


“This Crisis of Our History”: The Colored Conventions Movement and the Temporal Construction of Southern Politics

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Research Article

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Abstract

After defeat in the Civil War, the white South used time as a tool of political oppression. Myths of the “Old South” and the “Lost Cause” distorted history and public memory; vagrancy laws and labor regulations controlled the time of the newly free; grandfather clauses distributed rights based on past conditions; and attacks on education, labor, and democratic rights undermined progress in the “New South.” In this article, I show that Black southerners also recognized the political value of time. My source for their sentiments is the Colored Conventions Movement. From 1865 to 1900, dozens of conventions gathered in the South, at a significantly higher rate than in other regions. Delegates deployed temporal rhetoric of the past, present, and future in pursuit of equality and justice by (1) publicly recounting African American history and national contributions to counter white narratives, (2) arguing that emancipation was a new founding moment and the present a time of ongoing crisis, and (3) demanding labor and education rights to secure the future. Scholars of American political development often consider time in studies of institutional change; we should also explore the use of time as a political tool and how temporality illuminates American racial dynamics.

Alonzo Jacob Ransier approached the podium at the Southern States Convention of Colored Men assembled in Columbia, South Carolina, on October 18, 1871. He had just been elected president of the gathering that included delegates from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington, DC. Ransier was a native South Carolinian born to free Black parents in 1834; he represented Charleston at the South Carolina State Constitutional Convention of 1868, then served in the state House of Representatives, and was now the state’s first Black lieutenant governor.¹ “Upon your action, gentlemen, depends, in a great part, the future of the colored man, at least in the Southern States.”² The delegates later composed an “Address to the People of the United States” that read in part, “the instantaneous embodiment of four millions of citizens who had for years looked upon the Government as not only denying them citizenship, but as preventing them from acquiring that capacity under any other national existence, was, it must be admitted, a startling political fact.”³ Temporal themes were not just rhetorical flourishes—Ransier and his colleagues deployed time as a tool by which to advance their rights.

The Southern States Convention debates provide abundant evidence that Black southerners relied on imagery and narratives of the past, present, and future in their advocacy efforts. The Committee on Education wrote, “the question of education is, to the people of color, one of a most vital importance ... for nearly two centuries and a half, nineteen-twentieths of four millions of human minds—and minds susceptible of the highest cultivation, evidenced in numerous cases—have been shut out from the invigorating and regenerating influences of education.”⁴ And the Committee on Labor noted, “the condition of the colored population of this country is such that under the new order of things it becomes them to assume grave and important duties unknown to them in the past.”⁵ J. F. Quarles of Georgia provided to the convention an account of “The Social Problems of the South”:

And now we ask the Southern people, in all candor, if we have not borne this species of oppression long enough? We are weary of being consumed by this moloch, caste; we are weary of being hunted down by the ghosts of the defunct system of slavery; we are weary of being reminded of servitude more galling

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¹Thomas Holt, “Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 511–12; he was later elected to the United States Congress in 1872 for one term.

²*Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, Held in Columbia, S.C., Commencing October 18, Ending October 25, 1871*, 9.

³*Ibid.*, 50.

⁴*Ibid.*, 66.

⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

than Egyptian bondage; we are weary of being treated as outcasts and strangers in the land of our nativity, and the home of our fathers; and we ask, as it is our right, that these odious discriminations shall cease. Too long, already, have they been allowed to bear sway in this country. And surely now the time has come when their influence should be destroyed; the time has come when their power ought to be broken; the time has come when they should perish from the land.⁶

The Colored Conventions Movement served as a public political forum where African Americans could speak to each other, state governments, the federal government, and the nation.⁷ Delegates adopted the language of temporality in pursuit of justice and equality. They used the past to correct the historical record, the present to convey the urgency of the new post-emancipation era, and the future to advocate on behalf of labor rights and public education.

During the nineteenth century, African Americans gathered in many conventions to condemn slavery, advocate for their rights, demand equality, and debate paths forward. Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, John Mercer Langston, Charles Langston, and Henry McNeal Turner were regular participants, as were hundreds of other Black leaders and citizens from across the country. The meetings were largely dominated by men, though recent scholarship has found multiple paths of influence by Black women.⁸ These conventions are neglected resources that offer an indispensable view into African American political organizing and public debate over a range of policy and constitutional issues. The debate was taking place in other forums as well, but these gatherings were especially important. According to Eddie Glaude Jr., the early antebellum conventions “represent the first national forum for civic activity among African Americans.”⁹ The same is true for those held during and after Reconstruction in the South, where public political discourse had previously been reserved for whites.

⁶J. F. Quarles, “The Social Problems of the South,” in *Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, Held in Columbia, S.C., Commencing October 18, Ending October 25, 1871*, 99–100.

⁷I adopt the antiquated term “Colored” when referring to the movement because it was the language used by participants and is the now the accepted nomenclature of scholars who work on the subject.

⁸Jewon Woo examines the efforts of Jane P. Merritt in antebellum Ohio conventions and argues that the exclusion of women from most historical accounts should not be construed as evidence of their powerlessness. Jewon Woo, “Deleted Name But Indelible Body: Black Women at the Colored Conventions in Antebellum Ohio,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 179–92; in the same edited volume, Derrick Spires shows that Henry Highland Garnet’s wife and important abolitionist, Julia Williams Garnet, contributed to his “An Address to the Slaves of the United States,” delivered at the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, NY; Derrick Spires, “Flights of Fancy: Black Print Culture, Collaboration, and Performance in ‘An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America (Rejected by the National Convention, 1843),” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 138–53; and Kabria Baumgartner considers the evolving influence of Black women on education debates; Kabria Baumgartner, “Gender Politics and the Manual Labor College Initiative at the National Colored Conventions in Antebellum America,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 230–45; see also Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 102–106; Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

⁹Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.

The Colored Conventions Project at the University of Delaware has digitized and compiled transcripts from the movement.¹⁰ The founding director of the project, P. Gabrielle Foreman, argues that convention records offer an “articulation of Black subjectivity and the assertion of Black worth, ambition, and belonging in North America with which scholars have yet to fully grapple.”¹¹ She also notes that historical scholarship so often focuses on individual narratives that it can “obscure foundational commitments to Black collective authorship and address.”¹² These were “spaces for concrete planning, coordination, and advocacy for equal justice and freedom through collective efforts.”¹³ As such, careful consideration of the debates exposes additional evidence of the profound influence by Black activists on American political thought and development.

The American South has a fraught relationship with time. In fact, it is the purposeful construction and manipulation of time, history, and public memory that has defined Southern politics. White supremacists shaped perceptions of the past through stories of an “Old South,” a “Lost Cause,” and many promises of a “New South” in their effort to secure power and the racial hierarchy. State governments used time to control the distribution of rights through grandfather clauses, curfews, jail time, convict leasing, vagrancy laws, labor regulations, and other legal mechanisms. Landholders abused African Americans through a sharecropping system that relied on a variety of temporal constraints, including annual contracts (sanctioned and often required by the state) and credit arrangements with exorbitant interest rates on farming equipment, seed, and fertilizer. The result was a post-emancipation system of agriculture that more closely resembled slavery than free market capitalism. All the while, public space and public history valorized whites and ignored or vilified Blacks.

Scholarship on political development in the South should not always be divided by race, but experiences with time varied across the color line. Desmond King and Rogers Smith argue that “American politics has historically been constituted in part by two evolving but linked ‘racial institutional orders’: a set of ‘white supremacist’ orders and a competing set of ‘transformative egalitarian’ orders.”¹⁴ In his groundbreaking work on Reconstruction, Richard Velely describes a “parallel politics” in which “blacks used open-air settings, public spaces, and, in some cities, churches for broadly political purposes, even as presidential reconstruction denied freedmen access to official spaces of capitols and county courthouses.”¹⁵ And P. Gabrielle

¹⁰See the *Colored Conventions Project*, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://coloredconventions.org/>; the resources compiled by the project likely do not capture every convention from the movement, though this is the most comprehensive attempt ever to consolidate records and accounts. There are also digital exhibits available that highlight participants and other features of the movement.

¹¹P. Gabrielle Foreman, “Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship: The Long History of the Colored Conventions Movement,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement, Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 23.

¹²*Ibid.*, 47.

¹³P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, eds., *The Colored Conventions Movement, Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 5.

¹⁴Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, “Racial Orders in American Political Development,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (February 2005): 75.

¹⁵Richard M. Velely, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 36. Robert Mickey also points to “white and black civic spheres” in Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America’s Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.

Foreman uses the term “parallel politics” to describe the Colored Conventions Movement itself.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the vast majority of scholarly energy has been spent on the white South, wherein African Americans are often portrayed as pawns in the Southern political drama instead of people with agency.

Nell Painter writes, “for too long we have normalized whiteness, as though to be white were to be natural.... ‘Southerner’ used to mean only ‘white southerner,’ as though black southerners were not part of the South.”¹⁷ The course of American politics, however, was continuously shaped by the actions of Black southerners, who had their own relationship with temporality—they did not gaze back longingly on a lost past, and their vision for a New South required a fracture in the path of development.¹⁸ This relationship operated in a segregated but connected realm. The enslaved were trapped in an archaic, evil institution that prohibited any social advancement. Emancipation and the transformation from property to citizen was a critical juncture, a new founding moment in Black southern time. African Americans then had to counter white supremacist mythology about the past and resist laws and practices that were devised to control their time. Segregation itself is steeped in temporality—the basic structure of the Jim Crow South required that Blacks wait for whites to receive any public goods or rights before they could access the leftovers.

During the Civil Rights Movement, activists used the language of temporality to convey urgency in the fight for equality. Martin Luther King Jr. produced works titled “Why We Can’t Wait” and “Negroes Are *Not* Moving Too Fast.”¹⁹ In his most famous address, he invokes the broken promises of the past before warning,

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.²⁰

King then builds to a crescendo by outlining his dream of a more just future. Bobby Seale closed his account of the Black Panther

Party, with a call to African Americans, “We know that as a people, we must seize our time.”²¹ After her acquittal, Angela Davis told the nation, “it is justice that we seek, and many of us can already envision a world unblemished by poverty and alienation, one where the prison would be but a vague memory, a relic of the past. But we also have immediate demands for justice right now, for fairness, and for room to think and live and act.”²² These twentieth-century Black activists were standing upon a rhetorical foundation built by those who preceded them.

After defeat in the Civil War, white southerners sought to obscure a heinous past while maintaining the racial hierarchy that past had produced. Black southerners, on the other hand, began a whole new historical experience that required constant advocacy and sacrifice to secure the rights they had been promised during and after Reconstruction. They petitioned the Union Army, the federal government, state governments, and the greater public across this period in many different ways. I am investigating how they used time as a rhetorical tool to fight oppression and demand equal treatment and justice. The extant transcripts from the Colored Conventions Movement contain an important record of these efforts. Participants used public interpretations of the past, present, and future and the language of temporality to counter the work of white supremacists. Their efforts demonstrate that citizens and social movements, like governments, can wield time as a tool to shape politics.

1. Time as a Political Tool

Scholars of American political development (APD) often claim that “history matters” and we ought to take time seriously. According to Paul Pierson, careful consideration of timing and sequence offers a better understanding of political outcomes.²³ Attention to sequence speaks to an emphasis on “path dependence,” a concept that describes the growing costs of changing course over time, especially in economic or institutional development.²⁴ Other scholars use “multiple orders” to describe numerous political components progressing at different temporal speeds and logics.²⁵ And some are interested in progression after “critical junctures” (war, economic calamity, etc.).²⁶ Karen Orren and

¹⁶Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁷Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3; see also W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1–3.

¹⁸See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003); Kimberley Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

¹⁹See P. J. Brendese, “Black Noise in White Time: Segregated Temporality and Mass Incarceration,” in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, ed. Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 82, citing Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), and “Negroes Are Not Moving Too Fast,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 176–82.

²⁰Martin L. King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, DC, August 1968.

²¹Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970).

²²Angela Davis, “The Gates of Freedom,” speech delivered at the Embassy Auditorium, Los Angeles, CA, June 1972.

²³Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2.

²⁴Paul Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000): 72–92. In a commentary on Pierson’s effort to import path dependence from economics to political science, Amy Bridges identifies an underlying problem with the APD approach to timing, sequence, and history. Bridges argues that thinking just about change over time does not give the full story: “History is narratives over time; to think about history is to think about the importance of chronological time, not order and sequence alone.” And Bridges uses the study of child development as an example—there are a variety of theories about the differing attributes of each year of childhood and the significance of birth order, but as “persuasive as any claims about timing, sequence, and intersecting parallel processes might be in the theory of child development, they pale beside what one knows about children and their life’s prospects by knowing the year (better, the year and place) they were born.” Amy Bridges, “Path Dependence, Sequence, History, Theory,” *Studies in American Political Development* 14, no. 1 (April 2000), 111.

