

The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century

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Recommended Citation

De Vera, Samantha (2021) "The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/13>

Review

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Spring 2021

Foreman, P. Gabrielle, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson eds. *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469654263 pp. 392

The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century is a new and exciting volume that emerged from the collaborative work of the Colored Convention Project (CCP). It covers the seven-decade-long Colored Conventions movement, which was a series of political gatherings organized by Black community leaders and activists across the United States. The movement tackled pressing political, social, and economic issues faced by African Americans. At the outset of their collectively written primer for the volume, editors Jim Casey, P. Gabrielle Foreman, and Sarah Lynn Patterson establish the pedagogical significance of the collection's innovative and interdisciplinary interventions. Half of the essays are accompanied by open-access, digital exhibits on the CCP's website, which further explore the themes of the essays through interactive maps, biographies, and charts. More importantly, the book—like the essays therein—is an invitation for readers to expand and build upon the knowledge the authors produced, as the topics they tackle “are contained in a form too small for them” (1). Together with its digital components, *The Colored Conventions* is a unique and inventive contribution to the field of digital humanities and the current scholarship of the long nineteenth century.

Scholars have often studied nineteenth-century Black activists and organizers in relation to white abolitionists. The contributors of *The Colored Conventions* are acutely aware of this and have therefore written essays that disrupt popular understandings of the era's anti-slavery and civil rights movements. They put forth several questions: Why has Black-led activism been sidelined in favor of narratives that privilege white allyship? What familiar historical narratives elide and obscure “Black circuits of exchange, mentorship, and development” (2)? How can we rectify this omission? How do we interrogate the glaring absence of Black women activists in

past and recent scholarship? What insights can we glean from the social networks, debates, and textual productions that were made within the Colored Conventions movement? The sixteen essays in the volume are grouped into four parts: part one focuses on methodologies, two on Black women and print culture, three on Black activism beyond abolition, and four on the breadth of the movement. In line with one of the CCP's core principles, the essays center Black women's often uncredited labor and leadership. The book's contributors offer ingenious ways to read the convention minutes and other primary sources, challenging Black women's absence in the historical record.

The first essay in the volume, written by founder and director (now co-director of the Digital Black Studies Center at Penn State University with Dr. Shirley Moody) P. Gabrielle Foreman illuminates the ways that the project itself mirrors the practices of the Colored Conventions movement by normalizing collective authorship and collaboration. She proposes that we look at works traditionally ascribed to one author as products of many voices and several processes of revision within the conventions. Moreover, she emphasizes how understudied the movement is in spite of the fact that well-known nineteenth-century Black activists such as Frederick Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were all deeply invested in the conventions. Foreman powerfully challenges an all-too-common assumption that Black activism was a derivative of the anti-slavery efforts of whites, arguing that "Radical white abolitionists often followed the organizational lead of antebellum Black reformers, not the other way around" (28). The essays in this volume, in more ways than one, accentuate her point.

Part one also offers approaches on how to privilege Black women's activism and challenge scholars' perceived scarcity of sources and records regarding their participation in the conventions. Psyche Williams-Forsen's "Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Sleep" compels readers to look at "non-traditional" sources when centering Black women's invisible labor. She turns our attention to the spaces and the food that Black women provided in order to foster discussions, arguing that these domestic labors were not only political activities but also crucial to the cause of freedom (86). Indeed, studying the conventions and the culture that emanated from them upends narratives that take Black male leadership as the rule.

The essays in part two make a compelling argument against claims that minimize Black political consciousness or locate its origins within the white abolitionist movement. Derrick R. Spires's essay focuses on Henry Highland Garnet's "An Address to the Slaves of the United

States of America,” a radical and militant call for enslaved persons to rebel against their enslavers. Spires challenges the notion that Garnet’s radicalism caused fissures between him and allegedly moderate Black activists including Frederick Douglass. He further argues that by looking at the “Address” and the 1843 convention which rejected it allows us to see the collective Black politics that ultimately shaped it (125). He highlights Julia Williams Garnet’s crucial hand in the writing of the “Address,” positing her as an author as well. Erica L. Ball’s “Performing Politics, Creating Community: Antebellum Black Conventions as Political Rituals” complements Spires’s piece, as she focuses on how the ritualistic process of convention procedures fostered a distinct Black political consciousness among northern, free African Americans. Convention participation allowed Black women to situate themselves within a political community and present themselves as having the capacity to engage in it fully. Attendees—men and women—were asserting themselves as rightful citizens and positioning themselves at “the vanguard of a diasporic Black nation” (155).

Part three explores the various racial uplift strategies that emerged in the Colored Conventions movement. Examining the conventions’ demographic and sociological reports, Sarah Patterson’s “As the True Guardians of Our Interests: The Ethos of Black Leadership and Demography at Antebellum Colored Conventions” shows the multifaceted ways in which delegates asserted Black economic power and citizenship. As Patterson argues, the statistical and qualitative reports produced for conventions stood as a strong rebuttal of national census records that heavily misrepresented free African Americans in order to denigrate them and question their fitness for freedom. Another way of endorsing Black empowerment was through education. Kabria Baumgartner’s “Gender Politics and the Manual Labor Initiative at National Colored Conventions in Antebellum America” looks at the four school initiatives that convention delegates pushed forth, planned, and debated. Although these initiatives never materialized, Baumgartner argues that they reflect the evolving ideas and politics of Black leaders and their allies regarding the role of women. By the 1850s, they were espousing a more progressive and inclusive vision of Black higher education—one in which Black women’s community activism took a central place. As these essays show, there was a long thread of Black activism for full citizenship and civil liberties that helps explain African Americans’ preoccupation with landownership, education, and government participation after the Civil War.

Even well-seasoned Black studies scholars will find new insights in the volume's fourth section. Here contributors challenge well-accepted narratives that ignore the lasting influence of the Colored Conventions movement. Andre E. Johnson's "Further Silence Upon Our Part: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the Colored Conventions" explores Bishop Henry McNeal Turner's emigration activism, demands for reparations, and anti-lynching crusade, which predated that of Ida B. Wells. Johnson's essay is accompanied by Denise Burgher's digital exhibit on the CCP's website, which explicitly connects Marcus Garvey's brand of Black nationalism and "Back to Africa" movement to the traditions that Turner laid out. Along the practice of highlighting the many firsts that can be found in the Colored Conventions movement, Jean Pfaelzer's "None But Colored Testimony Against Him: The California Colored Convention of 1855 and the Origins of the First Civil Rights Movement in California" argues that had it not been for California convention delegates and their efforts, the ban on court testimony by any non-white person would not have been overturned in California. Here Pfaelzer points to the organizing practices that convention delegates used—such as petition drives—in order to end the ban. By tracking the prolific lives of Black activists long before and after the Civil War, contributors in this volume question the teleology that marks the end of the war as the final desired outcome of Black liberation movements.

In light of the misinformed notion that Black political thought emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, this volume is a refreshing and highly significant contribution to the fields of African American history, literature, and Black studies. Researchers and educators will find this book useful, as several of the essays are also accompanied by teaching guides and prompts on the CCP's site. Scholars might be surprised about the wide breadth of the Colored Conventions movement and its influence, which—with new primary documents becoming accessible—we have yet to fully establish and realize. The sixteen essays in this volume are excellently written and make crucial interventions in various fields, but given the expanse of the Colored Conventions movement, this book has only scratched the surface. Indeed, the volume is a noteworthy reminder that scholars have to "relearn, or at least reframe, much of nineteenth-century Black history" (7).

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