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Descendents of Africa, Sons of '76: Exploring Early African-American Rhetoric

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African-American rhetoric of the early Republic has been largely unexplored by rhetorical scholars. Addressing this gap in the scholarship, this study analyzes two intricately related forms of discourse: late eighteenth-century petitions and speeches celebrating the 1808 abolition of the international slave trade to the United States. Both sets of texts contribute to the expression of an African-American public voice, build upon and critique American ideals while retaining a proud sense of African heritage, exploit the available generic conventions, develop increasingly radical appeals, and feature arguments that transcend local issues to engage general questions of identity and history.

Introduction

Rhetorical scholars studying African-American discourse from the early 1830s to the present have revived forgotten texts and figures; traced the development of various strategies, appeals, and arguments; linked texts to activism, identity, and community institutions; and considered the ways that African-American rhetoric challenges and revises conventional assumptions and frameworks. The rhetoric of the period from the Revolutionary War through the first two decades of the nineteenth century, however, has been less rigorously scrutinized by those in our discipline.[1] As historians, sociologists, and literary critics probe these previously neglected texts,[2] historians of rhetoric must follow their lead. In so doing, we will create a longer, more inclusive history of African-American rhetoric than has been

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available to date, in effect extending the rhetorical trajectory previously explored by scholars. An examination of texts of the Revolutionary period and the first decades of the nineteenth century enhances our understanding of the rhetoric that followed; it also enables us to fashion a complex, subtle, and comprehensive picture of a developing African-American public voice.

The following study takes up this challenge through an analysis of two distinct, yet intricately related forms of discourse: petitions created during the last three decades of the eighteenth century and speeches celebrating the 1808 abolition of the international slave trade to the United States. Although different in form and intended audience, these two sets of texts reveal important developments in African-American discourse. Indeed, by featuring texts that diverge in period and form, we underscore the larger theoretical and rhetorical context that links them. We focus on the ways key rhetorical features contributed to the expression of an African-American public voice that is articulated in the petitions and amplified and intensified in the slave trade abolition orations. We demonstrate that these rhetors exhibit a rhetorical consciousness that transcends their local communities; engage questions of identity and nationality; and fashion forceful, even militant arguments to build community and challenge American society.

In the first section of this article, we show that although petitions of the last decades of the eighteenth century assume the form of requests, they were marshaled by African Americans in an effort to assert their rights, respond to misrepresentations, and develop a community consciousness that facilitates explicitly militant rhetoric. We examine how these petitioners blend accommodation with more forceful declarations within the rhetorical confines of the petitionary genre, engage and draw on the ideals and discourse of the new nation, and fashion a public voice that asserts both an American and African collective consciousness. Analyzing speeches celebrating the 1808 abolition of the international slave trade in the second part of our study, we show how these orators build on key elements developed by their eighteenth-century petitioner predecessors. These sophisticated orations demonstrate an awareness of the national and global struggle of people of color, project a strong African-American voice into the American debate over slavery and race, and set forth a positive view of Africa and a sense of ethnic pride that strengthen the bond among African Americans. Emerging in the petitions and intensifying in the orations, a radicalism develops that has been generally associated with the arguments of later decades of the antebellum period.

"Convinced of Our Right": Petitions, 1777–1799

"The Other Revolution"

The American Revolutionary period, as Vincent Harding asserts, was based on a "paradox": "Here were the colonists, moving toward revolution, calling for freedom and justice. . . . And here were their enslaved Africans" (15). Even as various states in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took steps to end slavery, either constitutionally or by gradual abolition laws, freedom from bondage did not bestow civil rights, equal opportunity, or safety. Discrimination and segregation restricted where free African Americans could work, live, learn, and worship; and the threat of abduction by those who would sell them into slavery was constant. Racist beliefs were promoted by prominent figures such as Thomas Jefferson and in the popular press, as well as in viciously demeaning cartoons and broadsides (Lapsansky 216; Melish 165–71). Although, as T. H. Breen explains, after 1776 Anglo-American males saw themselves as "citizens," rather than "subjects," they viewed citizenship as "an exclusionary category" that did not encompass African Americans (399–400).

John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss assert that despite African Americans' exclusion from the Revolution's promises of freedom and equality, many saw in the struggle "the implications for their own future" (90; see also Foner 442). They could, as Harding maintains, marshal the period's "revolutionary doctrines and put them to the service of the struggle for their own freedom" (16). Thus, as African Americans throughout the new nation began to address issues of self-determination, group identity, and civic involvement in the new republic, they engaged in what Harding calls "the other revolution" (17). Free African Americans in various cities established independent community organizations, including mutual aid societies, Masonic lodges, organizations to explore emigration to Africa, and religious denominations. During the decades following the American Revolution, sociologist Elizabeth Rauh Bethel asserts, "an emerging translocal moral community" brought together African Americans from different cities to consider common concerns (76; see also Hinks 96). These developments helped foster a sense of collective identity, a political consciousness, and various forms of protest rhetoric.

One such protest genre was the petition. Existing documentary evidence suggests that while individual African Americans petitioned for their freedom or for relief from local injustices as early as the seventeenth century (Ashcraft-Eason 72–73; Deal 283; Dodson, Moore, and Yancy 22–26), *collective petitioning*, which sought—in addition to

or in lieu of individual redress—more general, communal remedies for abuses such as slavery, kidnapping, or restrictive laws, arose in the 1770s (Aptheker 5–12). Beginning in this decade, African Americans collectively petitioned various local and state governments and, by the end of the century, the United States Congress for the abolition of various types of oppression.[3] Enabling African Americans "to directly utilize the power of language," Harry Reed asserts, these petitions demonstrate "the beginning process of self-identity," and the creation of "a community of common interest and the potential for united action" (11–12). Reed and others have noted the prominent role these petitions played in developing African-American activism, suggesting that such petitions demand attention, articulate a dynamic engagement with the civic culture of the young nation, and allow African Americans to develop community goals and identity (Bruce 53–58; Davis; Harding 16; Nash 58–59). Significantly, as Charles Wesley remarks, the petitions reveal that African Americans engaged "the very spirit of independence and freedom which [their] oppressors had employed for themselves" (64). In effect, as our analysis will reveal, they offered their own conceptions of citizenship to challenge and subvert the exclusive constructions of Anglo-Americans. In addition, although supplication is obligatory, we shall demonstrate that it is inaccurate to assume that petitions cannot be assertive, even radical, texts.

We examine six petitions created by African Americans in various locales. In 1777, eight black Bostonians—including Prince Hall, a minister and the founder of African-American Masonry—petitioned the Massachusetts General Court, requesting they address racial oppression and abolish slavery. The legislature referred it to the Congress of the Confederation, where it died (Bruns 428; Kaplan and Kaplan 26). At least two slaves of Fairfield County, Connecticut, appealed to the state's General Assembly for the statewide abolition of slavery in 1779.[4] The petition was considered and rejected by the General Assembly (Rosavich 82). Also during 1779, nineteen New Hampshire slaves petitioned the legislature for the passage of laws to abolish slavery in the state; their appeal was read in 1780 in the state's House of Representatives. According to the House's journal, "counsel for petitioners" argued in its favor before the legislators, yet they determined that "at this time the House is not ripe for a determination in this matter" and "post poned" the issue "to a more convenient opportunity," which, not surprisingly, appears never to have presented itself (Hammond 64–65).