²⁵Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); King and Smith, “Racial Orders in American Political Development.”

²⁶David Collier and Ruth Berins Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Stephen Skowronek attempt to synthesize the goals of subfield and tap its “fuller significance”—meaning “what it is APD might teach us about how past and present politics are connected, by what bridges or processes; about how time comes to exert an independent influence on political change, apart from the notion that time ‘passes.’”²⁷ Some work in APD examines the influence of time on developmental pathways, but this approach misses how essential temporality is to understanding racial dynamics in the nation and the fact that the state and citizens can wield time as a political tool through laws, policing, economic arrangements, and public rhetoric.

In a recent book, *The Political Value of Time*, political theorist Elizabeth Cohen argues that “scientifically measured durational time is a highly significant and underexplored political good,” “time is a tool in the arsenal of a state,” and governments exert control over the lives of citizens through a variety of temporal mechanisms—elections, political terms, censuses, taxes, prison sentences, naturalization procedures, welfare benefit requirements, military service, and probationary/waiting periods.²⁸ Charles Maier also recognizes a politics of time built into governance, while Stephen Hanson and Christopher Clark connect the manipulation of time to communist and fascist regimes.²⁹ Sociologists Donatella della Porta, Massimiliano Andretta, Tiago Fernandes, Eduardo Romanos, and Markos Vogiatzoglou argue that transitions to democracy operate as critical junctures during which social movements can exploit legacies and memories of the past to build solidarity and spur institutional change (the Black Southern conventions considered here also gathered during democratic transition—one that ultimately failed).³⁰ This scholarship shows that time can be used by those with power to undermine democracy and within individual movements. In this article, I demonstrate that subjugated groups can also use time to challenge those with power and the state.

Another conceptual facet that Cohen’s work helps elucidate is the notion that emancipation marked not just a critical juncture but a new founding moment. She argues that “time and territory are both implicated in the creation of political boundaries,” and “temporal boundaries separate in from out, enfranchised from disenfranchised, and rights-bearing from rightless.”³¹ Cohen refers to “zero-option rules,” which establish a temporal line, “a specific date upon which a form of legal sovereignty commences.”³² The Emancipation Proclamation and then the Thirteenth Amendment shifted one of these central legal

boundaries, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments moved that boundary yet again. For many convention participants, the abolition of slavery was a revolution akin to the break with England, a second founding. Thus, they were not just wielding temporal rhetoric, they were doing so at a rare point in history where the zero-option rules were operating in American politics.

Many of the temporal themes I locate in the Colored Conventions Movement appear in W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*. The entire book provides a template for considering the past, present, and future of the era.³³ The larger goal of *Black Reconstruction* is to correct a racist historiography and corrupted public memory. Du Bois laments that in the service of martyring the South, we have “completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government.”³⁴ The opening line of the book indicates that emancipation was not just a critical juncture but *the* critical juncture: “Easily the most dramatic episode in American history was the sudden move to free four million black slaves in an effort to stop a great civil war, to end forty years of bitter controversy, and to appease the moral sense of civilization.”³⁵ Du Bois argues that the labor regulations and vagrancy laws of the black codes “looked backward toward slavery.”³⁶ Moreover, “through establishing public schools and private colleges, and by organizing the Negro church, the Negro had acquired enough leadership and knowledge to thwart the worst designs of the new slave drivers.”³⁷ Scholar Charles Lemert believes that *Black Reconstruction* is primarily “about the perverse nature of historical time and its effects on the democratic ideal and the future of civilization.”³⁸

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes of how the postwar period “swayed and blinded men,” and that

Amid it all, two figures stand to typify that day to the coming ages,— the one, a gray-haired gentleman, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes;—and the other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforesaid quailed at that white master’s command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife,—aye, too, had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy’s limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after “cursed Niggers.” These were the saddest sights of that woeful day; and no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present-past; but, hating, they went to their long home, and, hating, their children’s children live today.³⁹

He warns that the past is always present, restricting rights and democratic progress for subsequent generations of Black southerners. Gregory Laski argues that with this notion of the “present-past,”

²⁷Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

²⁸Elizabeth F. Cohen, *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–2, 26, 32.

²⁹Charles S. Maier, “The Politics of Time: Changing Paradigms of Collective Time and Private Time in the Modern Era,” in Charles S. Maier, ed., *Changing Boundaries of the Political: Essays on the Evolving Balance between the State and Society, Public and Private in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 152; Stephen E. Hanson, *Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Christopher Clark, “Time of the Nazis: Past and Present in the Third Reich,” *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft Sonderheft* 25 (2015); Attempts to control time are not limited to the twentieth century totalitarians; the leaders of the French Revolution rewrote the entire calendar. See Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁰Donatella della Porta, Massimiliano Andretta, Tiago Fernandes, Eduardo Romanos, and Markos Vogiatzoglou, *Legacies and Memories in Social Movements: Justice and Democracy in Southern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³¹Cohen, *The Political Value of Time*, 30. Cohen also recognizes the racialized use of temporal boundaries in the South.

³²*Ibid.*, 6 fn 10, 42.

³³Du Bois is one of the few early scholars of Reconstruction who included coverage of the Colored Conventions Movement in his account. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 230–35. In fact, his own grandfather, Othello Burghardt, was a delegate to the 1847 National Convention of Colored People and their Friends in Troy, NY; Foreman, “Black Organizing, Print Advocacy, and Collective Authorship,” 26.

³⁴Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 723.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 55, 179.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 667.

³⁸Charles Lemert, “The Race of Time: Du Bois and Reconstruction,” *boundary 2*, 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 236.

³⁹W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25–26.

“Dubois reorders linear time—positioning the past after, rather than before, the present—and insists on intergenerational responsibility as a crucial democratic value alongside equality and liberty.”⁴⁰ In both works, separated by over three decades, Du Bois binds temporality to the failed democratization of the South.

I rely on Michael Hanchard’s ideas about the racial dimensions of time and memory to further illustrate the benefits of a temporal framework. He argues, for instance, that African Americans must often work together to preserve their own version of public memory, “Black memory,” to counter white accounts and make claims “about the relationship between present inequalities and past injustices.”⁴¹ And Hanchard defines “racial time” as “the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups,” including “unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power, and knowledge, which both groups recognize.”⁴² There are three conceptual facets of racial time: “waiting,” “time appropriation,” and “the ethico-political relationship between temporality and notions of human progress.”⁴³ Waiting refers to the stolen time that subordinate groups must endure to access goods, services, and even rights that are “delivered first to the dominant group.”⁴⁴ Time appropriation is marked by “efforts to eradicate the chasm of racial time” by social movements or other groups, and it “mostly occurs during periods of social upheaval and transformation.”⁴⁵ The final conceptualization is built on “the belief that the future should or must be an improvement on the present.”⁴⁶

There are other approaches to investigating the Colored Conventions Movement broadly and in the South after the war. Eddie Glaude Jr., for instance, argues that the first Black national conventions of the 1830s used the biblical story of Exodus in the struggle against slavery and for rights and recognition.⁴⁷ And “by appropriating Exodus, they articulated their own sense of peoplehood and secured for themselves a common history and destiny.”⁴⁸ Glaude emphasizes the secular nature of Exodus to highlight its “political value.”⁴⁹ After emancipation, Southern Black conventions saw the political value of time and used it to pursue many of the same goals for which their antebellum predecessors relied on the Exodus story—recounting the past, espousing Black nationalism, organizing to confront racial violence, countering claims by whites, and imagining a better future.⁵⁰ For Historian Selena Sanderfer, “the unwavering insistence on land acquisition and economic independence as a basic human right clearly distinguished Black southern nationalists.”⁵¹ Her

work highlights the importance of “space” for those who had been enslaved. It is time, however, that connects debates over property, labor, and education to the larger goals of the movement—justice, democracy, freedom, and equality. The following analysis reveals that the temporal rhetoric of citizens and social movements can operate as a political tool to counter the efforts of those in power, and it presents a new theoretical approach for studies of time and APD.

2. The Colored Conventions Movement and Temporal Agency

Organization of the Colored Conventions Movement during the antebellum era was almost completely limited to the North. Between 1830 and 1864 there are records of sixty-two conventions: thirteen national, two regional, and forty-seven state conventions.⁵² The 1852 Maryland state convention was the only meeting in a slave state, and there were none in Washington, DC, until 1865. These were essential locations of activism and debate over issues that included abolitionism, education, temperance, religion, emigration, and African colonization.⁵³ The American Moral Reform Society was heavily involved in the early movement, and Black conventions can be connected to the rise of the Black newspaper, which, in turn, helped spur more conventions.⁵⁴ In his study of the Black state conventions of the 1840s, Derrick Spires claims that convention records should be considered “political documents central to an understanding of citizenship practices in the antebellum United States.”⁵⁵

After the Civil War, African Americans continued to gather in conventions for public debate and advocacy. Between 1865 and 1900, there are records of sixty-five conventions outside the South: seven national, two regional, fifty-six state (just three more than in the previous thirty-five years).⁵⁶ At first glance,

⁵²There were also four conventions held in Canada. These are the most current numbers available, but there could have been additional gatherings. See Table 1. Data were compiled by the author using the *Colored Conventions Project*, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://coloredconventions.org/>. The first four conventions were national and appropriately met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which was then the site of two more national conventions; New York held four national conventions (New York City, Buffalo, Troy, and Rochester) and Ohio held two (Columbus and Cleveland). New York hosted the most state conventions with fourteen; followed by Ohio with eleven; Pennsylvania, Indiana, Connecticut, and California with three; Massachusetts, Maine, Iowa, and Illinois with two; and finally Michigan, New Jersey, Maryland, and Kansas with one. The two regional conventions met in Salem, New Jersey (Mid-Atlantic) and Boston, Massachusetts (New England).

⁵³See Howard Holman Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement 1830–1861* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969); Bella Gross, *Clarion Call: The History and Development of the Negro People’s Convention Movement in the United States from 1817 to 1840* (New York, 1947); Theophilus Herrington, “National Black Political Conventions in Black Politics, 1830–1976” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1977); Christopher A. Howard, “Black Insurgency: The Black Convention Movement in the Antebellum United States, 1830–1865” (PhD diss., The University of Akron, 2017).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*; see Joan L. Bryant, “Colored Conventions, Moral Reform, and the American Race Problem,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 167–78; Benjamin Fagan, “The Organ of the Whole: Colored Conventions, the Black Press, and the Question of National Authority,” *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 195–210.

⁵⁵Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship, Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 80.

⁵⁶Again, these records are likely incomplete. Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York again hosted the most with twelve, nine, and seven. Illinois, Iowa, and New Jersey followed with six each; then Massachusetts with four; Kansas and Indiana with three; California,

⁴⁰Gregory Laski, *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress After Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

⁴¹Michael Hanchard, “Black Memory versus State Memory: Notes toward a Method,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008), 48; see also John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), ch. 4, “The Assembly of History, Orations and Conventions,” 219–77.

⁴²Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999), 253.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 256–57.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 257.

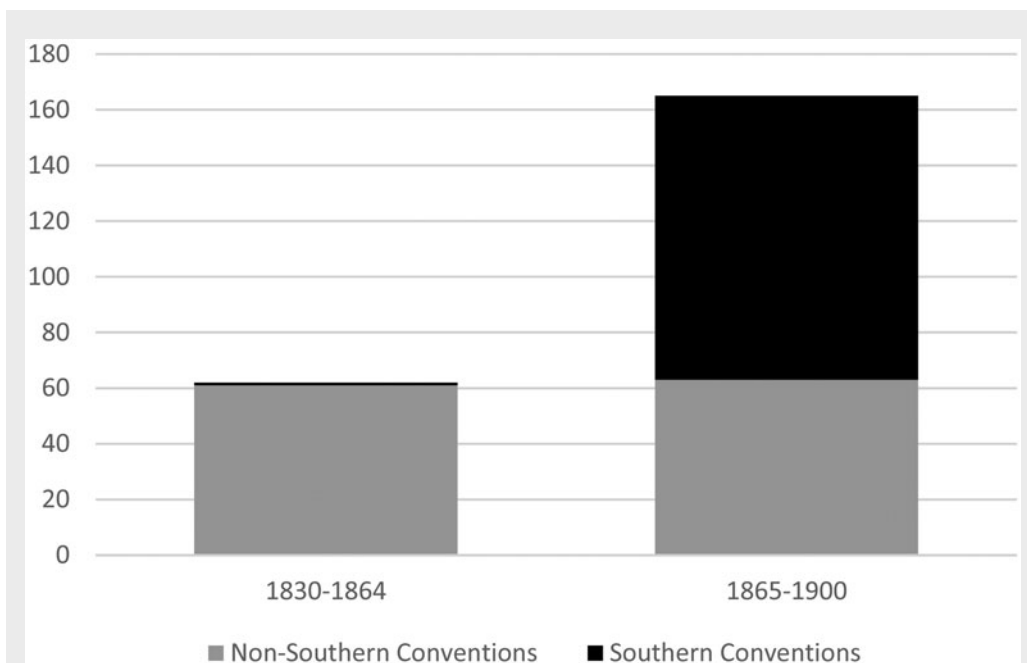
⁴⁷Glaude, *Exodus!*, 3.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 44, 56, 111, 163.

