



## Introduction

SLAVERY AT THE SCHOOL DOOR



WHEN a fourteen-year-old Black girl took her place at the front of the Mulberry Street New York African Free School (NYAFS),<sup>1</sup> she had already done the impossible. In 1822, when slavery was still legal in New York, and the nation was two generations away from the Emancipation Proclamation, Margaret Odle had graduated at the top of her class.<sup>2</sup> And she had stiff competition: the New York African Free Schools would produce brilliant leaders in medicine, politics, and the arts, including the first African American to earn an MD and the first Black man to perform *Othello* on the London stage. When Margaret looked out at the audience who had come to the NYAFS to witness the student performances, she would have seen a mix of white and Black faces, her fellow schoolmates among them, ready to applaud her accomplishments. We know that her brother was in the audience, probably joined by her family and other members of the community. In addition to the familiar faces of benefactors and local community members, white journalists were there, as they were nearly every year. They watched carefully, eager to file the children's success (or failure) as evidence in the ongoing experiment testing Black children's ability to master the trappings of freedom. Finally, as Margaret's eyes scanned the crowd, they would have fallen upon her teacher, Charles C. Andrews, a white Englishman who served as the schoolmaster at

the school for over twenty years. It was Charles Andrews, not Margaret, who had written the speech she was about to give.

When she finally spoke, Margaret told the story of a Black child caught between a promising future and a traumatic past. Her speech began with a hopeful look towards a future of equality, citing her own accomplishments as proof that such a future was, in fact, possible. She needed “only to point you to those specimens,” she told the crowd, “and remind you of the exercises this day exhibited before you to demonstrate a truth.” That truth, she insisted, was that Black people could, through education, grow into full, mature citizenship. Yes, the “African race” had “long been . . . held in a state, the most degrading to humanity,” she explained to the crowd. But they were “nevertheless, endowed by the same almighty power that made us all, with intellectual capacities, not inferior to any of the greater human family.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet even as she looked forward to a future made possible by her own education, the hopeful world in which she stood seemed to dissolve. Margaret’s speech suddenly immersed her—and the crowd—in a very different reality. Pausing in her recitation, she looked “round on my school mates” and soon observed “one among them who excites my most tender sollicitudes.” “It is my Brother,” she told the crowd. Looking at her sibling, she did not see the freedom that was promised to both of them. Rather, she imagined that she saw him on the auction block. Moved by the horror of the vision, she spoke of her grief in this alternate reality. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “if I were called to part with you as some poor girls have, to part with their equally dear kindred, and each of us (like them) to be forcibly conveyed away into wretched slavery never to see each other again . . .” In that moment, the school, the proud community members, the liberal reporters, all fell away before slavery’s world-destroying power. Almost as soon as the horror raised its head in the schoolroom, Margaret banished it, telling herself and the crowd that here, in the house of learning, time moves forward, not backward. “I must forbear,” she told herself, looking back out at the group of well-wishers, her brother among them. “Thank heaven it is not, no it is not the case with us.”<sup>4</sup> She ended her speech by reminding her brother to study hard and to listen to his teachers. Nonetheless,

this look forward to her brother's future remains haunted by her vision of the slave block. Her tale of progress had been broken in the middle, the rift in her story filled with a past that cannot be left behind. Slavery in this speech works as a force of gravity, perhaps allowing a naive child to think she can jump high enough to escape, but always, always pulling the aspirant back to earth, tethering her to a landscape where youth, old age, and everything in between became indistinguishable in the fog of endless bondage.

This book is about the lessons conveyed by Margaret's speech and taught for generations to Black children in a New York City school. It focuses on two schoolboys educated at Margaret's school who absorbed those lessons, and who, in their struggle to transcend them, changed the nation they lived in.<sup>5</sup> James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet achieved unprecedented honors in a world that believed Black people were irredeemably inferior. As the sons of enslaved mothers, these schoolboy friends would meet Revolutionary War heroes, travel the world, publish in medical journals, and speak before crowds of cheering thousands. Through their work in medicine, literature, public service, political activism, and the ministry, they showed others how to reject the false choices they themselves had been taught at school: that Black people must either embrace a cheerful exile abroad or accept a living death in the United States. Their work, and that of the Black activist community they helped to lead, influenced how the United States could imagine a way to grow out of its slave past.

