

African or American? Black Identity in New York City, 1784-1861

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In March 2008, candidate Barack Obama made a speech in Philadelphia articulating his own views on race in the politics of the presidential campaign. In it, he stated that ‘at various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either “too black” or “not black enough”.’⁽¹⁾ Clearly, issues of political and racial identity for African Americans are still both highly relevant and highly contentious today. This makes Leslie Alexander’s tightly knit narrative of the development of two broad African American political identities an important contribution to the growing historiography. It joins such recent titles such as James Sidbury’s *Becoming African in America* ⁽²⁾, Patrick Rael’s *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* ⁽³⁾ and Leslie Harris’s *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*.⁽⁴⁾ Alexander describes the purpose of her research as examining the conflict between ‘moral uplift’ and African heritage and emigration in the development of political activism and nascent Black Nationalism in New York City. She uses political activists’ speeches from throughout the period, as well as ongoing newspaper discourses, as her primary way into the politics of the black community.

The book is divided into seven chapters with a preface and epilogue. The first six chapters are organized chronologically, covering important political and antislavery developments in the city and wider country. Alexander begins the first chapter in the wake of the American Revolution, tracing the roots of Pan-African and Black Nationalist theories to the African Society, black churches, and traditions such as parades and burials. The African Society emerged in 1808, founded by the leading black activists in New York City, including the Reverend Peter Williams, Jr., John Teasman, elder William Hamilton, Henry Sipkins and Epiphany Davis. Although not overtly a political group – it operated primarily as a mutual aid society – Alexander deftly shows how this organization came to be ‘the most outspoken advocates for Black social and political rights in New York City’ (p. 14). These leaders in the African Society continually argued for

black political and racial unity, although they differed about the methods for achieving this. Alexander examines these differences in a set of speeches given at events in 1808 and 1809. These, she believes, represent the genesis of the 'divide that shaped political debates among free Blacks for the remainder of the century' (p. 21). The African Society leaders struggled between the extremes of unifying the community under their common African heritage, or seeking to 'morally uplift' the community in order to prove to white society their worthiness for freedom and political participation.

The practical responses to these two ideologies become African or Haitian emigration on the one hand, and on the other, commitment to winning black citizenship through education, demonstrations of patriotism during the War of 1812, the development of black cultural institutions such as the African Theatre, and the continued growth of the African Society and its auxiliary institutions. Chapter two looks at the period from 1810 to 1826. During this period, 'institution building, in particular, was a critical part of the [African] society's program' (p. 46) of creating a sense of black community in New York City and countering endemic racism. Alexander details the rise and fall of the African Theatre, which was both popular and financially successful but faced the wrath of an angry white New York, forcing it to close in 1822. Similarly, black schools were protested by white New Yorkers who objected to the development of these parallel institutions. The constant racism and injustice, despite African American sacrifices during the War of 1812, drove some leaders to consider alternatives to remaining in America. Reverend Williams supported emigration to Sierra Leone along the lines proposed by Massachusetts merchant Paul Cuffe, or to Haiti as solicited by Haitian President John Pierre Boyer. In this period, the divide between the two forms of political identity was mutable: while the African Society sought to support the creation of a unified identity through educational, philanthropic and business development ('moral uplift'), it also 'continued to flaunt its African heritage' with traditional parades marking important anniversaries (p. 46).

These parades become the catalyst for a major rift in the black community in the wake of New York emancipation. Chapter three is set in the period 1827–9, looking at the response to New York emancipation and the rise of the colonization movement. Parades feature heavily in this chapter, as the debate over how to appropriately celebrate New York emancipation led to conflict between celebrating in a 'solemn proper manner' (p. 55) (the view of the 'moral uplift' camp) or celebrating in the 'distinctly African fashion' (p. 57) of parading. Although there appears to be a clear divide in the columns of John Russwurm's newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, between the African Society's moral uplift and 'the vast majority of Black New Yorkers' (p. 55) who supported parading, in fact Alexander points out that African Society leader William Hamilton refers to his congregation as both 'citizens' of the United States and 'sons of Afric' [sic] (p. 59), just as members of the African Society lead the parade despite their editorial stand against it. Alexander points out that the debate over parades did not end with the 1827 celebrations but continued over the next two years, with the 'moral uplift' camp eventually trumping 'African heritage' through a combination of increasing white opposition, dissatisfaction with the realities of emancipation, and, as Alexander argues, the rise of the American Colonization Society (ACS).

