The Town Meeting Ideal and Race in America

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Abstract

This essay explores the development of the New England town meeting ideal in connection with matters of race and considers the place of that ideal in post-slavery America. In particular, the essay focuses on how the black abolitionists David Walker and Maria Stewart used the jeremiad to expand the deliberative rhetoric associated with the town meeting, and it considers Albion Tourgée's efforts to implement the town meeting system in the post-bellum South. The essay further considers the place of the lyceum system and the Chautauqua phenomenon, and it addresses how John Dewey's efforts to reinvent the town meeting for a much larger and more diverse nation bore fruit in media forums described as town meetings. Eventually, the town meeting was reinvented yet again as a national political venue that could be used to address persistent racial tensions. The essay closes with a discussion of how the American university could help close the gap between the town meeting-style forum as a place for discussion and the historical town meeting's value as a site of consequential decision-making.

Keywords

The New England town meeting has historically been celebrated as both an effective model of local self-governance and a school for broader forms of citizenship extending to state, national, and even global levels. These democratic and pedagogical features of the town meeting have often been blended together, rather than viewed as distinct elements. In town meetings, it has often been claimed, residents learn to work together on practical matters that affect common goods, such as roads, parks, and public schools. These schools of democratic citizenship foster the cognitive and expressive skills required for coalition building and problem solving. They give participants a sense that they can have an impact on the public domain and contribute to the experience of communal life. While often associated with the New England Puritan tradition, town meetings have also been placed in a lineage of local face-to-face governance that includes the Athenian agora and the Anglo-Saxon folk mote, and they have sometimes been analogized to tribal self-governance (Gustafson, 2000, p. 138-139; Latour and Weibel, 2005). As these comparisons suggest, the town meeting is primarily associated with small, homogeneous communities, not large, diverse polities like the United States.

The philosopher and progressive educator John Dewey, himself a product of a New England township, effectively summed up a long tradition of reflection about the significance of the town meeting for American democracy in his book *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). According to Dewey, "American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centres where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was carried on mainly with hand tools. It took form when English political habits and legal institutions worked under pioneer conditions….The township or some not much larger area was the political medium, and roads, schools, the peace of the community were the political objectives" (p. 101-102). Dewey described the national state as, in effect, the sum of these local institutions, and he proceeded to consider the stresses on this notion of town meeting-style democratic public life that had developed as a consequence of territorial expansion, industrialization, population growth, and new technologies. *The Public and Its Problems* focuses on matters of scale and, in a more muted way, on the challenges posed by the increased ethnic and religious diversity brought about by waves of immigration after the American Civil War.

Dewey chose to skirt the issue of racial diversity, but he need not have: there is a history to the idea that the town meeting could be used to dismantle the legacy of slavery and create a racially integrated society. A leading proponent of this view was Albion Tourgée, a Radical Republican and Civil War veteran, influential civil rights lawyer, and man of letters. Tourgée came from the Western Reserve in Ohio, a region largely settled by New England migrants who brought many of their practices to their new homes, including the town meeting. After the war he moved

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to North Carolina, seeking to "aid in transmuting an oligarchy based on race and caste into a democratic republic" (Tourgée, 2009, dir. Karcher, p. 8). He was a "carpetbagger," that is, a type of Northerner disdained by many white Southerners as an agent of a hostile regime. In North Carolina -- in a region long run by a white planter oligarchy -- he farmed and practiced law, founded a school, and helped his African American neighbors acquire land and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

In 1868 Tourgée played a leading role in the state constitutional convention, where he advocated for the creation of self-governing townships. As he wrote in his novel *Bricks without Straw* (1880), Tourgée believed that the racial and class inequities of the South would only be resolved through the exercise of democratic self-rule rooted in the town meeting. The Reconstruction era came to an end in 1877, reaching its dismal conclusion following a wave of white supremacist reaction exemplified by the Ku Klux Klan. The North Carolina township system was dismantled and oligarchy was restored, with the governor and state legislature taking responsibility for all official appointments. In 1879 Tourgée left the South forever. His political aspirations had been upended, his life had been threatened, his personal finances were in a shambles, and his lofty goals had crumbled (Elliott, 2006; Karcher, 2009).

A few months later he published *A Fool's Errand* (1879), his first Reconstruction novel, which drew comparisons to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and achieved similarly explosive sales and international circulation. Based on his experiences as a white Northerner in the Reconstruction-era South, *A Fool's Errand* highlights white efforts to transform the legacy of slavery. It ends with a plea for a national system of education: "Let the Nation educate the colored man and the poor-white man *because* the Nation held them in bondage, and is responsible for their education: educate the voter *because* the Nation can not afford that he should be ignorant" (Tourgée, 1961, p. 387).