As two Black children who came of age and came into freedom as the country itself matured from a slave nation to federal emancipation, James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet illustrate how powerfully narratives about Black children's capacity for growth influenced the national debate about slavery's future. The school where they met—and where these narratives were tested for public scrutiny—was the focus of intense local, national, and even international attention. That school, part of the New York African Free School system, was first created in 1787 by a group that included Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, two founding fathers still flush with optimism about freedom's power to transform the country. That

optimism had worn thin by the time Garnet and Smith graduated in the late 1820s, even as New York moved towards ending slavery throughout the state in 1827. The students literally had to fight their way through the city streets to get to class, continually harassed by poor white New Yorkers who felt excluded from the progress that these students seemed able to access.

But it was not just prejudice from outsiders that tore the school apart. The school's white teachers and trustees found themselves unable to prepare their students for a future as citizens. In truth, they simply could not imagine what that future would look like. Black parents were especially outraged by the schoolmaster's belief that Black children could never grow into full maturity in the United States, and thus needed to "return" to Africa. Indeed, by the 1830s, almost all the school's administrators had aligned themselves with the American Colonization Society, an organization that argued that emancipation could only be achieved through exile, that somehow America's future was doomed unless the descendants of slaves went "back" to the scene of the historical crime, resetting the clock on America's original sin. The lives of both Smith and Garnet would be shaped by the powerful story that the American Colonization Society told—that Black people were somehow lost in American time, but could grow into maturity if they returned to Africa as colonizers. Only by returning to an origin first stolen from their African ancestors, and then imposed on American-born Black people, the story ran, could Black children ever hope to grow up and assume the respect and responsibility accorded to adults.

The conflicting stories the NYAFS rehearsed about the future of Black children was part of a nationwide conversation anxiously considering how Americans would be able to "grow up." As the nation emerged from the War of 1812—largely considered the second war of independence from Mother England—Americans increasingly embraced the idea of the nation as a promising youth moving towards maturity. Yet even as Americans embraced youth as a political symbol, they scrambled to write laws reinforcing the dividing lines between

the adult citizen and the child subject. To take just one example, the years between 1790 and 1840 saw a decided shift in what Americans deemed a prerequisite for full citizenship. In the eighteenth century, men had to own property to be able to vote, but by 1840, most states felt that it was age, not wealth, that should be the determining factor in voting eligibility.<sup>6</sup> While voting laws throughout the young country differed in many respects, they all agreed that adulthood—defined as turning twenty-one—was required to access political power. This legal investment in a certain kind of adulthood (almost always defined as white and male) was just one part of a growing tapestry of narratives about development that would include medical, scientific, economic, and political theories that rendered progress the ultimate good. Those who were considered unable to develop along particular timelines were doomed to a life of childlike dependence. In short, nineteenth-century debates about the very nature of political power would, again and again, compare disempowered populations to children in order to justify their exclusion from a sovereignty that was solely the realm of adults.<sup>7</sup>

The bias against children was reinforced by narratives that relegated Black people to a permanent state of immaturity, forever unable to access the responsibilities of citizenship. That bias continues to shape our understanding of how freedom was imagined and established in the nineteenth century. We have long listened carefully to the enfranchised men who wrote the legislation that pushed the nation towards war and, eventually, legal guarantees of abolition. This book participates in the ongoing work of engaging how African Americans themselves—men, women, and children—conceived of the freedom they fought to inhabit.<sup>8</sup> The lives of James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet provide two remarkable responses to a political question that shaped their generation: how to imagine and secure a Black child's liberation.

As Smith and Garnet argued—sometimes bitterly—over how Black people could possibly grow up in a nation that sought to render them perpetual children, they laid the groundwork for Black political and

intellectual thought for generations to come. They emerge in these pages both as friends and as rivals. They had widely different temperaments, and left decidedly divergent paths through the archive that shapes the format of the chapters that follow, and the personalities that we glimpse within them. James McCune Smith, a believer in institutions and in the collaborations that could build them, is an elusive presence, even as his name appears on dozens of erudite and important documents. Naturally self-effacing, Smith once imagined himself as the descendent of a “coral insect . . . longing to work beneath the tide in a super-structure.”<sup>9</sup> For him, the work of supporting a larger whole would include introducing Frederick Douglass’s life story, expanding the educational possibilities at the Colored Orphan Asylum, and writing loving portraits of everyday Black life.

