformers generally, was obliged to extend to his fellows the means to obtain that grace. Ironically, however, this led to a call, if necessary, for violence.

Some scholars separate Garnet’s use of moral reform from his call for slaves to act. In their view, each stands as a distinctive rhetorical strategy in the speech, and, in the case of moral reform, suggests his close affiliation with Garrisonianism. Like Garrisonians, Garnet condemned slavery and slaveholding as a sin. He argued that the entire nation shared the guilt of that sin and that a moral attack would bring about the eventual destruction of slavery. Yet, scholars such as Harry Reed separate these propositions from Garnet’s conception of “the slave as an agent in his own liberation,” what Reed considers Garnet’s unique contribution to nineteenth-century abolitionism. Reed in particular fails to see that through the principles of moral reform Garnet exhorted the slave to act
surrounded by a halo of glory.” These heroes set examples for the slaves, and Garnet’s claim that slaves deliver themselves followed easily from their heroic example, for after he recounted the bravery of these men, Garnet exhorted the slave to freedom: “Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been—you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves. Remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS!”

Walzer would readily see a worrisome politics on the horizon here. Garnet grounded his claims in Christian duty: the revolutionary actions of slaves were sanctioned by an ultimate order. Garnet even offered a secular version, still drawing on ultimate ends, by lifting up the example of tragic heroes—men who were courageous for us—to excite bravery among slaves. The stakes, then, were certainly high, and demands for restraint were met with claims of cowardice. But why this sense of urgency on the part of Garnet? Perhaps the sense of suffering in his background, and a consciousness of the suffering of his people, impelled him to force the End. Walzer assumes the presence of this pain and suffering but never really explores its effect on the Israelite struggle.

For Garnet, the pain and suffering of slaves justified his eagerness to force the End. For him, slavery “dirtied” them, not only in the present but in death as well. Slavery robbed the slave of his death. No peace awaited him in paradise, for there was a continuation of suffering from the living to the dead. He stated this unequivocally in a description of slavery: “Nor did the evil of... bondage end at their emancipation by death. Succeeding generations inherited their chains, and millions have come from eternity into time, and have returned again to the world of spirits, cursed and ruined by American slavery.” Death and heaven were not safe havens from white supremacy nor great liberators from suffering and evil.” Instead, slavery extended its shame and burden to past and future generations.

What is interesting for me, though not for Sterling Stuckey, is not the relation between Garnet’s formulation of the reciprocity between the living and the dead and traditional African religious beliefs but rather his attempt to redirect the Christian energies of the slave. Stuckey too often burdens his analysis of personalities and themes with claims of continuity with an African ethos, so much so that his arguments seem strained. For example, he argues that “[s]ince the principle religious ceremonies of the
slaves were devoted to the renewal of contact with the ancestors. Garnet’s references to the continuing responsibility of the slave to them is a brilliant illustration of cultural thought being put to revolutionary purposes. But Garnet’s address is best understood in Christian terms, not as an example of African religious sentiments put to political use. His appeal to Christian piety and devotion—what I’ve called his use of irony—grounded his call for slave insurrection. If the slave loved God, then he had to rebel. Also, Garnet’s redescription of death and heaven held off the more accommodating tendencies of slave Christianity: its focus on the other world as compensation for the despondency of slave life. For Garnet, freedom would not be found in death. As long as slavery and racism existed freedom would be understood as proleptic, that is to say, as an anticipated outcome of our actions in the face of such evil. This proleptic conception of freedom, in death or in the North, demanded of each black person a stern discipline to remember those in bondage and required actions to end the conditions that enslaved the entire community. No black person could rest until the scourge of slavery and racial prejudice was destroyed.

In the most stunning moment of his address, Garnet put this formulation to use. He rejected Exodus as a model for black liberation.

You had far better all die—die immediately, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once, rather die free men than live to be the slaves. It is impossible, like the children of Israel, to make a grand exodus from the land of bondage. The Pharaohs are on both sides of the blood-red waters!

