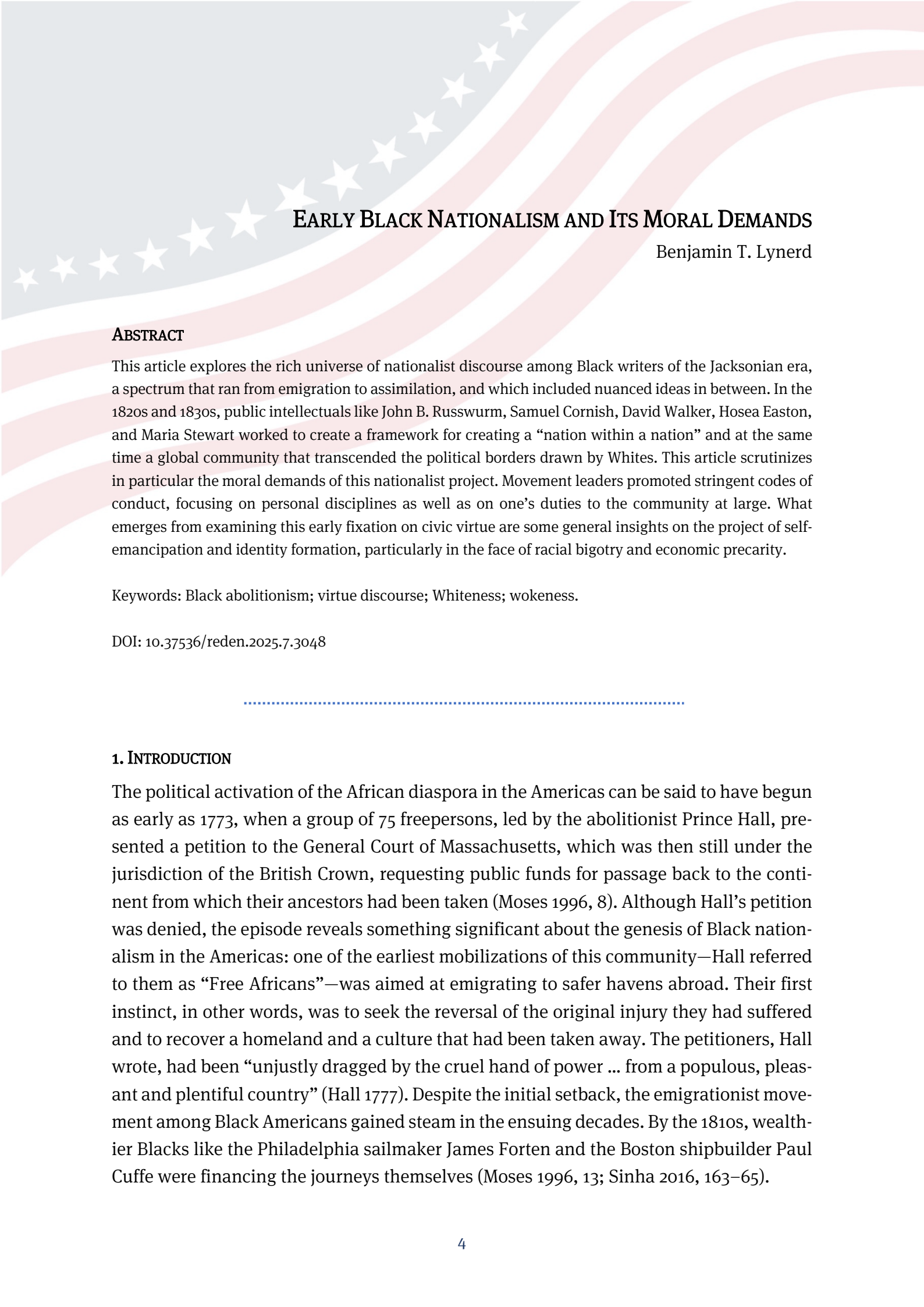




EARLY BLACK NATIONALISM AND ITS MORAL DEMANDS

Benjamin T. Lynerd

ABSTRACT

This article explores the rich universe of nationalist discourse among Black writers of the Jacksonian era, a spectrum that ran from emigration to assimilation, and which included nuanced ideas in between. In the 1820s and 1830s, public intellectuals like John B. Russwurm, Samuel Cornish, David Walker, Hosea Easton, and Maria Stewart worked to create a framework for creating a “nation within a nation” and at the same time a global community that transcended the political borders drawn by Whites. This article scrutinizes in particular the moral demands of this nationalist project. Movement leaders promoted stringent codes of conduct, focusing on personal disciplines as well as on one’s duties to the community at large. What emerges from examining this early fixation on civic virtue are some general insights on the project of self-emancipation and identity formation, particularly in the face of racial bigotry and economic precarity.