This emphasis on education also appears in *Bricks without Straw*, which gives greater scope to the experiences of formerly enslaved people. Two of this novel's central characters, Nimbus and Eliab Hill, exemplify the freed people's aspirations toward self-sufficiency and citizenship. Together they build a thriving African American community based on Nimbus's agricultural skill and business acumen and Eliab's spiritual leadership. They hope to place the budding town on solid foundations with the help of Mollie Ainslee, a young white woman from Massachusetts, who sets up a school in the community's church. Signs of trouble arise when a request to have a polling station in the settlement is rejected out of concern that it will provoke racial antagonism. Any sign of civic agency among former slaves is taken as a threat by local whites, who respond violently to a parade

of black voters into town, on their way to the poll located there. Terrorized by the Klan, the once-thriving free black community falls apart.

Even as the "town" organized by Nimbus and Elias meets its sad end, Northern and Southern whites reconcile through the marriage of Ainslee to Hesden Le Moyne, a local plantation owner who has an ambivalent relationship to his heritage. It is Le Moyne who becomes the mouthpiece for "the success and glory of the great republic" (p. 322) – which he, like Tourgée, believes to reside in the South's adaptation of the New England township system and the town meeting. Tourgée expresses his own views through a Southern plantation owner – one who has lost an arm defending his homeland, despite his ambivalence about the cause – apparently to suggest that his failed efforts to establish precisely such a system in fact had local support, and that with the right leadership the effort might still succeed. Le Moyne champions the town meeting as a crucial institution for reintegrating the South and bringing it into line with Northern democratic values. "I venture to say," LeMoyne asserts to a skeptical Northern Congressman, "that the presence and absence of the town-meeting – the township system or its equivalent – in the North and in the South, constituted a difference not less vital and important than that of slavery itself. In fact, sir," he continues, "I sincerely believe that it is to the township system that the North owes the fact that it is not to-day as much slave territory as the South was before the war" (p. 422). The South, by contrast, "is to-day and always has been a stranger to local self-government" (p. 424-5). In that region, officials are appointed by "some central power in the county" (p. 425) rather than by popular election. LeMoyne goes on to attribute New England's early abolition of slavery, high levels of education, and greater per capita wealth to the influence of the town meeting. He calls for a federally funded educational system that would alleviate lasting tensions between North and South by proving to Southern whites that the aim of the North was not to dominate them but to end racial injustice, as well as to help create the essential conditions for self-government in a mixed race community. The township system, Le Moyne argues, has proven to be "an essential concomitant of political equality" as well as "a vital element of American liberty" (p. 423). Citing Alexis de Tocqueville, he traces the town meeting to the "the little colony upon the Mayflower" (p. 426) and makes a case for republican self-government that closely resembles arguments dating back to before the Civil War.

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The significance of the town meeting as it figures in *Bricks without Straw* will be clearer after some background into how the town meeting emerged as a central element of American political self-conception, and of the place that race held in relation to its emergence. This history is tied to the emergence of modern

republican thought, whose roots in classical republicanism have been thoroughly explored by Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock (among many others). Philip Pettit's *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997) provides the most sustained consideration of this political regime's contemporary relevance. Modern republican thought is sometimes cast as "neorepublicanism," and it shares important affinities with deliberative democracy theory.

In *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (2011), I provide the first sustained historical and critical treatment of modern republicanism, focused on the years between 1815 and the late 1830s – an age of robust political inventiveness and exploration in the United States and throughout the Atlantic world.[1] During this period, modern republican thought emerged as a distinct ideology, linked to yet distinct from its classical predecessors. The modern republic shared with its classical ancestors a foundational idea of popular sovereignty, but it differed in size (the extended republic replaced the city-state), economy (commerce and later industry became more important than agriculture), and makeup (movements of people and contests for rights gradually produced a greatly diversified body of citizens). The expansion of the suffrage in the United States, the anticolonial revolutions in Haiti and Spanish America, the Greek independence movement, and revolution and counterrevolution in Europe all contributed distinctive elements to the modern republic.

Representation provided the formal mechanism for expanding classical republican practices of face-to-face deliberation to large territories. Instead of meeting together to discuss and debate, citizens sent their elected officials to deliberate for them. The relationship between a representative government and the deliberations of the broader public from which it drew authority, however, was not well defined. The grassroots, bottom-up narrative of American state formation built on the practices of the New England town meeting is based on events leading to the Revolution. Two central figures in the formation and circulation of the town meeting narrative are President John Adams, who began his political career as a member of the Braintree, MA town meeting; and his cousin Samuel Adams, who was a leader of the Boston Town Meeting, which played a significant role in the revolution. In later years, Samuel Adams became closely associated with the ideal of the town meeting as a means for translating local sentiment into revolutionary activism.

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[1] This section is a modified version of my discussion in *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011), 5-6, 21-29, 41-46, and Chapter 5.

As early as 1788, the Reverend William Gordon identified the town meeting as foundational to the polity then taking shape. In his four-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America*, Gordon described the structures of self-governance in the region: "Every town is an incorporated republic. The selectmen, by their own authority, or upon the application of a certain number of townsmen, issue a warrant for the calling of a town-meeting. The warrant mentions the business to be engaged in, and no other can be legally executed. The inhabitants are warned to attend; and they that are present, though not a quarter or a tenth of the whole, have a right to proceed. They choose a president by the name of moderator, who regulates the proceedings of the meeting. Each individual has an equal liberty of delivering his opinion, and is not liable to be silenced or brow-beaten by a richer or greater townsman than himself. Every freeman, or freeholder, gives his own vote or not, and for or against, as he pleases; and each vote weighs equally, whether that of the highest or lowest inhabitant. . . . All the New England towns are on the same plan in general" (p. 382). Gordon's description captures the way that republican ideals came to be associated with the town meeting, and highlights the participation of white men from different economic and social backgrounds.