In 1780, slaves petitioned the Governor and General Assembly of Connecticut for the statewide abolition of slavery. Vincent Rosavich

speculates that the document was likely delivered to Governor Jonathan Trumbell, who probably "failed even to transmit it to the Assembly" (86). A petition protesting taxation without representation was presented in 1780 to the Massachusetts legislature by seven Dartmouth African Americans, including the ship captain and merchant Paul Cuffe and his brother, John. The petition culminated the brothers' three-year protest against the requirement that they pay taxes when they were not allowed to vote. "The petitioners were successful," James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton explain; the state's 1780 constitution "remov[ed] [voting] restrictions against black and Indian men" (70). In 1799, seventy-one self-described "People of Colour, Freemen within the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia," including Philadelphia leaders and clergymen Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, petitioned the President and the United States Congress to protest slavery, the international slave trade, and the "peculiarly hard and distressing" provisions of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law.[5]

In spite of the fact that, with the exception of the 1780 Dartmouth petition, these appeals failed to achieve their immediate ends, they enabled African Americans to create significant arguments for freedom; to develop a public voice; to interact with and respond to their white and black contemporaries, both directly as they addressed leaders and indirectly as they commented on American texts and ideals; and to both draw on and redefine conceptions of citizenship and natural rights. As Thomas Davis remarks, in petitions of the 1770s, African Americans "raised their own voices in publicly articulating the claims of liberty" (262). Dickson Bruce maintains that the petitions of this era "reveal a . . . sense of a world in which there was both a need to assert a black voice and a possibility for doing so," "show the kinds of conventions in both substance and voice that were coming to characterize a black voice," and demonstrate that African Americans "buil[t] on the ambivalences over color and status around them and creat[ed] strategies within those ambivalences to gain a hearing for themselves" (53–55).

Requests and Claims: Blending Rhetorical Appeals

As various studies demonstrate, nineteenth-century African Americans often combine measured, careful arguments appealing to audiences' interests with more militant claims built upon forceful moral authority (Bacon, *Humblest* 84–93; Condit and Lucaites 69–98; Logan 62–69). Although a petition is, in a formal sense, a request, this ostensibly supplicatory genre is in fact well suited to meld these two types of appeals to create powerful, assertive rhetoric. Petitions, Susan Zaeske suggests,

have always had a "subversive potential" (13). As petitioners employ "flattering adjectives" and refer to their subordinate position, they express "some degree of power" by "plac[ing] demands on rulers and test[ing] their accountability to the people" (13). Petitioners affirm their identity as "citizens" (2), according to Zaeske, a particularly significant rhetorical move for those with limited civil and political rights. For free African Americans of the late eighteenth century, this seemingly restrictive framework was sufficiently flexible—and potentially radical—to allow them to take authority, make uncompromising claims, and challenge white hegemony.

In their 1779 petition, the slaves of Fairfield County, Connecticut, blend recognition of the legal power of the General Assembly to whom they appeal with assertions that implicitly challenge that authority. Employing formal, deferential language, they describe themselves as "Humble Petitioners" who "beseech," "entreat," and "look up to" these "fathers of the People." Yet within these conventions, the petitioners strongly criticize local and national leaders and attack slavery. Consider, for example, their portrayal of a key feature of their enslavement:

> [A]s if the Perpetrators of this horrid Wickedness, were Conscious (that we poor Ignorant africans, upon the least Glimmering Light, derived from a Knowledge of the Sense and Practice of civilized Nations) should Convince them of their Sin, they have added another dreadful Evil of holding us in gross Ignorance.. . .[M]ay it please your Honours, we are most grievously affected.. . .Your Honours who are nobly contending, in the Cause of Liberty. . .will not resent our thus freely animadverting, on this detestable Practice. . . . (P2 80)[6]

While conforming to the constraints of their genre by relying on politeness and praise, the petitioners deliver a sharp, forceful critique. Professing that those "who are nobly contending" for freedom themselves "will not resent" the petitioners' claims, they create an exaggerated tone of goodwill that highlights the irony of their implicit message: white America's hypocrisy in lauding freedom while tolerating slavery is all too obvious.

In addition, encoded within this appeal is a strong argument that foreshadows explicit claims by nineteenth-century luminaries such as Frederick Douglass: slavery is connected to the lack of literacy and voice (258–59). Thus, the very act of petitioning is itself a form of resistance, asserting the illegitimacy of their masters power—and by extension, the government that grants their masters' authority. The masters themselves realize that educated slaves will be able to persuade them that slavery is sinful; the skilled and sophisticated

appeals of the petitioners, then, challenge the institution's very foundation. In effect, they ironically reverse the roles of master and slave, proposing that—despite efforts to keep them in ignorance—they are now in the position to instruct white authorities.

Through their reference to the "cause of Liberty" in which those whom they address are "nobly contending," these petitioners exploit what Kenneth Burke calls the "rhetoric of courtship"—the use of hierarchical language to imply the possible reversal of roles of superior and inferior, thus destabilizing the existing power structure (124, 140). While all petitioners must rely on this convention to some extent by acknowledging and deferring to the power structure within which they make their requests, for African Americans the use of a rhetoric of courtship has particular implications (see Bacon, *Humblest* 65–59). Engaging (and implicitly undermining) the hierarchy based on race allows these rhetors to control the terms by which they are represented and to question the exclusivity of the definitions created by white male leaders. Demonstrating that they, too, can marshal the power of the language of liberty, they expose the hypocritical foundations of America's racial hierarchy.

As they acknowledge the influence of American leaders and appropriate their language, they also condemn their practices that fail to live up to their own standards. Their simultaneous acknowledgment and reversal of the positions of superior and inferior is highlighted by their use of the word "animadverting," which means both to pay attention to or to observe and to censure in a legal or judicial way. This role reversal sets the stage for strong, unequivocal statements of rights: "[W]e are Convinced, of our Right. . .to be free. . . . [We] ask for nothing, but what we are fully persuaded, is ours to Claim" (P2 80).

Notably, the tactics deployed here—using excessively polite statements that implicitly disparage, reversing roles, and exploiting the master's own ideals and language to undermine the power structure—may be characterized as signifying, an African-American rhetorical strategy described by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, and Roger Abrahams. A layered discourse built on ambiguity, irony, and multiple connotations, they propose, is ideally suited to the position of the African-American rhetor, who must use the forms and language of the dominant culture to encode alternate, often subversive, meanings. As Gates explains, "the Discourse of the Black Other in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" depends upon repetition, reversal, intertextuality, and literary revision (*Figures* 49).[7] In the petitions, African-American rhetors signify at various levels, using language to resonate with, revise, and challenge the ideals of a new nation.

