Book Reviews


Reviewed by Shevaun E. Watson, University of South Carolina

Jacqueline Bacon’s new and comprehensive history of *Freedom’s Journal* is a welcome addition to African American rhetoric studies, and to the field of rhetoric and composition more generally. *Freedom’s Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* follows on the heels of Bacon’s important study of abolitionist rhetoric, *The Humblest May Stand Forth*. In *Freedom’s Journal*, she turns her attention to the rhetorical dimensions of the early black press, linking this newspaper to antislavery efforts but also situating it within other meaningful contexts. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Bacon’s study is her multilayered analysis of the newspaper, whereby through meticulous archival research she elaborates the biographical, historical, political, and social aspects of *Freedom’s Journal*’s success, demise, and lasting significance. As Bacon herself acknowledges, other useful studies of *Freedom’s Journal* exist, but important questions and lines of inquiry about this seminal paper have remained. She builds expertly on the groundwork laid by others, expanding readers’ field of vision for understanding *Freedom’s Journal* while also refusing “to be the last word” on the subject (6-9). Those familiar with nineteenth-century African American rhetoric will appreciate this detailed history and deft analysis; others will welcome an engaging discussion of the era and some of its key black rhetors.

The book is organized into three sections. Part 1 provides important historical and rhetorical background. In chapter 1, Bacon offers what might be the most useful and succinct discussion of northern black communities, 1780-1830, currently available to rhetoric scholars. This period in African American rhetorical history is little known, so its inclusion here not only contextualizes the appearance of *Freedom’s Journal* in 1827, but more importantly, provides a much-needed introduction to black rhetoric and politics during and after the Revolution. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the exact circumstances and goals of the paper’s genesis. What Bacon makes so clear and interesting in this section is the varied exigencies and objectives of *Freedom’s Journal*: not solely an abolitionist instrument, Bacon argues, the paper was devoted to other, larger causes, such as social justice in the broadest terms, as well as the development of community identity and black consciousness. *Freedom’s Journal* provided local, national, and international news of interest and import to African Americans, while it also offered an array of information about black schools, businesses, organizations, and events. Bacon illustrates quite convincingly that, above all, the newspaper functioned as a highly accessible form of rhetorical education for free blacks.
and even for slaves. The editors, Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, sought to promote debate rather than establish consensus on key issues of the day. By allowing the expression of diverse points of view, *Freedom's Journal* “[featured] models of strong persuasion by African Americans, [and . . . demonstrated] the link between rhetorical expertise and public activism” (84-85).

Part 2 traces the paper’s “dialogic” treatment of the subjects most pressing to antebellum blacks: self-help, morality, and racial uplift (chapter 4); gender roles, masculinity, and womanhood (chapter 5); Africa and Haiti (chapter 6); colonization and emigration (chapter 7); and slavery and abolition (chapter 8). Bacon finds that in each case, the post-revolutionary African American community was far from monolithic in its sentiments, experiences, and struggles. Bacon does exquisite justice to the complexity of black communities at the time: there was “unity without uniformity” (6). She shows, for instance, that self-help rhetoric was part of a larger, ongoing debate among African Americans about the relationship between racism and moral behavior: “was prejudice due to condition (behavior or morality) or to color (the fact of being black in a white racist society)?” (101). Blacks disagreed about strategies to combat racism and build community, rendering vocabularies of “character” and “elevation” to be quite varied in political inflection. African Americans’ views of gender were equally complex. Here Bacon carefully parses out shifting definitions of black masculinity and womanhood, linking them to a range of communal and political interests.

Similarly, Bacon demonstrates the various ways in which Africa and Haiti operated in the antebellum black imagination. In the pages of *Freedom's Journal*, African Americans articulated multiple significances of Africa and Haiti for their collective past, present, and future. Bacon is smart to separate the issues of colonization and emigration from discussions of Africa and Haiti. Though clearly related, these topics figured differently in the paper’s history and politics. Bacon describes *Freedom's Journal* vexed and changing relationship with the American Colonization Society and emigration efforts, placing the paper at the center of this crucial cultural debate. Bacon treats with remarkable even-handedness Russwurm’s eventual endorsement of colonization and lifelong commitment to Liberia. Though Russwurm ultimately alienated many readers with his political views, Bacon shows the ways in which he helped the paper fulfill its larger rhetorical goals of promoting even contentious debate. By discussing slavery last, Bacon does not in any way diminish the paper’s involvement in early nineteenth-century abolitionism. Clearly a major vehicle for antislavery rhetoric, *Freedom's Journal* also offered free expression of competing proposals for abolition. That abolitionists themselves needed to remain “creative and flexible” was mirrored in the paper’s diversified coverage of slavery and its foes (241).

The third section of the book, chapter 9, makes a final argument for the powerful legacy of *Freedom’s Journal*. Bacon takes this short-lived paper, which survived financial hardship, the departure of editor Samuel Cornish, and continual berating from some whites, and she uses it to elaborate the history of early African
American rhetoric. Bacon positions *Freedom’s Journal* as a central—and transformative—component of antebellum black “life, letters, and activism”: “It gave voice to the concerns of African Americans about the issues that affected them and the nation . . . in ways that influenced black and white abolitionists and reformers” (252). Without pressing the argument too far, Bacon offers a most compelling case for why this newspaper deserves our attention. A vehicle of growing African American literacy, a complement to the burgeoning black literary societies, an instrument of antislavery efforts, and an important mode of rhetorical education, *Freedom’s Journal* was groundbreaking in the struggle against oppression. Bacon achieves her aim of demonstrating its great influence without idealizing its editors and contributors or ignoring its faults and cleavages. Bacon has done a masterful job of providing a history of early black rhetoric and writing that gives agency to the African Americans themselves who wrote for, read, distributed, and discussed the paper. *Freedom’s Journal* is essential reading as it expands our current understanding of the role of rhetoric in early African American politics and culture.

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**Work Cited**


Reviewed by Amy Lynch-Biniek, Kutztown University

Before I began writing this review, I did some homework: I read at least a dozen other reviews published in *Composition Studies*. I was aiming to understand the style, structure, and other textual conventions of the medium. According to Anne Beaufort’s new text, this skill in analyzing the norms of a discourse community is precisely what students of freshman composition need.

In *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, Beaufort presents the results of a six-year study in which she followed the writing development of Tim, encompassing his four undergraduate years as a double major in history and engineering. The study included interviews with Tim and with his freshman composition teacher, Carla, as well as analysis of the feedback he received on written work in composition and in first-year through advanced courses in history and engineering. Beaufort follows up on Tim for two years after graduation, learning about the writing he does on the job as an engineer,