Town meetings were not always effective ways to mediate conflicts, particularly at times when those conflicts were ideological in nature. The limits of the meetings can be seen in a series of letters that an obscure Massachusetts merchant named Henry Bromfield wrote to his daughter about stark partisan divisions between the Federalists and the Democrats in the Harvard, Massachusetts meeting. In one letter from 1813, Bromfield described how ideologically based partisanship affected deliberations: "We have a number of bad men among us of French principles, as you will find; We had a Town meeting on Monday, but the democrats were so noisy and ungovernable, that the federalists left the meeting, at which the democrats chose ten of their number to go to a convention of democrats now sitting at Worcester and who are gone there; some of the most worthless and disorderly men among us. We are in a sad situation, and what the present convention will end in, a gracious God only knows" (Slade, 1890, p. 18). The withdrawal of the Federalist members from the meeting allowed the Democrats to seize power. This snapshot of deliberative breakdown at a town meeting is suggestive of a more general dynamic that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Federalist Party.

The New England town meeting ideal was given new life in Daniel Webster's oration on "The First Settlement of New England," which he presented at Plymouth in 1820. Remarkably popular in its own day, the oration offers a noteworthy reflection on the political history of the United States. Webster (1782-1852) was a prominent lawyer and politician who rose to national prominence in the 1820s. Over the course of his political career, he represented Massachusetts in both houses

of Congress, twice served as secretary of state, and ran for president on three occasions.

Like President John Adams, who was an important mentor, Webster was the son of a man who was active in the local politics of New England townships. Judge Ebenezer Webster held a number of public positions in New Hampshire, and he was elected to serve as the moderator of town meetings on forty-four occasions between 1768 and 1803 (Nesmith, p. 324). In his Plymouth oration, Daniel Webster singled out New England town meetings for praise, describing them as "so many councils or parliaments, in which common interests are discussed, and useful knowledge acquired and communicated" (p. 40). Webster proved to be an influential framer of an emerging narrative about the New England town meeting and its actual and potential contributions to national political life.

Remarkable for its intellectual substance as well as the accessibility and elegance of its language, Webster's address presents a history of representative government that begins in ancient Greece and Rome, encompasses different types of colonial relationships (notably contrasting Britain's Roman-style extractive colonies in the West Indies with the Greek-like approach to local authority in British North America), and distinguishes between direct democracy (which led to the downfall of Athens) and representative institutions (where the U.S. federal government was more similar to Rome – though with important differences to avoid the class warfare that brought down the Roman Republic). Webster suggested two ways that the town meetings contributed to the evolution of representative government in the United States: by giving citizens direct experience in self-government; and by training young people who might go on to serve in higher office.

Praise for the town meeting circulated in the region's major intellectual circles – notably including the works of historian George Bancroft and Transcendentalist writers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson -- whose members disseminated versions of Webster's narrative far and wide. It came to inform what historian Harlow W. Sheidley has called "sectional nationalism," which involved an effort to project New England values onto the expanding polity – an effort that achieved greatest success in western New York and the Midwest.

This narrative was picked up by Alexis de Tocqueville, who noted that town meetings embodied the local tradition of self-governance that laid the groundwork for the federal republic in *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840). Tocqueville's treatment of American democracy reflects the influence of the Boston-based intellectual Jared Sparks, a Webster associate. *Democracy in America* in turn had a substantial impact on John Stuart Mill's understanding of the role that local deliberative bodies can play in representative governments. Tocqueville also

emphasized the place of voluntary associations, which extended the town meeting tradition in new directions. Mimicking the forms of state with their constitutions, debates, and parliamentary procedures, voluntary associations were organized to solve social problems through economic development (agricultural societies and working men's groups), institution building (Bible societies and churches), moral reform and self-culture (temperance, the lyceum movement), and social reform (colonization societies and mission societies).

This conceptual broadening of the town meeting ideal to include voluntary associations had been previously suggested by the Philadelphia lawyer and politician Charles Jared Ingersoll in a speech to the American Philosophical Society that was reprinted in *The North American Review*, a Boston-based periodical with which Jared Sparks was closely associated. Ingersoll described the "innumerable voluntary associations" in the United States and noted that "several hundred thousand persons assemble in this country every year, in various spontaneous convocations, to discuss and determine measures according to parliamentary routine." The effect on the members of "self-created associations," ranging from "bible societies to the lowest handicraft," was to "sharpen their wits, temper their passions, and cultivate their elocution" (p. 30-35) as well as to familiarize a great many people with the legislative process.