The Connecticut slaves' 1780 petition similarly combines appeals to authority with bold accusations against slaveholders, creating a complex rhetoric of courtship that seeks to undermine the power of those to whom they are obliged to appeal. The slaves recognize their position as supplicants who "in a most humble maner Criy unto" the Governor and General Assembly "for Liberty," asking the "Kind and good will" of these legislators to assist them (P4 83). Yet, they simultaneously emphasize that the roles of superior and inferior in their society are neither absolute nor just. "[O]ur marsters have no more Rite to make us Searve them then we have to make our Marsters Searve us" (P4 83), they assert early in the petition, challenging the very authority to which they must plead their case. Even if circumstances dictate that they must appeal to others, they affirm that they are in principle if not in fact already entitled to every right for which they must petition. They boldly demand that white leaders acknowledge that roles can be reversed: "Do unto us as you would be Glad that we Should Do unto you if we was in your Condishon and you in ours" (P4 83).

Within the petition itself, this role reversal is enacted as the slaves assume moral and spiritual superiority over the white authorities. As in the petition from Fairfield County the previous year, here slaveholders are charged with withholding education. The petitioners lament that many slaves have not been taught "the word of God" or its meaning and that their masters have "Keept [them] from the Knoledge of that Salvation which [they] have a Right to By Jesus Christ" (P4 84). Yet in spite of this oppression, the petitioners have gained a detailed, potentially revolutionary knowledge of the Bible. They cite nine specific scriptural passages that plead for deliverance from distress, denounce oppressors, and affirm God's promise that divine justice will ultimately uplift the persecuted. Quoting from Jeremiah 22:13—"Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work"—they explicitly condemn the sinful institution of slavery. The petitioners' references to the Bible resonate on various levels. As they are unable to restrain the power of literacy, the masters cannot control the force of God's Word. The slaves assert explicitly that God "is as able to Save" them as their masters (P4 84); through the biblical references to God's ultimate justice for the oppressed, they go even farther, affirming that God is in fact on their side. Indeed, the spiritual dimension of this reversal is already in place, as the slaves offer detailed and ironic instruction to those who have refused to teach them.

''Apprehending'' Rights, Affirming Citizenship

The petitioners' references to the "cause of liberty" and the struggle against Great Britain indicate that these African Americans did not see themselves merely as members of local communities seeking limited remedies. Instead, through links to the new republic, they demonstrate an emerging national consciousness. Deploying the ideology and the language of the Revolution and the nation's founding, they affirm their status as Americans and propose that they, too, have the right to the citizenship that white men claimed for themselves (but not for others) as a result of the successful struggle against Britain. The 1780 Dartmouth petitioners, for example, support their argument against taxation without representation with a brief but powerful lesson in recent history:

> [W]e apprehend ourselves to be aggrieved, in that, while we are not allowed the privilege of freemen of the State, having no vote or influence in the election of those that tax us, yet many of our colour (as is well known) have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defence of the common cause, and that (as we conceive) against a similar exertion of power (in regard to taxation), too well known to need a recital in this place. (P5 87)

The Dartmouth petitioners set forth a multifaceted affirmation of their American identity and African Americans' right to full citizenship. As they exploit parallels between their situation and that of the colonists who rebelled against Britain, these activists employ the general strategy characterized by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca as the rule of justice (218–20), arguing from precedent that similar norms should apply to those in analogous situations. As they do so, they demonstrate clearly that they are aware of the implications of the definitions of citizenship favored by white Americans and that they can claim equality on those terms. As Breen explains, after the Revolution white male leaders carefully crafted a definition of citizenship as "an exclusionary category that carried responsibilities as well as rights" (400). This definition provided a rationale for states to refuse to deem resident blacks citizens (402). Yet the Dartmouth petitioners astutely take up this conception of citizenship in order to expand the category. If rights as citizens are given to those who have responsibilities, then those such as themselves—who pay taxes and have, in many cases, participated in the armed struggle that led to the nation's founding—have a valid claim.

Yet, as Bethel maintains, African Americans of this period were not making claims for a citizenship based solely on white America's

perceptions of freedom and nationhood. Instead, they forged their own "definition of citizenship" grounded in the "civic culture" and "organizational infrastructure" that had already been created during the post-Revolutionary period and that allowed them to assert "cultural integrity and civic equality" (55). This foundation underlies the community consciousness and pride in African Americans' recent accomplishments that inform the language of the Dartmouth petitioners.

It is notable that the Dartmouth petitioners employ the term "apprehend," which means both to understand and to seize, to describe their grasp of their situation and its implications for their status. Their awareness of the injustices they face has not been given to them by others, but has been seized by applying the revolutionary principles valorized by their oppressors. Signifying via multiple connotations, they ironically maintain that they need not elaborate on the injustice of taxation without representation, which is "too well known to need a recital in this place." They have taken—"apprehended"—from these leaders themselves the very principles that make their case.

The petitioners reveal that they have discovered another resource within the rhetorical and philosophical repertoire dear to post-Revolutionary Americans: the language of the Anglo-American concept of natural law as articulated by Hobbes and Locke, in which God confers certain basic rights on humans. As Davis demonstrates, African-American petitioners of the 1770s featured "Natural Rights ideology as a rhetoric of emancipation" (250).[8] The 1779 petition of the New Hampshire slaves maintains, for example, that "the *God* of nature gave them life and freedom, upon the terms of the most perfect equality with other men" and that this "freedom is an inherent right of the human species, not to be surrendered, but by consent, for the sake of social life" (P3 63). The petitioners draw on the tenet of natural law that government is a consensual social contract between rulers and the governed. This proposition is central to America's founding; the word "consent" appears three times in the Declaration of Independence to highlight the illegitimacy of the British government of the colonies. Asking "what authority" grants their masters "the power to dispose of [their] lives, freedom and property," the petitioners inquire, "Is it from the volumes of nature? No, here we can read with others, of this knowledge, slavery cannot wholly deprive us; here we know that we ought to be free agents. . .here we feel a just equality; here we know that the God of nature made us free" (P3 63–64). As Bruce remarks, the slaves articulate here the idea "that love of freedom implied a claim to freedom" that was "consistent with the most radical trends in American Revolutionary ideas" (58). Tapping into the language and ideology of the recent Revolution, the petitioners demonstrate

the injustice of their enslavement and assert their innate, unconditional right to be equal citizens of the new nation.

The Boston petitioners in 1777 refer even more explicitly to the canonical texts of the new nation: "[Y]our Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Unavers hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfuted by any Compact or agreement whatever. . ." (P1 436). As do the Dartmouth petitioners three years later, the Bostonians use the term apprehend to invoke a dual meaning, suggesting that they have seized the knowledge of their own inherent right to liberty in spite of and in opposition to the "cruel Power" of those who enslave them. Their understanding is thorough and well grounded; the Boston petitioners combine the language of the Declaration of Independence with an explicit reference to Locke's description of the social contract, the notion that governmental power is dependent upon a "*Compact* and Agreement" between rulers and the governed (172).