⁵¹Selena R. Sanderfer, “The Emigration Debate and the Colored Conventions Movement,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 286.

Table 1. Colored Conventions Movement, 1830–1900

the movement appears steady, but participation dramatically increased in the South, where the millions of new citizens, many of whom had previously been held in bondage, gathered to debate the path forward and speak publicly to the Black community, to the white community, and to state and federal government officials.⁵⁷ In their account of the postwar movement, Philip Foner and George Walker note that “defeat of the slaveholders’ rebellion did not eliminate the need for conventions. On the contrary, to make meaningful the Northern victory, organization and action by blacks themselves were essential.”⁵⁸ And it is these Southern conventions that have been most neglected by scholars.⁵⁹

For the purposes of this article, I define the South as those states where slavery was legal as of 1860: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. I also include Washington, DC, where slavery was legal until 1862. This allows me to focus on the efforts of emancipated Black southerners contending with new historical circumstances. There are records of 102 conventions (twenty-one national, one regional, seventy-four state, three county, and three city) in the South between 1865 and 1900.⁶⁰ As with state constitutional conventions during the era, most of the activity was in the South.⁶¹

Connecticut, and Nebraska with two; and Michigan and Minnesota with one. There are no records of conventions in Colorado, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

⁵⁷See Table 1 and Appendix. Regarding the 1865 South Carolina convention, Daniel Carpenter notes that “southern observers White and Black knew that the conventioners were taking their case directly and simultaneously to Washington and Charleston, as well to wider Black and White publics.” Daniel Carpenter, *Democracy by Petition: Popular Politics in Transformation, 1790–1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 470.

⁵⁸Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), xx.

⁵⁹Foreman et al., *The Colored Conventions Movement*, 7.

⁶⁰See Table 1 and Appendix; *Colored Conventions Project*, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://coloredconventions.org/>.

Texas held fifteen, followed by Washington, DC, with thirteen; Kentucky with ten; Louisiana, Georgia, and Tennessee with eight; Maryland with seven; Virginia and Missouri with six; South Carolina and Alabama with five; North Carolina with four; Arkansas, Delaware, and Mississippi with two; and Florida with one.⁶² Within those, there were two national and six state conventions on labor, four state conventions on education, three state teacher’s conventions, seven national press conventions, and one state farmers convention.⁶³

The convention movement unfolded in a variety of ways across the South, but these gatherings were connected by similar goals and themes, including education, equality, voting rights, office-holding, labor rights, and emigration.⁶⁴ Black leaders in Tennessee began organizing in the summer of 1864, issuing a

⁶¹See Paul E. Herron, *Framing the Solid South: The State Constitutional Conventions of Secession, Reconstruction, and Redemption, 1860–1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

⁶²See Appendix and Table 2. I do not include conventions without a known location (1872 Convention of the Colored People of the Choctaw Nation, 1886 New England States Convention of Colored Men, 1887 National Convention of Colored Men, 1890 National Colored Press Convention, 1897 National Afro-American Press Association Convention, 1898 National Afro-American Press Association Convention). Data were compiled by the author using the *Colored Conventions Project*, accessed October 5, 2021, <https://coloredconventions.org/>.

⁶³See *Proceedings of the Convention of the Equal Rights and Educational Association of Georgia, Assembled at Macon, October 29th, 1866; Containing the Annual Address of the President, Captain J.E. Bryant; Kentucky State Colored Educational Convention held at Benson’s Theater, Louisville Ky, July 14, 1869; Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention: Held in Washington, D.C., on December 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th, 1869; Maryland State Colored Labor Convention 1869; Texas State Colored Labor Convention held in Galveston 1869; Georgia State Colored Labor Convention held in Macon 1869; Proceedings of the Colored People’s Educational Convention Held in Jefferson City, Missouri, January, 1870; Alabama Labor Union Convention 1871; Colored National Labor Union Convention held in Washington, D.C. 1871; Alabama Negro Labor Convention held in Montgomery 1874; Georgia State Educational Convention of Colored Men held in Hawkinsville 1877; Proceedings of the State Colored Educational Convention Held at Frankfort, Kentucky, August 22, 1877; Colored Laborer’s and Business Men’s Industrial Convention held in Kansas City, Missouri 1878.*

⁶⁴Alwyn Barr, “Early Organizing in the Search for Equality: African American Conventions in Late Nineteenth Century Texas,” in *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans*

Table 2. Colored Conventions Movement in the South, 1865–1900

| | Ala. | Ark. | Del. | Fla. | Ga. | Ky. | La. | Md. | Miss. | Mo. | N.C. | S.C. | Tenn. | Tx. | Va. | DC | Total |
|---------|------|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|-----|------|------|-------|------|-----|----|-------|
| 1865 | | * | | | | | * | | * | | ** | * | * | | ** | * | 10 |
| 1866 | | | | | *** | * | | * | | | * | | * | * | | | 8 |
| 1867 | * | | | | | * | | | | | | | | | | ** | 4 |
| 1868 | | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 1869 | | | | | * | * | | ** | | | | | | * | * | ** | 8 |
| 1870 | | | | | | | * | | | * | | | | | | | 2 |
| 1871 | * | | | | * | * | * | | | * | | * | * | * | | * | 9 |
| 1872 | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 1873 | | | * | | * | * | * | | | | | | | * | | ** | 7 |
| 1874 | ** | | | | | | * | | | | | | * | | | | 4 |
| 1875 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 0 |
| 1876 | | | | | | | | | | | | ** | * | | | | 3 |
| 1877 | | | | | * | * | | | | * | * | | | | | | 4 |
| 1878 | | | | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | 1 |
| 1879 | | | | | | | * | | | | | | * | * | | | 3 |
| 1880 | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | * | | | 2 |
| 1881 | | | * | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 1882 | | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | * | 2 |
| 1883 | | * | | | | * | | | | * | | * | | * | | * | 6 |
| 1884 | | | | * | | | | | * | * | | | * | * | | | 5 |
| 1885 | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | | * | | 2 |
| 1886 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | * | | | 1 |
| 1887 | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 1888 | | | | | * | | | | | | | | * | | | | 1 |
| 1889 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | **** | | * | 5 |
| 1890 | | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | * | 2 |
| 1891 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | * | | * | 2 |
| 1892–93 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 0 |
| 1894 | * | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | * | | 3 |
| 1895 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | * | | | 1 |
| 1896–98 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 0 |
| 1899 | | | | | | | * | | | | | | | | * | | 2 |
| Total: | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 15 | 6 | 13 | 102 |

call that “every colored man, woman and child come spend one day in the cause of human Freedom and human equality ... for the future freedom of our race.”⁶⁵ In Alabama, Black citizens gathered to advocate for rights after the war, like elsewhere in the region, but additional conventions were required in the 1870s to respond to the white supremacist “redemption” of the state government and ongoing violence—even debating an exodus from the region.⁶⁶

Those who participated in the Colored Conventions Movement in the South from 1865 to the turn of the twentieth century deployed the temporal rhetoric of the past, present, and future in their pursuit of equality and racial justice by: (1) publicly recounting African American history and national contributions to counter white narratives, (2) arguing that emancipation was a new founding moment and the present a time of ongoing crisis, and (3) demanding labor rights and public education to secure the future of the race. First, they sought to correct the historical narrative that was under active revision by forces of white supremacy. This was accomplished by publicly acknowledging the principles of freedom and equality contained in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, the military service of African Americans in every national conflict, the essential part Blacks played in the economic development of the country, and the brutality and oppression that pervaded the institution of slavery. Second, delegates argued after the critical juncture of emancipation that the present was a time of crisis (ongoing from the beginning of Reconstruction through the rise of Jim Crow) that required political action. Third, they insisted that labor rights and public education were essential to secure the future of the race. These temporal mechanisms track those used by white supremacists: Recounting the evils of slavery undermines the notion of the Old South; emphasis on the military service of African Americans can be balanced against Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and other rebel soldiers of the Lost Cause; and treating the present as a moment of crisis where decisions would dictate the path of public education, labor rights, and ultimately political equality offered a Black vision of the New South.

2.1 Correcting the Past

Delegates highlighted the contributions that enslaved and free African Americans made to the nation, usually under immense suffering. These public narratives represented an attempt to correct the historical record, just as the white South and their political and academic allies were rewriting the causes of the war and the brutalities of slavery through images of the Old South and the Lost Cause.⁶⁷ Historian William Dunning, political scientist John Burgess, and many others perpetuated the image of happy slaves and benevolent masters, blamed the North for the damage of the war and the failures of Reconstruction, and demonized the efforts

of Black southerners to secure their rights and change the politics of the region.⁶⁸ Du Bois dissents in *Black Reconstruction* and notes that “no serious or unbiased student can be deceived by the fairy tale of a beautiful Southern slave civilization.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, it was the Dunning School that had a larger influence on the academic approach to Southern political history, especially the racist narratives regarding Reconstruction.

Du Bois implies that segregated society leads to a segregated memory of the past, and Michael Hanchard notes that “Black memory ... is often at odds with state memory,” which pushes nationalism through public symbols, rituals, and rhetoric.⁷⁰ P. J. Brendese defines “segregated memory” as “the distinctly racialized encounters with haunting pasts that separate citizens of a polity.”⁷¹ But there is a danger to democracy that flows from the differing accounts of the past by the white and Black South. Brendese cites the work of Orlando Patterson for the consequences of white supremacists controlling history: “Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed to freely integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.”⁷² There is also a rich historiography that considers public memory, and much of this scholarship is devoted to the Southern experience.⁷³ Part of the mission of the conventions studied here was to influence

⁶⁸John William Burgess, *Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866–1876* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1905); William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1907); John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

⁶⁹Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 715.

⁷⁰Hanchard, “Black Memory versus State Memory,” 46.

⁷¹P. J. Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 61; see also Thomas McCarthy, “Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 5 (October 2002): 623–48. Brendese also explores the idea of “segregated temporality,” which “refers to how experiences of time diverge across peoples, how a range of political subjects are viewed as occupants of different time zones, and how these divergent temporal spheres are mutually entwined” (Brendese, “Black Noise in White Time,” 82). He is now finishing a manuscript called *Segregated Time* that “examines how racial inequality functions as an imposition on human time, how time serves as a vehicle of power and resistance, and how the extended lifetimes of racially dominant groups are leveraged upon the foreshortened lifetimes of racial others.”

⁷²Brendese, *The Power of Memory*, 62, citing Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 5.

⁷³John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, (London: Routledge, 2003); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, Reprint (New York: Vintage, 1993); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). For work on the American South, see e.g., Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002); David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Brundage, *The Southern Past*; Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Carol Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

and *Their Quest for Justice*, ed. Debra A. Reid (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 2.

⁶⁵Judy Bussell LeForge, “State Colored Conventions of Tennessee, 1865–1866,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 232.

⁶⁶Judy Bussell LeForge, “Alabama’s Colored Conventions and the Exodus Movement, 1871–1879,” *The Alabama Review* 63, no. 1 (January 2010): 3–29.

⁶⁷Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*; Gallagher and Nolan, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*; William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); Charles Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); James W. Loewen and Edward H. Sebesta, eds., *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The “Great Truth” about the “Lost Cause”* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

how society, Black and white, remembered the institution of slavery and the national contributions of African Americans.

Participants in the Colored Conventions Movement corrected the historical record as it was being distorted, highlighting their dedication to founding principles. An 1865 Virginia convention approved a set of resolutions that began, “we and our fathers have from sixteen hundred and twenty until now, both by our sweat and our blood, helped to make the country what she is in wealth, in power, and in greatness”; they then claimed that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution guaranteed “a perfect equality before the law.”⁷⁴ In Washington, DC, William Howard Day provided a history of slavery to the Colored People’s Education Monument Association but praised the founding ideals, “then that there was sent forth upon the wings of the wind the Declaration of Independence, read to-day; one of the greatest documents the world has ever seen—great, with reference to the occasion which brought it forth—great, with respect to humanity, in all coming time.”⁷⁵ Day’s entire address is steeped in temporal themes.