Tocqueville similarly wrote that "as soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world…they unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example; when it speaks, men listen" (p. 516). In these voluntary associations, "large numbers see, speak, listen, and stimulate each other to carry out all sorts of undertakings in common. Then they carry these conceptions with them into the affairs of civil life and put them to a thousand uses" (p. 524). Already in the 1820s and 30s, then, a broad consensus was forming that representative democracy worked through deliberative bodies, beginning locally in town meetings and voluntary associations, and extending to the state and federal governments. The kinds of people interacting in these deliberative organizations varied. In many cases membership was restricted by one or more identity categories, such as gender, race, or religion, but some groups were more heterogeneous.

Even as voluntary organizations proliferated and their memberships became more varied, there was no consensus developing around the extension of the franchise to excluded groups, notably women and free blacks. There was likewise no clear path to a negotiated end to slavery or a way of addressing the many conflicts and injustices arising from settler colonialism. Here the revolutionary associations of the town meeting, often traced to Sam Adams, helped to foster new styles of activist

politics. During the 1820s there arose a movement to oppose Indian Removal, prominently involving women, and with a locus of activity in Boston. Around this same time anti-slavery activism entered a new phase.

The slave population in the New England states had never been large, and after independence regional governments were comparatively forward in their use of legal means to end the institution. Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire abolished slavery soon after the Revolution, while Rhode Island and Connecticut passed gradual emancipation laws that brought an official end to slavery in the 1840s. (Maine, the sixth New England state, was part of Massachusetts until 1820, at which time slavery was already illegal.) With slavery largely ended in the region, Boston developed into a hub of national antislavery activism. It was there that William Lloyd Garrison established *The Liberator* in 1831. Garrison went on to organize the New England Anti-Slavery Society the following year, followed two years later by the American Anti-Slavery Society. Long the leading edge of antislavery sentiment in the United States, New England – and Boston in particular – became the hub of immediatism, that is, the demand for an immediate end to slavery.

Boston's African American community had long been involved in anti-slavery efforts, providing a base on which Garrison built. David Walker and Maria Stewart were two noteworthy activists and Garrison associates, whose speeches and writings were powerful influences in their own day and continue to draw readers. In their works Walker and Stewart employed prophetic rhetoric to advance a multiracial ideal of the modern republic based on full citizenship rights, equality before the law, and inclusive deliberations. These antiracist leaders were active for a handful of years around 1830, during which time they published speeches, manifestoes, autobiographies, and histories in which modern republicanism was both the object and the tool of critique. In their political writings they interrogated the way racialist thought related to republican ideals and highlighted the contradictions between republicanism and race-based nationalism. Their works examine a national crisis in deliberation produced by the increasingly pointed exclusion of people of color from mainstream civic life in the United States, particularly after the presidential election of 1828 when Andrew Jackson, a prominent slave owner and leading proponent of Indian removal, won the executive office.

Contending with the consequences of the Jackson victory – the further extension of white manhood suffrage, the implementation of Indian Removal, and the consequent expansion of slave territory into the old Southwest -- Walker and Stewart responded with a rhetorical style that they honed in addresses to Boston's African American civic organizations, notably the Prince Hall Masons, the

Massachusetts General Colored Association, and the African American Female Intelligence Society. In their addresses they employed the jeremiad, a traditional genre of social critique based on the biblical Book of Jeremiah. Their works are distinguished by their shared emphasis on the ways that prejudice closed down avenues of communication, and for their development of evangelical Christian strategies of social reform to address that prejudice. These public figures used language in an effort to overcome white prejudices and achieve the inclusive deliberations essential to a well-functioning republic. They contributed importantly to the especially vigorous discussion in and around Boston about the potential for and limits to the deliberative traditions of the town meeting.

Stewart and Walker brought the conditions of public discourse into sharp focus and sought to redefine the relationships between the speaker, the audience, and the larger culture. Their works particularly highlighted the way that racist attitudes foreclosed the interracial deliberations that would have better fulfilled major republican objectives, including self-government and resistance to oppression. They also drew on the experiences of other republics – notably, Haiti – as well as the Atlantic world history of modern republicanism, to promote deliberative reform that would allow minority communities to resist oppression and achieve self-definition as well as full participation and equality within the early American republic.

While the jeremiad is a genre that lends itself most directly to an oppositional stance, Walker and especially Stewart transformed it into a tool of deliberative reform. They accomplished this in part by exhorting their audiences to examine their prejudices and embrace more racially inclusive institutions and more fully democratic practices of deliberation. Even as they shared basic themes and rhetorical strategies, their works had different audiences and specific objectives. Walker used the jeremiad to unite the "coloured citizens of the world" against white supremacists, alternately appealing to white readers and threatening them with the Lord's vengeance. In a somewhat different manner, Stewart pursued a multi-layered jeremiad, directing a gender-based critique at men of all races while also criticizing white racism and calling for black development and unity. The jeremiads of Stewart and Walker shared important features as well: they exposed the racist assumptions of a white supremacist society; and they challenged the early American republic to be transformed or be destroyed.