Keywords: Black abolitionism; virtue discourse; Whiteness; wokeness.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3048

1. INTRODUCTION

The political activation of the African diaspora in the Americas can be said to have begun as early as 1773, when a group of 75 freepersons, led by the abolitionist Prince Hall, presented a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, which was then still under the jurisdiction of the British Crown, requesting public funds for passage back to the continent from which their ancestors had been taken (Moses 1996, 8). Although Hall’s petition was denied, the episode reveals something significant about the genesis of Black nationalism in the Americas: one of the earliest mobilizations of this community—Hall referred to them as “Free Africans”—was aimed at emigrating to safer havens abroad. Their first instinct, in other words, was to seek the reversal of the original injury they had suffered and to recover a homeland and a culture that had been taken away. The petitioners, Hall wrote, had been “unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power ... from a populous, pleasant and plentiful country” (Hall 1777). Despite the initial setback, the emigrationist movement among Black Americans gained steam in the ensuing decades. By the 1810s, wealthier Blacks like the Philadelphia sailmaker James Forten and the Boston shipbuilder Paul Cuffe were financing the journeys themselves (Moses 1996, 13; Sinha 2016, 163–65).

However, two developments in the 1790s—the revolution in Haiti and the establishment of independent Black churches across the northeastern United States—gave rise to a quite different approach to the formation of a Black nation, one that insisted that people of color did not have to leave America to enjoy freedom, much less to retain their identity as a community with a shared experience and outlook. Notably, this form of Black nationalism still retained certain separatist instincts: in the face of not only southern slavery but also restrictions on political and economic rights in the north, Black Americans found it increasingly necessary to form their own churches, businesses, Masonic lodges, aid societies, and other institutions in which they could forge their own cultural identity. As Eddie Glaude has noted, the biblical concept of an “exodus” became the dominant metaphor of Black activism in the early 1800s, even among those who had no intention of leaving the United States. By this metaphor they “articulated their own sense of peoplehood and secured for themselves a common history and destiny” (Glaude 2000, 9).

Building on Glaude, and on more recent work by Manisha Sinha and Melvin Rogers, this article will explore the rich universe of nationalist discourse among Black writers of this era, a spectrum that ran from emigration to assimilation, and which included many nuanced ideas between these two poles. In the 1820s and 1830s, a growing circle of Black thinkers that included Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, Samuel Cornish, John Brown Russwurm, Hosea Easton, and Maria Stewart worked to create a framework in which people of color could form a “nation within a nation,” and at the same time establish a global Black community, one that transcended the political borders drawn by Whites (Glaude 2000, 19). In addition to the different perspectives this discourse yielded on how a dominated people might best reclaim their freedom and identity, I will examine a theme that emerged with remarkable consistency, concerning the *moral* demands of this nationalist project. The didactic features of early Black nationalism are striking. Movement leaders promoted stringent codes of conduct, focusing on personal disciplines as well as on one’s duties to the community at large. Above all, they focused on the imperatives of “waking up” to the servile position of Black people throughout the Americas and of defying it by almost any means necessary. Internal critiques of the Black community were often harsher than attacks on White oppressors. Melvin Rogers describes this rhetoric as articulating the “demandingness of freedom” (Rogers 2023, 63). In considering the reasons for this early fixation on moral virtue, I will draw out some general insights on the project of self-emancipation and identity formation, particularly in the face of racial bigotry and economic precarity. These insights, I believe, can offer a compelling framework for current discourses on nationalism and race.

In particular, the works discussed in this essay anticipate a rhetoric that has lately become a flashpoint in the American discourse on race, namely the idea of “wokeness.” It was not long ago that “woke” was the specific property of the Black community, a word by which members of that community connected on their shared experiences and

especially “the need to be aware of racially motivated threats and the potential dangers of white America” (Romano 2020). As we will see, Black abolitionists of the Jacksonian Era stand at the headwaters of this linguistic tradition with a robust concept of liberation that entails an “awakening” to the realities of racial domination, to the need for solidarity among the dominated, and above all to the moral duties that belong to those bound together by that experience. For much of the two centuries that followed, the metaphor of awakening remained a crucial part of Black American discourse (Cf. Newton 1973, 76–77). The rise of the more vernacular term “woke” in the early twentieth century underscores the significance of this language as an exhortative concept within the Black community.¹ Thus, the casual appropriation of “wokeness” in the 2010s by privileged classes to signal their sensitivities to various racial controversies has, in a few short years, emptied the term of its original content and turned it into something like “political correctness,” making it a target of mockery within popular culture, and diminishing its currency even among African Americans (VanDreew 2025, 2). Returning to the linguistic roots of this concept, I hope to show, is one way to recover its moral substance and its specific implications for the project of self-liberation.

This article will begin by elaborating on some of the historical developments that helped to shape African American writing in the early nineteenth century, such as the Haitian Revolution, the launch of Black-run religious denominations, and the rise of the White colonization movement, and by fleshing out the complex spectrum of thought that emerged in their wake. It will then turn to a highly concentrated archive of writing from the late 1820s and early 1830s to examine Black thinkers on the intellectual and moral disciplines that it takes to liberate and sustain a new nation under conditions of racial domination. It will close with reflections on the implications of this discourse for the concept of wokeness in discussions of racial justice today.

