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Corey D. B. Walker. *A Noble Fight: African American Freemasonry and the Struggle for Democracy in America.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xii + 288 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03365-0.

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The Freemasonry of the Race

A Noble Fight, by Corey D. B. Walker, responds to the neglected study of Freemasonry and to scholarship that has interpreted it as a misguided strategy for attaining American citizenship or worse, as an exceptionally conservative force in African American politics and social life. Furthermore, this volume builds on and pushes forward the recent and excellent work of such scholars as Joanna Brooks; Steven Bullock; Stephen Kantrowitz; Cecil Revauger; Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz; Martin Summers; Mark Tabbert; Maurice O. Wallace; and Craig Wilder.[1] *A Noble Fight* opens with a vignette from James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) that reveals the unnamed narrator admitting that it was the "'freemasonry of the race"' who exposed him to, in Walker's words, "a degree of racial knowledge of which he was totally unaware" (p. 2). Walker argues that "the freemasonry of the race" constitutes a perspective particularly suited to deflecting and countering the sources and effects of racial prejudice within the democratic context of the United States (p. 3). In addition, Walker argues that democracy arises not only from sources of liberation and justice, but also from extreme proscription and racial violence. Hence, the acceptance and rejection of various parts of American democracy by African Americans leads Walker to search for new answers to the vexing question of how "African Americans rationalize American democracy?" (p. 9).

By framing his study of African American Freemasonry within debates about democratic theory and association, Walker successfully illustrates the significance of black Freemasonry, and he makes original contributions toward "establishing some preliminary considerations for rethinking the connections between the cognitive processes and cultural practices of voluntary associations and articulations of democracy in America" (p. 4). Legal scholars should pay close attention to how Walker's discursive understanding of democracy relates to the contestation and complexity within American democracy and the multiplicity and irreducibility of African American experience.

An introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue organize the book. Chapter 1 contains little that is directly about African American Freemasonry. However, this section situates later chapters that discuss how black Masonic activism and ideology reveal democracy as an inherently contested category. Walker accounts for bureaucratic definitions of democracy that entail the "'rule of law, promotion of civil and political liberties, and free and fair election of lawmakers."' However, he is more interested in democracy understood as a "set of cultural habits, critical sensibilities, and ideological positions that animate and register particular ideas and understandings of the United States and what it means to be an 'American"' (p. 228n5).[2]

In an impressive review of secondary literature, Walker explains that current configurations of the relationships between democracy and association, whether arising from literate intellectual communities, public activism, or associational activity, define democracy as an inherently valuable phenomenon and suggest that it is declining because of a decrease in various kinds of associative behavior. Walker contests both arguments by exposing "the underside of the democratic experiment," and by showing how black Masonic activism demonstrates the vitality of American democracy (p. 7). Using the tools of literary theory and American studies, Walker traces the idea of democracy from Alexis de Tocqueville to Martin Luther King Jr., and he highlights how democratic ideas have inspired liberal activism while also arising from social, economic, and political exclusion.

In the second chapter, rather than pin the beginnings of black Freemasonry to 1775, in Revolutionary era Boston, Walker employs the idea of "'zones of cultural contact"' to map the encounters between the African di-

aspora and the expansion of Freemasonry (p. 13).[3] Moreover, he argues that these junctures underlay the "supranational" outlook and politics of early African American Freemasonry (p. 74). Walker rightly contends that the significance of black Freemasonry reached well beyond the confines of local and private fraternal groups; it shaped and was shaped by the African diaspora.

Chapter 3 starts from the slave revolt conspiracy, Gabriel's Rebellion, that occurred in the summer of 1800 near Richmond, Virginia, and it ends with the close of the Civil War. Walker traces how the fear of slave uprisings continually forced violent and proscriptive reactions from whites who worried about the psychological and physical results of a reversed racial order. This argument is not new; however, Walker's novel contribution illustrates how the secrecy and connectivity of black Freemasonry helped organize covert and subversive networks of slave communication.

This section also explores the imagining of a black nation. For whites, the idea of a black nation represented not just the acceptance of black citizenship, but also a nightmare of black political control. In contrast, blacks increasingly relied on the concept for inspiration and community formation. Walker threads this debate through a discussion of Gabriel's Rebellion; Martin Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859-62); and the decision of a black Virginian Lodge to name itself Jefferson Lodge, after Thomas Jefferson. Walker discovers black Freemasonry at work in Gabriel's Rebellion. He examines how Delany's Masonic beliefs infused his literary work, and he sees the name Jefferson Lodge as a significant appropriation of a symbolic American founder. Together, these examples indicate how Masonic ideas both absorbed and contested racial boundaries.

Chapters 4 and 5 retain Walker's insistence on a discursive approach; however, he narrows his focus to a close examination of the literate and public activities of black Freemasons in postemancipation Virginia. By understanding African American Freemasonry as representative of a larger field, "the freemasonry of the race," these last two chapters clear new analytic space for understanding black masculinity and respectability as complex and complicated, but nonetheless animating mechanisms of public and discursive activism.