Similarly, the Fairfield County petitioners of 1779 rely on the language of natural law and the Declaration. Their claim to freedom, they affirm, is clarified by "Laws of Nature," as well as the "whole Tenor, of the Christian Religion" (P2 80). "[W]e perceive by our own Reflection," they assert, "that we are endowed, with the same Faculties, with our Masters. . . . [W]e have Endeavoured rightly to understand, what is our Right, and what is our Duty, and can never be convinced, that we were made to be Slaves" (P2 80). Appealing to the general principles of natural law upon which the American Revolution was based and evoking the premise of the Declaration that "Liberty" is one of the unalienable Rights with which "all men are endowed by their Creator," the Boston and Fairfield County petitioners, like their New Hampshire counterparts, implicitly challenge any limitations on their freedom and assert their right to resist slavery as an unjust social structure.

The rule of justice here is evoked through the oppressors' own language, which the petitioners skillfully deploy against the very institutions that oppress them. This strategy of taking power by appropriating and redefining dominant texts is also a form of signifying. Gates demonstrates that as African-American rhetors create an "intertextual relationship" between their language and the words of white America, they alter the meaning of canonical texts, creating a "double-voiced" discourse that "achieve[s] difference through repetition" (*Figures* 54–57). Referring to powerful documents such as the Declaration, they exploit the texts' historical resonances to suggest radical conclusions. The Boston petitioners remark, for example, that following "the Lawdable Example of the Good People" of the

United States in their struggle against Britain, they "have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition," with "too similar" results (P1 436). Unstated, but strongly implied, is the conclusion the Founding Fathers drew in the Declaration: "Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people." So long as it tolerates slavery and ignores the pleas of the oppressed, the American government must be opposed, even with force, by all people truly committed to freedom.

Two decades later, Absalom Jones and his fellow Philadelphians, in their 1799 petition, were able to draw upon an additional resource, the United States Constitution. Quoting directly from its preamble, they argue that its guarantees of "domestick tranquility" and "blessings of Liberty" are violated by the kidnapping and enslavement of free people of color (P6 274). Like the petitioners in Boston and New Hampshire in 1777 and 1779, the 1799 petitioners to Congress and the President challenge the authorities by marshaling their own language and ideals against them, but they are even more assertive. Whereas their predecessors had pointed out that America's own ideology supported the slaves' freedom and equality, the Philadelphians specifically charge that the principles on which the nation is founded are illegitimate unless kidnapping and slavery cease: "[I]f the Bill of Rights, or the declaration of Congress are of any validity, we beseech that as we are *men*, we may be admitted to partake of the Liberties and unalienable Rights therein held forth . . ." (P6 276). Far from merely acquiescing to the supremacy of those who govern them, they contend that unless American leaders follow the dictates of their own declarations, their political power has no authority.

A Collective Consciousness: The African Past and the American Future

As these late-eighteenth-century petitioners ably deploy the texts and ideology of the new republic to assert their rights to citizenship, they articulate the fundamental bonds that link those of African descent and demonstrate a sense of black collective consciousness grounded in their distinct culture, heritage, and destiny. Their appeals demonstrate a complex "double consciousness," the sense of their dual identity as African and American. Indeed, for various petitioners, the connection to their African past is personal and fresh, as they refer to their seizure and transportation from the continent. They have neither forgotten nor renounced their continent of origin; indeed, they suggest a positive history for Africa and a proud identification with

their African heritage. Consider, for example, the bold charge of the 1777 Boston petitioners that they were "Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power . . .from A popolous Pleasant and plentiful contry and in violation of Laws of Nature" (P1 436). The 1779 New Hampshire petitioners, who describe themselves as "natives of Africa," offer a more qualified but equally telling description:

> [T]hrough ignorance and brutish violence of their native countrymen, and by the sinister designs of others (who ought to have taught them better). . .they. . .were seized, imprisoned, and transported from their native country, where (though ignorance and unchristianity prevailed) they were born free, to a country, where (though knowledge, Christianity and freedom are their boast) they are compelled and their posterity to drag on their lives in miserable servitude. . . . (P3 63)

These petitioners take pride in Africa, identifying themselves both as Africans and Americans. Although they lament the "ignorance and unchristianity" of Africa (not a surprising rhetorical move, given American religious leanings), the comparison serves to highlight the shortcomings of the United States, which are worse in light of America's professions of enlightenment, Christianity, and freedom.

By proudly claiming their African heritage and representing Africa as a place of freedom and plenty, the petitioners tap into various sources and accomplish various rhetorical goals. As Bruce notes, this "imagery had roots in the oral traditions of kidnapping and betrayal in which storytellers evoked the idyllic Africa from which they had been stolen," as well as in "Revolutionary American arguments in opposition to slavery" that often tended toward "a golden-age primitivism" (58–59). As African Americans of the post-Revolutionary period represented Africa as a land of true freedom, historians maintain, they were able to forge a sense of common identity, of nationhood, that enabled them to resist oppression (Waldstreicher 320–22; Bethel 116–17). At the same time, they countered images of Africa as a land of barbarism that were often used to keep blacks oppressed. This strategy strengthened African Americans' sense of a communal consciousness anchored both in Africa and America, Bruce explains, since images of "an idyll interrupted by corrupt Europeans. . .undermine[d] [American] claims to superiority" and "gave Africa and their own background a place within the Revolutionary milieu" (60). Thus, although brief, the petitioners' references to Africa demonstrate the creation of a complex identity embracing African and American nationhood. As we shall see, the slave trade orators built on and extended the petitioners' portrayals, engaging more deeply the implications of the history and future of Africa for African Americans.

Collective identity is also articulated by various explicit references to African Americans as a people. Although signed by local groups, these petitions ask for remedies beyond their own particular circumstances and reflect a consciousness that all African Americans are linked. "[W]e not only groan under our own Burden," the 1779 Fairfield County petitioners profess, "but with Concern & Horror, look forward & Contemplate, the miserable Condition, of our Children, who are training up, and kept in Preparation, for a like State of Bondage, and Servitude" (P2 80). Referring to African Americans as a whole rather than merely their individual families, they request that the General Assembly will consider "whether it is Consistent, with the Present Claims, of the United States to hold so many Thousands. . .in perpetual Slavery" and will "apply such Remedy, as the Evil does require" (P2 80). The 1780 petition of the Connecticut slaves similarly suggests that they call for a remedy beyond their own freedom. Their references to scriptural passages such as Isaiah 58: 6 ("undo the heavy burdens, and. . .let the oppressed go free") and Psalms 140: 12 ("I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor") highlight the injustice and immorality of all slavery. At the end of their petition, they offer a general appeal: "Surr we hope that you will Remember the Poor and oppresed negro men in the State which you are Chosen to Do Justice in" (P4 84).

The 1799 petition has an even stronger communal focus. Of the three forms of oppression that they protest—slavery, the international slave trade, and the kidnapping of free African Americans—only the latter threatens the petitioners directly. Yet their argument goes beyond their own concerns or even those of their immediate neighbors:

> [W]hile we feel impressed with grateful sensations for the Providential favours we ourselves enjoy, We cannot be insensible of the conditions of our afflicted Brethren, suffering under curious circumstances in different parts of these States; but deeply sympathizing with them. We are incited by a sense of Social duty and humbly conceive ourselves authorized to address and petition you in their behalf. . . . (P6 273–74)

Zaeske's study of nineteenth-century women's antislavery petitions indicates that the form enabled them to move "from isolated individuals to political actors," effecting a "transformation of women's political identity from one rooted in localities and religious duty to one of national citizenship and natural rights" (106, 159). A similar process was at work for eighteenth-century African-American petitioners, who in their appeals create a collective consciousness and articulate a public, national, political voice.