Convention notes indicate that Black southerners saw themselves as Americans and used connections with the past to advocate inclusion and equal rights. In early 1866, delegates in Georgia crafted an address to the state legislature that read in part,

Suffering from consequent degradation of two hundred and forty-six years of enslavement, it is not to be expected that we are thoroughly qualified to take our position beside those who for ages have been rocked in the cradle of education. But we are willing to bury the past, and forget the ills of slavery, and assume the attitude of a free people.... The dust of our fathers mingle with yours in the same grave yards.... This is your country, but it is ours too; you were born here, so were we; your fathers fought for it, but our fathers fed them.⁷⁶

That same year, in Kentucky a set of resolutions asserted that “we are part and parcel of the Great American body politic; ... we are intensely American, allied to the free institutions of our country by the sacrifices, the deaths and the slumbering ashes of our sons, our brothers and our fathers.”⁷⁷ And in 1871, the Colored Citizens of Tennessee wrote to Congress, “As in the past, we in the future, pledge to you all of your efforts, to stand firm to our country, unfetter the chains of the oppressed and break the yoke of the captor.”⁷⁸ They presented a public rebuke of the stories of contented slaves and kind masters, while expressions of national pride and loyalty buttressed claims of citizenship.

The debates also offered a proper recounting of the fundamental contributions of African Americans to the development of the nation and of the South in particular. The National Equal Rights League of Colored Men issued a statement to Congress, “the bones of our fathers and of our fathers’ fathers lie here. Our sweat has moistened this soil; our hands have felled your Southern forests, and made the wealth of your cotton, rice, and sugar plantations.... We propose, therefore, to remain here and

cast ourselves upon your generosity and justice.”⁷⁹ In Lexington, delegates wrote to the General Assembly that “much of the property now constituting the aggregate wealth of Kentucky has been acquired or improved, in whole or in part, by our labor.”⁸⁰ Colonel Robert Harlan, who had been born a slave, warned against emigration at a national convention in 1879: “The southern country is ours. Our ancestors settled it, and from the wilderness formed the cultivated plantation, and they and we have cleared, improved, and beautified the land.”⁸¹ J. C. Corbin of Arkansas agreed that the labor of African Americans “is the basis of the wealth of the South.”⁸² And the “Address to the Colored People of Texas” reminded Black citizens that “our labor as slaves made the south one of the wealthiest agricultural countries of the world.”⁸³

Black southerners were also aware of the ongoing attempts by white southerners to rewrite history. At the National Convention of the Colored Men of America in 1869 a portion of a report from the Judiciary Committee read,

I would call your attention to the title of a book recently written by Alexander Stephens. Holding to the old doctrine on which secession was built he gives his book the title, “War between the States,” thinking thereby to blink out of sight the historical truth that the war was not between the States as such, but one in which the supreme and sovereign Government subdued the rebellious subject States. And before I leave this point, permit me to say that if a man of his ability, of his antecedents, would seek at this late day to impress such a pernicious doctrine on the public mind, it exhibits in the clearest light the importance of settling this question of state power beyond the possibility of a doubt.⁸⁴

Then in 1879, the former African American Governor of Louisiana, Pinckney B. S. Pinchback, told delegates in Tennessee, “the love and respect of the white race for their prominent men ... is illustrated in the South by the reverence they have for the memory of Robert E. Lee. In its great centers monument piles are erected to perpetuate his memory.”⁸⁵ The Colored Conventions Movement was an opportunity for African Americans to publicly honor and revere their own efforts in building the nation and to provide a counternarrative.

Many Southern conventions focused on the history of African American military service. In June of 1865, the address drafted in Virginia included the following:

Why, the first blood shed in the Revolutionary war was that of a colored man, Crispus Attucks, while in every engraving of Washington’s famous passage of the Delaware, is to be seen, as a prominent feature, the woolly head and dusky face of a colored soldier, Prince Whipple; and let the history of those days tell of the numerous but abortive efforts made by a vindictive enemy to incite insurrection among the colored people of the country, and how faithfully they adhered to that country’s cause. Who has forgotten Andrew Jackson’s famous appeal to the colored

⁷⁴Liberty, and Equality Before the Law: Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored People of Va., Held in the City of Alexandria (August 2, 3, 4, 5, 1865), 17–18.

⁷⁵Colored People’s Educational Monument Association in Memory of Abraham Lincoln, July 4, 1865, 12–13.

⁷⁶Proceedings of the Freedmen’s Convention of Georgia, Assembled at Augusta, January 10th, 1866, Containing the Speeches of Gen’l Tillson, Capt. J.E. Bryant, and Others, 17.

⁷⁷Proceedings of the First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky Held in Lexington, March the 22d, 23d, 24th and 26th, 1866: With the Constitution of the Kentucky State Benevolent Association: Printed by Order of the Convention, 22.

⁷⁸Proceedings of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Tennessee, Held in Nashville, Feb. 22d, 23d, 24th & 25th, 1871, 16.

⁷⁹National Equal Rights League. Address and Resolutions of the National Equal Rights League Convention of Colored Men, Held at Washington, D. C., January 10th, 11th and 12th. Washington, 1867, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.20501300/>.

⁸⁰Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men, Held at Lexington, Kentucky, in the A.M.E. Church, November 26th, 27th, and 28th, 1867.

⁸¹Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville, Tennessee, May 6, 7, 8 and 9, 1879, 30.

⁸²Ibid., 51.

⁸³“Conference for the Colored People of Texas,” *The Galveston Daily News*, July 4, 1879.

⁸⁴Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America: Held in Washington, D.C., on January 13, 14, 15, and 16, 1869, iv.

⁸⁵Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville, 98.

“citizens” of Louisiana, and their enthusiastic response, in defence of liberty, for others, which was denied themselves?⁸⁶

In September 1865, in Newbern, North Carolina, Abraham Galloway, who was enslaved before escaping and working as a Union spy, military recruiter, and Republican politician, argued “if the negro knows how to use the cartridge-box, he knows how to use the ballot-box.”⁸⁷ Two months later in Arkansas, William Henry Grey, an African American politician and Republican Party organizer, recounted the history of Black military service and said, “Our future is sure—God has marked it out with his own finger; here we have lived, suffered, fought, bled, and many have died. We will not leave the graves of our fathers, but here we will rear our children; here we will educate them to a higher destiny; here, where we have been degraded, will we be exalted.”⁸⁸ These leaders were not just asking for rights of African Americans as a concession, they used history to demonstrate that the rights had been earned.

At the National Equal Rights League of Colored Men Convention in 1867, delegates argued that service in the Civil War entitled them to “share of the fruits of victory—freedom, manhood, all the rights and privileges of citizenship.”⁸⁹ The address they composed read, “Need we remind you that amid the darkest hours of the late war we came promptly at your call... That conflict is now past, and the records of your history testify that we fought and suffered nobly, and that on our part we have fulfilled faithfully those conditions.”⁹⁰ Attendees also referenced service in other conflicts, “When you fought for national independence colored soldiers were by your side; colored regiments swelled your brigades, and shared with you the sufferings, the hardships, and the conflicts unto blood by which you became an independent nation.”⁹¹ And in “the British war of 1812, colored regiments fought and bled. You will remember the glowing testimony which their heroism drew from the lips and the pen of Andrew Jackson after the great and decisive battle of New Orleans.”⁹² Reference to Andrew Jackson’s approval of Black soldiers at the Battle of New Orleans is recurrent in the notes of several conventions.⁹³

The public accounting of Black military service appears frequently. Delegates in Baltimore argued voting rights were “due

⁸⁶*Equal Suffrage: Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States: Also an Account of the Agitation Among the Colored People of Virginia for Equal Rights: With an Appendix Concerning the Rights of Colored Witnesses Before the State Courts, June 5, 1865, 2.*

⁸⁷“Report on the Meeting of the Colored Citizens held in Newbern, NC,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, September 11, 1865.

⁸⁸*Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas: Held in Little Rock, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Nov. 30, Dec. 1 & 2 (1865), 192.*

⁸⁹National Equal Rights League, *Address and Resolutions of the National Equal Rights League Convention of Colored Men, Held at Washington, D. C., January 10th, 11th and 12th*. Washington, 1867, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.20501300/>.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.*

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³See *Minutes and Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color in these United States, Held by Adjournments in the City of Philadelphia, from the 4th to the 13th of June, Inclusive, 1832, 12, 35; Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour, in the United States: Held by Adjournments in the Asbury Church, New York, from the 2nd to the 12th of June, Inclusive, 1834, 21; Address to the Constitutional Convention of Ohio from the State Convention of Colored Men Held in the City of Columbus, January 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th, 1851, 6; Equal Suffrage: Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., 83 (see quote above); “Report on the Convention of the Colored People of North Carolina, September 29, 1865: Letter of Hon. Wm. W. Coleman to the North Carolina Colored Convention,” *The Liberator*, October 20, 1865.*

to us from our citizenship.... We have helped to fight the country’s battles; we have stood shoulder to shoulder with white men, in every contest from 1776 to 1865.... Will the nation cast off us who have been its defenders?”⁹⁴ As in the twentieth century, African Americans used their sacrifices on behalf of the nation to demand equal treatment under the law.⁹⁵ And they did so through a public recounting of the past that contradicted the dominant white narratives and the public reverence shown for the leaders and soldiers of the Confederacy.

2.2 The Urgency of the Present

There have been many pivotal dates in the path of American political development. Giovanni Capoccia explains that in historical institutionalism the study of “critical junctures” is “the analysis of the politics of institutional change during a relatively brief phase which is characterized by the availability of different courses of action capable of affecting future institutional development in the longer term.”⁹⁶ Collier and Collier point to “a period of significant change that occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.”⁹⁷ Paul Pierson argues that “contingency” is one of the four features of path dependence. Contingency means that “relatively small events, if occurring at the right moment, can have large and enduring consequences.”⁹⁸ Sociologist George Wallis uses the term “chronopolitics” “to emphasize the relationship between the political behavior of individuals and groups and their time-perspectives.”⁹⁹ Wallis argues that “the view of the present as a period of crucial decisions leads to the politics of crisis,” and “the perception of the present as a ‘time of transition’ in this sense suggests that those who have control at this critical time will mold that tomorrow.”¹⁰⁰ And for Hanchard, racial time can be divided into two phases—the pre-emancipation and post-emancipation periods.¹⁰¹

Delegates often spoke of the historical moment and referred to the fact that they were operating at a crucial point in time (which was ongoing throughout the period as crisis after crisis emerged), separate from the past, where their decisions and actions could have far-reaching consequences for the future. P. B. S. Pinchback described emancipation to the Louisiana State Colored Men’s Convention in 1871 as “the ruptured political and social relations of 4,000,000 people placed for solution before the nation a problem

⁹⁴*Address of the Colored Men’s Border State Convention to the People of the United States, Baltimore, August 5–6, 1868; see also Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville, 96.*

⁹⁵See Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁹⁶Giovanni Capoccia, “Critical Junctures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, ed. Orfeo Fioretos, Tullia G. Falletti, and Adam Sheingate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 90.

⁹⁷Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*, 29.

⁹⁸Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 44.

⁹⁹George W. Wallis, “Chronopolitics: The Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamics of Change,” *Social Forces* 49, no. 1 (1970): 102.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 106. Also, historian Christopher Clark uses the term “temporality” “to denote a political actor’s intuitive sense of the texture of experienced time,” which helps individuals determine whether to take political action; see Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 6.

¹⁰¹Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity,” 255; Hanchard recognizes emancipation as the critical juncture in African American time.

hitherto unsolved.”¹⁰² The use of temporal themes in a public forum for the once voiceless members of Southern society allowed these men and women to demand immediate political action.

Emancipation was both a critical juncture and a new founding moment. Frederick Douglass viewed the Civil War as “apocalyptic,” according to historian David Blight.¹⁰³ In February 1863, Douglass delivered an address on the implications of the Emancipation Proclamation at the Cooper Institute, “Assuming our Government and people will sustain the President and the Proclamation, we can scarcely conceive of a more complete revolution in the position of a nation.... Henceforth that day shall take rank with the Fourth of July. (Applause.) Henceforth it becomes the date of a new and glorious era in the history of American liberty.”¹⁰⁴ The conventions that gathered in the South after the war also saw the connection between 1776 and 1863—Black southerners were starting anew as citizens of the nation; this was the beginning of a new era, a founding moment for those excluded during the first American revolution. And, as Elizabeth Cohen shows in her work on time, boundaries like emancipation result in a new legal sovereignty for some citizens, in this case African Americans.¹⁰⁵

In an editorial from a prominent Black newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune*, the authors described the first state convention to meet in the postwar South as having “inaugurated a new era ... a great spectacle, and one which will be remembered for generations to come,” but warned, “this is the time, and if you let the opportunity slide and pass away, you will be forever a downtrodden people.”¹⁰⁶ Observers of the conventions, as well as the delegates, recognized the import of the moment. William Howard Day spoke in Washington, DC: “We meet under new and ominous circumstances to-day. We come to the National Capital our Capital with new hopes, new prospects, new joys, in view of the future and past of the people.”¹⁰⁷ James Walker Hood, once a Pennsylvania abolitionist and now a transplanted southerner, told delegates, “There had never been before and there would probably never be again so important an assemblage of the colored people of North Carolina as the present in its influence upon the destinies of the people for all time to come.”¹⁰⁸ And in a memorial to the State Legislature and United States Congress, the Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas wrote, “We believe the time has come when wisdom again asserts her sway in the councils of the nation,” followed by a poem:

We dream no more—our country wakes at last
And reads wise lessons from the stormy past.
The spirit of the nation, proud and free,
Might err and wander, reft of memory;
But linked to truth, magnetic poles of yore,
The dead sense wakens and she sins no more.