The documents generated by Garnet’s work testify to his infectious charisma, even as the records themselves are often a chronicle of conflict. Where Smith sought to methodically set building blocks in place, Garnet often sought to burn the whole house down. He changed his mind often, reflecting the tumultuous nature of the nation he lived in. His speeches were incendiary, and his political philosophy volatile and provocative. Much of what we know of him emerges from the words—sometimes admiring, often exasperated—of friends and rivals seeking to come to terms with his formidable rhetorical and political skill. The format of the book attends to the separate paths of these two leaders by alternating focus between Smith’s and Garnet’s early years for the first section of the book. The last two chapters bring the schoolboy friends back together as they faced the cataclysmic events of the Civil War, the 1863 Draft Riots, and the crafting of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Not surprisingly, both men disagreed about the possibility of progress and the best way to achieve it in the United States. Smith, a star student who achieved success and stability as the first African American to earn an MD, would remain passionately opposed to the arguments made by the American Colonization Society throughout his life. He rejected the premise that Black children needed to orphan

themselves from America in order to achieve the equality America promised. For much of his career, Smith would draw upon his scientific training to rewrite the pessimistic narrative that posed African exile as the only viable future for Black people. He used medical and statistical methods to refute arguments of Black pathology that showed up everywhere, from US census reports to autopsies performed on orphans. As head physician of the New York Colored Orphan Asylum, he held up Black children's physical health and academic prowess to prove racial equality. By the eve of the Civil War, Smith's faith in the ability of factual evidence to disrupt racism had been profoundly shaken. The man who had dedicated his life to healing argued that if abolitionists could not move hearts and minds, they would have to resort to violence. Yet he always believed that progress would come, if only Black people would fight for it on American soil. For Smith, choosing exile from the United States was nothing less than surrender.

Henry Highland Garnet had a markedly different relationship to exile, perhaps because he spent his life searching for stable ground, only to have it repeatedly torn from under his feet. From the moment he ran away from slavery as a nine-year-old child, he had to look over his shoulder in fear. When he was just fourteen, he returned to his family's home one evening to find the rooms ransacked, his family hunted down by agents eager to sell them back into slavery. Garnet's response to this horror foreshadowed his life as a rebel and as an activist. Faced with the potential loss of his family and grave danger to himself, he grabbed a knife and took to the streets, hoping to confront his family's tormentors. Throughout his life, Garnet would run towards a fight, no matter the consequences. And fights would follow him wherever he went. As a minister and famous orator, Garnet gave speeches that would gather audiences of hundreds, even thousands, of rapt listeners. The content of those speeches—some of which were too controversial for immediate publication—urged Black resistance, even as they portrayed the United States as a landscape full of ghosts. In prose that echoed the gothic writers he had admired as a young man, Garnet described the United States as haunted by specters of

Black ancestors lamenting a cycle of injustice endlessly repeating itself. Eventually, his despondence at the nation's lack of progress led him to believe that African Americans needed to settle in West Africa—a belief that would render him an outcast among his old schoolmates.

As they rose to the top of their respective fields, Garnet and Smith would join a conversation about the nature of freedom alongside some of the nation's leading cultural and political figures.<sup>10</sup> As gifted writers, they were inspired by—and contributed to—emerging literary conversations. Smith, for instance, used the imagery he found in Melville's *Moby-Dick* to make the case for dogged persistence in the antislavery cause. Garnet, for his part, drew inspiration from the Byronic hero, both in prose and in personal demeanor. Both men tangled with pro-colonialist politicians like Senator Henry Clay, and had pointed conversations with radical abolitionist John Brown about the role of violence in the struggle. Frederick Douglass emerges as an important character in this story, as he spent years working alongside both men. He had a close friendship with Smith, deepened by engaging editorial collaborations. When it came to Henry Highland Garnet, Douglass would often swing from admiration to attack and then back again within a matter of weeks. Many considered Henry Highland Garnet a contender for the most eloquent Black orator of the time, a title Douglass coveted; the two ambitious men clashed often on matters both personal and political.