Tying together the issue of parades and colonization, Alexander argues that in these crucial years the black leadership 'reflexively defended their right to American citizenship and, in so doing, took a definitive step toward embracing moral uplift as a strategy to obtain their goals' (p. 54) rejecting any remnant back-to-Africa arguments endorsed by the ACS or its supporters in the black community.

Chapter four is set in the 1830s and examines budding abolitionism. Alexander argues that opposition to the ACS caused the re-emergence of the two strains of black activism in the form of Canadian emigration, supported by Reverend Peter Williams, Jr., or early abolitionism, favoured by William Hamilton and Philip A. Bell. The Colored Convention movement of the early 1830s sought to reconcile the divergent halves of the wider African American political leadership, 'but dissension over strategy and ego-driven posturing also prevented the Colored Conventions from maintaining a unified agenda' (p. 95). The failure of this movement saw the rise of biracial alliances with William Lloyd Garrison's abolition movement. Here, Alexander turns to the broader black community in New York to show the impact of an anti-abolition riot in 1834. Beyond the damage and death caused by the riot, Alexander argues that this was a turning point in political activism because it marked the end of Reverend Williams' political career (he was asked to refrain

from political activity by his Bishop after the riots) and the beginning of unified black abolition activity in New York in the form of the Committee of Vigilance and similar groups that sought to prevent fugitive slave kidnapping in the city.

The focus on abolitionism is continued in chapter five, which runs through the 1840s. Responding to the division in the national abolition movement – William Lloyd Garrison’s non-resistance and anticlericalism led Arthur and Lewis Tappan to create their own political abolition movement – the black leadership in New York once again called for unity. Just as in previous decades, leaders struggled over which approach would be practical for achieving suffrage in New York and the recognition of their citizenship. In this case the options were political non-resistance (‘moral uplift’) or the fight for suffrage through the establishment of separate black political conventions. With a new generation of leaders in Charles Ray, Henry Highland Garnet and James McCune Smith, Alexander argues that the tensions that defined the earlier movements persisted, as black New Yorkers continued to struggle with activist identification. The political struggle for control and unity was manifested in the divide between Frederick Douglass, who supported continued moral suasion and distrusted political antislavery, and Henry Highland Garnet, who became a staunch advocate of the abolitionist Liberty Party and led New York’s black suffrage movement. As in earlier eras, the political leaders seem to defy hard categorization, calling for political action while simultaneously shaping their message in terms of moral uplift (p. 109) or endorsing political action while personally preferring moral uplift, as activist Charles Reason did (p. 111). This explains the ultimate decision amongst the political leadership to ‘articulate a brand of Black Nationalism and move forward as a unified people’ (p. 119) in the wake of the failures of the Liberty Party in national elections in the late 1840s.

Chapter six is the last of the chronological chapters, examining the heightening of tensions in the 1850s in the lead up to the Civil War. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act with the Compromise of 1850 saw African American liberty reach an all-time low. Not only were all African Americans now vulnerable to slave catchers, but protecting them from kidnapping was deemed illegal. The *Dred Scot v. Sandford* Supreme Court decision in 1857 further reduced African American rights, as all slaves were deemed to be property, not people. Heightening sectional tensions also saw white New Yorkers turn on the black community as they blamed them for destabilizing the Union. In the wake of all of this misery, however, Alexander writes that ‘Black leaders emerged triumphant in the sense that they overcame ideological disputes that had stymied their movement in previous decades and managed to build a unified Black coalition’ (p. 122). This coalition emerged out of institutions such as the Committee of Thirteen, a group set up to oppose the Fugitive Slave Act; state conventions; and public meetings that sought to defend the rights of black New Yorkers to ride the streetcars. In a series of cases foreshadowing the Montgomery Bus Boycotts of the 20th century, Elizabeth Jennings, Sarah Adams, and Reverend J. W. C. Pennington refused to get down from segregated streetcars, eventually forcing the desegregation of the streetcars through a New York State Supreme Court case in 1858. However, the difficulties of this decade forced a return to the argument for a back-to-Africa approach, and coinciding with the independence of Liberia in 1847, many were willing to give emigration a second chance. Thus the ‘African heritage’ side of the debate finally re-emerged in the political sphere as the Liberian Agriculture and Emigration Society was founded, Henry Highland Garnet endorsed Liberian emigration, and a national movement by Martin Delany to immigrate to Africa was established. Tensions between Garnet and the anti-emigrationists James McCune Smith, Frederick Douglass, and George Downing dominated the debates of the late 1850s. Here again, in response to continued and persistent oppression in America, Alexander’s question of ‘African or American?’ comes to the political forefront. While Alexander acknowledges that some chose to emigrate, she emphasizes that even in the face of these struggles, ‘what emerged from these conflicts was the Black community’s determination to stay in the United States and agitate for its rights’ (p. 153).