¹⁰²“State Colored Men’s Convention,” *The New Orleans Republican*, November 18–20, 1873.

¹⁰³David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass, Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), xvii, 341, 349.

¹⁰⁴Frederick Douglass, “The Proclamation and the Negro Army” (1863), in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 306, 308.

¹⁰⁵Cohen, *The Political Value of Time*, 42.

¹⁰⁶Editorial, *New Orleans Tribune*, Sunday, January 15, 1865.

¹⁰⁷*Colored People’s Educational Monument Association in Memory of Abraham Lincoln*.

¹⁰⁸“Report on the Convention of the Colored People of North Carolina, September 29, 1865.”

The drama moves—the people fill the stage,
And virtue will restore the golden age.¹⁰⁹

Kentucky delegates drafted resolutions that exalted freedom and hailed “the day of our Emancipation, as the brightest in the calendar of the nineteenth century.”¹¹⁰

At an 1865 Virginia convention, Henry Highland Garnet composed an address with Fields Cook, a Baptist minister who was once enslaved, that connects the recounting of African American history to the urgency of the moment. They begin, “As a branch of the human family we have for ages been deeply and cruelly wronged, and by a people with whom might constituted right.”¹¹¹ Then: “We have been compelled, under pain of death, to submit to injuries deeper and darker than earth ever witnessed in the case of any other people.... When the nation in her hour of trial called her sable sons to arms, we gladly went and fought her battles.... We fought and conquered but have been denied the benefits of victory.”¹¹² They rejected the idea of emigration because “as natives of American soil we claim the right to remain upon it ... for here we were born, and for this country our fathers and brothers have fought, and we hope to remain here in the full enjoyment of enfranchised manhood and its dignities.”¹¹³ The address closed, “That emerging as we are from the long night of gloom and sorrow, we are entitled to, and claim the sympathy and aid of the entire Christian world. We invoke the considerate aid of mankind in this crisis of our history, and in this hour of our trial.”¹¹⁴ The title chosen by the authors was “Our Wrongs and Rights,” and the entire structure was temporal, moving from the wrongs of the past to the significance of the present to the rights necessary for the future.

After the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, Black southerners saw a new urgency in the political moment. A national convention in January 1869 distributed an “Address to the Colored Citizens of the United States,” which noted,

we speak to you under far different circumstances from those in which you have been addressed by your assembled representatives at other periods of our history ... we have reason to rejoice in the fact that the past has had its triumphs for us; but our condition in the present, together with the duties and responsibilities which it enforces upon us, demands our attention.¹¹⁵

Bishop Daniel Payne, born in South Carolina and a prominent leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, sent a letter that was read to delegates: “Perhaps at no period of our history, was it so needful that the voice of Colored Americans be heard addressing the State and National Legislatures, and counseling one another as the present time.”¹¹⁶ In Virginia, that same year, delegates expressed confidence in President Grant and the Republicans as they navigated “the dawn of a new era in this Republic.”¹¹⁷ And the National Labor Convention endorsed the creation of a Black newspaper to be named *The New Era*.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁹*Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas*, 193.

¹¹⁰*Proceedings of the First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky Held in Lexington*, 21.

¹¹¹*Liberty, and Equality Before the Law*, 12 (there were several additional unlisted authors).

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³*Ibid.*

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹¹⁵*Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America: Held in Washington, D.C.*, 39.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁷*Report on the Virginia State Colored Convention Held in Richmond, May 27, 1869*.

¹¹⁸*Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention: Held in Washington, D.C., on December 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th, 1869*, 16.

At the Southern States Convention of Colored Men in 1871, Jonathan Clarkson Gibbs, prominent African American minister, politician, and the Florida secretary of state told the delegates, “I believe it possible that this Convention may be made the most important gathering of our people that has ever occurred on this continent.”¹¹⁹ And J. F. Quarles of Georgia claimed, “We have passed through a revolution which, for intense bitterness, stubborn encounters, and stupendous results, has rarely been equaled, and never surpassed in the history of any people.”¹²⁰ He pushed against the oppression by the white South, imploring, “let us clear away the rubbish of the past.”¹²¹ The emergence of a new historical moment was obvious to all, but the urgency for political action persisted when conditions did not improve.

It is noteworthy that convention participants do not identify the end of Reconstruction as another critical juncture. There is scant discussion of 1877 as a break in the path of development compared to the many pronouncements about emancipation. Selena Sanderfer finds that support for emigration increased after the removal of federal troops and the subsequent rise in violence against Blacks, but it “was not uniform and was usually reserved for movements within the United States.”¹²² At the first national conference after the Hayes Tilden Compromise, the Report of the Committee on Migration outlined the causes of the new exodus movement:

The colored people of the Southern States have become thoroughly alarmed at the constant attacks on their political and civil rights, not only by legislative enactments and verdicts of courts, but more especially through and by the medium of State constitutional conventions. These conventions have been called in nearly every State once ruled by Republicans, but now under the rule of the Democratic party. In every instance the openly-avowed object for the holding of these constitutional conventions by Democrats is to overturn and repeal all laws passed by Republican conventions or legislatures looking toward the protection of colored people in all of their political, civil, and educational rights.... These Democratic enactments have made the colored people the target for so-called vagrant laws, unjust poll-taxes, and curtailed educational advantages, and all legislation has been toward enfeebling them in all that Republican legislation strengthened and protected them.¹²³

The reactionary state constitutional conventions referenced by this report were called by white conservatives in 1870 (Tennessee), 1874 (Arkansas), 1875 (Alabama, North Carolina, Texas), 1877 (Georgia), and 1879 (Louisiana).¹²⁴ As early as 1871, the Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Kentucky, drafted a timeline of 116 atrocities committed by white citizens over the previous two and a half years.¹²⁵ Black southerners experienced the end of Reconstruction as a rolling series of failures, which perhaps explains why the Compromise of 1877 and federal abandonment are not discussed as a critical juncture in the debate records.

Some convention delegates, on the other hand, demonstrated optimism, even as the war and emancipation grew more distant.

In 1877, Black North Carolinians drafted resolutions that stated, “the disappearance of race prejudice and the growing feeling of confidence and friendships between the races were among the encouraging signs of the times.”¹²⁶ J. C. Corbin of Arkansas told the National Conference of Colored Men in Tennessee two years later that disfranchisement would be “temporary and transitory” because “the spirit of our age, the genius of our Government, the grave evils that follow in its wake, all strongly tend to shorten its duration; so that they that be with us are mightier than they that be against us.”¹²⁷

The sanguinity of the “new era” was illusory for many, however, and they pushed with a new resolve to combat forces of white supremacy. At the same convention, Theo Greene of Mississippi argued, “It is said that the darkest hour is just before dawn; if so let us strive to realize the fact that the present period of our history is about the gloomiest of our experience, and endeavor to fit ourselves for the dawn of a better and brighter day.”¹²⁸ And the report of the committee on the address warned, “We have reached a crisis in the history of the race.... We have submitted patiently to the wrongs and injustice which have been heaped upon us, trusting that in the fullness of time a generous and humane public sentiment would bring to our relief the enforcement of all laws passed for our protection.”¹²⁹ Resistance by whites required Black southerners to continually operate under emergency conditions, from Reconstruction to its failure to the legal and extralegal assaults on civil rights that followed.

Frederick Douglass delivered an address in Louisville to the National Convention of Colored Men in 1883. “We rejoice also that one of the results of this stupendous revolution in our national history ... that this change has started the American Republic on a new departure, full of promise.”¹³⁰ But he warned of “problems novel and difficult.”¹³¹ That same year, Douglass told a convention in Washington, DC, “Far down the ages, when men shall wish to inform themselves as to the real state of liberty, law, religion and civilization in the United States at this juncture of our history, they will overhaul the proceedings of the Supreme Court, and read the decision declaring the Civil rights Bill unconstitutional and void.”¹³² He saw that the crisis continued and that while emancipation was a revolutionary moment, white supremacists at every level and in every branch of government would oppose any efforts to move the nation down the path of equality.

On the eve of widespread state constitutional disfranchisement of Black men, confidence about improvement over the previous two decades mixed with fear and determination. An “Address to the Colored People of Kentucky” in 1885 read, “We, your delegates in convention assembled, have pleasure in congratulating you upon the progress you have made in the pursuit of those things which commend you to the world. Your progress is the more gratifying when it is remembered under what circumstances

¹²⁶James H. Harris, President, and J. C. Dancy, Secretary, “Proceedings of the Colored Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh on the 18th and 19th of Oct. 1877,” *Raleigh Register* [Raleigh, North Carolina], November 1, 1877.

¹²⁷*Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville*, 51.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 93.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁰*Address of Hon. Fred. Douglass, Delivered before the National Convention of Colored Men, at Louisville, Ky., September 24, 1883.*

¹³¹*Ibid.*

¹³²*Proceedings of the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting Held at Lincoln Hall, October 22, 1883: Speeches of Hon. Frederick Douglass and Robert G. Ingersoll*, 5.

¹¹⁹*Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men*, 10.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 93.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 99–100.

¹²²Sanderfer, “The Emigration Debate and the Colored Conventions Movement,” 294.

¹²³*Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville*, 102.

¹²⁴Herron, *Framing the Solid South*, 22.

¹²⁵*Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, Ky., and Vicinity, Praying the Enactment of Law for the Better Protection of Life, April 11, 1871.*

it has been achieved.”¹³³ They continued, “the hand of Providence has led you in ways you knew not of, and though opposed by foes without and often betrayed by friends within, to-day you make a showing that has no parallel in history.”¹³⁴ Reverend William J. Simmons, who had once been enslaved but became a scholar, minister, educator, and college president, offered the “grievances of the colored citizens” to the state legislature. He said, “We belong to the South—the ‘New South’... We look to you, the new blood of a new generation, for modifications and innovations. We are moving with the tide. ‘We are heirs of all the ages.’”¹³⁵ Simmons articulated the historical shift and the idea that African Americans were indeed southerners.

In Georgia in 1888, the proceedings indicate a suspicion of reliance on the benevolence of whites. Rev. Charles T. Walker, who was born into slavery but later established Augusta’s Tabernacle Baptist Church, warned, “the time has fully come in the history of the colored race when the Negro must no longer be a chattel and a tool.”¹³⁶ Rev. Walker gave voice to the “waiting” facet of Michael Hanchard’s “racial time” (wherein Blacks are delayed access to rights and privileges that whites receive first)—“the Negro has been told to wait, don’t be hasty. If we are citizens why wait any longer than others, we have proven to the government that we are a peaceable, loyal, law-abiding people.”¹³⁷ He closes with a call to action, “For all time to come let none be more solicitous for our welfare, than we ourselves. Let us crowd our petitions into the national halls of legislations, let us solve our problems, shape our destiny, make for ourselves a history, and take our places in the onward march of progress alongside with the other races of this country.”¹³⁸ Here the rhetoric suggests the present was a critical moment to both control the historical narrative and direct the march into a new, more just South.

2.3 Fighting for the Future

A key component of Hanchard’s racial time is “the belief that the future should or must be an improvement on the present.”¹³⁹ And for Du Bois, labor and education rights were integral to democratization of the South after the war.¹⁴⁰ In this section, I treat labor and education rights separately, though they were often interconnected in the rhetoric of convention participants, who saw both as key to future development and democratization. Almost all conventions addressed these topics, but there were sixteen called explicitly to consider education, teaching, or labor. It is telling that all four education conventions, all three teacher’s conventions, and eight of the nine labor conventions were held in the South.¹⁴¹ Black southerners were the most vociferous promoters of these rights that they had for so long been denied and that they saw as necessary to the acquisition of other political and social rights.