2. FORMS OF BLACK NATIONALISM: AN EMERGING IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

Several developments laid the groundwork for a stateside version of Black nationalism. The first was the Haitian Revolution. In a sequence that shocked the world in the 1790s, thousands of Haitian slaves escaped their plantations, formed highly disciplined battalions of soldiers, and launched an attack on the French colonial government, evicting it for good in 1804 and establishing an independent government in its place (James 1963, 199–244). Like any other, the Haitian Revolution followed a complicated trajectory, and Black writers in America found themselves having to defend its leaders against widespread contempt among Whites for the Revolution’s violence and the instability of its

¹ The phrase “stay woke” appears to have originated in the 1938 song “Scottsboro Boys” by the Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter, a ballad about nine teenagers accused of raping two White women (Romano 2020).

postcolonial government. As Bruce Dain notes, “to many American whites, the Haitian Revolution had become a frightful racially charged affair that exacerbated their racial feelings and fears” (Dain 2002, 89). To Black Americans, however, it became a source of inspiration. The Haitians supplied Black Americans with innovative paradigms of civic virtue, but the most basic thing they modeled was the possibility of securing freedom and nationhood without boarding a boat and returning en masse across the Atlantic. Prior to the Haitian Revolution it was almost impossible for Black Americans to envision attaining self-determination within the western hemisphere; after 1804, that possibility became much more realistic.

The 1790s yielded a second development that made it easier for African Americans to imagine liberation without emigration, namely the establishment of Black churches and other civil institutions in the Northeast. The first Black-run churches were founded in Philadelphia in 1794 after two members of St. George’s Methodist Church, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, anticipating Rosa Parks by almost two centuries, refused to vacate pews reserved for White congregants and were escorted from the building (Allen 1833, 15). Declining to return to St. George’s, Jones started his own Episcopal parish and Allen founded the first congregation in what would soon turn into the African Methodist denomination. The Black church experienced meteoric growth over the following two decades, as did Black reform societies, charitable organizations, and fraternities like the Freemasons. Not only did these outfits open up a new flow of ideas and resources within the northern Black community, they “gave birth,” as Manisha Sinha puts it, “to an autonomous tradition of activism and an alternative discourse of abolition...an early black public sphere” (2016, 130). Glaude suggests that the Black church became “the primary vehicle for the exercise of Black agency, a place where the humanity of America’s darker ‘citizens’ was acknowledged and basic human aspirations for self-determination were achieved” (Glaude 2000, 19). In effect, what African Americans discovered in the early years of the nineteenth century was a way to claim a space for themselves within the larger space dominated by Whites. They could achieve their “exodus” without actually leaving the United States.

Additional catalysts for stateside Black nationalism came from the activities of White politicians. The establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1816, for example, brought to the foreground an explicitly racist rationale for Black emigration—that people of color were incapable of exhibiting the virtues necessary for American citizenship—from which African American leaders felt a strong need to disassociate. While some wanted to leave of their own accord, they could not tolerate being pushed out with prejudice. The biggest impetus, however, was the sunset of legalized slavery in New York State in 1827—set in motion by legislation that passed in 1799—which the state then decided to compensate for by passing new voting restrictions for Black residents. These

actions, seemingly intended to pressure people of color to look for the exits, instead inspired their leaders to stay and fight for equality.

It was in direct response to these developments, in fact, that Black northerners founded *Freedom's Journal* in the spring of 1827, aiming to equip the free Black population with the tools to demand their political and economic rights. The discussion below centers on a network of public intellectuals who not only spearheaded the birth of Black journalism but also propelled what Sinha calls the “second wave” of abolitionism, a movement marked by the greater participation of African Americans and the expansion of the cause into issues of concern among freepeople in the North (Sinha 2016, 195ff). This circle included, among many others, the Presbyterian minister Samuel Cornish and the Jamaican-born John Brown Russwurm, who coedited *Freedom's Journal*; David Walker, a Boston clothing merchant who aided in the Underground Railroad and served as a sales agent for the *Journal*; Hosea Easton, a Congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut who raised startup funds for the *Journal*; and Maria Stewart, the wife of a Boston shipping agent who became a prolific abolitionist writer after his death in 1829 and for a time a lecturer on the Garrisonian circuit.

These writers inhabited an increasingly complex spectrum of ideas concerning the Black nation, its contours, and the conditions by which it might be sustained (see Table 1). On one end was emigrationism, which retained a small but vocal core of supporters. At the other was an even smaller band of writers committed to colorblind assimilation, the belief that the American republic could be integrated if White people overcame their prejudices and if Black people adapted to American civic norms, sublimated their own culture, and patiently negotiated the terms of their acceptance. In between these two poles emerged a critical mass of thinkers committed to two distinct but largely compatible versions of stateside Black nationalism. One version advocated the development of a “nation within a nation,” and the other a transnational, Pan-African movement of Black solidarity and liberation. The differences between these two approaches were subtle. Both carried forward the spiritual language of a Black Exodus, but insisted that the chosen people did not have to leave Egypt in order to be free.

Emigrationism	Pan-Africanism	Nation within a Nation	Assimilationism
James Forten Paul Cuffe J.B. Russwurm (after 1829)	David Walker Robert A. Young Hosea Easton (after 1836)	Nathaniel Paul Samuel Cornish J.B. Russwurm (before 1829) Hosea Easton (after 1836) Maria Stewart	Lemuel Haynes William Whipper

Table 1. Forms of Black Nationalism in the 1820s and 1830s

2.1 THE POLES: EMIGRATION VERSUS ASSIMILATION

While emigrationism entered the 1820s on the back heel, it remained a viable anchor point within Black discourse for decades. Russwurm, for example, who with Cornish co-edited *Freedom's Journal* as a staunchly anti-emigrationist newspaper, was publicly wavering on that issue within months and in 1829, after a spate of violence against Black businesses in Ohio, Russwurm reversed himself completely, having concluded that it was now “a waste of words to talk of every enjoying citizenship in this country” (Sinha 2016, 204). That same violence prompted the assembling of the first nation-wide Black convention in Philadelphia in 1830, where organizers strategized a broad range of responses, including the emigration of least their most vulnerable members to Canada or to Haiti (Sinha 2016, 206–10).