When Garnet declared himself in favor of African colonization, Smith and Douglass were some of his loudest critics. Smith felt that Garnet's work closely resembled the mission of the hated American Colonization Society, whose proponents had filled their school days with lessons about how Black children had no future in the United States. Both words and fists would fly between the opposing camps, even as the nation itself split apart along two irreconcilable visions of the country's future. In the midst of this acrimony, the spring of 1863 would remind Smith and Garnet that they had all too much in common. While the Civil War raged on, and Lincoln moved towards rendering slavery illegal throughout the nation, white prejudice revealed just how little Black "freedom" could mean.

The story ends with the two New York African Free School friends coming together for one final collaboration. When the Thirteenth Amendment was finally on the road to being ratified, Congress requested a speech from Henry Highland Garnet, “the most eloquent Black man in America.” When it was time to publish his words, Garnet wanted just one man to write the introduction to his life and work: James McCune Smith. The historic document reveals how deeply the men had influenced one another. Garnet’s fire had shaped Smith’s belief that progress could not come without bloodshed. For his part, Garnet would recalibrate his colonizationist plans to align with the hopes of his old friend Dr. Smith, who had always believed that progress was possible in the United States. After Smith passed away in 1865, Garnet would dedicate the next twenty years of his life to educating Black youth above and below the Mason-Dixon Line. He would, however, die on the African soil he had spent much of his life dreaming about but had never actually seen.

In telling this story, I have chosen to depart from standard biographical practice, in which one moves quickly from a subject’s childhood in order to attend to the historian’s “proper focus”—the politically significant work that the subject engaged in as an adult. *Educated for Freedom* braids the personal with the political, the needs of a child with the demands of a citizen, to reflect how deeply intertwined these ideas were in the way slavery was being defined, attacked, and defended in the antebellum United States. Each chapter of the book features a document taken from the schoolwork of students at the school Garnet and Smith attended as children, creating an ongoing conversation between the issues they navigated as children and the work they pursued as adults. Rather than featuring their remarkable childhood as an interesting side note, *Educated for Freedom* traces the importance of children—imagined and actual—throughout the lives of both men, with much of the story crystallizing around moments when their “adult” work in medicine, science, and politics was shaped by the Black children in their lives. Sometimes those children were strangers, sometimes they were weary fugitives, and sometimes, they were their own flesh and blood. These children emerge from a range of documents—newspapers,

orphan asylum records, the letters of their grieving fathers. Although they have rarely appeared in the history books, these young people were anything but marginal to the lives of these men who so deeply influenced the antislavery debate, and by that debate's outcome, have helped create the nation we live in today. By refusing separations between my subjects' work as schoolchildren and their work as activists, *Educated for Freedom* recasts the well-worn narrative of Black abolitionism primarily as a demand for political manhood. This book tells a different story, in which Black leaders sought to create alternate paths to freedom that discarded—or at least redrew—the usual dividing lines between child and adult, Black and white.

In addition to recovering the work of two understudied African American leaders, this study also provides new insight into how deeply slavery, colonialism, and capitalism were intertwined in the first half of the nineteenth century—and how savvy many abolitionists were about the odds of disentangling these threads. The very school Garnet and Smith attended was organized around a system devoted to producing, and dispersing, reliable labor across the world. Administrators boasted that both the system and the students it produced could be exported to faraway climes with consistent results. While analyzing the mutually constitutive connections between slavery and capitalism is a relatively recent trend in twenty-first-century scholarship, *Educated for Freedom* demonstrates that Black abolitionists had recognized—and resisted—this relationship as early as the 1840s.<sup>11</sup>

The questions that plagued Smith and Garnet remain relevant today. The notion that somehow Black bodies are doomed—stuck on a historical wheel that keeps returning them to the same place—has powerful resonance in the twenty-first century, as the country continues to reenact bitter divisions over the role of race in remembering our history and imagining our future.<sup>12</sup> Current educational and legal approaches to children of color are not free from the longstanding idea that somehow Black children have inherited an inability to leave the past.<sup>13</sup> By looking to—and learning from—nineteenth-century children as they navigated their school's problematic lessons to forge new possibilities for Black people in the United States and abroad, this book asks us to

think of how powerfully children operate within the racial stories this country has told, and continues to tell. This work is necessary if we are to fully comprehend the nineteenth century, when the majority of the US population was under eighteen, and to better understand our own moment, when so many American children are excluded from the promises the future should offer.