Walker was a free-born Southern black man who had travelled extensively around the United States before settling in Boston. He became involved in the active black community there and worked as the principal agent for *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American owned and edited newspaper. In 1829 he published *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the*

World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of Americas. With its preamble and four articles, the *Appeal* alluded to the U.S. Constitution and to the proliferating constitutions of the era, including the newly revised state constitutions and the constitutions of France, Haiti, the Cherokee republic, and the Latin American republics.

As a genre, constitutions typically communicate impersonality, universal accessibility, and permanence. They create institutional sites of deliberation, such as the Senate, but they exclude the deliberative process that produced them. On his title page Walker disrupted his constitutional model when he identified himself as the author ("Walker's Appeal") and then specified an audience ("the coloured citizens of the world") and a place and date of composition ("Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829"). He opened his preamble addressing "My dearly beloved Brethren and Fellow Citizens" (p. 3), and each article began with a similar preacher-like appeal. The tensions between natural law, divine law, and positive law that were endemic to the legal culture of the early United States emerge here as problems of literary form. In this text designed to create the physical and vocal effects of speech through typography, the preacher's voice breaks open the Constitution that authorized slavery and excluded African Americans from full citizenship. The textual "voice" signifies the spirit that smashes the dead letter of the law; the constitutional form is shattered by the spiritual meaning that it fails to contain.

Even as he posed a sharp challenge to the Constitutional order, Walker insisted that political representation was an important step in the creation of a multiracial republic, and he pointedly observed the absence of black legislators, lawyers, and jurors in the United States. Using biblical language, he appealed to the portion of his white audience that was capable of hearing and responding to his message, repeatedly alluding to Isaiah's invitation to "let us reason," and warning that if they did not rid themselves of "fears and prejudices" and promote black education and Christian conversion, then God's "crushing arm of power" (p. 72–73) would intervene to liberate African Americans from white oppression. The jeremiad form shifted the content of Walker's message away from deliberative exchange, instead seeking to inspire fear as he warned Americans that "your DESTRUCTION is at hand . . . unless you REPENT" (p. 45).

The *Appeal* engaged the deliberative practices of Walker's contemporaries while putting forward a position that embodied metaphysical truth claims that implicitly challenged deliberative ideals, but with the aim of achieving more inclusive – and thus more effective -- deliberations. Walker emphasized that black and white Americans needed to engage in critical self-analysis and social reform if they were to achieve the Christian equality whose accomplishment alone would prevent

divine retribution and realize deliberative democratic ideals. He called on blacks to unite in their resistance to oppression, promising that God would be with them in a just cause if white Americans refused to reform. Walker died suddenly in 1830, just as the abolitionist movement was entering a new phase under Garrison's leadership.

After Walker's death, Maria Stewart played a similar role advocating for the abolitionist cause in the African American associations of Boston. While Stewart shared a number of themes and rhetorical strategies with Walker, her approach differed in two crucial ways: she made women central to the republican project; and she split the jeremiad form, directing its components of reform and punishment at different audiences. While Walker stressed the breakdown in deliberation between whites and blacks, Stewart emphasized the divisions within Boston's African American community that contributed to the deliberative crisis over slavery. "The general cry among the people is, 'Our own color are our greatest opposers';" she observed, "and even the whites say that we are greater enemies towards each other, than they are towards us." "Come let us plead our cause before the whites," she told an audience at Franklin Hall in 1832, urging the black community to unite in an effort to solicit white support for abolition.

Like Walker, Stewart sought to unite Christian and republican principles and bring them to fruition. In her early tract "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build" (1831), she laid out a nuanced argument about the multiracial Christian republic. "All the nations of the earth are crying out for liberty and equality" (p. 29) promoted by the "great and mighty men of America" (p. 39), who supported republican movements in places like Poland, Greece, Ireland and France. Indeed, Americans "have acknowledged all the nations of the earth, except Hayti" (p. 39), she observed, implying a racial cause for this distinction. Stewart contested this rationale, emphasizing that "it is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is the principles formed within the soul" (p. 29).

She went on to outline a course of action focused on moral reform, education, and economic development, but directed specifically to the black community. The targets of her proposed reforms were familiar figures in contemporary social criticism. Permissive mothers, vain daughters, ignorant and unambitious fathers and husbands, and extravagant households were commonly diagnosed ills in the early republic, and Stewart criticized them all. Like Walker, she devoted considerable attention to the need for better education, but she focused proportionally more attention on the moral reform of Boston's black community and less on the sources of white oppression. She expressly distanced herself from Walker's more inflammatory passages, urging her "brethren" to "sheathe your

swords, and calm your angry passions" (p. 40) -- rejecting the path of republican revolution.

For Stewart the "daughters of Africa" (p. 30) played a central role in the forming of principles that would allow African Americans to achieve full citizenship. Republican wives and mothers should raise virtuous children and inspire men with "a holy zeal for freedom's cause" (p. 31). A daughter should be raised to "blush at vulgarity," and a son trained to "thirst for knowledge," rise "above trifles," and focus on the future, "when he shall redress the wrongs of his father and plead the cause of his brethren" (p. 31). In addition to emphasizing the importance of their work as mothers, Stewart called on women to "excel in good housewifery" (p. 37) and use the profits of their domestic economy to contribute to civic projects.