At the opposite end of this discourse were those who advocated for the gradual and patient assimilation of free Blacks into White American society. Assimilationists tended to model this aspiration rather than to explicitly endorse it. Lemuel Haynes, for example, was a freeborn resident of Connecticut who fought in the War for Independence and then became the first Black ordained minister in North America, spending almost thirty years as a pastor to an all-White congregation in rural Vermont. Haynes barely discussed the issue of slavery after taking up his post in Vermont; when he mentioned it at all it was as part of a long list of vices from which Americans needed rescuing, like drinking and gambling, which are “to the body politic what sickness is to the natural constitution” (Newman 1990, 85). A somewhat louder voice for assimilation came from William Whipper, one of the founders of the American Moral Reform Society in 1835, who spearheaded the decision *not* to include any racial identification in the name of the organization on the belief that Black people would do better to not contribute to the “racecraft” that had placed them in a separate category to begin with. The only way to achieve a colorblind society, Whipper argued, was to act as though such a society already existed. Whipper’s position, however, proved so divisive within the African American community as to single-handedly revive the Black press after the fizzling of *Freedom's Journal* a decade earlier. In March 1837 a new weekly called *The Colored American* launched under Cornish’s editorship, promising to call out and combat “the galling chains of prejudice” (Sinha 2016, 304).

2.2 A NATION WITHIN A NATION

Of primary interest to this study are the two positions that formed between these two poles. The idea of a “nation within a nation” was most fully articulated for the first time in a speech delivered on July 5, 1827, in Albany, New York, by local pastor Nathaniel Paul. Postponing by 24 hours their celebration of America’s independence *and* New York’s abolition of slavery because of threats of White violence, the Black community in Albany

launched what would become a new tradition of marking an alternative, Black Independence Day on the Fifth of July. July Fifth addresses always entailed a rhetorical balancing act between, on the one hand, affirming the values of the Declaration of Independence and celebrating the slow progress of emancipation, and on the other, calling out the hypocrisies of the White republic.² In the Reverend Paul's case, the speech was also about forming the Black citizenry. "This day commences a new era in our history," he declared. "New duties devolve upon us; duties which, if properly attended to, cannot fail to improve our moral condition and elevate us to a rank of respectable standing in the community, or if neglected, we fall at once into the abyss of contemptible wretchedness." The moral severity of Paul's rhetoric would become quite typical. To form a nation within a nation, Paul and others believed, would require every member of the Black community to exercise personal discipline and civic virtue on a monumental scale. The stakes were extremely high. "We do well to remember," Paul continued, "that every act of ours is more or less connected with the general cause of emancipation" (1827, 19).

2.3 PAN-AFRICAN SOLIDARITY

There was, in fact, almost complete unanimity among early Black nationalists on the belief that the self-liberation of the emerging Black nation would necessitate the cultivation of new virtues among its citizens. Some of these writers, however, went to greater lengths than others to conceptualize these virtues through a global lens. Two explosive pamphlets, Robert Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* and David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, appeared in 1829 as violence against free Blacks was mounting. Both pieces depicted that violence as part of a much longer, larger, even cosmic war against the self-determination of Black people. Both suggested that God himself had already chosen the ultimate victor in that conflict, and that the tide of battle would soon change. But above all, they both sought to cultivate in their readers a Black identity that transcended geographic borders, one grounded in the common experience of racial domination. Young addressed his *Manifesto* to "the whole of the Ethiopian people," regardless of "the nation within which you reside" (Aptheker 1973, 90). The very title of Walker's pamphlet signals the ways in which he sought to constitute a new, global community of warrior-citizens. As Rogers notes, the language of an "appeal," which "affirms the political standing of the claimant and the recipients," combined with the use of the term "citizens," which invites the readers into the "democratic rationality" of the arguments, does much work to call an expansive Black nation into existence before the arguments even get under way (Rogers 2015, 20-21). The only real difference between these two pieces concerned how they each envisioned the battle unfolding. While Young's *Manifesto*

² The best-known speech in this tradition by far is Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" which he delivered in Rochester on July 5, 1852.

pointed to the coming of a Black messiah, “who awaits but his season to proclaim his birthright,” Walker’s *Appeal* placed it directly at the feet of rank-and-file Blacks “all over the world” to wage the righteous war against their oppressors:

O, my God!--in sorrow I must say it, that my colour, all over the world, have a mean, servile spirit. They yield in a moment to the whites, let them be right or wrong--the reason they are able to keep their feet on our throats. Oh! my coloured brethren, all over the world, when shall we arise from this death-like apathy?--And be men!! (Walker 1829, 70).

At the same time, Walker was adamant in his objection to emigration, devoting an entire chapter to “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Colonizing Plan” (Walker 1829, 50-67). As Apap notes, Walker turned “the spatial logic of Exodus – that of a literal movement out of the land of slavery – on its head,” aiming instead “to alter the land itself into a space informed and shaped by its inextricability from the African American experience” (Apap 2011, 322). This project entailed, as Asukile explains, the creation of a “new African culture,” defined both by a common heritage and by the “cultural circumstances that confronted them” in the New World (Asukile 1999, 19–20).

