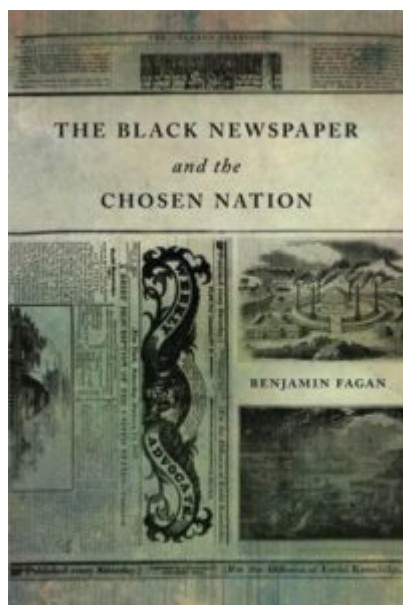
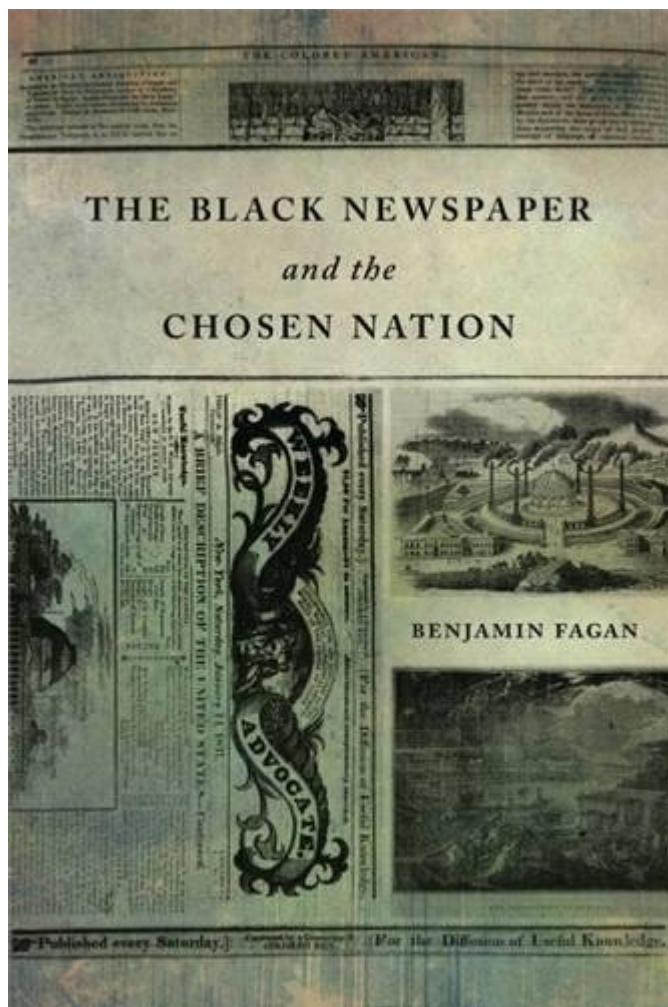


Chronicling Black Chosenness



Benjamin Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016. 200 pp., \$44.95.

In “Chronicling White America,” a short, provocatively titled piece for a forum in *American Periodicals* on digital approaches to periodical studies, Benjamin Fagan laments the paucity of black periodicals in freely accessible digital databases like the Library of Congress’s [Chronicling America](#) and condemns the “modern-day ‘capturing,’ buying, and selling” of antebellum black periodicals by for-profit, private corporations that sequester those archives behind prohibitive digital paywalls. For Fagan, this simultaneous absence from or imprisonment within the digital domain not only echoes the racial, economic, and carceral logics of slavery, but also risks erasing from American history black cultural productions and the communities that made them.

Fagan’s warning, I trust, will resonate with readers of [Common-Place](#), dedicated as they are to countering such historical erasures in early American histories as well as in the physical and digital archives out of which those histories are written. Readers will thus welcome Fagan’s first book, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*, which demonstrates what new questions could be asked and new insights gained if antebellum black newspapers were freely accessible and equally represented in our digital repositories. Keenly aware of the ways that the material obstacles facing scholars of black newspapers and the methodological priorities of book history can obscure the vibrant role black newspapers played in African American communities, Fagan chronicles the emergence of a black periodical tradition and maps the social, material, and institutional networks that created and sustained it. Far from simply recovering a neglected archive, however, Fagan knits together the overlapping histories and figures behind five early black newspapers—the New York-based *Freedom’s Journal* and *Colored American* in the 1820s and 1830s; Frederick Douglass’s transatlantic organ, the *North Star*; Mary Ann Shadd’s Canadian-based *Provincial Freeman*; and the Civil War-era *Weekly Anglo-African*—to demonstrate in profoundly new ways the collaborative and collective project that was the black newspaper in the nineteenth century. While none of these titles will be new to scholars of early African American print or nineteenth-century print culture more broadly, it is Fagan’s scrupulous attention to their interwoven histories and the complex body of black thought about emancipation, citizenship, and nationhood they give voice to that distinguishes his book from earlier, more comprehensive accounts of the nineteenth-century black press like Irvine Garland Penn’s pioneering *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (1891) or from the tremendously insightful but narrow profiles of particular titles like Jacqueline Bacon’s *Freedom’s Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (2007) or Eric Gardner’s recent *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* (2015).