"Glorious Victory": Speeches Commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1808–1815

A Robust Rhetorical Practice

In the early nineteenth century, national and international developments suggested the dawning of a new era of freedom, opportunity, and self-determination to African Americans. One particularly important step was the 1808 federal ban on the transatlantic slave trade to the United States (Bethel 85–96; Bruce 92–134; Kachun 16–20). Henry Sipkins, one of the seven orators featured below, fondly recalls the passage of the new law as "[t]hat day which caused our hearts to dilate with the ideal hope of future bliss" (Porter 372). In 1808, and for a number of years following, thus, daylong commemorative celebrations were held annually on January 1 in New York and Philadelphia and on July 14 in Boston. Organized and attended by the leadership of the black communities of these cities, these events included parades, banquets, music, and—most germane to this discussion—speeches.

Unlike the eighteenth-century petitions we have just examined, these addresses were public performances specifically targeting large African-American audiences. Many of these orations (including those featured below) were subsequently printed and distributed as pamphlets, which, as Bruce contends, "clearly moved them into a broad realm of public discourse. . .rather than the essentially contained audience of the celebration itself" (110–11). The significance of these texts is profound. In the celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade, Bethel indicates, we can "trace the contours of an emerging historical consciousness that simultaneously constructed a common ancestry and claimed a common future" (86). David Waldstreicher emphasizes, "As centerpieces of the celebrations, these speeches and pamphlets fought American racial injustice while inventing and establishing black nationality" (343–44). Yet it is important to note that this genre did not begin such rhetorical projects anew, but built on and advanced the themes and strategies of the petitioners by efficiently accessing the vibrant alternative public or counterpublic that had emerged through the church and complementary social organizations.[9] It is, in this sense, the natural extension of the eighteenth-century petition.

The eight speeches we consider here were presented over a seven-year period. The first two, Absalom Jones's sermon, preached at St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, and Peter Williams's oration at St. Philip's African Church, New York, were both delivered on January 1, 1808, the date marking the official end of the international slave trade to the United States. One year and a

day later, Joseph Sidney, William Hamilton, and Henry Sipkins spoke in New York at the Wilberforce Philanthropic Association, the Universalist Church, and the African Church, respectively. On January 1, 1813, George Lawrence addressed those assembled at the African Methodist Episcopal Church, New York; and one year later, Russell Parrott presented his oration at the African Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia. The final speech was delivered by William Hamilton on January 2, 1815, at the Episcopal Asbury African Church, New York.[10]

As epideictic rhetoric, all eight speeches give thanks for the new federal law banning the slave trade while reinforcing fundamental community values. Typical of the epideictic genre, though, these orations also include deliberative components, in this case, arguments supporting the growing abolition movement in the United States and other initiatives aimed at advancing African Americans. The balance between the ceremonial and the deliberative functions varies considerably from speech to speech. Jones, Williams, Sipkins, and Hamilton focus mostly on celebrating the new law and condemning the outlawed practice of slave trading, whereas Sidney, Lawrence, and Parrott place greater emphasis on attacking the institution of slavery itself and calling for ongoing political action. Furthermore, the rhetors' approaches to abolition itself differ. Sidney adopts a gradualist orientation, arguing that immediate emancipation would not be desirable because "our brethren in the South are in a state of deplorable ignorance" (S3 357). Lawrence, on the other hand, suggests that "the land in which we live gives us the opportunity rapidly to advance the prosperity of liberty" (S6 379).

As is typically the case in epideictic oratory, these orations are richly endowed with pathos. Yet appeals based on logos or reasoned argument are also prominent, particularly since charges of mental inferiority had long been lodged against African Americans. To support their arguments about the evils of the recently outlawed slave trade and to make the case for further emancipation, these rhetors provide detailed discussions and narratives elaborating on the cruelty of slavery, the evil consequences of the slave trade in Africa, and the nature of freedom and human rights. Like the Connecticut petitioners of 1780, these orators frequently rely on Scripture to support their claims about public policy, as well as draw upon—and in some cases attack—a considerable variety of premises and commonplaces central to white discourse.

Whereas the petitioners are compelled by generic constraints to balance accommodation with more direct, forceful argumentation, the speakers commemorating the end of the American slave trade have

less reason to bow to the white power structure. Nevertheless, they must manage a variety of potentially conflicting intentions, expressing gratitude for the end of the transatlantic slave trade, advocating the abolition of slavery, questioning the legitimacy of the white power structure, evoking anger and indignation toward their oppressors while maintaining the mantle of Christian charity and humility, and admonishing their audience to embrace morality and practice self-help. They strive to effect an eloquence that is ostensibly humble and artless, yet passionate and authoritative. To this end, Hamilton begins his 1815 address with strategic self-criticism. Although he desires to present "a plain instructive address," he apologetically reports that he may be unable to avoid "a vain attempt at oratory, or rhetorical flourishes" (S8 391). Such moves are commonplaces in nineteenth-century oratory, yet for African Americans the convention serves additional purposes. Like the flattery and professions of humility marshaled in the petitions, this self-deprecation creates a rhetoric of courtship that can in fact function ironically to undermine the hierarchy. Hamilton downplays his skill, but, as we shall see, he aptly employs the rhetorical resources of the accomplished nineteenth-century orator against those who occupy positions of power in the traditional hierarchy.

''Ourselves and Our Country'': A National Voice

The nascent national voice that emerges from the petitionary rhetoric of the eighteenth century is strongly developed in the speeches commemorating the abolition of the slave trade. Engaging issues and movements important to the new country, these texts rely on and question American beliefs and values, particularly those of the Founding Fathers. Quoting Sidney's oration, Mitch Kachun argues that the "slave trade celebration orators exhibited a definite pride in the principles of the Revolution and an expectation that their application would culminate in 'a more general extension of freedom'" (32). In this spirit, Williams bolsters his thanksgiving for the new law with an eloquent reference to the Declaration of Independence:

> [A]t that illustrious moment, when the sons of '76 pronounced these United States free and independent…when the inspired voice of Americans first uttered those noble sentiments, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and when the bleeding African, lifting his fetters, exclaimed, "am I not a man and a brother;" then with

> redoubled efforts, the angel of humanity strove to restore to the African race the inherent rights of man. (S2 350)

Like the eighteenth-century petitioners, Williams appeals to Revolutionary precedent and the language of the Declaration, employing the rule of justice to establish compelling support for the new law. Yet he features an even more extensive, forceful analogy than his rhetorical forebears. The restrained language of the Dartmouth petitioners, for example, who refer to the "common cause" and an "exertion of power" (P5 87), contrasts sharply with Williams's vivid references to "the bleeding African" freed by "the angel of humanity."