While both pamphlets garnered a lot of attention, Walker’s was by far the most influential. *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* went through three printings in 1829 alone; thousands of copies were smuggled into the American South and throughout the Caribbean, and the work was widely blamed for instigating Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831 (Finseth 2001).

3. THE MORAL DEMANDINGNESS OF BLACK NATIONALISM

Aside from the global scope of its messaging, the most striking feature of Walker’s *Appeal* (1829) is its unyielding criticism of Black people for their weakness and their complicity in the subjugation of their race. “My object,” he writes toward the beginning of the pamphlet, is “to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded, and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness” (4–5). Throughout the pamphlet, Black readers are confronted with the charge of acting “in league with slaveholders and tyrants...acquiring their daily bread by the blood and sweat of their more ignorant brethren” (4). The work is full of tragic examples of Black people failing to fulfill the basic duty of resistance, from an enslaved woman who attends to her wounded owner after an altercation with escaped slaves to a freeman in Massachusetts whose obsequious polishing of White men’s boots Walker found infuriating (28–34). Such behavior, he declared, could only be the result of “servile deceit, combined with the most gross ignorance: for we must remember that humanity, kindness and the fear of the Lord, does not consist in protecting devils” (28). Ignorance was no excuse, Walker insisted, but was itself a moral failing in dire need of correction.

Rogers (2023) ties this moral commentary to Walker’s “rich notion” of freedom, which penetrated the inner life of the person and carried significant ethical implications:

His persistent attack on servility and ignorance throughout the *Appeal* means to illuminate a form of enslavement that distorts the humanity of the enslaved person, not exclusively because individuals are treated as ‘merchandise’ but also because of the narrowing effect it has on one’s self-understanding. To free oneself from this notion of slavery is to move toward human flourishing; it is to resist domination. (64)

What Rogers perceives in Walker’s critique of these individuals is a set of positive moral duties associated with being free, duties which begin with a transformation of one’s own self-understanding: the dominated must first wake up to the fact of their degradation, reject its validity, and then act in accordance with that rejection. Any obstacles which stand in the way only deepen the virtue required to enact the resistance. Such virtue, moreover, is available to all—every one of Walker’s readers would have possessed “the basic and equal capacity to reflectively align one’s actions with the demand freedom makes” (84).

When we put Walker’s moral imperatives together with the transnational direction of his messaging, what we discover is a theory not just of personal freedom but of *collective* freedom—freedom for the Black nation Walker calls into existence with his epistle. This nation has no chance of forming unless its citizens prod each other into active duty. Indeed, it is instructive that one of the earliest expressions of Black “wokeness” as a moral imperative operates as an urgent summons to racial brotherhood. At stake is not just their civil freedom but their self-understanding. Many stand in need of being rescued from complicity in their own subjugation. “Men of color who are also of sense,” he writes, “I call upon you to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—go to work and enlighten your brethren! Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation” (Walker 1829, 33). This theme, in fact, was pervasive in the writings and rhetoric of Black nationalists in this period.

Whether advocating for a “nation within a nation,” a Pan-African movement, or both, the writers in this circle focused a great deal of attention on the moral demandingness of nationhood in the face of racial domination. In different ways they all highlighted several imperatives that fell on every dominated person of color—the duties of enlightenment, the duties of resistance, the duties of self-discipline, and the duties of self-sacrifice for the common good of the Black nation. The following pages will survey four figures besides Walker—Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russwurm in their roles as the editors of *Freedom’s Journal*, the Congregationalist minister Hosea Easton, and the antislavery lecturer Maria Stewart—as they promoted these duties to free Black audiences in the 1820s and 1830s.

3.1 SAMUEL CORNISH, JOHN BROWN RUSSWURM, AND FREEDOM’S JOURNAL

In its first issue, published in New York City on March 16, 1827, *Freedom's Journal* laid out its aims to promote “the dissemination of useful knowledge among our brethren [for] their moral and religious improvement” (FJ1827a). In its brief and turbulent run, the paper followed through on this promise with weekly advice on how free people of color—of which there were about a half-million living across the northern states—should live. The most conspicuous of this advice was the voluminous instruction on what the “bourgeois virtues” of hard work, self-discipline, and sober living—what Cornish and Russwurm called “the general precepts and rules of economy,” with a special emphasis on “the excellency of [Benjamin] Franklin’s maxims” (FJ1827a). As Franklin had done in *Poor Richard’s Almanac* decades earlier, Cornish and Russwurm drew a linear connection between self-discipline and social advancement. “Success,” they explained in an article entitled “Every Man the Architect of His Own Fortune,” “is as generally a consequence of industry and good conduct as disappointment is the consequence of indolence and indecision” (FJ1828c). Looking past their strong opposition to Paul Cuffe’s views on emigration, Cornish and Russwurm printed glowing accounts of the shipbuilder’s character and determination (FJ1827b). The paper offered its unequivocal endorsement of the temperance movement, and warned its readers about drinking, gambling, and every other undisciplined habit available to free people in the North (FJ1827c). Fagan notes that *Freedom’s Journal* reflected the aspirations of New York’s growing Black middle class, who craved the esteem of “White onlookers” (Fagan 2016, 25–27).