United in knowledge and love, the black community could rise up from its oppression and "the chains of slavery and ignorance would melt like wax before the flames" (p. 31). By linking the ills of slavery and oppression to the choices of black individuals and communities, Stewart sought to inspire her audience to take steps that she believed could improve their lives. Her most specific proposal was directed to the "daughters of Africa," whom she invited to establish a fund that could be used to build a high school. Stewart saw education as the avenue to individual and collective improvement in a modern republic, and women were central to that endeavor.

In *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1835), the culminating publication of Stewart's Boston period, Meditation VI begins with a passage from Isaiah that had previously been cited by Walker: "Come, now, saith the Lord, and let us reason together." Like her mentor, she followed this invitation with a warning that "this people have sinned a great sin." True to the original scripture, Stewart offered to deliberate with members of the community on terms that she presented as divinely ordained.

The conclusion of Stewart's early work "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" offered a vivid image of the speaker isolated and embattled, in the manner of Jeremiah before the Pharisees: "I stand alone in your midst, exposed to the fiery darts of the devil, and to the assaults of wicked men. But though all the powers of earth and hell were to combine against me, though all nature should sink into decay, still I would trust in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation" (p. 41). Adopting a rhetorical posture as an isolated prophet in this address Stewart anticipated her actual stance two years later when she bade farewell to Boston.

Her isolation poses a sharp contrast with Walker's concluding focus on uniting the colored citizens of the world against their white oppressors – resistance, it seems,

offered a more compelling rallying point and a clearer objective than deliberative reform. Struggling to overturn race and gender prejudices and build a more inclusive culture of deliberation, Stewart turned to the work of education that she had repeatedly called for in her addresses. In 1833 she left Boston for New York, where she taught in the public schools; she later continued her work as an educator in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

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The works of David Walker and Maria Stewart suggest how the republican ideals that had come to be associated with the town meeting could be interrogated and reshaped to address issues of racial injustice. Ultimately, of course, these and other efforts to use deliberative reform to reshape American society failed. War and not deliberation ended slavery in the United States. Even so, while the American Civil War demonstrated the limits of the nation's deliberative institutions and practices, it did not kill those ideals altogether. Celebrations of the town meeting never entirely disappeared – indeed, the first volume of George Bancroft's ten-volume *History of the United States* (1834-74) appeared shortly after the works of Walker and Stewart, giving influential shape to the theory that American democracy originated with the Puritans and their town meetings. Bancroft was a descendant of early settlers and a devoted son of Massachusetts, who, like Sparks and Webster, had connections to the *North American Review*. He took up ideas that he learned during his studies in Germany and developed a form of Romantic historiography that put the growth and spread of democracy at the heart of US history. In part as a consequence of Bancroft's considerable influence, the possibility of disseminating the town meeting throughout the expanding United States was offered as a solution to deep-seated social problems, including race relations, in the period after the Civil War.

This understanding of the history and value of the town meeting is more amply developed in an article by the historian Arthur May Mowry on the "Influence of John Calvin on the New England Town Meeting" that appeared in the March 1890 edition of the *New England Magazine*. Explicitly building on the claims presented in Bancroft's *History of the United States*, Mowry cites an impressive lineage for this association: "The town-meeting of the seventeenth century has been declared to be most precious by such men as John Stuart Mill, De Tocqueville, John Adams, Samuel Adams, and Ralph Waldo Emerson" (p. 109).

Mowry also cites the Unitarian minister George Batchelor and Bryce on what is sometimes called the "Teutonic germ theory," that is, the theory that the town meeting descended from Germanic traditions of self-governance known as folk-motes (a view that Tourgée alluded to as well in *Bricks without Straw*): "There can

be no reasonable doubt that the town-meeting found only in New England is the legitimate descendant of the Germanic folk-mote, the fixed, frequent, accessible meeting of the individual freemen for discussing and deciding upon public matters. And yet this folk-mote reappeared in the New England town-meeting, after many years of decay and almost actual disappearance in England. The lack of patriotism and of nationality, together with the all-powerful sway of the clergy, and the succeeding political tyranny of the Tudor rulers of England, had nearly blotted out of existence this democratic form of government. How and why the Puritan Fathers revived this old institution cannot fail to interest any student either of religion, history, or civics" (p. 102).

The Anglo-Saxonist bias behind this theory of Germanic origins becomes apparent when Mowry addresses the future of the town and the town meeting: "What is the present condition of the town and the town-meeting? What is to be its future? The growth of the towns and the necessity of making them into cities is one cause of change. The increase of foreigners, i.e. of those who are not of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and have not as yet imbibed fully the principles that lie back of a proper conducting of town and town-meeting, furnishes another cause of change" (p. 109).

Mowry closes his essay with a lengthy quotation in praise of the town meeting by "ex-Governor Long" (that is, John Davis Long, who served as the governor of Massachusetts from 1880-83) and a briefer passage from James Kendall Hosmer, the biographer of Samuel Adams, who wrote: "Certainly it is well to hold the town-meeting in memory; to give it new life if possible wherever it exists, and to reproduce some semblance of it, however faint, in the regions to which it is unknown" (p. 109).