At the Colored National Labor Convention in 1869, the report of the Committee on Education read in part, “The relations which education sustains labor are, indeed, second in importance only to

those which are sustained to it by attributes of life and freedom.”¹⁴² It continued, “education is the necessary condition of the most efficient labor; and such being the case, it becomes a matter of great moment to colored workingmen to inquire as to their present condition and future prospects in reference to it.”¹⁴³ The 1879 national convention held in Tennessee created a single Committee on Education and Labor rather than separate the issues.¹⁴⁴ Another gathering that year ordered its “Address to the Colored People of Texas” published in newspapers, including the following proclamations,

First—That by the fruits of our labor the great majority of the finest educated white gentlemen of the past and present generations of the south mainly owe their education and prosperity. Second—That not only in the past, but at the present time, the white people of the south control our labor, and that it would be but a small return to aid our people to educate their children. Third—That the ignorance and abject poverty of large numbers of citizens has, and will ever prove detrimental to the best interests of all classes of citizens and good government.¹⁴⁵

So, for these delegates, education and labor were not just connected to each other, they were part of the past, present, and future of Southern society.

It is not surprising that Black politicians and activists focused on protecting workers after the Civil War. They recognized the potential for abuse and exploitation of those who had been enslaved. The transformation in Southern economic relationships was not just a move from chattel to wages; it was about who controlled the time of the Black agricultural labor force. A Southern slaveholder explained: “I have ever maintained the doctrine that my negroes have no time whatever; that they are always liable to my call without questioning for a moment the propriety of it; and I adhere to this on the grounds of expediency and right.”¹⁴⁶ Slaveholders also heavily regulated calendrical time.¹⁴⁷ And these white men managed the lifetime of Black southerners, from birthdays to age when sent to the fields to reproduction to retirement.¹⁴⁸ Scholars note the great potential for emancipated men and women to achieve temporal autonomy.¹⁴⁹ Hanchard writes, “temporal freedom meant not only an abolition of the temporal constraints slave labor placed on New World Africans but also the freedom to construct individual and collective temporality that existed autonomously from (albeit contemporaneously with) the temporality of their former masters.”¹⁵⁰ The shift from slavery to freedom seemed to promise African Americans new

¹⁴²*Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention*, 26.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴*Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville*, 51.

¹⁴⁵“Conference for the Colored People of Texas.”

¹⁴⁶Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity,” 255, quoted in Michael J. Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 119.

¹⁴⁷Walter Johnson, “Possible Pasts: Some Speculations on Time, Temporality, and the History of Atlantic Slavery,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 491.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.* Charles Maier points to labor and its connection to the politics of time, writing “the abolition of slavery and then indenture, the infringement of apprenticeship, and the spread of salaried and wage labor ... beckoned as moves toward liberty and away from arbitrary control.” Maier, *Changing Boundaries of the Political*, 158; see also Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock, Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁹Eric Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 435–60; Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity”; Johnson, “Possible Pasts”; Ulfried Reichardt, “Time and the African-American Experience: The Problem of Chronocentrism,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000).

¹⁵⁰Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity,” 255.

¹³³*Proceedings of the Colored State Convention Assembled in St. Paul’s A. M. E. Church, Lexington, Ky., November 26, 1885*, 10.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 16–17.

¹³⁶*Proceedings of Consultation Convention of 350 Leading Colored Men of Georgia: Held in Macon, Georgia, January 25th and 26th, 1888*, 10.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity,” 257.

¹⁴⁰Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 580, 667.

¹⁴¹See Appendix.

temporal authority, and they saw the right to own land and control their work time as indispensable to securing other rights.

Demands for labor rights appeared soon after emancipation in the Colored Conventions Movement. Virginia delegates in 1865 warned that “your late owners are forming Labor Associations, for the purpose of fixing and maintaining, without the least reference to your wishes and wants, the prices to be paid for your labor,” and then advocated the creation of Black labor associations, “having for their object the protection of the colored laborer, by regulating fairly the price of labor; by affording facilities for obtaining employment by a system of registration, and ... to enforce legally the fulfillment of all contracts made with him.”¹⁵¹ Later that same year a convention in Arkansas included among its resolutions, “Believing, as we do, that we are destined in the future, as in the past, to cultivate your cotton fields, we claim for Arkansas the first to deal justly and equitably for her laborers.”¹⁵² And Georgia delegates in 1869 created the State Mechanics’ and Laborers’ Association, as well as local unions, and recommended the formation of auxiliary Workingwomen’s Associations.¹⁵³

The final national convention of the 1860s met in Washington, DC, with the specific purpose of promoting labor rights. Delegates to the Colored National Labor Convention demanded vast safeguards for Black workers. In the address titled, “The Relations of the Colored People to American Industry,” they asked for apprenticeships for young African Americans, access to all industries, protection of contracts, and that “for every day’s labor given we be paid full and fair remuneration.”¹⁵⁴ And “Our mottoes are liberty and labor, enfranchisement and education! The spelling book and the hoe, the hammer and the vote, the opportunity to work and to rise.”¹⁵⁵ The Committee on Education wrote, “the laborer must be a living man, free in all his acts, thoughts, and volitions ... the emancipation of slaves was in effect a conversion of capital into labor,” so protection of rights was essential.¹⁵⁶ There was an appeal to all citizens and workingmen, “every man should try and receive an exchange for his labor, which by proper economy and investment, will, in the future, place him in the position of those on whom he is now dependent for a living.”¹⁵⁷ And through labor organization, “you will force opposite combinations to recognize your claims to work without restriction because of our color, and open the way for your children to learn trades and move forward in the enjoyment of all the rights of American citizenship.”¹⁵⁸ Labor rights were indispensable.

The Colored Citizens of Tennessee warned in 1871 that Black agricultural workers were perpetually exploited by whites, threatened by violence from the Klan, and denied protection of the state government. Convict leasing presented a new method of temporal theft: “We shall soon see them [prisoners] hired out to private service by the year as servants and sold on the auction block as slaves for the balance of their time.”¹⁵⁹ The committee on labor at the Southern States Convention of Colored Men reported, “Capital and labor are now beginning to recognize their mutual

relations and dependence on each other. The importance of the development of the resources of the country by the colored men of the South presses itself upon our attention at all times and in all places.”¹⁶⁰ Treatment of labor was tied to the many contributions of Black southerners to the region’s economy, and delegates saw it as an issue of the historical moment. J. F. Quarles of Georgia argued, “This question of labor is one of the most delicate, as well as one of the most pressing questions of the age.... How shall the laborer be justly remunerated? We must impress upon the Southern mind the fact that the time has passed when oligarchy and aristocracy and caste could bear rule.”¹⁶¹ In 1879, the National Conference of Colored Men met in Nashville and adopted a resolution, “That the right to labor and to receive wages commensurate with the labor performed are sacred principles underlying the primal foundation of human society.”¹⁶² These rights were necessary to the break with the past, take advantage of the new beginning promised by emancipation, and improve the future.

Debates in the Colored Conventions Movement also focused on the right to education, something that was not always guaranteed.¹⁶³ Most state constitutions drafted after 1820, however, included a free public education.¹⁶⁴ Framers in the South resisted such provisions because reading and writing could spread ideas of freedom, foster hope, and encourage rebellion among enslaved people. Reconstruction brought public education to the region.¹⁶⁵ A review of the state constitutional convention debates reveals that African Americans were crucial advocates for including this right in the fundamental law.¹⁶⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that participants in the Colored Conventions Movement also placed an emphasis on the issue. Calls for education were often indicative of how Black southerners saw themselves in the flow of time. They had been denied access in the past, so new laws and institutions were immediately necessary in the present to protect the future. And education itself was a vehicle through which African Americans could better understand their own history.

In Charleston in 1865, delegates drafted resolutions connecting education to Black political, social, and economic prosperity. Whereas “knowledge is power,” it was resolved to “solemnly urge the parents and guardians of the young and rising generation, by the sad recollection of our forced ignorance and degradation in the past, and by the bright and inspiring hopes of the future, to see that schools are at once established.”¹⁶⁷ And the 1865 Little Rock convention included among its resolutions

¹⁶⁰*Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men*, 77.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁶²*Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville*, 24.

¹⁶³John C. Eastman, “When Did Education Become a Civil Right? An Assessment of State Constitutional Provisions for Education 1776–1900,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 42, no. 1 (January 1998): 1–34; Emily Zackin, *Looking for Rights in All the Wrong Places: Why State Constitutions Contain America’s Positive Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 67–75.

¹⁶⁴Herron, *Framing the Solid South*, 202.

¹⁶⁵James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Horace Mann Bond, *Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South, from 1619 to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); David Tyack and Robert Lowe, “The Constitutional Moment: Reconstruction and Black Education in the South,” *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 2 (February 1986): 236–56; Zackin, *Looking for Rights in All the Wrong Places*, 87.

¹⁶⁶Herron, *Framing the Solid South*, 201–206.

¹⁶⁷*Proceedings of the Colored People’s Convention of the State of South Carolina, Held in Zion Church, Charleston: Together with the Declaration of Rights and Wrongs: An*

¹⁵¹*Equal Suffrage: Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va.*, 88.

¹⁵²*Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas*, 193.

¹⁵³“Georgia State Colored Convention, Macon, November 1869,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 6, 1869.

¹⁵⁴*Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention*, 18.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹*Proceedings of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Tennessee*, 15.

“that we are the substrata, the foundation on which the future power and wealth of the State of Arkansas must be built, and as the future prosperity of the State cannot afford to rest upon ignorant labor, therefore, we respectfully ask the Legislature to provide for the education of our children.”¹⁶⁸ This statement ties education to past contributions, justice for Black laborers, and future development.

The Freedman’s Convention of Georgia explained to the state legislature in 1866 that “you can not in justice with the progress of society and spread of ideas, enact laws for the future by the aspects of the present. A few years will materially change our status, education and wealth.... We therefore trust your honorable body will make laws which will contemplate the future, more than, the present.”¹⁶⁹ The Colored Men of Kentucky argued that we “must educate our people, and make for ourselves and our posterity undying characters—reputations which will grow brighter as time with rapid whirl rolls on the ages.”¹⁷⁰ And the Colored People’s Educational Convention addressed the people of color of the state of Missouri, “we beg you to lend us your ears. Knowledge is power.... As, in the crucial test of the past, whether amid the haunts of peace, or beneath the fiery baptism of battle, you have done your duty right well and nobly, so we beg you will, in the present and in the time to come, be unswervingly loyal to the sacred principles of American constitutional liberty.”¹⁷¹ Temporal metaphors and images link education and progress.

The Colored National Labor Convention connected education to labor and the future. One resolution advocating for free public schools argued that “educated labor is more productive, is worth, and commands, higher rates of wages, is less dependent upon capital.”¹⁷² The report from the Committee on Education noted that it had been almost two and a half centuries since “since a Dutch vessel landed upon the shores of Virginia the first cargo of human merchandise,” and “through the servile agency thus introduced, and extended also to the adjoining provinces, the eminent agricultural resources of the country were largely developed.”¹⁷³ These debates included the necessity of education, labor rights, and historical narratives about the essential contributions by African Americans to national economic development.

Education was a primary focus at the Southern States Convention of 1871 as well. William Henry Grey told the delegates, “In the country in which I reside, these questions are of vital importance: questions of education, and of the progress of the rising generation. These questions lie near the heart of every colored man in Arkansas, and they are expecting that something will be done, by this Convention, to give an impetus to the education of the rising generation.”¹⁷⁴ The “Address to the People of the United States” read, “While we have, as a body, contributed our labor in the past to enhance the wealth and promote the welfare of the community, we have, as a class, been deprived of one of the chief benefits to be derived from industry, namely: the acquisition of education and experience, the return that civilization

makes for the labor of the individual.”¹⁷⁵ And the Report on Education and Labor presented the new founding moment: “The sudden emancipation of over four millions of colored men, women and children, naturally brought with it the concomitant disadvantages of centuries of accumulated ignorance.”¹⁷⁶ Educational progress was tied to the path of development: “We look at the future of our race, on this Continent, as one of only a question of time, as to the, complete success of the realization of our most sanguine expectations, or most devout wishes.”¹⁷⁷

An 1873 convention in Delaware pleaded for the expansion of public education that had been denied by the state for so many years. The “Address to the People of the State” focused on this topic: “We specially ask now that equal school rights be afforded us. This we do not ask merely as a matter of right, but as a crying necessity—a necessity without which the future of our race appears almost utterly hopeless.”¹⁷⁸ In 1877, African Americans in both Georgia and Kentucky called Educational Conventions. The delegates similarly connected the right to the future. Prof. J. M. Maxwell told delegates in Kentucky, “I rejoice that the prospect is so bright for the coming of that day when in every county, township, and village of this beautiful and rich Commonwealth the portals of knowledge shall be opened.”¹⁷⁹ He also associated education with the urgency of the political moment, “The history of the ages that are past has begun to convince the nations of the earth that to make liberal provisions for the education of the people is national economy instead of political extravagance; and never in the world’s history has the cause of general education been espoused so universally as at the present time.”¹⁸⁰

Theo H. Greene spoke on the “Elements of Prosperity” to the National Conference of Colored Men in Tennessee in 1879:

Of all the agencies that serve to further advancement and produce happiness and refinement, education stands first and foremost. Its power and efficacy in the attainment of these has been forcibly exemplified during all ages, and it is an undoubted fact that it will continue to wield this commanding power and influence in shaping the affairs and destinies of nations for all coming ages.¹⁸¹

Delegates in Texas that same year adopted resolutions that reflected Greene’s observation. “The foundation stone of education and character must be laid in the grand race of life.”¹⁸² They also tied education to labor rights in their “Address to the Colored People of Texas.”¹⁸³ Temporal framing again moves from the historical moment to labor to the right to a public education.