However, the paper did not advance these notions of respectability merely in order to assimilate its readers to the dominant culture. In fact, Cornish and Russwurm also went to great lengths to cast a fresh look at Africa, its peaceable history in comparison to destructive European wars of conquest, and the anti-commercialism of its native proverbs (FJ 1827g; 1827h). The *Journal*, moreover, often depicted American culture at large as anything but respectable (FJ 1827d). All of the *Journal’s* advice on moral improvement was aimed at releasing its readers from their dependence on Whites. This meant, in the first place, confronting them with the sheer depth of that dependence. Two years before Walker leveled his own critiques in the *Appeal*, *Freedom’s Journal* lamented “the deplorable effects of ignorance” and the “groveling and selfish habits so prevalent among us” (FJ1827d; 1827e). The *Journal* pushed for Black parents to educate their children in ways that would empower them not only to succeed in the realm of commerce but also to resist becoming mere “conformists to the customs of [the] state” (FJ1828b).

Most importantly, Cornish and Russwurm impressed upon their readers the moral imperative of resisting domination. Every issue of *Freedom’s Journal* featured heroic accounts of freedom fighters, from seventeenth-century rebels against the Habsburg empire to the Haitian revolutionaries. Indeed, it was on the pages of *Freedom’s Journal* that Americans first encountered a salutary account of Toussaint Louverture, who was presented as an exemplary republican hero—cunning and ruthless toward Napoleon’s army

but a model of self-negation in the sphere of personal conduct, abstaining from alcohol and restraining his troops from taking advantage of women (FJ 1827f). The *Journal* also spotlighted small-time rebels like a Haitian mother named Theresa who disguised herself as a French soldier in order to spirit her children to freedom in the early days of the revolution (FJ 1828a). Ultimately, the *Journal* sought to rally northern Blacks around the Theresa's of the American South, exhorting them to put their own time, comfort, money, and safety on the line to help in the work of the Underground Railroad (FJ 1828d).

The genesis of Black journalism, in other words, yielded a rich manual of civic virtue aimed at creating a new nation within a nation. As Fagan puts it, Cornish and Russwurm sought to promote the idea that it was Black Americans who were the “chosen people” of the western hemisphere, by dint of how they had been enslaved and abused. But this designation still required that they “act chosen,” embodying the traits of a people set apart (Fagan 2016, 20–28). A chosen nation, *Freedom's Journal* made clear, could only be sustained on the strength of highly disciplined citizens who were fiercely devoted to protecting their own freedom and each other's.

3.2 HOSEA EASTON

Few individuals devoted more time, energy, money, and risk to personal safety for the advancement of the Black community in his day than Hosea Easton, and few underwent a more dramatic philosophical journey than Easton on how this community ought to function within a context of increasingly violent racial domination. Easton was the son of James Easton, a freeborn Bostonian of Wampanoag and African extraction who built an ironworks business in the early 1800s that specialized in toolmaking, ship anchors, and supplies for buildings and railroad tracks. Hosea, who trained for Congregational ministry rather than for the ironworks business, nevertheless inherited from his father a belief in the promises of bourgeois uplift, raising money to establish a vocational college in New Haven, Connecticut, modeled on a similar school that James had started in Boston in the 1820s. (Price and Stewart 1999, 6–10). A popular preacher, Easton's early messaging to free Blacks was geared toward the themes of self-discipline and mutual aid. Although conceding, that “everything is withheld from us,” Easton insisted in 1828 that Blacks could only respond by “turn[ing] our attention to moral improvement,” by which he meant building a healthier Black community:

A principle of jealousy one towards another has become almost hereditary which prevents any combined operation among us. The first thing necessary is to cultivate the principles of concord and unanimity among ourselves, that we may become aids to each other. (Price and Stewart 1999, 60)

Easton's tone shifted considerably in the ensuing years as every effort the northern Black community made to pursue its own advancement was met with hostility from Whites. Most painfully for Easton, a fatal combination of municipal opposition and vandalism

halted the construction of the vocational college in New Haven before it began. His own church in Hartford was burned to the ground in 1836 (Stewart 2003, 346). Shortly before his death a year later (at age 38, from causes unknown), Easton published *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; And the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them* (1837). The *Treatise* advanced a piercing commentary on White supremacy, connecting the dots between colonialism, slavery, and the general suppression of nonwhite people. Everything that appeared to the advancement of the western culture, Easton argued, was in fact nothing more than grand theft: “There is not a foot of God’s earth which is now occupied by [Europeans] but has been obtained by the dint of war and the destruction of the vanquished, since the founding of London in A.D. 49” (19). The moral imperative of Black Americans in response to this brutal legacy was to show the world a superior way: “Africa will never raise herself,” Easton insisted, “by warlike implements.” Nothing but “liberal, generous principles can call the energies of an African mind into action.” Black Americans, in other words, needed to look beyond the myths of Western greatness and embrace their own heritage of peaceable living, cooperative innovation, and “the true spirit of civil wisdom” (9).

3.3 MARIA STEWART

On February 27, 1833, at the midpoint of Andrew Jackson’s presidency, a 29-year-old widow named Maria Stewart delivered a speech at the African Masonic Hall in Boston to a group of African American men and women. Stewart had caught Garrison’s attention and was embarking on a speaking career on the abolitionist circuit. The speech was so badly received, however, that Stewart abruptly withdrew from the circuit and never returned, spending the next forty-nine years working to promote Black civil rights, and then women’s rights, with somewhat greater success as a writer.