While Mowry's discussion of the Calvinist origins of the town meeting addresses that institution's past, the article immediately preceding it addresses the impact of the town meeting on the future. Titled "The Chautauqua as a New Factor in American Life," and written by Frederick Perry Noble (an affiliate of Chicago's Newberry Library), the essay employs the same language of the Teutonic germ theory as Mowry to describe what was sometimes termed "the Chautauqua phenomenon." The vagueness of the phrase reflects the multifaceted nature of the Chautauqua movement.

Established in 1874 as a semi-permanent Methodist camp meeting on the banks of Chautauqua Lake in southwestern New York, Chautauqua Institution quickly expanded its mission to include interfaith dialogue as well as educational and cultural activities. It also developed a large correspondence learning program with national and international reach, and it spun off numerous regional and traveling Chautauquas that featured lectures and, increasingly over the years, entertainment.

For some four decades between 1880 and 1920 the Chautauqua was a major force in American life, with an especially strong impact on the Midwest (Reiser).

Scholars have connected the Chautauqua phenomenon to the deliberative traditions of town meetings in a loose fashion. They note that by bringing people together to discuss cultural events, lectures, and shared readings, the "mother Chautauqua" (as the original site was known) and its offspring helped create general frames of reference and nurtured habits of civil discourse. It was especially successful at addressing religious differences. Though founded by Methodists, the Institution and the larger Chautauqua movement quickly expanded to include other Protestant denominations; over time it came to involve Catholics and Jews as well. This religious orientation enhanced the movement's appeal to women, who provided an enthusiastic base of support. Early promoters stressed the access to educational resources that the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle made available to women and other people with limited opportunities for formal schooling through correspondence courses and book groups. (Ten thousand Chautauqua-affiliated reading groups existed in 1900.)

Moreover the grounds of the Institution provided a semi-public space where women could experience an unusual degree of social freedom and intellectual opportunity. Though it would be misleading to suggest that Chautauqua's leadership embraced the cause of women's rights, the issues were actively discussed. Woman suffrage became a high profile topic at the Institution in 1900, when Susan B. Anthony led a successful effort to give a pro-woman suffrage tenor to the "Woman's Day" events, despite the opposition of conservative co-founder John Heyl Vincent (Kilde).

Noble's strategic references to the "folk-mote" in his *New England Magazine* essay on the Chautauqua suggest an effort to broaden the basis of support for the town meeting idea by appealing to the masses of German immigrants that had entered the country since the 1840s. "The large fact called Chautauqua has its root in some sort amidst the German forests and in the days of Hermann," Noble explains. "Our Teuton forefathers held their folk-mote as open-air gatherings under the trees. The institution was both political and religious in its character, and emigrated to England and to New England. The Great and General Court of Massachusetts was a democratic folk-mote; the General Camp-Meeting of Kentucky was a religious folk-mote. In the religious democracy of the Bay State popular education was born; in the Ohio Valley was conceived the idea of utilizing the camp-meeting for the needs of an educational democracy" (p. 91). Elsewhere in the essay, Perry described Chautauqua as "the educational folk-mote in the woods" (p. 98). He also related "the Chautauqua idea" to the frontier by calling the Chautauqua phenomenon "the homestead law of intellectual democracy" (p. 99).

Perry stated the impact of Chautauqua most expansively in a passage that reads like a synopsis of deliberative democracy theory: "Chautauqua is a power in the upbuilding of that real democracy wherein character and culture shall be ranked above the wealth and pride of blood and social forms that warp even this republic. It strikes against all false partitions between the classes and the masses. Bringing people together, putting the more scholarly in touch with the less scholarly, enlarging for the community its stock of ideas and common sympathies, Chautauqua leads all sorts and conditions of men into some understanding of each other. As organized feeling, Chautauqua is a social force from whose reserves humanitarian and reformatory movements may draw supplies of power" (p.99).

The idea of Chautauqua as "organized feeling" is especially suggestive in connection with three elements that characterize the essay as a whole: Noble especially highlights the importance to women of the educational, cultural, and social resources that Chautauqua made available; elsewhere in the essay, Noble alludes to the hope that the Chautauqua phenomenon can help defuse class conflict; and finally, he makes no mention of race in the essay, despite the fact that he had a longstanding concern with racial justice. Indeed, Noble would soon become closely involved with the representation of Africa at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, collaborating in that effort with Albion Tourgée. Noble's silence on race reflects a central reality of the version of the town meeting promoted by the Chautauquas.

It did not have to be this way. In 1881, Tourgée had purchased a home in Mayville, New York, a tiny town at the head of Chautauqua Lake, less than five miles from the Institution. From that remote yet oddly central location, midway between New York City and the exploding metropolis of Chicago where he had some of his most important connections, Tourgée remained active in the cause of racial justice. He pursued that goal through a variety of literary and legal endeavors, writing on the subject for *The Chicago Inter-Ocean*, and pursuing his own literary and publishing projects, which included efforts to support African American writers.