Black Freemasonry expressed the gendered conventions of Freemasonry and larger society, ideas that excluded women from lodge membership and reflected paternal and patriarchal assumptions about female political roles. Walker notes this conflict, while explaining that it reflected a partial response to a history of constant sexual threat and violence. African American Freemasons expressed their masculinity, in part, through the supervision and guarding of black female bodies. Placing the body at the center of Masonic notions about self-representation and self-respect, Walker explains that black Freemasonry sought to redeem the female and male black body by expressing them as "controlled, principled, moral, and upright," a view that contrasted with white depictions of the black body, "a specter … uncontrolled and uncontrollable" (p. 142).

Walker describes respectability to function less in terms of socioeconomic differentiation and more in terms of psychological redemption. He examines respectability as a key emotional alloy. Walker also argues against an "economically deterministic model" of class that overlooks the social and educational heterogeneity of lodge members (p. 205). Moreover, he shows how a narrow materialist approach obscures the symbolic nature of status. Walker admits that Masonry created difference among African Americans; however, he examines Masonic parades, funerals, and cornerstone laying ceremonies to reveal how public Masonic rituals also provided a broad sense of community.

Walker successfully opens up the mind of black Freemasonry and locates its symbolic importance within the politics of broader black and white societies. However, Walker could have more closely investigated the role of Freemasonry in the appearance of material and political divisions. For example, using new and fascinating sources Walker narrates a tension between Fairfax Taylor and his son, James T. S. Taylor, who were both prominent social and political activists in postbellum Virginia. The elder Taylor was a black Freemason, and, in the 1860s, helped organize Delevan Baptist Church, the first separate black religious group in Charlottesville, Virginia. However, the father opposed the nomination of his son to be a state constitutional convention delegate and voted for a white candidate. Moreover, James never became a Freemason. Walker sees differences of personality behind the generational conflict, and he suggests that for Fairfax, the black lodge may have represented "'a replacement for emotional ties to [his] own children"' (p. 151).[4] This episode raises important questions about whether the tensions between father and son reflected, to any degree, thorny issues among a broader group of African Americans. Following this inquiry would have led to a clearer understanding of Freemasonry relative to varied and competing interests. In addition, pursuing this question would have only deepened an analysis to which Walker is committed; he demonstrates that the formation of black identity and community are always

"contingent," and even fraught (p. 4).

The question of context arises in another way. Walker does explore the "changing conception and meaning of the nation as articulated through the institutionalization of African American Freemasonry in the postemancipation context" (p. 91). He also does show African American Freemasonry to be "a malleable and responsive associational form that permits the articulation and development of new dimensions in conceptions of the nation" (p. 91). Approaching African American Freemasonry simultaneously as an analytical tool and an object of historical inquiry reveals new dimensions of the dialectical relationship between American democracy and African American Masonry. Yet this investigative strategy demands clarity about how, for example, the historical forces of abolition, nationalism, migration, and community formation affected change and continuity in the connections between Freemasonry and democracy.

Walker recognizes that black Freemasons, in the late eighteenth-century North, derived their claims for "national citizenship" through "an appeal to non-nation-specific ideals" arising partly from the Masonic concept of universal brotherhood (p. 80). This insightful interpretation raises a series of important questions. Did the attraction of black Masons to supranationalist ideas wax or wane from the American Revolution through the Civil War, and how did these ideological transformations function? Increasing numbers of black leaders, many of them Freemasons, demanded that blacks be recognized as full citizens given the expansion of radical abolition, the rise of the American Colonization Society, and the entrenchment of southern slavery. Furthermore, after the United States formally ended slavery, and as African American Masonry expanded and became more bureaucratized, what became of supranationalist ideas in black Masonic political thought? Explicitly addressing these issues would have enriched the analysis. However, these are quibbles that mark the success of this book in pushing forward the study of African American Freemasonry and fraternalism.

A Noble Fight is an ambitious, imaginative, and interdisciplinary book that demonstrates the historical, cultural, and theoretical significance of black Freemasonry. Moreover, it also adeptly addresses debates within critical race studies and democratic theory. Walker contributes original conceptual frames and empirical evidence to a small but slowly growing body of work about African American fraternalism. Although his volume is not definitive, it introduces promising questions about black Masonry that force a rethinking of certain interpretations within the field of African American studies. For example, scholars need to continue to flesh out the origins, parameters, and fluctuations of respectability and further explore black identity formation as an always developing process. Walker carefully investigates how Freemasonry evolved from and shaped the fissures between being defined as black and expressing blackness. In addition, his examination of black Freemasonry introduces novel ways of understanding how the relationships between association and democracy arose from roots nourished simultaneously by the promise of equality and the peril of prejudice. Future scholars exploring questions of masculinity, respectability, and democracy in North America and the African diaspora must consider Walker's insights about "the freemasonry of the race."

Notes

[1]. Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Stephen Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Stephen Kantrowitz, "'Intended for the Better Government of Man': The Political History of African American Freemasonry in the Era of Emancipation," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 4 (March 2010): 1001-1026; Cecil Revauger, *Noirs et Franc-Maçons* (Paris: Edimaf, 2003); Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Mark Tabbert, *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building American Communities* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Craig Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

[2]. Walker quotes from Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

[3]. Walker borrows the idea of "zones of cultural contact" from Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29.

[4]. Walker quotes from Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 123.

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