It might seem self-evident at first why the speech was met with such a poor reception. From the outset, Stewart adopted a confrontational tone, blaming Black Americans for their own misery. “It must certainly be for the want of energy on the part of the free people of color,” she asserted within the first minute, “that they have been long willing to bear the yoke of oppression. It must have been the want of ambition and force that has given the whites occasion to say that our natural abilities are not as good, and our capacities by nature inferior to theirs” (Richardson 1987, 56). Like Walker, Cornish, and Easton, Stewart depicted Black subjugation in America as part of a broader narrative, but she flipped their script on who was to blame: “Poor despised Africa,” she argued, “was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations... But it was our gross sins and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others” (Richardson 1987, 58). It is not hard to imagine why such words left her audience aghast. However, when we read the full speech, and consider its intervention into

the larger virtue discourse on Black nationalism, we actually find one of the most robust theories of liberty within this entire archive, one that fleshes out in painful detail what it would mean to truly recover moral agency under the conditions of racial domination. Her arguments are not so much novel as they are meticulous.

In the speech, Stewart adopted as hard a line against Black emigration as anyone else in this circle: “They would drive us to a strange land,” she declared at the end of the speech, “but before I go the bayonet shall pierce me through” (Richardson 1987, 64). More than defiance on this score, however, what Stewart undertook in her address was the much harder task of charting a vision for staying in America and forming an assertive Black nation that could hold its own. Stewart expanded on every facet of civic virtue that had become important to the Black nationalist project—discipline, sacrifice, enlightenment, and resistance. She implored working-class Blacks “to flee from the gambling board and the dance hall,” acknowledging the cold reality that “we are poor, and have no money to throw away.” What little resources the community had, Stewart urged, should be “appropriated for schools and seminaries of learning for our children and youth” (Richardson 1987, 60).

Like David Walker before her, Stewart lamented the psychological barriers to liberation that had settled on Black people, but probed deeper still into their causes – the specific damage White supremacy had done to the self-image and self-confidence of Black Americans: “most of our color have been taught to stand in fear of the White man from their earliest infancy, to work as soon as they could walk, and to call ‘master’ before they scarce could lisp the name of ‘mother,’” all of which had “lessened in us that natural force and energy which belong to man” (Richardson 1987, 59). For all of Stewart’s lecturing on self-discipline and education, she made it clear in the end that the only way for Blacks to self-liberate would be to confront this fear head-on and refuse it to let it rule their minds:

It is of no use for us to wait any longer for a generation of well-educated men to arise... Let every man of color throughout the United States who possesses the spirit and principles of a man...[demand] the rights and privileges of common free citizens, for if you had had faith as a grain of mustard seed, long before this the mountains of prejudice might have been removed. (Richardson 1987, 62)

As with everyone else in this circle, all of the civic virtues that Stewart promoted for the Black nation revolved around one basic imperative: to resist the forces of racial domination, whatever it took.

4. CONCLUSION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON WOKENESS

Of the many linguistic travesties that have marked the last decade in American politics, the most tragic is surely the cratering currency of the word “woke.” In the space of a few months, it seems—late 2020 through early 2021—the term went from carrying the sacred

weight of the Black experience to becoming a shorthand for a vapid and imperious brand of cultural commentary. For more than a century, “stay woke” had an almost liturgical significance for the African American community; the phrase served as a reminder in the 1920s and 1930s to young people about clear and present dangers on the streets; Civil Rights activists in the 1960s used it as a point of motivation and solidarity. Broader usage in the mid-2010s suddenly gave the term “woke” new shapes and causes, until it became by the end of that decade a kind of catchall for the awareness of virtually any social injustice. Anyone could be “woke” in the summer of 2020 simply by putting the right signs on one’s lawn or using the right words in conversation (VanDreew et. al. 2025, 1–2). While the ensuing right-wing mockery certainly played its predictable role, a big part of the word’s morphing into a pejorative was the growing ambivalence of the Black community itself toward the performative use of the term among virtue-signaling Whites. Today its toxicity is almost a given; knowing that it will boost its popularity, state legislatures paste “woke” into the titles of legislation aimed at rolling back any sort of cognizance of the nation’s racial history (Romano 2020, n.p.). A gaping lexical hole now stands where the word once did vital work. What makes this tragic is that the realities to which “stay woke” responded have not disappeared. Clear and present dangers to Black youth hover on every street in the country; racial obstacles to economic and social advancement remain, if better hidden than before. There is still much to be “woke” about. Something more consequential than the attrition of language, therefore, has occurred: in marginalizing the term, Americans have been able to marginalize even the discussions about racial injustice.