The heart of Fagan’s argument concerns how black newspapers transmitted, shaped, and fostered the myriad “practices of a dynamic black chosenness,” a powerful ideological tradition linking the experiences of black Americans with God’s chosen nation (8). Akin to notions of American exceptionalism, black chosenness became a multifaceted site for imagining black liberation and eventual American citizenship. African American communities saw the newspaper as a powerful medium for articulating such notions as well as a key weapon in

the fight for black rights, and each chapter illuminates a new development in the historical relationship between black chosenness and American national identity. It goes without saying that the conjunction of terms in Fagan's title will remind readers of a commonplace in early American scholarship since Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: the newspaper-nation nexus by which the unique form of the newspaper enables geographically scattered readers to imagine themselves as belonging to the same community. By tracing the trope of black chosenness through five decades of newspapers, however, Fagan revises this commonplace, demonstrating how black editors and readers created communities that transcended national boundaries and "worked to bring black Americans into chosen nations that existed independently of, and at times in direct opposition to, the United States" (7).

Fagan's first chapter shows how *Freedom's Journal* articulated a theory of black chosenness that saw proper black behavior as the avenue to belonging in the American nation. Liberation would be achieved, according to this theory, when black Americans could prove their fitness to white America, and Fagan examines this idea's influence on the editorial practices of the newspaper: always aware of two audiences, one black and one white, the newspaper aimed to instruct black readers in proper behavior while displaying black respectability to a white audience. The middle chapters then redefine black chosenness and its link to American national identity, delineating the different ways that the *Colored American* (chapter two), the *North Star* (chapter three), and the *Provincial Freeman* locate black chosenness beyond the narrow confines of the United States and, in the case of the *Provincial Freeman*, beyond the boundaries of racial solidarity. Eschewing the need for white acceptance and picturing the United States as a modern-day Babylon, the *Colored American* reimagines black Americans "as one part of a larger, chosen American nation," a nation defined by the experience of oppression and not by political membership in the United States (64). The transatlantic orientation of Douglass's *North Star* takes this "uncoupl[ing] of the promise of black chosenness from American identity" one step further, by situating black Americans as one part of a global army of liberation coursing through the revolutionary Atlantic of 1848 (94). For Shadd's *Provincial Freeman*, it is an open question whether the United States could ever be redeemed as a space for black freedom. Her advocacy of emigration to Canada as a pathway to liberation locates freedom in Britishness, not in racial identity, thus demonstrating the "limits of black chosenness" (98). The story of black chosenness, however, does not end in Canada, and Fagan closes his book by examining the ways that the Civil War and emancipation shuffled the deck of black chosenness. While readers of the *Weekly Anglo-African* hardly trusted the U.S. government to ensure the liberation of slaves, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation renewed the cause of black chosenness, linking it once again to American national identity, and the *Weekly Anglo-African* reimagined the mission of black chosenness in the image of an army of black teachers heading south to redeem newly freed slaves and bring them into the American nation.

One of the pleasures of *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* is the way

that Fagan anchors his argument in a detailed accounting of the social, material, and institutional networks of black newspapers. Early in the book he notes that his methodology was “guided by the relationships between and among the people who produced the papers,” and each chapter paints a richly textured portrait of the publishers, editors, printers, subscription agents, writers, and the communities they reached (19). This approach allows Fagan to reconstruct a deeply rooted periodical tradition from black print’s fragmentary record. With each new newspaper that he profiles, Fagan introduces new voices and figures, but also documents the social, institutional, and even familial relationships that stretch across time and space in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, Thomas and Robert Hamilton, responsible for launching the *Weekly Anglo-African* in the late 1850s, not only worked for the *Colored American* in the 1830s, but were also the sons of William Hamilton, a close associate of the men who founded *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827. Another case in point, one that highlights the ways that black newspapers transcended national and even racial boundaries during this time, involves John Dick, a white printer and Scotsman who immigrated to the United States in the 1840s. Having learned the printing trade in London, Dick played a key role at Douglass’ *North Star* in Rochester, not only setting type, but running the day-to-day affairs when Douglass was traveling and serving as an unacknowledged co-editor. Dick reappears, though, in the 1850s in Canada, where he assists Mary Ann Shadd in the printing of the *Provincial Freeman*.

In addition to reconstructing this deeply human history of the early black press, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* also offers an incisive workshop on how to read nineteenth-century newspapers and, in the tradition of some of the best periodical scholarship, Fagan derives his approach to these newspapers from the very “theories and practices developed by the black men and women who lived with the print” (10). Nineteenth-century newspapers can be exasperatingly eclectic and difficult to read, a chaotic landscape of editorials, letters, serialized fiction and poetry, local reporting, subscriber lists, market prices, advertisements, and miscellaneous squibs, jokes, and puns. The black newspaper was no exception, and Fagan teases out a range of editorial, printing, and reading practices by which nineteenth-century audiences made sense of the printscape before them. His sensitivity to the “social nature of newspapers” and the materiality of the newspaper page makes black newspapers a productive site for creative engagement, unexpected connection, and unintended reading (10-14). As a demonstration of the powerful semiotic flexibility of the newspaper’s material form and the ingenious ways black editors employed it, for example, Fagan shows how Douglass folded local reports of slave uprisings and escapes—including the large-scale *Pearl* affair in which seventy-seven slaves attempted to escape aboard a northern-bound schooner before being recaptured—into his coverage of the revolutionary events in Europe in 1848. By juxtaposing local, national, and international events on the same page, Douglass could connect numerous revolutionary fronts and suggest that slave uprisings in the U.S. were just one part of a global war for liberation.

Fagan's work invites us and teaches us how to read like a nineteenth-century newspaper reader, attuned to the unexpected and the unintended, and alive to the possibility of different American futures. It is this invitation that ultimately makes his book such a rewarding and invigorating read.

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