In his oration a year later, Sidney praises states that have taken steps to abolish slavery and decries its persistence in places such as Virginia. "No people in the world make louder pretensions to 'liberty, equality, and the rights of man,' than the people of the South!" he declares. "And yet, strange as it may appear, there is no spot in the United States where oppression reigns with such unlimited sway!" (S3 358). Sidney's emphasis on the importance of newly won "rights and duties . . .which are all-important, both to ourselves and to our country" (S3 359), demonstrates his determination to draw African Americans into the civic and political life of the new nation. As did the Dartmouth petitioners in 1780, Sidney favors a notion of citizenship that involves both rights and responsibilities. Moreover, he demonstrates how in the nearly three decades that passed since these petitioners appealed to the authorities, this conception of citizenship had evolved. While the petitioners urged their leaders to give them the right to vote as they demanded of them the responsibility to pay taxes, Sidney sees voting itself as embodying the complexities of civic duty, since this right "brings with it a duty of the highest obligation," namely choosing those leaders who will "promote the best interests of America" (S3 359). In a lively, sophisticated reflection on the American party system, economics, class, race, and human rights, Sidney displays a keen understanding of the national scene, including the tension between the commercial emphasis in the North and the agricultural agenda of the South, the intricacies of the electoral system, and the interests of the major players in the nation's capital. Whereas his petitionary forbears expressed a general sense of the fundamental principles undergirding the nation, Sidney exhibits a more thorough, specific knowledge of the way these fundamental principles play on the national stage.

Like Sidney's, Hamilton's abolitionist arguments in his 1809 oration are built upon, address, and often critique the dominant discourse about America, politics, and race. Notably, Hamilton flavors his

historical reflections with irony as he signifies on Jefferson's racist arguments in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (S4 36). Sarcastically discrediting the white philosopher's logic, he refutes Jefferson's odious comparison between Roman and African slaves, which for Jefferson bolsters claims for African inferiority. Hamilton both demonstrates the salient difference between these two systems of servitude and proves himself the master of the philosophic tools Jefferson purports to use against him.[11] Although more bold, Hamilton's signifying continues the tradition of irony at work in the petitions of the previous century.

Lawrence, too, reviews and refutes racist commonplaces and attacks the charge that Africans and African Americans are mentally inferior, noting slavery's role in blunting his people's progress. Building on Enlightenment notions of natural law dear to white society, he exclaims, "This government founded on the principles of liberty and equality, and declaring them to be the free gift of God, if not ignorant of their declaration, must enforce it. . ." (S6 379). In addition, he presents an extended case against the notion that slavery is natural, "for between no two things in existence does there exist so irreconcilable opposition, as between the human mind and slavery" (S6 380).

The petitioners, as we have seen, also rely on these ideals, asserting African Americans' place in the social contract in opposition to those who would exclude them, yet the slave trade orators more directly and boldly counter racist limitations of the scope of natural rights. Parrott explicitly refutes his opponents' racist line of reasoning: "[The slave's] mental facilities are depressed, and ignorance inculcated with the most studious assiduity, and then he is represented as being incapable of receiving instruction; ingenuity is tortured to assimilate him to the brute, as a justification for his inhuman treatment" (S7 386). Whites may hold authority, but Parrott notes that "power and right are terms quite dissimilar in their signification; and as man receives his liberty with his existence, from God, no earthly power has the right to take it from him" (S7 387). In a stinging rebuke, Parrott exposes the motives of slavery's apologists and declares that slavery is inherently unjust: "That freedom is the natural inheritance of man, is a truth that neither sophistry nor interest can shake. . . . " (S7 389). Parrott's pitch for freedom ends with an implied warning that reminds all Americans that this cause is not merely local: "If the security of a country should rest within her bosom, then it is necessary that each citizen should be a freeman" (S7 389). Although their approaches to the rhetorical situation vary, these orators uniformly engage the discourse of the young country in which they seek to establish their rightful place.

Africa and African Americans: History and Destiny

The African-American character manifest in the eighteenth-century petitions is richly developed in the speeches celebrating the abolition of the slave trade. Kachun notes that "from the first slave trade celebrations in 1808. . .African American organizers consistently used freedom celebrations to articulate a distinctive, black-centered historical consciousness and sense of peoplehood" (27–28). To ground their African-American identity and to honor the African Diaspora, the slave trade orators emphasize strong connections with Africa and alternative interpretations of the presence of Africans in America. Waldstreicher argues, "The slave trade orations place Africa on the world stage as resolutely as Independence Day rhetoric placed America at the center of world history" (344). The eighteenth-century petitioners praise Africa in general terms and decry their own mistreatment by traders; the slave trade orators, who proudly use phrases such as "descendants of Africans," "my beloved Africans," and "descendant of Africa" to describe their audiences and themselves, build on this theme while historicizing the catastrophic force of the slave trade.

Like the petitioners before them, these rhetors emphasize that before the slave trade began, Africa was a beautiful, peaceful land. Williams dubs it "the garden of the world, the seat of almost paradisiacal joys" (S2 348). Hamilton echoes this sentiment in his 1809 speech, suggesting, "The country of our forefathers might truly be called paradise, or the seat of ease and pleasure" (S4 35). Sipkins argues that Africa's "innocent inhabitants regardless of, or unacquainted with the concerns of busy life, enjoyed with uninterrupted pleasure the state in which, by the beneficent hand of nature, they were placed" (S5 367). Lawrence declares that the native Africans' "employments were innocent, neither did they seek evil, contented in the enjoyments of their native sports; they sued not for the blood of their fellow men" (S6 377).

Furthermore, they present additional praise for the continent, expanding upon the petitioners' portrayal of their ancestral home. In his 1815 speech, Hamilton emphasizes its storied past and its prominent place in world history: "She can boast of her antiquity, of her philosophers, her artists, her statesmen, her generals; of her curiosities, her magnificent cities, her stupendous buildings, and of her once widespread commerce" (S8 392–93). Developing what Wilson Jeremiah Moses calls an Egyptocentric perspective (23–24, 48–62), Hamilton features the significance of that ancient, influential nation. He suggests that Africa's centrality among the continents makes it

"a grand eligible situation for the seat of Authority" (S8 392). As William Gravely (307–08) and Shirley Logan (27) maintain, such appeals create a collective identity that challenges white racist definitions of Africa and supports the elevation of the race. The history of Africa, these speeches reveal, has developed since the late eighteenth-century petitioners. It is not just that the African past was peaceful and happy; it is also a source of pride and a repository of accomplishment.

Developing the narrative suggested by the petitioners, the slave trade orators uniformly argue that once the slave traders arrived, Africa was thrown into conflict and deprivation. The greed and treachery of the Westerners annihilated the natives' natural inclinations toward social harmony. "[God] has seen the wicked arts," Jones declares, "by which wars have been fomented among the different tribes of the Africans, in order to procure captives, for the purpose of selling them for slaves" (S1 337). Using a phrase that has become very popular in our time, Williams asserts, "Trace the past scenes of Africa, and you will manifestly perceive these flagrant violations of human rights" (S2 347). Parrott, who explicates the ill effects of the slave trade in a powerful retelling of "the discovery of the new world," argues that this commerce "has filled this earth with more moral turpitude than any other event that has ever occurred" (S7 384) and that its "corruptive influence" has caused "most of the wars that have desolated unhappy Africa for more than a century" (S7 387). In his 1815 oration, Hamilton concludes that the introduction of European and American avarice into Africa transformed "perhaps the most happy people the earth ever knew, to the most miserable under heaven" (S8 394).