For Stuckey this moment represents Garnet’s refusal of moral suasion as a strategy sufficient to end slavery (he only quotes the first part of this paragraph). He fails to see that Garnet’s call for slaves to resist turns on his use of the cycle of existential pain and unrest. The paragraph begins with the formulation of reciprocity, the seemingly endless succession of births and deaths in slavery. The only way to end this cycle was, perhaps, through the cathartic moment of violence, a one-and-for-all struggle that lifted the burden of slavery in the present, into the future, and from the past.

Yet, violence was not the only means to achieve this end. It was a last resort. Garnet stated:

Think how many tears you have poured out upon the soil which you have cultivated with unrequited toil and enriched with your blood; and then go to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you are determined to be free. Appeal to their sense of justice, and tell them that they have no more right to oppress you, than you have to enslave them. Entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you, and to remunerate you for your labor. Promise them renewed diligence in the cultivation of the soil, if they will render to you an equivalent for your services. . . . Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgement, and of the righteous retribution of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is freedom, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and forever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences.

If violence was to occur, the enslaver, not the slave, would be morally culpable; physical force could be used without guilt.

Garnet understood that his call to action, to some extent, cut against the grain of the slave, nay, the black Christian imagination. He turned then to the most important story of this people in bondage, Exodus, and decreed its analogical use in the black American context. “It is impossible, like the children of Israel, to make a grand exodus from the land of bondage.” This rejection of Exodus spoke directly to the slaves’ belief that God was acting, in fact, would act on their behalf as he had acted for Israel. Providential gradualism stood in the way of Garnet’s eagerness to force the End, and he attacked it head-on. Garnet stated:

But you are a patient people. You act as though you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake, millions of voices
are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust. 42

A call for confrontation immediately followed this passage. “Let your motto be resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.” 43 Garnet had set the stage. He had listed the nationalist ideologues’ ultimate horror: the raping of wives and daughters. He described the enemy as devils, and, in some respects, beyond salvation. And, finally, Garnet challenged the manliness of the slave and of the black convention movement. He confronted them with a critical choice: moral suasion or political militancy. Perhaps the contrast is too sharp. The militancy of Garnet relied heavily on a moral argument that drew most of its content from an ironic use of general abolitionism. Such arguments had a tremendous political impact on the nation. Still, it makes a difference whether one emphasizes the politics of the struggle for racial equality or the morality of that struggle, even if the latter has political effects.

Garnet’s address presented before the convention movement a direct frontal assault on the policies of the nation-state. His speech called for radical political action by people of color. As such, the inside dimension of the convention movement—that immanent conversation about the circumstance of black people with the two different inflections that created a domain of self-determining action on the part of black people—confronted, with a violent posture, the domain of the state. Herein lies the radicalism of Garnet’s address. Out of the dimension of the convention movement that spoke to cultural identity he attempted to articulate a national politics that violently challenged the nation-state. In other words, he interpreted the call for an immanent conversation as a call for general slave insurrection in the South and mass “black” political action in the North.

Opposition to Garnet came almost immediately from Frederick Douglass and others committed to Garrisonianism. 44 They complained that the speech advocated excessive force and that such actions would be fatal to the free blacks in the slave and border states. A great debate ensued on the floor of the convention. Garnet defended his address, often moving his audience to tears. Douglass countered with as much emotion, imploring the convention to try “the moral means a little longer.” 45 In the end, the convention rejected Garnet’s address by a vote of 19 to 18. The dele-

gates made a choice: that the black nation would remain essentially in the cultural domain. They embraced a race-based politics but rejected any call for violence against the state. Instead, the convention movement turned to the precepts and language of moral reform. The black struggle for freedom, in their view, was a moral struggle, a fight for the soul of the American nation, and violence compromised that fact. Exodus 23:9 dictated a way of living: “You shall not oppress a stranger. You know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”
Exodus!

Religion, Race, and Nation in
Early Nineteenth-Century Black America

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