Mayville remained his main residence when he agreed to represent Homer Plessy in the watershed case that became *Plessy v. Ferguson.* In its 1896 decision, the Supreme Court fashioned the "separate but equal" policy that established racial segregation as the legal norm throughout the United States. Tourgée felt this failure keenly. He later moved to France, serving as U.S. consul in Bordeaux. After his death in 1905, his body was returned to Mayville for burial.

Tourgée maintained some degree of connection to Chautauqua Institution during his residence at Mayville. His Methodist roots may have made the association congenial, though the extent and nature of any actual ties remain obscure – perhaps because they were minimal. The strongest documented connection involves

Tourgée's daughter Aimee, who for some years in the 1890s wrote a regular arts column in *The Chautauquan Daily* during the summer season. The absence of a strong affiliation between Tourgée and the Institution points to the limits of the Chautauqua phenomenon.

Opening avenues for women, and cautiously advancing religious diversity, the Chautauqua network had an ambiguous impact on race relations. African American performers and speakers presented at the Institution and toured on the Chautauqua circuit, sometimes in exoticized roles. Racial injustice was rarely if ever a major theme. Southern venues were often less than welcoming, and in some locales there came to be independent Chautauquas for African Americans. The kinds of issues that Tourgée and Noble confronted in getting respectful representation of African and African American people at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago – and that Frederick Douglass addressed forthrightly in his speech at the Exposition – were also issues for the Chautauqua system. In this regard, the Chautauqua phenomenon indexes the historic limits of the town meeting ideal as a model for American democracy.

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The failure of Tourgée's political reconstruction – his dream of reproducing the New England township throughout the South – and the transformations in American society addressed in Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* point to two distinct lines of potential development: the more robust use of local governments to address racial disparities; and the creation of media forms that employ the town meeting model to address racial injustice. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Dewey's diagnosis of the challenges besetting American democracy helped catalyze efforts to reclaim the town meeting as a political form by adapting it to the new social and media environment. Among these efforts was "America's Town Meeting of the Air," an innovative radio program of the National Broadcasting Corporation that aired between 1935 and 1956. The program featured experts representing opposing views who debated the issue of the week. There was a live audience whose members were given an opportunity to make statements and pose questions to the experts, in a format that was later adapted by television talk shows. Among the topics that the program covered were labor relations and the place of Communism, the war effort, the nature of democracy, and racial and religious differences. One program asked "Should We Ignore Racial Differences," while another explored "Public Opinion and the Town Meeting Idea."

More recently, the televised town hall meeting became a staple of presidential politics during the 1992 election, when Bill Clinton staged several campaign events that were styled "town meetings" (Fabry). This format – typically involving a

modest-sized, representative audience (where the modes of representation vary depending on the nature of the event), a moderator, and candidates or experts who field questions – has become a familiar element of the political coverage on national television. President Clinton later pursued a "race initiative" involving town meeting-style gatherings in 1997.

More than fifteen years later, two high-profile adaptations of the televised town meeting addressed the persistent racial divide in the United States, when the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) aired town meetings in response to acts of racially charged violence in Ferguson, Missouri and Charleston, South Carolina. Hosted by leading journalist and author Gwen Ifill, *America after Ferguson* (2014) and *America after Charleston* (2015) used the televised town meeting format to engage public figures and typical citizens expressing a spectrum of perspectives on race in the United States. The aim of these events was to create a forum for civil dialogue on issues that can evoke strong emotion, in part because they involve distinct historical experiences and narratives. Across the United States university campuses – which often aspire to serve as incubators for a racially diverse polity -- have also embraced the town meeting model for addressing identity-based conflicts. These forums test the capacity of the town meeting format to stretch in ways that accommodate very different kinds of issues from the maintenance of roads and the running of public schools for which it was originally designed.[2]

If Albion Tourgée came back to life today, he would find a startling paradox: the town meeting as a media event or campus forum has become a preferred model for addressing racial identity and conflict in the United States; and yet the institution itself remains largely confined to its home region of New England, where racial diversity remains relatively thin. The gap between these two ways of enacting the town meeting ideal is profound. Traditional town meetings are places where civic learning occurs in tandem with consequential decision making. The town meeting is not mainly an arena for airing opinions and expressing grievances; it is a place for enacting measures that affect the life of the community. Some of the benefits of the town meeting system can be captured in alternative arenas – school programs, activist organizations, and so forth -- where skills essential to a robustly democratic polity can be developed. Maria Stewart's emphasis on education provides a helpful starting point for considering what pedagogical approaches might best promote capacities for democratic citizenship -- as Stewart famously said, "Talk, without effort, is nothing" (58) – while *Bricks without Straw* illuminates both the benefits

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[2] *America after Charleston* also drew attention for its innovative use of social media. See Goldsmith.

of establishing a strong educational foundation in citizenship practices and the challenges of sustaining it.[3]

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[3] See also works by Amy Gutmann and Danielle Allen, two contemporary theorists of democratic education who extend the ideas of John Dewey.

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