The slave trade orators also go beyond the petitioners in considering Africa's future. Although Hamilton and his fellow rhetors lament the current state of Africa, they nonetheless express optimism about its ultimate renewal. Just as the United States will someday throw off the sin of slavery, so will Africa rise from its current state of degradation. Typically, the rejuvenation of Africa is bound up with the missionary movement. Marshaling an oft-cited verse from Psalms (68: 31), Jones prays, "We thank thee, that thou has appeared, in the fullness of time, in behalf of the nation from which most of the worshipping people, now before thee, are descended. . . .May *Ethiopia soon stretch out her hands unto thee*, and lay hold of the gracious promise of thy everlasting covenant" (S1 341). Seven years later, Parrott continues the theme, arguing that with the end of the slave trade "mild religion begins to unfold her heavenly truth, through this former land of paganism and error—and over the ruins of the altars that idolatry

had reared, the sacred temple points its spire towards heaven" (S7 390).

The slave trade orators' characterizations of Africa's history and future support their efforts to argue for an African-American consciousness. Jones's sermon, which explicitly draws its scriptural inspiration from Exodus 3:7–8, employs as a key source of its rhetorical power the analogy between the Hebrews held in bondage in Egypt and Africans enslaved in America. Whereas the eighteenth-century petitioners marshaled short quotations from Scripture to bolster their arguments, here Jones's sustained, biblically based argument supports his position and establishes a strong sense of cultural awareness. He declares, "The history of the world shows us that deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage is not the only instance in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name" (S1 337). Suggesting that African Americans, like the Israelites of biblical times, constitute one of the "oppressed and distressed nations" worthy of God's intervention in their behalf, he crafts his message of thanksgiving for the end of the slave trade in terms that transcend the identity and interests of the specific Philadelphians he initially addresses.[12]

In establishing a broad African-American identity, Jones and his fellow orators do not neglect local issues; nor do they omit calls for moral reform characteristic of African-American discourse. Their moral appeals are framed pragmatically, however, combining issues of conduct with the nationally oriented political agenda discussed above. Jones argues that just as the Jews, "after they entered the promised land, were commanded, when they offered sacrifices to the Lord, never to forget their humble origin," so should African Americans' behavior "be regulated by the precepts of the gospel" (S1 339–40). Urging his audience to "conduct [themselves] in such a manner as to furnish no cause of regret to the deliverers of [their] nation" (S1 339), he again communicates a broad racial consciousness. Williams asserts that since their detractors "will not fail to augment the smallest defects in our lives and conversation," African Americans must, "by a steady and upright deportment, by a strict obedience and respect to the laws of the land, form an invulnerable bulwark against the shafts of malice" (S2 352–53). Sidney urges "pure and upright conduct, to convince the world that we are not only capable of self-government, but also of becoming honourable citizens and useful members of society" (S3 362). Depending on the power of righteous conduct, Lawrence suggests that as "continual droppings of water . . . wear away the hardest and most flinty substance," so African

Americans, "abounding in good works, and causing our examples to shine forth as the sun at noonday" (S6 379), will erode Southern resistance to abolition.

A Growing Radicalism

It is frequently assumed that African-American rhetoric became radicalized through the efforts of antislavery activists such as David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, and Frederick Douglass. While taking nothing away from these vital figures of the abolition movement, it is important to recognize the strongly worded arguments presented by earlier figures. The growing militancy present in the rhetoric of the eighteenth-century petitioners foreshadows the more forceful appeals that distinguish the slave trade abolition speeches.

Lawrence, for example, minces no words as he predicts the ultimate fall of slavery. "[T]he time is fast approaching," he declares, "when the iron hand of oppression must cease to tyrannize over injured innocence . . ." (S6 380). Although, he argues, "there are thousands of our enemies who had rather see us exterminated from off the earth, than partake of the blessings that they enjoy . . .their malice shall not be gratified; they will, though it blast their eyes, still see us in prosperity" (S6 380). This is not the rhetoric of accommodation and compromise, but of battle. Jones, too, targets slaveholders with eloquent fury:

> Our God has seen masters and mistresses, educated in fashionable life, sometimes take the instruments of torture into their own hands, and, deaf to the cries and shrieks of their agonizing slaves, exceed even their overseers in cruelty. Inhuman wretches! though You have been deaf to their cries and shrieks, they have been heard in Heaven. (S1 338)

Such direct confrontation contrasts sharply with the obligatory flattery of the petitioners, which precludes such harsh critique.

Parrott's account of Europe's colonization of America and development of the transatlantic slave trade is forceful and indignant. He calls attention to "[t]he infamous barbarities committed by the Spaniards" and "the piratical Portuguese, who were the first violators of the rights of the African," and emphasizes the rampant cruelty of the British colonists: "[M]an assumed the nature of the savage; plucked from his bosom every sentiment of pity; and, to gratify his accursed avarice, devoted to lasting bondage his equal, man" (S6 384). Continuing in this vein, Parrott condemns current apologists of American slavery, whom he labels "ye sophists whom avarice has armed in [slavery's] cause" (S7 387).

Similarly incensed, Hamilton strikes out against the slave trade in his 1815 speech with an anger designed to rally African Americans against their oppressors. As he details the worst features of the practice, he declares that "all this butchery [was] set on foot. . .for sordid gain, the white man's God" (S8 395). Suggesting that the devil himself is "a white man" (S8 396), Hamilton boldly condemns the European colonization of the New World, wishing "that Columbus with his exploring schemes had perished in Europe ere he touched the American Isles; or that Americus had perished in the ocean ere he explored the southern parts of the Continent, or rather that the hateful Cortes, with his murderous band, had been swallowed by an earthquake ere he reached the City of Mexico" (S9 396). This radical view of America and its founding differs dramatically from the dominant culture's official version of these honored events and figures. The United States, the petitioners suggest, was founded on noble, although unfulfilled, ideas; Hamilton looks beyond the Founding Fathers to find a longer, and more sinister, tradition that birthed the nation.