Chapter seven deviates from chronology to conduct a case study of Seneca Village, which existed from 1825–57. This chapter sets up Seneca Village as a microcosm of African American experience more generally in New York City, revealing the strategies of land purchase, institution building, and individual contributions to community. The chapter features maps and illustrations of the community, detailed census data, and an examination of individual contributions to the community, as well as an argument for the village’s importance as a symbol of success for those who chose to remain in America and gain suffrage

through the holding of property. The importance of churches and schools as community institutions is examined in detail. It is unfortunate that this episode is featured separately because it would have made a nice contribution to the overall narrative by stepping back from the purely political, top-down approach featured in the rest of the book. Although perhaps spending too much time revealing a 'conspiracy' by the mayor to raze Seneca Village and construct Central Park, this chapter features excellent research on the purchase and development of a true black community in New York, with all of the cultural, social and political institution building that encompassed.

The strengths of this book are its adherence to its institutional focus, presentation of an exciting new case study of Seneca Village, and attention to the dynamism of African American politics in an age when formal political participation was nearly impossible. Alexander very neatly traces the trajectory of certain individuals as they emerge from their civic roles as pastors, teachers, and newspaper publishers to become newly minted political figures. The rise and fall of their often overlooked early political groups – the Colored Conventions, the New York Association for the Political Improvement of the People of Color, the American Reform Board of Disenfranchised Commissioners, the National Council of the Colored People – reflects what Alexander argues is the indestructible, but often politically divided, commitment to freedom, justice and equality (p. xx). The level of detail given to both the successful and unsuccessful political movements helps to illustrate the challenges these leaders faced from both wider American society and within the black activist community itself. Alexander also makes excellent use of a variety of interesting sources, and the chapter on Seneca Village was fresh and provided a new focus for the story. This case study gives the reader a sense of the parallel and equal development of culture, society, and politics in black New York.

Despite Alexander's careful treatment of her political sources, there are times when it seems that she is reading reality where there is only rhetoric. Part of the reason for her title, *African or American?*, is because the black community of New York was divided over issues of personal and group identification, leadership, and community coherence, as Alexander perceptively demonstrates in the first three chapters. However, one of the weaknesses of this title and the frame for her argument proves to be that she wraps up this particular debate over identity (African or American) through what she describes as a unified response to the rise of the American Colonization Society (rather simplistically dismissed as 'evil' (p. 77)). After this period, until emigration is reintroduced as a possibility by the leadership in the 1850s, it is unclear what makes up the 'African heritage' side of the debate, other than persistence in identifying with other people of African descent within America. Only on the eve of the Civil War does Alexander return to the issue of African heritage, pointing out that the black leadership 'may have been startled to notice that members of the Black working class had never fully abandoned African cultural practices' (p. 138). By using the rise of the ACS as a moment of clear break between the African and American arguments, Alexander does a disservice to the continued interest in Africa and African heritage that she admits (later) persisted throughout the period in the non-political realm.

This demonstrates the weaknesses of the political approach, which precludes what would be of enormous value to this study: incorporating the perspectives of average New Yorkers. Alexander regularly identifies dissension and debate amongst the political leadership, but when writing about average people, groups black New Yorkers as a cohesive entity that acted uniformly, generalizing about their feelings and intentions ('the Black community began to publicly distance itself from Africa' (p. 75); 'the Black community demonstrated its strength and resolve' (p. 88); 'Black New Yorkers refused to surrender' (p. 135); 'Black New Yorkers were united in their decision to remain in the United States' (p. 146)). If this was truly the case, why did the political leadership constantly have to call for unity and action? While the framing dichotomy of 'moral uplift' versus 'African heritage' may have been an overarching theme of African American societal identification, there are many examples cited by Alexander that do not fit into these categories, and even more cases where there was an apparent disconnect between political leadership and the general feeling of the majority of black New Yorkers.

Therefore, while Alexander provides a generally fresh take on the cultural and social foundations of New

York City's African American political activism, her analysis highlights the need for further research on how individual African Americans reconciled these dichotomies, provided to them by their political leaders and white society, with the realities of their everyday lives. In the meantime, Alexander's work elegantly provides the understanding of from where – culturally, socially, and politically – these rhetorical dichotomies emerged and how they moulded political thinking and shaped the development of broad political identities.

Notes

1. *The Huffington Post*, 18 March 2008 <[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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