

Interview Excerpt

Soul Liberty

Summer 2020

Turner, Nicole M. *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469655239 pp. 232

CWBR: Good afternoon listeners! Welcome to the *Civil War Book Review*. Today we are speaking with Dr. Nicole Turner. She is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University. Her research focuses black religion, politics, and constructions of manhood and womanhood, situated at the intersections of African American religious history, Africana Studies, and black digital humanities. Her book *Soul Liberty* is the focus of our conversation today. Dr. Turner, welcome!

Dr. Turner: Thank you so much for having me! I am really happy to be here to talk about this work.

CWBR: One of the great accomplishments of *Soul Liberty* is your breakdown of multiple “false binaries,” as you call them – or paradigms regarding black religious and political institutions. Could you explain some of these false binaries and how your arguments challenge their long-standing place in historiography?

Dr. Turner: Sure! I think the one binary that I really had in my sights while I was writing the book was this idea that black churches were either an opiate – or something that made people fall asleep politically – or a catalyst for political engagement. The real aim of the work was to demonstrate how black religious institutions were all of that. On the one hand, black people coming out of slavery certainly interpreted emancipation as a moment of liberation, interpreted in the context of Christian Jubilee and Exodus, using the Biblical narratives to interpret the moment. But they were also very concerned with the tangible and material aspects of what it meant to be free – about politics and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that they sought to access and live out. So they were doing both and I wanted to really bring that out so we can have a more nuanced discussion about what black people and religious institutions were doing at the time.

CWBR: Why is it that historians have argued either in favor of one or the other? That black religious institutions after the Civil War were either an opiate or fully committed to black political and civic engagement? Why was it that it was either one or the other, without consideration for the nuance and the complexities in between?

Dr. Turner: I think that interpretation is one that’s much broader than Reconstruction. It’s a framework that came more out of the 1960s scholarship, one that was trying to make sense of Civil Rights-era activism. It was also part of a longer historiographic consideration of black

churches and black religion begun by W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the twentieth century as he began to explore black religious institutions and what they were doing. Developing in the early decades of the 20th century, scholars tried to interpret the role of religion in the context of their research. So even into the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, with scholars like E. Franklin Frasier, there was a whole conversation about what black churches were doing that was heavily shaped by earlier interpretations of black leaders like DuBois. There was a concern that black churches were not doing enough for black liberation – that they were not doing enough to help black people, that there were too many churches, and that they were too divided to be effective. I think that’s where the paradigm comes from. But when we think about the post-emancipation period, the most dominant narratives are the ones with very flat depictions of black churches as places of organizing and skill building, but not places that change and transform all the time. The way that those two interpretations connect have to do with the flatness of how people view the catalyst of black churches, black people simply propelled by a need to separate from white churches. It is much more nuanced than that.

CWBR: Throughout *Soul Liberty*, you discuss the important work that black churches did in building coalitions to advance their political and civic access. You emphasize the role of interracial religious and political institutions in the Readjuster Movement. Were these coalitions successful? What were some of their accomplishments and limitations in advancing black religious and political institutions?

Dr. Turner: Black churches built very robust networks both before and during the Readjuster Movement, which was, in effect, Virginia’s Reconstruction. Virginia pretty quickly went back under conservative control by the early 1870s, so there wasn’t this extended period like in the deeper South states. But when the Readjusters gained control, they did do things like end the whipping post and help to secure black participation in juries, some of the things that we would traditionally associate with Reconstruction-era policies that made it possible for black people to participate more actively in government. They were successful, in part, because black men were elected to the state legislature and formed a coalition that nominated William Mahone to the U.S. Senate, gaining access to patronage appointments which was really important to black communities in the southern and eastern part of Virginia. There was a lot that was built out of this coalition, including the founding of Virginia State University. Despite these advancements, the Readjuster Movement was brought to an end by a violent backlash and the inability of some white Virginians in the movement to appreciate black people as human beings and as worthy of equal rights. That coalition really broke down over the politics of what offices black people could hold. William Mahon was not supportive of black people holding higher offices in the federal government and that was one of the major failures of that coalition. They were certainly able to build policies that made it possible for black people to participate more readily in government, but they weren’t willing to have black people hold the highest offices or and they weren’t willing to respect black self-determination.

CWBR: Your work arrives at a crucial moment in American history. At every moment of democratic and social upheaval, religion and civic engagement have gone hand in hand. How does your work speak to our current crisis? What lessons might we draw from the post-emancipation era that would give us a sense of both the possibilities and limitations of our own institutions in advancing the causes of freedom, equity, and justice?

Dr. Turner: Thanks so much for this question. I think what struck me most with this study was the networks of accountability and efficacy that black churches built in advancing their religious life and civil rights. The book explores how geography, activism, and belonging intersect, which points toward how we might think more carefully about sites of organizing like online communities and the internet, for example. Another touchpoint, particularly in this moment, is the significance of black humanity and black self-determination. The great failure of the Readjuster Movement was the collective unwillingness on the part of white Readjusters to recognize black humanity and black self-determination. That was, to me, what made the vulnerabilities of the Readjuster Movement most evident. The Readjuster Movement ended because of a violent backlash, culminating in the Danville Massacre, that led us down the road to Jim Crow. But it also ended because of the failure to recognize black self-determination. Had white Readjusters reckoned with the demands of black self-determination and humanity, we might be in a better place to think about the claim of “Black Lives Matter.” That there is both a *need* to even express this and a strong push back to this articulation is even more profound. We can see from this historical moment why we are still saying “Black Lives Matter” and why we still need to say “Black Lives Matter” until it rings fully true.