

“The Future of the Negro”

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Before the end of the Civil War, reports of widespread suffering, disease, and death among freed Blacks, especially in urban environments, circulated widely in the press. Critics of emancipation regarded these reports as proof that freedom was literally harmful to the health and well-being of African Americans. After the war, similar claims about rising death rates due to disease and skyrocketing rates of infant mortality among Southern Blacks continued to spread. Southern apologists used these rumors to argue that, lacking the medical care, shelter, food, and clothing that had once been provided by their former owners, emancipated African Americans were doomed to fall victim to illness and disease that would threaten the very survival of the race. In 1884, the *North American Review* solicited a series of articles by various authors entitled “The Future of the Negro Race” that sought to address such claims, along with other subjects affecting race relations, ranging from emigration to Africa, political participation, and miscegenation to the effects of emancipation on the formerly enslaved and free Black populations.

Founded in Boston in 1815, the *North American Review* remains the longest-running literary magazine in the United States. When Allen Thorndike Rice took over the editorial helm in 1876, the *Review*’s content changed significantly. Shying away from traditional journalist contributors, Rice, along with his editorial assistant James Redpath, sought “men of action” to discuss the latest social, political, and scientific issues. In 1884, Rice sought a wide range of authors and opinions, centered around the topic of the “Future of the Negro.” The tone of the essays ranged from optimistic to overtly racist. Of the nine contributors, two others in addition to Douglass were African American: Richard T. Greener and J. A. Emerson. The first essayists to appear in the series, John T. Morgan and Zebulon Baird Vance, were former Confederate officers who later became U.S. senators. Unsurprisingly, these essayists offered a negative assessment of the future of African Americans in the country: they were against miscegenation, favorable toward emigration to Africa, and overtly paternalistic toward Blacks. Essays by Douglass, Joel Chandler Harris, Richard T. Greener, Oliver Johnson, and Samuel C. Armstrong took a more hopeful approach.

Douglass’s contribution to the series stated that African Americans would unequivocally not migrate to Africa and compared the plight of African Americans to those of other minority groups oppressed throughout history. Douglass argued for unification, rather than isolation from Whites, prompting a call for “human brotherhood.” He modeled this call for unity in his personal life. In January 1884, he married Helen Pitts, a White woman from New York who served as his clerk while he was recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia. Throughout 1884 Douglass received harsh criticism from Whites and Blacks alike, many of whom felt he had betrayed his race that he worked so diligently to support. Even Douglass’s children from his first marriage to Anna Murray and his second wife’s former abolitionist father disapproved of the new union.

Following its publication, one reviewer of the collection sarcastically wrote, “The latter gentleman [Douglass] has lately done his share towards amalgamation, and does not see why others should not follow so excellent an example.” Predictably, Southern reviewers sided with the two former Confederate writers, Morgan and Vance. Writing in a North Carolina newspaper, one reviewer stated, “First, the only writers who can treat the negro question intelligently are Southern

whites . . . Northern writers fail always to understand the race problem in the South when they discuss it.” Another Southern paper went so far as to suggest the editor of the *Review* rename the publication “The North American Kaleidoscope” due to its “departure from the heavy seriousness of a Review literature.” Northern newspapers, however, wrote approvingly of the collection of essays. One review in particular focused primarily on the African American authors: “It is a significant fact that the . . . ablest, calmest, and most sensible contributions are from the pens of colored men.” *Boston Zion’s Herald*, 25 June 1884; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 23 June 1884; *Wilmington (N.C.) Weekly Star*, 11 July 1884; *New York Mail and Express*, c. 1884 as reprinted in *Selma (Ala.) Times-Argus*, 4 July 1884.

IT would require the ken of a statesmen and the vision of a prophet combined to tell with certainty what will be the ultimate future of the colored people of the United States, and to neither of these qualifications can I lay claim. We have known the colored man long as a slave, but we have not known him long as a freeman and as an American citizen. What he was as a slave we know; what he will be in his new relation to his fellow-men, time and events will make clear. One thing, however, may safely be laid down as probable, and that is, that the negro, in one form and complexion or another, may be counted upon as a permanent element of the population of the United States. He is now seven millions, has doubled his number in thirty years, and is increasing more rapidly than the more favored population of the South. The idea of his becoming extinct finds no support in this fact. But will he emigrate? No! Individuals may, but the masses will not. Dust will fly, but the earth will remain. The expense of removal to a foreign land, the difficulty of finding a country where the conditions of existence are more favorable than here, attachment to native land, gradual improvement in moral surroundings, increasing hope of a better future, improvement in character and value by education, impossibility of finding any part of the globe free from the presence of white men,—all conspire to keep the negro here, and compel him to adjust himself to American civilization.

In the face of history I do not deny that a darker future than I have indicated may await the black man. Contact of weak races with strong has not always been beneficent. The weak have been oppressed, persecuted, driven out, and destroyed. The Hebrews in Egypt, the Moors in Spain, the Caribs in the West Indies, the Picts in Scotland, the Indians and Chinese in our own country, show what may happen to the negro. But happily he has a moral and political hold upon this country, deep and firm, one which in some measure destroys the analogy between him and other weak peoples and classes. His religion and civilization are in harmony with those of the people among whom he lives. He worships with them in a common temple and at a common altar, and to drag him away is to destroy the temple and tear down the altar. Drive out the negro and you drive out Christ, the Bible, and American liberty with him. The thought of setting apart a State or Territory and confining the negro within its borders is a delusion. If the North and South could not live separately in peace, and without bloody and barbarous border wars, the white and black cannot. If the negro could be bottled up, who could or would bottle up the irrepressible white man? What barrier has been strong enough to confine him? Plainly enough, migration is no policy for the negro. He would invite the fate of the Indian, and be pushed away before the white man’s bayonet.

Nor do I think that the negro will become more distinct as a class. Ignorant, degraded, and repulsive as he was during his two hundred years of slavery, he was sufficiently attractive to make possible an intermediate race of a million, more or less. If this has taken place in the face of those odious barriers, what is likely to occur when the colored man puts away his ignorance and

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degradation and becomes educated and prosperous? The tendency of the age is unification, not isolation; not to clans and classes, but to human brotherhood. It was once degradation intensified for a Norman to associate with a Saxon; but time and events have swept down the barriers between them, and Norman and Saxon have become Englishmen. The Jew was once despised and hated in Europe, and is so still in some parts of that continent; but he has risen, and is rising to higher consideration, and no man is now degraded by association with him anywhere. In like manner the negro will rise in the social scale. For a time the social and political privileges of the colored people may decrease. This, however, will be apparent rather than real. An abnormal condition, born of war, carried him to an altitude unsuited to his attainments. He could not sustain himself there. He will now rise naturally and gradually, and hold on to what he gets, and will not drop from dizziness. He will gain both by concession and by self-assertion. Shrinking cowardice wins nothing from either meanness or magnanimity. Manly self-assertion and eternal vigilance are essential to negro liberty, not less than to that of the white man.

Source: Frederick Douglass, “The Future of the Negro,” *North American Review* 139:79–99 (July 1884). Other text in *Philadelphia Christian Recorder*, 19 June 1884.