

To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement

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Review

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Cameron, Christopher *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement*. The Kent State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781606351949

Reexamining Overlooked Early African American Abolitionists

To most students of history, David Walker's 1829 pamphlet, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, marks the accepted beginning of popular abolitionism in the United States. Before that, the common belief maintains, anti-slavery ideologies remained largely within quiet, fragmented circles of white clergymen and radical political leaders. Appearing at the height of renewed academic interest in early African American intellectual culture, Christopher Cameron's *To Plead Our Own Cause* challenges this long established frame. Rightly recognizing the importance and reach of Walker's influence—especially among such well-known radicals as William Lloyd Garrison and his cohort of "immediatists"—Cameron argues that "Walker's blend of religious and political rhetoric in the cause of abolitionism was a tactic African Americans had employed in the fight against slavery since the eighteenth century (1)." As early as 1774, Cameron claims, African Americans in Massachusetts were publishing essays, pamphlets, and sermons in-voking Calvinist notions of imminent, heavenly judgment for the sin of slavery. This movement, evidence of which appears throughout the Early Republican era, was, accord-ing to Cameron, "just as radical as its nineteenth-century counterpart," and even repre-sents the "origins of abolitionism in America (2)."

Throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century, Cameron tells us, Af-rican Americans, many of whom were still enslaved, petitioned the Massachusetts Gen-eral Court, published works of poetry and prose, and brought suit against white men and women, each time challenging contemporary justifications of slavery. Ideas of Puritan Reform Theology pervade nearly every example, arming this charter generation of African American radicals with a

divinely inspired language of universal equality and natural freedom. This legal, intellectual, and theological tradition, Cameron explains, found a home and a voice in the organizations it inspired. Through the likes of Prince Hall, whose own aggressive anti-slavery rhetoric added to the flow, Freemasonry became a *de fac-to* “church” for the movement (92), giving it a wider, more attentive audience. The same can be said for the emigration movements championed in the early 1800s by Paul Cuffe and Prince Saunders. These bold, but hardly revolutionary, movements, according to Cameron, forced the tradition into the on-going discussion of the slave trade by offer-ing to enlighten, convert, and thus liberate benighted Africa on the back of Reform-inspired Quaker egalitarianism.

Cameron nicely lays out his argument, and often in convincing fashion. In-deed, there can be no doubt that major aspects of mid-nineteenth-century abolitionism had direct roots in the late eighteenth century. The success of Cameron’s claim here pro-vides a larger base upon which to investigate African American identity and culture in the Early Republic, taking it out of the antebellum-centric approach so popular in the last few decades. Using both published and personal accounts—including poetry, sermons, letters, and broadsides—Cameron places free and enslaved African Americans in Massachusetts at the heart of the slavery debate, and shows that, if nothing else, notions of belonging, natural rights, and theological liberation were active within a Northern African American community much longer and more active than we have previously assumed. Importantly, too, Cameron convincingly shows that white, pro-slavery apologists were not the only people to use the Bible to justify their positions in the Early Republic. Indeed, African American intellectuals, as early as the 1770s, waded boldly into the discussion, using the same verses, psalms, and teachings as whites, but this time in the name of God-given freedom.

The problem is that although Cameron’s conclusions prove largely convincing, they do so often in spite of, or with little regard for the evidence produced. Instead of uncovering and displaying new sources and figures either ignored or overlooked by pre-vious historians, Cameron, perhaps justifiably, brings to the fore well-known, well-studied early African American intellectuals—Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Cuffe, Prince Hall, Lemuel Haynes, and Prince Saunders, to name a few. As a result, much of the discussion sur-rounding these figures relies, it seems, too heavily on a simple shift in interpretation pred-icated upon the assumption that their ideas did in fact derive entirely from the Reform Theology tradition Cameron lays out in the beginning.

In this way, then, the work falls victim to the limits of regional history. There seems to be no question that Reform Theology and Quaker egalitarianism heavily influenced the figures and minds presented in *To Plead Our Own Cause*, but those same figures and minds, who, Cameron even explains, often grew up outside the state and sometimes the nation, and lived in an Atlantic realm flooded with political theories, theological debates, and radical Enlightenment tracts arguing much the same thing as Reform Theology and the so-inspired works of Wheatley, Cuffe, and Haynes. To focus so closely on a single thread of Atlantic influence, without placing it in the larger intellectual flow of the time, distracts the reader from a perhaps more convincing alternative explanation for the conclusions provided. This is not to say that Cameron is incorrect or misguided in his focus. It simply means that the focus needs more context outside of a single state and a single movement. It is difficult to agree that Reform Theology led these early African American intellectuals to the "origins of abolitionism in America" if so many other traditions and ideologies active at that time and in that region remain equally plausible explanations of influence.

In spite of these weaknesses, *To Plead Our Own Cause* remains extremely valuable. In providing an expanded timeframe for the development of abolitionist thought in the United States, it opens a new discussion of African American intellectual history, its origins, and its influence on more heavily investigated ideas and movements of the nineteenth century. It also constructs a communal voice for individuals once thought fragmented and exceptional. *To Plead Our Own Cause* shows, beyond doubt, that African Americans were agents of political change long before their movement had a name, a newspaper, and white men to give them words.

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