Amber Burns

History 221-03

Professor Meadows

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Change through Time: Slaves and Liberty

Throughout the history of the United States, the culture of the society centered around the usage of slave labor, specifically in the Southern portion of the United States, and was at its peak in the Antebellum period, the period prior to the American Civil War. The northern and southern portions of the United States were often at opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to the morality of using African American slave labor, however across the board, slaves had zero rights and privileges in their lives. The appeal that the enslaved African Americans, as well as free African Americans, made during the Antebellum period allowed for the non-enslaved portions of the United States to recognize their wrongdoings through the use of the African Americans’ voices to create change.

Prior to the Antebellum period of the United States, slaves had virtually no rights or privileges, and were trapped to their labors dictated by their masters. However, as the Antebellum period began to develop among the country, so did the mindsets of these enslaved populations. Some slaves decided to take the physical voyage to freedom by escaping their lives of servitude to the northern states and sometimes all the way to the Canadian border, trying to achieve their freedom from oppression. One slave that was noted for escaping his servitude and eventually escaping all the way to Canada was Joseph Taper, who left his home in Virginia to move north to Pennsylvania, which almost put him at risk for being captured once again, so Taper and his family escaped north to Canada, and began growing their lives there[[1]](#footnote-1). In his letter to a white acquaintance back home in Virginia, Taper notes to him that he is now “in a land of liberty”, and that the Queen of England has provided “50 acres of land to every colored man who will accept the gift, and become an actual settler”[[2]](#footnote-2). By moving north to Canada and out of the oppressive reigns of the United State’s slave policies, Taper was granted land and opportunities for him and his family that would have never arose for him if he had stayed behind in Virginia in his enslavement, or if he had remained in Pennsylvania, at risk of being captured by “slave capturers”. Taper uses his voice through writing this letter to his white acquaintance from Virginia in order to express how living a free life as an African-American is not an uncommon occurrence; it is happening all over the world, and the United States is not adapting to the policies and morality of their surrounding countries. The United States has the ability to observe other countries, like Canada, and adopt their principles of abolition, but are continuing to stay stuck in their past and copying the ways of their ancestors rather than changing with the world around them, and Taper expresses this indirectly through his letter.

Other abolitionists decided that running away from the issue of slavery was not as effective as addressing the problem in the present in the exact place where it needed to be heard most: on United States’ soil. In 1837 in Pennsylvania, a group of abolitionists gathered in Philadelphia in response to a constitutional convention stripping African Americans the right to vote in this city, which happened to be the largest free black community in the North[[3]](#footnote-3). In this protest, the African American speaker notes to the “Fellow citizens” of Philadelphia, using “fellow citizens” as a way to establish the unity among their status as humans, that taking away the right to vote from the African American population here is them denying “’that all men are born equally free’, by making political rights depend upon the skin in which a man is born”[[4]](#footnote-4). The speaker also notes that women and children have their voices heard through their white male superior, and the foreigners immigrating into the United States have the ability to gain the right to vote through work, yet the natural-born African American citizens are being stripped of their rights and liberties, showing the inequality and unfair treatment the white population had against the African Americans[[5]](#footnote-5). Frederick Douglass, another African American abolitionist, also noted in a speech in Rochester, New York on July 4,1852, how the African American community had to mourn this day of celebration of the establishment of this country due to the white community “to forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world”[[6]](#footnote-6). By saying this, Frederick Douglass is using his voice to exclaim to the white population that forgetting the past would be considered treason among all people, therefore by neglecting to address the issue of slavery is also considered treason, due to the fact that the African Americans were a major aspect of the United States’ past.

The voices that the individuals used in the African American community, whether through their physical actions or their actual voices, allowed for them to be heard by the white population in order to show them that there needed to be a change in the system in which society functioned on. By ignoring these enslaved people and refusing them the rights of the basic human in the United States, they were ignoring the principles in which their country was founded. Although the northern states decided early on in the Antebellum period that slavery was immoral and needed to be fixed, the southern culture of the United States was heavily reliant upon it, which began to create tensions between these portions of the country, but the voices of these African Americans still hung on to the thoughts of all individuals in the United States.

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