

The Black Newspaper And The Chosen Nation

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Review

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Fagan, Benjamin *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*. University of Georgia Press, \$44.95 ISBN 9780820349404

Being Chosen, Being Free

Over the past two decades scholars from several disciplines and subfields have been steadily expanding our knowledge about African American print culture, with attention devoted to black writers and publishers, readers, newspapers, and the communities they helped to create. Historians, of course, have long mined the black press for sources relating to African American communities, activism, politics, and culture. But much recent work has come from literary scholars investigating nineteenth century black newspapers as important vehicles for black writers of poetry, short stories, novels, and children's literature who could find few outlets for their work among mainstream publishers. This growing body of work has transformed the study of African American literature and has made research on the black press one of the most dynamic areas within African American studies.

Benjamin Fagan, assistant professor of English at Auburn University, enters this field with *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*, in which he argues that antebellum black newspapers promoted varied expressions of black "chosenness" as a central conceptual structure in African Americans' quest for freedom and equality. Though situated in an English department, Fagan's interest in the construct of blacks as a chosen people is less literary than political. The book's five chapters, framed by an Introduction and Conclusion, proceed chronologically from the 1820s to the 1860s, with each chapter focusing on a prominent black newspaper that articulated a particular variety of the chosen nation with which the editors seemed to identify.

Fagan begins with *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper, published in New York from 1827 to 1829. This mouthpiece for New York's black elite targeted African Americans' public conduct: black

Americans could fulfill their destiny as God's chosen nation only by adhering to the broader society's standards of respectability through appropriate public comportment. Like other scholars examining black New York, Fagan focuses on the disconnect between elite champions of respectability and those who embraced a more animated culture of the streets, a conflict played out most visibly in debates over how to acknowledge New York State's abolition of slavery on July 4, 1827.

Chapter 2 examines another New York paper, the *Colored American*, which in the late 1830s linked black chosenness with the "a distinctly American nation state" informed by the "language and logic of American millennialism" (46). The paper fully embraced an exceptionalist American identity and envisioned an American chosen nation in which blacks and whites acting as equal partners represented a necessary step in the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. White Americans' fierce resistance to racial equality moved the paper by 1840 to a jeremiadic position that cast the United States as a new Babylon and reserved chosen status to African Americans and Native Americans, both of whom could claim a solidarity of oppression with the ancient Israelites.

Frederick Douglass's *North Star* expanded the contours of black chosenness in the late 1840s by linking African Americans' freedom struggle with the European revolutions of 1848 and other oppressed peoples' quests for self-determination and equality. In casting black Americans as part of a "global army of liberation" (74), Douglass rejected the American exceptionalism of the *Colored American* in favor of a transnational community united in its opposition to all forms of tyranny. The *North Star* embraced neither faith in American institutions nor support of revolutionary violence; rather, Douglass and his staff maintained earlier newspapers' calls for temperate public conduct as a tool through which blacks might attract support for their peaceful revolution.

Both American identity and blackness were rejected as sources of chosenness by Mary Ann Shadd. During the mid-1850s her Canadian publication, the *Provincial Freeman*, touted Canada as the freest place on earth for blacks and advocated that blacks embrace an identity as British subjects. Shadd believed the British people represented the chosen nation with which blacks must identify, even advising against any participation in racially exclusive organizations.

Fagan's final chapter focuses on New York's *Weekly Anglo-African*, which was published throughout the Civil War. The paper provided a forum for African Americans to air their diverse views on the war and the role African Americans might play in it. The editors presented the war as the tool selected by God to liberate his chosen people, counseling black men to prepare to fight even before the Emancipation Proclamation opened the U.S. army to black enlistees. Once black men were in the field the editors stressed soldiers' duty toward their enslaved brethren; they were now a literal army of liberation and once more the United States was presented, for the time being, as the champion of God's chosen people.

Fagan incorporates many important political and intellectual threads of antebellum African American culture into this volume—respectability, transnationalism, emigration, revolution, and nationalism prominent among them. The connecting fabric is the concept of blacks as a chosen nation, which itself embodies two themes that are deeply embedded in both American and African American experiences: exceptionalism and evangelical Christianity. While the newspapers discussed did not have ties to any religious denomination, many of their editors and central contributors were either ministers or fundamentally informed by religious sensibilities. Fagan is correct in emphasizing that any understanding of black print culture in this period must take stock of how a sense of sacred destiny informed even the most apparently secular positions.

Most of the issues and individuals discussed in this book will be familiar to specialists in nineteenth century African American history. Taken separately, many of Fagan's observations have been addressed by previous scholars, sometimes in much more depth. At times Fagan seems to overstate or oversimplify his points of emphasis to fit them into the framework of the chosen nation. *Freedom's Journal* surely played an important role in circulating ideas and solidifying a northern free black activist culture, but it was one of many vehicles for pontificating about black behavior, before, during, and after its brief run. It hardly played the causal role in shaping northern black leaders' obsession with respectable public conduct that Fagan implies.

Similarly, in describing the disagreement between Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Shadd over whether a black or a British identity held more promise for black liberation, Fagan oversimplifies Douglass's position. In the specific editorial exchanges discussed in the book, Douglass indeed minimized Britain's

importance and “argued that race, more than anything else, defined and united black people worldwide” (116). But this was a situational argument explicitly crafted to discourage black emigration to Canada. Douglass’s August First orations in this same period, on the other hand, praise Britain as the best hope for freedom in the world. And Douglass’s solidarity with Italian, Hungarian, and Irish nationalists, among other global movements among non-blacks, suggests that he saw African Americans as of a kind with those other combatants in the struggle between liberty and slavery.

In contrast to these reservations, I find Fagan’s analysis of the *Colored American* in the late 1830s compelling. The construct of the chosen nation in the context of the nation’s surge of millennial perfectionism in this case works very well to make sense of the editors’ shifting positions on black identity and African Americans’ status within the American nation. A question I am still grappling with is whether or not situating all these newspapers and their positions within the construct of the chosen nation advances our understanding of the intellectual and political workings of the era’s African American activists and communities. At the very least, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* provides a new angle of vision on familiar issues and questions. Individual scholars will come to different conclusions about the approach’s value, but the fresh perspective offered in this slim volume must be taken into account.

Mitch Kachun is Professor of History at Western Michigan University; author of Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915 (Massachusetts 2003 [paper 2006]); and co-editor of The Curse of Caste; or, the Slave Bride (Oxford 2006), an 1865 serialized novel by Julia C. Collins. Kachun’s next book, First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory, will be published in 2017 by Oxford University Press.