

### To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class

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#### Recommended Citation

Wang, Xi (2014) "To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.2.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss2/14>

## Review

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Spring 2014

**Ball, Erica L.** *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*. University of Georgia Press, \$22.95 ISBN 978-0-8203-4350-1

### The Personal Struggle Against Slavery

“Personal politics” is the running theme of this 5-chapter study focusing on the peculiar form of politics embedded in the print literature directed toward the “elite and aspiring” African Americans living in the antebellum North. The “elite and aspiring” African Americans were mostly members of northern black middle-class who occupied a modest space between the massive black working class and a hostile white society. Combing through black magazines, slave narratives, personal memoirs, didactic writings, and fictions published in the three decades before the Civil War, Erica Ball attempts to capture the essence of this particular strand of black writing dealing with social conduct and cultural norm. Her finding is both enlightening and insightful: the antebellum black middle class literature was neither a mimic of white middle class’s system of beliefs and values or a self-contained cultivation of petty bourgeois lifestyle separated from the harsh reality of northern racial oppression and southern enslavement. Rather, it was a free blacks’ version of social respectability that “fused advice on personal and domestic conduct with antislavery and revolutionary themes” (2). More importantly, by encouraging members of black middle class to fashion themselves into “ideal husbands and wives, self-made men and transnational freedom fighters,” this literature created a public space for the elite and aspiring free blacks to “engaging in a deeply personal politics” and to commit themselves to living “an anti-slavery life” (2). The essence of the black ideals of social respectability and cultural cultivation, Ball argues, was “simultaneously respectable and subversive” (2).

To illustrate her argument, Ball examines black discourse on five themes - social conduct, black manhood, youth morality and upbringings, domesticity,

and revolution - and in each of these areas she finds the advice for self-improvement and social respectability “worked in concert” with the overriding antislavery theme. The black conduct discourse, for example, that offered advice to young blacks about “how to speak, what to eat and wear and how to court potential spouses, and how to govern and raise families” (14) was intended to transform black youths into externally respectable persons with internal strengths. Black middle class interpreted black respectability, according to Ball, as a “responsibility to act on behalf of the race” instead of an attempt of winning the approval of the white society (36). As a matter of fact, respectable blacks were more vulnerable than black wage workers to whites’ attacks precisely because their insistence on respectability was seen as an act of direct defiance of white society’s social and racial hierarchies.

Black conduct discourse was deeply concerned with the cultivation of morality and character-building for the young men and women of black middle class, especially those who were exposed to the influence of urban life. In this aspect, the narratives written by former male slaves like Samuel Ringgold Ward and Frederick Douglass played an effective role. These narratives, as Ball argues in Chapter 2, “dramatized the link between male self-improvement and the independence that came with freedom” and demonstrated that “the process of living an antislavery life required constant work and continuous effort” (55). Other slave narratives, such as those by Harriet Jacobs (who published her narrative under a pseudonym), Sojourner Truth and Solomon Northup, featuring the traumatic experiences of family separation and slave women’s particular vulnerability under slavery, drew black middle class readers closer to the reality that slavery had “perverted proper domestic and family relations, chipped away at women’s virtue, and reduced African American fathers to an unmanly and dependent condition,” thus reinforcing the black advice literature writers’ argument that “aspiring African American men and women” must “live antislavery principles day in and day out” since they bore the duty “to do whatever possible to bring an end to the peculiar institution” and to save the future of the race (79).

Ball’s Chapter 4 is devoted to family relationship, a major theme in the advice literature read by black middle class. Elite and aspiring African Americans were encouraged to create “ideal antislavery household” (85) with a husband-wife economic partnership, open exercise of female influence in the household and thorough indoctrination of antislavery values in children. Black home and familial relationships therefore “positioned as a privileged antislavery

space and the barometer of the future health of the race" (85). Realizing that only a few black women were able to enjoy the life of ideal domesticity (as most of black men and women in the North had to work for wages), black domestic writers instead "praised a democratized version of female influence," which would allow all respectable African American women to be "purveyors of qualities generally presumed to be reserved for middle-class whites alone" (94). For Ball, this was another example of creative use of conventional idea of domesticity by black writers. Child rearing, another important aspect of domestic life, was characterized as one of the key privileges and duties of freedom by advice writers like John Berry Meachum who would urge black parents to "raise our children with as much industry as we possibly can" (101). Linking family life to antislavery, Frederick Douglass insisted that antislavery was not merely an individual act but required "a family commitment" (107).

In her final chapter, Ball switches gears to the creation of "black militant identity" and a revolutionary discourse by black presses on the eve of the Civil War. Pulling together different strands of literatures ranging from ancient Rome tales, contemporary European revolutions of 1840s to fictions by Alexander Dumas (who was of French and African origins), *Anglo-African Magazine* created a distinctive political and transnational narrative for its readers. In the meantime, the magazine's writers highlighted the actions taken by leaders of southern slave insurrections ■■ Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner ■■ and characterized these rebels as "romantic heroes" (114). *Colored American* also praised Joseph Cinque, the leader of the slave rebellion taking place on the slave ship *Amistad* as a "Noble Hero" (114). Internationally, northern blacks embraced Louis Kossuth, who visited the United States after his Magyar uprising against the Ottoman Empire had failed in 1848, even though the Hungarian nationalist declined to issue a formal statement condemning American slavery. In an effort to create a distinctively black memory of American history, *Anglo-African Magazine* contributor William J. Wilson chose to "blend past and present, history and politics, fact and fiction in a most creative way" (125) by highlighting black notables like Crispus Attucks (first martyr of Boston Massacre), James Forten (entrepreneur), Phillis Wheatley (poet) and Richard Allen (the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church). In Ball's view, "the revolutionary identity put forward in the *Anglo-African Magazine* offered inspiration at a moment of crisis" (130) for black middle class and black abolitionist leaders.

Ball is most successful in uncovering the political contents of the seemingly apolitical writings by free black middle class writers. Her interpretations are persuasive and help us to understand the process of the politicization of social and cultural life taking place among black middle class in the antebellum North. In addition, Ball's work inspires us to rethink the antebellum origins of black intellectual heritage, its transformative nature, and its impact upon the Civil War and even postwar reconstruction of black families and culture life. Such prevalent values as independence, self-improvement, upward mobility, puritanical work ethics, domesticity, and material success, were creatively turned into the quality and strengths that were intimately identifying with living "an antislavery life." "Personal politics" was indeed a brilliant intellectual reinvention and a powerful legacy of African American politics.

The work would be much stronger and more effective if the author could broaden and deepen the contexts of her analysis. For example, one would wonder how large the class of "elite and aspiring African Americans" was and who specifically belonged to the circle. Readers may also be interested to know who exactly the audience was and what was the impact of these writings among various groups, including the lower classes of African Americans and the white society at large. Unavailability of sources for this information is understandably a hindrance. But another question the author may be able to address. At the end of Chapter 5, Ball concludes that the revolutionary ideas of black writers on the eve of the Civil War "ultimately.... shaped the way leading black activists interpreted the Civil War and characterized the role they believed northern blacks should play in the conflict" (133), one wonders how the switch from "advice literature," as described in the earlier chapters, to the revolutionary discourse occurred. Did the two "ideologies" share the same origin of a "revolutionary" discourse, or, if not, how did the two visions reconcile or accommodate with each other or merge into one discourse for emancipation? There seems to be a gap that needs to be filled. In the meantime the book has critically filled a large gap in African American studies with deep research and elegant writing.

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