African Americans continued to argue that education was bound to future prosperity in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The report by the Committee on Education at the 1884 State Conference of Colored Men of Florida read, “The general diffusion of knowledge is one of the most powerful agencies of

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 48.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 68.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 69.

¹⁷⁸Proceedings of the Convention of Colored People Held in Dover, Del., January 9, 1873, 6.

¹⁷⁹Proceedings of the State Colored Educational Convention Held at Frankfort, Kentucky, 6.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 7.

¹⁸¹Proceedings of the National Conference of Colored Men of the United States, Held in the State Capitol at Nashville, 91.

¹⁸²Conference for the Colored People of Texas.”

¹⁸³Ibid.

Address to the People: A Petition to the Legislature, and a Memorial to Congress (November 1865), 9–10.

¹⁶⁸Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Arkansas, 194.

¹⁶⁹Proceedings of the Freedmen’s Convention of Georgia, 18–19.

¹⁷⁰Proceedings of the First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky Held in Lexington, 22.

¹⁷¹Proceedings of the Colored People’s Educational Convention Held in Jefferson City, 28.

¹⁷²Proceedings of the Colored National Labor Convention, 10.

¹⁷³Ibid., 27.

¹⁷⁴Proceedings of the Southern States Convention of Colored Men, 24.

human progress.... It affords the benefits to be derived from the arts and literature of the world, past and present."¹⁸⁴ The following year, an "Address to the Colored People of Kentucky" asserted that "Education is most important factor in the solution of the problem that is before you."¹⁸⁵ Georgia delegates in 1888 spoke on behalf of the Blair Education Bill, "No people should be more interested about federal aid to education than the colored man. It is a lever than will lift him from the grave of ignominy and hatred and give him a prominent place on the stage of progress. The time has fully come in the history of the colored race when the Negro must no longer be a chattel and a tool."¹⁸⁶ They also believed that without education "the future will present insurmountable difficulties."¹⁸⁷

Professor Hugh M. Browne, an educator, minister, and civil rights activist, spoke to the Hampton Negro Conference in 1899. Topics covered included the inadequate facilities, the lack of teachers, and the failure to agree on the type of education needed by Black southerners—literary or industrial. Browne related schooling to both the future of the race and the future of the region. "I believe that this matter of education is the vital feature connected with the development of the South."¹⁸⁸ He advocated for improvement of education so that Black southerners might contribute to the growth and progress of their native land. The temporal feature of this foundational right was present in 1899, as it was at the end of the war. Resistance by the white South and efforts to keep the labor force ignorant made Black education an ongoing crisis that required continual attention.

3. Conclusion

The Colored Conventions Movement was a vital part of nineteenth-century American political development. Black southerners assembled in the very states where they had recently been enslaved to demand recognition as citizens and equal treatment under the law. The delegates illuminated the power of time as a tool for individuals and social movements. They used the statements, resolutions, and addresses of this public forum to advocate on their own behalf. Time is a constant theme of the movement—not just change over time or the passage of time, but the perception of time, and ultimately the use of time and temporal language as a political tool. Many of their efforts failed initially, but they did not quietly accept subjugation and abuse. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black leaders again used the past and present to demand a different path into the future, building on the rhetorical work of their activist predecessors.

The most prevalent temporal tool in the convention debates was the use of the past to correct the distorted historical record. Participants did not just recount history from a Black perspective; they forced the white public to confront the brutality of slavery and accept the many contributions that African Americans had made to the nation's economic development and military efforts. Their timeline established a path from suffering and degradation to land cultivation to military service to full citizenship. The conventions gathered during the same period in which

representatives of the white South were telling the story of benevolent slaveholders, white supremacy, ungrateful and ignorant Blacks, evil Republicans, failures of Reconstruction, white victimhood, a lost cause, an old South, and the promise of a new one. It was thus imperative that Black delegates engage with the past while advocating for the future.

The second temporal tool was the identification of emancipation as a new founding moment and the present as an ongoing moment of crisis. In a 1967 speech criticizing the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated a similar vision of the present wherein political action was necessary to define the path of future development:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The 'tide in the affairs of men' does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late.'¹⁸⁹

The delegates of the Colored Conventions Movement also recognized that their actions would affect the legal and political path forward and whether African Americans would gain essential rights. The speeches, writings, and accounts show that they saw the present as a time of transition that would shape tomorrow—an example of individuals within a social movement recognizing a critical juncture in history and attempting to change the path of development. They would not "wait" any longer for equal treatment; they would instead upend the control of time by whites.¹⁹⁰ And they used the language of time in their advocacy.

For Black southerners, labor and education rights were foundational. Without the ability to earn a living and enlighten the mind, participation in politics through voting and officeholding would be impossible. The convention debates and documents show that African Americans recognized that the shift from slavery to freedom (real freedom) would require education and protection of agricultural laborers from the white landholders of the South. Black southerners were previously denied education to their detriment and to the advantage of whites, so the right to a free public education was critical for the future of Blacks in the South and in America. The struggle over how a new free economy might operate required Blacks to think about both time and space. Could they acquire land, and if they worked the land of others, could these men and women get paid what they deserved? If not, should African Americans leave the South? The principal way delegates used temporality to advance labor and education rights was by arguing that these rights were necessary in the present to gain more opportunity in the future. There were, however, secondary temporal dimensions to each that appeared as well—labor rights meant individual control over work time, and a free public education was a tool to better understand the past. Convention transcripts repeatedly show the conceptualization of a timeline moving from the ignorance and weakness of slavery to the knowledge and power of independence.

¹⁸⁴*Proceedings of the State Conference of the Colored Men of Florida, Held at Gainesville, February 5, 1884*, 13.

¹⁸⁵*Proceedings of the Colored State Convention Assembled in St. Paul's A.M.E. Church*, 10.

¹⁸⁶*Proceedings of Consultation Convention of 350 Leading Colored Men of Georgia*, 10.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸*Hampton Negro Conference: Number III: July 1899*, 13.

¹⁸⁹Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 243.

¹⁹⁰Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 257

These temporal themes were sometimes joined in the dialog of convention debates. In 1872 at the National Convention of Colored Citizens in New Orleans, Alonzo Jacob Ransier of South Carolina tied together control of the historical narrative, urgency of the present moment, and the rights that would be essential for the future:

I know, gentlemen, that there are those among us, white and colored, who question the propriety or the wisdom of colored men, as such, coming together in regular convention, to the exclusion of the other race or races, to consider matters relating to themselves, being as they are a component part of the great American body politic, composed of other races. But in my humble judgment, gentlemen, if those who take this position will give themselves sufficient time to reflect—will consider for a moment what kind of government we are living under; the wrongs we, as a class, have suffered for years; the tremendous revolution that has swept over the country within the past ten years; the position in which we find ourselves today, though declared to be American citizens; still laboring without adequate compensation, our education and that of our children almost totally neglected; shut out from decent accommodation at the hotels, places of amusement and in common carriers, and exercising that most valuable of a freeman's rights, the right to vote as one's conscience and judgment may dictate, at the very peril of our lives in many localities, they would see the propriety, they would be at once convinced of the necessity—if they claim to be human and so regard us—of our coming together, being the aggrieved party, that we may bring our grievances before the country and ask for that relief from this condition, and that protection from these outrages, as citizens of this country, which it is its duty to give.¹⁹¹

Ransier's narrative deployed the themes chronologically moving from the past to the present to the future, and the first rights he mentioned were education and labor. The Colored Conventions Movement was a vibrant, public political exercise in the nineteenth century. It affords a view into how the Black South resisted the manipulation of the past by the white South, managed the founding moment of emancipation and the ongoing crisis of Reconstruction and its aftermath, and demanded labor rights and public education to ensure a New South that looked decidedly different from the one envisioned by their oppressors.

The movement dissipated as the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, but public themes of temporality and racial time persisted. Just a year before his death, Frederick Douglass delivered an address in Washington, DC, titled "Lessons of the Hour." In it, he decried the return to power by Southern white conservatives and warned "the cause lost in the war, is the cause regained in the peace, and the cause gained in the war, is the cause lost in the peace."¹⁹² He claimed that lies about the past had given credence to the idea "that the condition of the colored people of the South has been made worse; that freedom has made their condition worse.... It is another way of saying that slavery is better than freedom; that darkness is better than light and that wrong is better than right."¹⁹³ Optimism about the future still lingered with the despair of the past for many Black southerners. James Weldon Johnson, who was born in Florida and educated in Georgia before moving to New York City and participating in the Harlem Renaissance, composed "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in 1900, which became known as the "Negro

National Anthem" and was used to open gatherings of African Americans and civil rights activists in the new century. The first verse closes with the following:

Sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.¹⁹⁴

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Appendix: The Colored Conventions Movement, 1830–1900¹⁹⁵

- 1830 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in Philadelphia, PA
- 1831 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in Philadelphia, PA
- 1832 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in Philadelphia, PA
- 1833 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in Philadelphia, PA
- 1834 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in New York, NY
- 1835 National Convention of Free People of Colour held in Philadelphia, PA
- 1837 Ohio Convention held in Columbus, OH
- 1840 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Albany
- 1841 Maine State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Portland
- 1841 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Troy
- 1841 Pennsylvania State Convention of Colored Freemen held in Pittsburgh
- 1842 Indiana State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Indianapolis
- 1843 Mid-Atlantic Regional Temperance Convention of Colored Citizens held in Salem, NJ
- 1843 Michigan State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Detroit
- 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens held in Buffalo, NY
- 1843 New York State Convention of Colored People held in Rochester (Seeking Records)
- 1843 Ohio State Colored People's State Convention held in Columbus (Seeking Records)
- 1844 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Schenectady
- 1844 Ohio State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Columbus
- 1845 New York State Free Suffrage Convention held in Geneva
- 1847 National Convention of Colored People and Their Friends held in Troy, NY
- 1847 Canadian Convention of the Colored Population held in Drummondville, ON
- 1848 National Convention of Colored Freemen held in Cleveland, OH
- 1848 Pennsylvania State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Harrisburg
- 1849 Connecticut State Convention of Coloured Men held in New Haven
- 1849 New Jersey State Convention of Coloured Citizens held in Trenton
- 1849 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Hudson
- 1849 Ohio State Convention of Coloured Citizens held in Columbus

¹⁹⁴James Weldon Johnson, *Complete Poems*. (First published in 1927 by Viking Press). Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 121; Johnson composed the lyrics, and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson composed the music for a group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday in 1900.

¹⁹⁵Southern conventions are in bold. "Seeking Records" is designated by the Colored Conventions Project. There are likely additional conventions that have yet to be documented. Data were compiled by the author using the Colored Conventions Project, <https://coloredconventions.org/> (last accessed October 5, 2021).

¹⁹¹*Louisiana National Convention of Colored Citizens, in the House of Representatives, at New Orleans, April 10th, 1872.*

¹⁹²Frederick Douglass, *Lessons of the Hour, Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, Washington DC* (Baltimore, MD: Press of Thomas and Evans, 1894), 24.

¹⁹³*Ibid.*, 27–28.