In examining the rhetoric of early Black nationalists, some particulars have surfaced which might point us toward a possible redemption of wokeness, as a word and as a concept. The linguistic parallels are fairly obvious: when David Walker implored his readers to “enlighten your brethren!” he was pointing to much the same kind of consciousness of oppression that would later become embedded in the twentieth-century imperative to “stay woke” (Walker 1829, 66). Pressing deeper into this connection, I perceive within the earlier archive two vital insights into the original power of wokeness, which taken together offer a path for recovering some respect for that concept. First, it is important to remember that the notion of awakening in the rhetoric of early Black nationalism operated within a valence that was almost exclusively internal to that community. This was not because Walker, Stewart, or anyone in that circle were indifferent to the racial ignorance of White people, but rather because they believed that waking up to one’s state of domination was an essential part of becoming free, and that this awakening required the formation of consciousness among Black people as an oppressed race. Liberation would not *come to* the Black nation; that nation would have to free itself. The original power of the idea, in other words, derived from its *not* being universal, from its special currency among those bound by a particular experience of subjugation. Early

Black nationalists, of course, would have been all too happy for White readers to wake up to these realities as well—Walker’s *Appeal* has plenty to say to White Christians, for example—but that was not their primary rhetorical project (Walker 1829, 40–49). All of this points us to the fallacy of appropriating “wokeness” as broad awareness of social injustices, particularly by those in relative positions of power and privilege. This not only cheapens the term; it utterly misses the point. Originally, wokeness was for those in the trenches of battle for their own freedoms. Well-meaning others should frame their understanding of that battle in a fundamentally different way, one which honors the unique perspective of the dominated.

The second, and related, aspect of this archive that stands out is the way in which early Black nationalists connected the imperative of awakening to a more comprehensive set of moral duties. Indeed, the demands that Paul, Walker, Cornish, Stewart, and Easton placed on their Black audiences is striking—almost shocking to modern readers. In every primary source examined in this article there is a summons for Black Americans to cultivate personal habits of frugality, sobriety, and industry; to make significant sacrifices of their time and treasure for the liberation of their race; to care for each other at great cost. This was not a superficial, performative kind of nationalism; awakening to the realities of domination carried within itself heavy burdens, and these leaders took it upon themselves to articulate those burdens as clearly and fully as they could.

Recovering wokeness as a respectable concept today therefore entails not only recognizing its proper purview among those who actually experience racial domination and who seek self-liberation from it, but also by appreciating the sheer weight of that battle. The very idea that wokeness could be actuated with online hashtags, slogans in the front window, or with sensitivity training in the workplace misunderstands and trivializes the project. There is substantive work for everyone to do, of course, in reforming unjust systems and empowering the powerless. But as the early Black nationalists understood, the hardest work is always going to fall, fairly or not, on those seeking their own freedom. These are the properly woke. It is for others simply to honor moral burdens they carry.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Richard. 1833. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. Martin and Boden, Printers.
- Apap, Chris. 2011. “‘Let No Man of Us Budge One Step’: David Walker and the Rhetoric of African-American Emplacement.” *Early American Literature* 46 (2).

- Aptheker, Herbert. 1973. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. Citadel Press.
- Asukile, Thabiti. 1999. "The All-Embracing Black Nationalist Theories of David Walker's *Appeal*." *The Black Scholar* 29 (4).
- Dain, Bruce. 2002. *The Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*. Harvard University Press.
- Easton, Hosea. 1837. *A Treatise On the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; And the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them*. Isaac Knapp.
- Fagan, Benjamin. 2016. *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*. University of Georgia Press.
- Finseth, Ian. 2001. "David Walker, Nature's Nation, and Early African-American Separatism." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 54 (3).
- Glaude, Eddie S. Jr. 2000. *Exodus!: Religion, Race, in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. University of Chicago Press.
- James, C.L.R. 1963. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Vintage Books.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah, ed. 1996. *Classical Black Nationalism, from the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. New York University Press.
- Newman, Richard ed. 1990. *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774–1833*. Carlson Publishing.
- Newton, Huey P. 1973. *Revolutionary Suicide*. Random House
- Paul, Nathaniel. 1827. *Address Delivered on the Celebration of the Abolition of Slavery in the State of New York*. John B. Van Steenburgh.
- Price, George R. and Stewart, James Brewer. 1999. *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*. University of Massachusetts Press
- Richardson, Marilyn. 1987. *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer*. Indiana University Press
- Romano, Aja. 2020. "A History of 'Wokeness.'" Vox. October 9: <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-woke-ness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>
- Rogers, Melvin. 2015. "David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43 (2).
- Rogers, Melvin. 2023. *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*. Princeton University Press
- Sinha, Manisha. 2016. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. Yale University Press.
- Stewart, James Brewer. 2003. "The New Haven Negro College and the Meanings of Race in New England, 1776–1870." *The New England Quarterly* 76 (3).
- VanDreew, B. M., Phillips, J. B., Munis, B. K., and S. Goidel. 2025. "What's Woke? Ordinary Americans' Understandings of Wokeness." *Research & Politics* 12(2): 1–8.
- Walker, David. 1829. *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*. Boston.

Articles from *Freedom's Journal* (New York City)

1827a. To Our Readers. March 16

- 1827b. Memoirs of Capt. Paul Cuffee. March 23
- 1827c. The Cure for Drunkenness. March 30.
- 1827d. Philanthropos. March 30
- 1827e. Philanthropos. April 6
- 1827f. Toussaint L'Ouverture. May 1
- 1827g. Africa. September 14
- 1827h. African Proverbs. December 7
- 1828a. Theresa, A Haytian Tale. January 18
- 1828b. Ethics, or the Science of Morals. April 4
- 1828c. Every Man the Architect of His Own Fortune. September 25
- 1828d. Land of Liberty. December 5