For Hamilton, the greed and injustice that fueled the conquest of the New World live on in white society. After providing an extensive review of the evils of the Middle Passage and the barbaric cruelty of plantation discipline, erroneously justified by the belief that whites are "an order of being above any other order of men," Hamilton bitterly declares, "If these are some of the marks of superiority may heaven in mercy always keep us inferior: go, proud white men; go, boast of your superior cunning; the fox, the wolf, the tyger, are more cunning than their prey" (S8 397–98). Returning to *Notes on the State of Virginia*, upon which he signified in his 1809 address, Hamilton concludes this rousing attack of the dominant American culture by speculating that the Southern representatives to Congress who unsuccessfully opposed the abolition of the slave trade were possibly motivated by "their guilty souls, fearful that [the ban] would bring on Mr. Jefferson's doomsday" (S8 399). Whereas the petitioners look to Jefferson's optimistic Declaration for support, here Hamilton references a particularly problematic text, marked by its profound anxiety concerning the institution of slavery and its ultimate effect on the health of the United States, to expose the moral weakness of the white hierarchy. Tearing into the third president—whose vision of the future "made him tremble for the fate of his country, when he reflected that God was just" (S8 399)—and the contradictory, destructive, pathological psychology he epitomizes, Hamilton constructs a blistering indictment of the American status quo. Although, as mentioned above, Hamilton begins his oration by apologizing for providing anything

but "a plain instructive address" (S8 391), the grand style inspires his passionate account of the evils of white society.

Conclusion

This study seeks to enhance our discipline's engagement with early African-American texts and indicate new directions for further research. Examining multiple texts from two important genres of the early republic, we demonstrate that even in the initial decades of the history of the United States, African-American rhetors fashion complex appeals that build upon and critique important American ideals while retaining a proud sense of their African heritage. They work adroitly with the generic conventions available to them, developing militant, increasingly radical, appeals. Their arguments transcend local issues and specific concerns to engage general questions of identity and history, in effect constituting a national voice. Because subsequent generations built upon this rhetoric, it anchors our understanding of the development of African-American rhetoric in the nineteenth century and beyond.

In addition, our analysis suggests that instead of attempting to identify distinct developmental stages of African-American rhetoric or to pinpoint where and when it became "radical," "national," or "political," we should instead trace essential elements of the tradition to very early years. Rather than undergoing discrete transformations, the basic features of this discourse—translated through genre and time—steadily gather strength and complexity, acquiring momentum and force from decade to decade. This approach takes nothing away from the accomplishments of later African-American rhetors, but provides valuable historical context for their efforts to transgress generic boundaries, fashion militant arguments, and deploy themes expressing African and American identities. Scholars have noted the links between African-American persuasion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, creating a rhetorical trajectory that demonstrates the fundamental connections between the rhetoric of various periods and movements—such as the abolition movement, the late nineteenth century, and the Civil Rights era—and, reveals how rhetors built on and expanded key *topoi* and strategies of those who preceded them (Bacon, *Humblest*; Bormann; Logan). We extend this trajectory to include earlier discourse aimed at various audiences and created for diverse purposes.

Finally, as historians of rhetoric, we call for more interdisciplinary collaboration. Significantly, most of the scholarship on the texts

featured in this study has been produced not by researchers in rhetoric or communication, but by historians, literary critics, and sociologists. As demonstrated in their insightful, nuanced readings, these scholars pay careful attention to the rhetorical characteristics of these documents. We can benefit from the ways that many contemporary historians approach the study of the past, continually opening previous frameworks, models, and chronologies to question as they include new voices, experiences, and texts. As historians of rhetoric follow their lead, we are hopeful that our colleagues in other disciplines will, in turn, find their scholarship enhanced by our contributions, by our attention to the way people—particularly those who are marginalized—have marshaled what Zaeske calls the "ever-changing discursive resources available to them" (4) to take control of the ways they are represented; to insert themselves into the public sphere; and, ultimately, to authorize themselves as full participants in the continual evolution of the nation and its history.

Notes

[1]Exceptions include Bacon, "Rhetoric"; Condit and Lucaites; Gordon; Ray.

[2]Historical and/or literary treatments of the texts of this period include Bethel; Brooks; Bruce; Davis; Kachun; Saillant; Waldstreicher.

[3]A petition of January 30, 1797, from four free African Americans living in Philadelphia is the first extant petition from African Americans to Congress (Aptheker 39–44; Kaplan and Kaplan 267–72).

[4]Rosavich indicates that this petition, which was signed by slaves Prime and Prince (about whom little is known) and which describes itself as "The Petition of the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield," was written in the hand of attorney Jonathan Sturges (80–82). Yet Rosavich remarks that the existence of other petitions of Connecticut African Americans "should caution us against overestimating the role of Sturges and underestimating that of Prime and Prince in drafting this document" (81–82).

[5]This law gave rise to kidnappings of African Americans by allowing a master to seize a alleged fugitive slave anywhere in the country without a warrant, present him or her to a judge, and—if the master could "prove" that the person in question had escaped—take him or her into custody.

The texts of the petitions are published in the following sources and will be hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as follows: the 1777 petition to the Massachusetts General Court is found in *Collections* and will be cited parenthetically as P1; the 1779 petition of slaves of Fairfield County, Connecticut, is found in Rosavich and will be cited as P2; the 1779 New Hampshire petition is found in Hammond and will be cited as P3; the 1780 Connecticut petition is found in Rosavich and will be cited as P4; the 1780 Dartmouth petition is found in Nell and will be cited as P5; the 1799 petition to the President and the United States Congress is found in Kaplan and Kaplan and will be cited parenthetically as P6. Readers interested in historical information beyond that we provide here should consult the sources cited in this note.

[6]Rosavich's transcriptions of the 1779 petition of slaves of Fairfield County, Connecticut (P2), and the 1780 Connecticut petition (P4) include words that were erased or crossed

out and indicate where words were added to the text. We omit these editorial notations in our quotes from the petitions.

[7]Gates notes that the use of such rhetorical strategies is not "the exclusive province of black people" (*Signifying* 90). However, it assumes particular importance for African Americans, who often must use "double-voiced words," create "double-voiced discourse," and rely on "formal revision" and "intertextual relation[s]" (*Signifying* 50–51). For further discussion, see Bacon, "Taking Liberty," 273–74.

[8]On the general resonance of natural law for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African Americans, see also Finseth 350; Gordon 93.

[9]Scholars have established that African-American discourse often takes place within black counterpublics or alternative public spheres that are fundamentally connected to community civic, educational, and religious institutions; see Bacon, *Humblest* 10; Baker 13–26; Dawson 210–11; McClish 60.

[10]The texts of the speeches featured in this section are published in Porter and will be hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as follows: Absalom Jones's sermon as S1; Peter Williams's oration as S2; Joseph Sidney's speech as S3; William Hamilton's 1809 oration as S4, Henry Sipkins's speech as S5; George Lawrence's address as S6; Russell Parrott's oration as S7; and William Hamilton's 1815 speech as S8. Several other speeches from this period celebrating the abolition of the slave trade are extant, including orations by William Miller, Adam Carman, and Henry Johnson. These significant texts include many of the same elements prevalent in the other eight; space limitations, however, do not permit us to feature them here. Finally, we note that although speeches celebrating the abolition of the slave trade were delivered for decades, we have featured orations written before 1816 in order to demonstrate the early manifestation of key components of African-American rhetoric.

[11]For further discussion of Hamilton's signifying, see Bacon, "Taking Liberty" 278–79.

[12]Miller in his 1810 address (8) and Carman in his 1811 speech (14) also marshal biblical parallels between African Americans and ancient Israel to suggest black nationhood.

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