- 1850 Maine State Colored Convention held in Portland
 1850 Fugitive Slave Law Convention held in Cazenovia, NY
 1850 Ohio State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Columbus
 1851 Indiana State Convention of People of Color held in Indianapolis
 1851 New York State Convention of Colored People held in Albany
 1851 North American Convention held in Toronto, ON
 1851 Ohio State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Columbus
 1851 Pennsylvania State Convention of Colored People held in Sandy Lake (Seeking Records)
1852 Maryland State Convention of Free Colored People held in Baltimore
 1852 Ohio State Convention of Colored Freemen held in Cincinnati
 1853 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Muscatine
 1853 Illinois State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Chicago
 1853 National Convention of the Free People of Color held in Rochester, NY
 1853 Ohio State Convention of Colored Freemen held in Columbus
 1853 Canadian Convention for the Improvement of Colored Inhabitants held in Amerstburg, ON
 1854 Connecticut State Convention held in Middletown
 1854 Massachusetts State Council of Colored Citizens held in Boston
 1854 New York State Council of Colored People held in Albany
 1854 National Emigration Convention held in Cleveland OH
 1855 California State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Sacramento
 1855 Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men held in Hartford
 1855 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Albany
 1855 New York State Convention of Colored Men held in Troy
 1855 National Convention of Colored People held in Philadelphia, PA
 1856 California State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Sacramento
 1856 Illinois State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Alton
 1856 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men held in Columbus
 1857 California State Convention of Colored People held in San Francisco
 1857 Iowa State Convention of Colored Men held in Muscatine
 1857 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men held in Columbus
 1858 Massachusetts State Convention of Colored Citizens held in New Bedford
 1858 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Troy
 1858 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men held in Cincinnati
 1858 Canadian Convention held in Chatham ON
 1859 Indiana State Convention of Colored Men held in Indianapolis
 1859 New England Regional Convention of Colored Citizens held in Boston, MA
 1863 Kansas State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Leavenworth
 1863 State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Poughkeepsie, NY
 1864 National Convention of Colored Men held in Syracuse, NY
- 1865 Arkansas State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Little Rock**
 1865 California State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Sacramento
1865 City Meeting of the Colored Citizens of New Bern, NC
1865 City Meeting of the Colored Citizens of Norfolk Virginia
 1865 Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men held in New Haven
 1865 Iowa State Convention of Colored People held in Davenport
 1865 Indiana State Convention of Colored People held in Indianapolis
1865 Louisiana State Convention of Colored People held in New Orleans
 1865 New England Regional Convention of Colored People held in Boston, MA
 1865 Michigan State Equal Rights League Convention held in Detroit
1865 Mississippi State Colored Convention held in Vicksburg, MS
1865 North Carolina State Convention of Colored People held in Raleigh
 1865 New Jersey State Convention of Coloured Men held in Trenton
 1865 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men held in Xenia
 1865 National Equal Rights League Convention held in Cleveland, OH
 1865 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Harrisburg (Feb. 8–10)
 1865 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Harrisburg (Aug. 9–10)
1865 South Carolina State Convention of Colored People held in Charleston
- 1865 Tennessee State Convention of Colored Men held in Nashville**
1865 Virginia State Convention of Colored People held in Alexandria
1865 Washington, DC, Celebration by the Colored People's Educational Monument Association in Memory of Abraham Lincoln
 1866 New Jersey State Colored Convention held in Gloucester (Seeking Records)
1866 Georgia State Freedmen's Convention held in Augusta (Jan. 10)
1866 Georgia State Freedmen's Convention held in Augusta (Apr. 4)
1866 Georgia State Convention of the Equal Rights and Educational Association in Macon
 1866 Illinois State Convention of Colored Men held in Galesburg
 1866 Indiana State Equal Rights League Convention held in Indianapolis
 1866 Kansas State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Lawrence
1866 Kentucky State Convention of Colored Men held in Lexington
1866 Maryland State Convention of Colored People held in Baltimore
1866 North Carolina State Freedmen's Convention held in Raleigh
 1866 New York State Convention of Colored Men held in Albany
 1866 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Pittsburgh
1866 Tennessee State Convention of Colored People held in Nashville
1866 Texas State Central Committee of Colored Men (Seeking Records)
 1867 Ohio State Equal Rights League Convention held in Cincinnati (Seeking Records)
1867 Alabama State Convention of Colored Men held in Mobile
1867 Kentucky State Convention of Colored Men held in Lexington
1867 National Colored Convention held in Washington, DC
1867 National Equal Rights Convention held in Washington, DC
 1867 National Convention of the Colored Soldiers and Sailors in Philadelphia, PA
 1867 Ohio State Equal Rights League Convention held in Cincinnati
 1868 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Des Moines
 1868 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Muscatine
1868 Maryland State Convention of Colored Men held in Baltimore
 1868 New Jersey State Convention of the Colored Men held in Trenton (Seeking Records)
 1868 Pennsylvania State Convention of Colored Men held in Pittsburgh (Seeking Records)
 1868 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Williamsport
1869 Georgia State Colored Labor Convention held in Macon (Seeking Records)
1869 Kentucky State Colored Educational Convention held in Louisville (Seeking Records)
1869 Maryland State Colored Convention held in Baltimore (Seeking Records)
1869 Maryland State Colored Labor Convention
1869 Maryland State Convention of Colored Mechanics held in Baltimore
 1869 Minnesota State Convention of Colored Citizens held in St. Paul
1869 National Convention of Colored Men held in Washington, DC
1869 National Colored Labor Convention held in Washington, DC
 1869 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Philadelphia (Seeking Records)
1869 Texas State Colored Labor Convention held in Galveston (Seeking Records)
1869 Virginia State Convention held in Richmond
1870 Louisiana State Convention held in New Orleans (Seeking Records)
1870 Missouri State Colored People's Educational Convention held in Jefferson City
 1870 New York State Convention of Colored Voters held in Syracuse
 1870 New York State Labor Convention held in Saratoga (Seeking Records)
1871 Alabama Labor Union Convention
1871 Colored National Labor Union Convention held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)
1871 Georgia State Convention of Colored Men held in Atlanta

- 1871 Indiana State Convention of Colored Men held in Indianapolis (Seeking Records)
- 1871 **Kentucky State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Frankfort**
- 1871 **Louisiana State Convention of Colored People held in New Orleans (Seeking Records)**
- 1871 **National Convention of Colored People held in St. Louis Missouri**
- 1871 Nebraska State Convention held in Omaha (Seeking Records)
- 1871 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men held in Columbus
- 1871 **Southern Regional Convention of Colored Men held in Columbia, SC**
- 1871 **Tennessee State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Nashville**
- 1871 **Texas State Colored Convention held in Houston (Seeking Records)**
- 1872 Convention of the Colored People of the Choctaw Nation (Seeking Records)
- 1872 Cuban Slavery Convention held in New York, NY
- 1872 **National Convention of Colored People held in New Orleans, LA**
- 1872 Nebraska State Convention of Colored People held in Omaha
- 1872 New England States Convention of Colored Citizens held in Boston, MA (Seeking Records)
- 1872 New York State Convention of Colored Men held in Troy (Seeking Records)
- 1872 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Harrisburg
- 1873 **Delaware State Convention of Colored People held in Dover**
- 1873 **Georgia State Convention of Colored People held in Macon (Seeking Records)**
- 1873 **Kentucky State Convention held in Frankfort**
- 1873 **Louisiana State Convention held in New Orleans**
- 1873 **National Civil Rights Convention held in Washington, DC**
- 1873 New Jersey State Convention of New Citizens held in New Brunswick
- 1873 Ohio State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Chillicothe (Seeking Records)
- 1873 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention (Seeking Records)
- 1873 **State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)**
- 1873 **Texas State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Brenham**
- 1874 **Alabama Labor Convention of Colored Men held in Montgomery**
- 1874 **Alabama State Convention of Colored Men held in Montgomery**
- 1874 **Louisiana State Convention (Seeking Records)**
- 1874 New York State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Utica (Seeking Records)
- 1874 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention (Seeking Records)
- 1874 **Tennessee State Convention held in Nashville (Seeking Records)**
- 1875 National Convention of Colored Newspaper Men held in Cincinnati, OH
- 1876 **Charleston City Meeting of Colored Citizens South Carolina (Seeking Records)**
- 1876 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Oskaloosa
- 1876 **National Convention of Colored People held in Nashville, TN (Seeking Records)**
- 1876 **South Carolina State Conference of Colored Citizens held in Columbia**
- 1877 **Georgia State Educational Convention of Colored Men held in Hawkinsville**
- 1877 **Kentucky State Colored Educational Convention held in Frankfort**
- 1877 **Missouri State Convention of Colored Teachers held in St. Louis (Seeking Records)**
- 1877 **North Carolina State Convention of Colored Citizens held in Raleigh**
- 1877 Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League Convention held in Erie (Seeking Records)
- 1878 **Colored Laborer's and Business Men's Industrial Convention held in Kansas City, MO (Seeking Records)**
- 1879 **National Conference of Colored Men held in Nashville, TN**
- 1879 **Texas State Convention of Colored People held in Houston**
- 1879 **Louisiana Convention held in New Orleans (Seeking Records)**
- 1880 Illinois State Convention of Colored People held in Springfield (Seeking Records)
- 1880 **National Colored Press Convention held in Louisville, Kentucky (Seeking Records)**
- 1880 **Texas State Farmers Association Convention held in Dallas**
- 1881 **State Convention of the Colored People of Delaware (Seeking Records)**
- 1882 Kansas State Convention of Colored Men held in Parsons
- 1882 **Maryland State Convention held in Baltimore (Seeking Records)**
- 1882 **National Colored Press Convention held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)**
- 1883 **Arkansas State Convention held in Little Rock**
- 1883 Illinois State Convention of Colored People held in Springfield (Seeking Records)
- 1883 Massachusetts State Convention of Colored Men held in Boston (Seeking Records)
- 1883 **National Civil Rights Meeting held in Washington, DC**
- 1883 **National Colored Press Convention held in St. Louis, Missouri (Seeking Records)**
- 1883 **National Convention held in Louisville, KY**
- 1883 Ohio State Convention of Colored People held in Columbus (Seeking Records)
- 1883 **South Carolina State Convention of Colored Men held in Columbia**
- 1883 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Austin**
- 1884 Colored Men's Inter-State Conference held in Pittsburgh
- 1884 **Florida State Convention held in Gainesville**
- 1884 **Mississippi State Convention of Colored Men held in Jackson**
- 1884 **Missouri State Convention of Colored Teachers (Seeking Records)**
- 1884 **Tennessee State Convention of Colored Men**
- 1884 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Houston (Seeking Records)**
- 1885 Illinois State Convention of Colored Men held in Springfield (Seeking Records)
- 1885 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Oskaloosa (Seeking Records)
- 1885 **Kentucky Colored State Convention in Lexington**
- 1885 **Virginia State Convention of Colored People held in Lynchburg (Seeking Records)**
- 1885–86 Iowa State Colored Convention possibly held in Des Moines (Seeking Records)
- 1886 Connecticut State Convention of Colored People
- 1886 National Colored Press Convention held in Atlantic City, New Jersey (Seeking Records)
- 1886 New England States Convention of Colored Men (Seeking Records)
- 1886 Ohio State Convention of Colored People held in Alliance (Seeking Records)
- 1886 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Brenham (Seeking Records)**
- 1887 Kansas State Convention of the Afro-American League held in Topeka (Seeking Records)
- 1887 **National Colored Press Association held in Louisville, KY**
- 1887 National Convention of Colored Men (Seeking Records)
- 1888 **Georgia State Union Brotherhood Convention held in Macon**
- 1888 **National Colored Press Association held in Nashville, TN (Seeking Records)**
- 1889 Illinois State Convention of Colored Men held in Springfield (Seeking Records)
- 1889 **National Colored Press Convention held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)**
- 1889 State Convention of the California Afro-American League (Seeking Records)
- 1889 **Austin County Convention of Colored Men held in Bellville, TX**
- 1889 **McLennan County Convention of Colored Men held in Waco, TX (Seeking Records)**

- 1889 **Caldwell County Convention of Colored Men held in Lockhart, TX**
- 1889 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Waco**
- 1890 **Convention of Colored Americans held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)**
- 1890 **Maryland State Convention of Colored People held in Boston (Seeking Records)**
- 1890 National Colored Press Convention (Seeking Records)
- 1890 National Convention of the Afro-American League held in Chicago, IL (Seeking Records)
- 1891 **American Citizens Equal Rights League Association Conference held in Washington, DC (Seeking Records)**
- 1891 Iowa State Colored Convention held in Cedar Rapids
- 1891 National Colored Press Convention held in Cincinnati, Ohio (Seeking Records)
- 1891 New York State Convention of the Afro-American League (Seeking Records)
- 1891 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Houston (Seeking Records)**
- 1892 Massachusetts State Convention of Colored Men held in Boston (Seeking Records)
- 1892 National Convention of Afro-American Press Association (Seeking Records)
- 1892 New Jersey State Convention of Colored Men held in Trenton
- 1893 National Colored Convention held in Cincinnati, OH
- 1894 **Colored Convention held in Birmingham, Alabama (Emigration)**
- 1894 **National Afro-American Press Association Convention held in Richmond, VA (Seeking Records)**
- 1894 **National Convention of Colored Teachers held in Baltimore, MD (Seeking Records)**
- 1895 **Texas State Convention of Colored Men held in Houston**
- 1897 National Afro-American Press Association Convention (Seeking Records)
- 1898 National Afro-American Press Association Convention (Seeking Records)
- 1898 Pennsylvania State Convention of the Afro-American League (Seeking Records)
- 1899 **Louisiana State Convention of Colored Men held in New Orleans**
- 1899 **Hampton Negro Conference held in Hampton, VA**