

The William Whipper Arguments and the Push for Color-Blind Abolitionism in the Antebellum North

Lauryn Aviles

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA



Abstract

This essay examines 1830s Black abolitionist rhetoric through periodicals in order to map preferred and unpreferred terms of Black self-reference as immediatism in abolition took root. More specifically, this essay homes in on the local conversation surrounding racial monikers in Black-elite Philadelphia-based abolitionist circles and pays particular attention to one activist, William Whipper, who spurred a decade-long debate over an appropriate moniker to refer to Black people as he took a much contested, color-blind stance towards abolition. This essay concludes by asserting that a unified Black epithet of self-reference alone could not overcome the layered oppression of enslavement and the entrenched racism in 1830s America. However, the quest for a moniker that spoke to the variability in Black identity was a valiant attempt by Black people to shift the narrative that blackness was not an inherently degrading condition; rather, the assertion of blackness via a Black epithet was a testament of Black belonging in an America which had been built by and sustained on Black people.

“It is not our business to know whether they are *white*, or *colored*. It is sufficient to know they are human beings.”

—William Watkins, *The National Reformer*, 1838

Introduction

While abolition is often depicted as a white-forged endeavor in the United States, the power of both free and enslaved African Americans in the abolitionist movement in the years leading up to the Civil War cannot

be understated. It was the resistance of enslaved Black people that many abolitionists, both Black and white, pointed to as evidence of the injustice of the system of enslavement. Enslaved rebels inspired and prompted both the rise of immediatism and the adoption of a militarist stance by Black abolitionists in the United States.¹ Through uncompromising rhetoric, Black abolitionists showed that their stance was larger than proving Black worthiness in white eyes. As fugitive enslaved Black people wrote themselves into existence through their narratives, Black abolitionists increasingly theorized solutions and strategies to combat the widespread repercussions of enslavement, racism, class differentiation, poverty, and the lack of opportunity provided to free Black people. These narratives, in conjunction with

Black-owned newspapers and the increasing popularity of literary blackface,² which served as a pathway for blackface minstrelsy, came the evolution of the language employed by Black abolitionists to describe free and enslaved Black persons. Beginning in the late 1820s, many debates ensued as Black abolitionists argued over which racial monikers were appropriate and inappropriate to use in reference to themselves. These debates, however, were often in contention with the monikers that white people used to denote and portray Black people in antebellum blackface minstrelsy shows, literature, and newspaper editorials. Many Black spokespersons and writers of the anti-colonialist and abolitionist movements felt that a unified abolitionist position necessitated a unified language, and among

¹ Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: a History of Abolition*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 196-7.

² In Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor's *The Etymology of Nigger: Resistance, Language, and the Politics of Freedom in the Antebellum North*, she defines the term "literary blackface" as a prototype for blackface minstrelsy productions. Gaining momentum in the late 18C, literary blackface writings in newspapers entailed mockeries of Black usage of nigger to demonstrate white unease

with the practice. On literary blackface, Pryor writes: "Editors of these publications purported either to have received an authentic letter from an African American or one from a bystander who overheard and recorded verbatim an exchange with a white and black person or between two or more persons of color. The satirists who wrote them portrayed African American subjects who were almost invariably masculine, speaking in broken English, belying their slave roots."

the monikers up for debate were the use of “colored,” “people of color,” “negro,” and “nigger.”

In this essay, I discuss the local debates surrounding the use of various Black monikers among Black writers, intellectuals, and Northern elites in Philadelphia, which most intensified in the 1830s as moral reformer William Whipper took a much contested, color-blind stance towards abolition. In mapping these debates across a number of Black-owned newspapers, I argue that naming and labeling is inherently exclusionary, for there will always be those who will say a chosen moniker fails to encompass the variability in individual identity, expression, and experience. Nonetheless, the assertion of blackness via a Black epithet in abolitionist rhetoric was a testament of Black and colored peoples’ belonging in an America which had been built by and sustained on them.

The Colored Arguments

With the admittance of Missouri as a slave state in 1820 and the consequential growth of southern enslavement, a push

towards immediatism in the abolitionist movement took hold in the North. Philadelphia, as well as Baltimore, New York, and Boston, became centers for Black and mixed-race abolitionists to congregate, create societies, and contest the ever-growing concerns surrounding Black support for colonization. Philadelphia’s geographical position, sizeable free Black population, and early history of Quaker antislavery activism warrants particular attention, however, for Pennsylvania not only lay at the border of enslavement and freedom, but prominent members of Philadelphia’s local Black activism often took a discrepant or more radical tone from its Northern metropolitan counterparts.³ Because of their generations of removal from their African ancestry, many mixed-race Black northern elites thought of themselves as more *American* than African. As such, affinity for Africa began to fade as nineteenth-century discussions surrounding Black self-reference resulted in name changes to many institutions, such as the African Baptist Church of Boston being renamed The First Independent Church of the Free People of Color “for the very good reason that the name African is ill applied to a

³ Brooks, Corey M. Review of *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the*

City of Brotherly Love by Richard Newman and James Mueller. *Civil War History* 59, no. 2 (2013), 243-245.

church composed of American citizens.”⁴ Additionally, with growing support amongst white people for Francis Scott Key’s and Henry Clay’s American Colonization Society (or ACS), Northern affinity for Africa faded more intensely as free, American-born Black people feared a forced removal to Liberia. Consequently, many abolitionists felt that the cornerstone of elevating Black people to the status held by white Americans was moral reform as a form of mimicry of white values.

Northern Black intellectuals and abolitionists, in attempts to indicate nineteenth-century racial unity through language, tended to favor the term “coloured” as a term of self-reference. “Coloured” appeared positively connoted as early as 1829 in Bostonian activist David Walker’s manifesto *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker’s *Appeal*, published in three editions, was a radical document of Black protest that deemed emancipation a “holy cause” and urged immediatism and militarism in abolitionist movements. According to Walker, Black people were

painstakingly aware that to be Black in public domain meant to be a moving target for the verbal assault of “nigger.” Unlike other Black racial monikers, “nigger” carried the weight of all of the anti-Black sentiment in the U.S.—it was a marker of the limits of blackness, and thereby, the limits of freedom. Meanwhile, “coloured,” he felt, was a term indicative of Black racial unity under oppression, as shown when Walker wrote: “Oh! my coloured brethren, all over the world, when shall we arise from this death-like apathy?—And be men!!”⁵ Invoking the word “colored” as a term of Black self-assertion, however, was not a sentiment shared by all Black northern elites. And one such man was the outspoken and quick-witted Philadelphian, William Whipper.

Stepping onto the Black-led abolitionist scene through newspaper editorials against colonization and his involvement with National Free People of Color Conventions and Philadelphian Moral Reform Societies, William Whipper was a prominent member among 1830s Black

⁴ Rael, Patrick. *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*. The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 91

⁵ Walker, David, 1785-1830. *David 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 America*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 71

northern elites⁶ and notorious for his colorblind approach to abolitionism. Whipper's politics surrounding the appropriate language to be used by African Americans in reference to themselves spurred a whirlwind of debates beginning in 1835 at the Free People of Color Conventions. Held in Philadelphia in June 1835, the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color in the United States convened and was part of a nationwide, decades-long initiative of Black organizing for both civil and human rights. During this particular convention, however, Whipper suggested the creation of an organization known as the American Moral Reform Society, or AMRS, that was to be led by a committee of five. Whipper appointed himself to the committee with a promise of "improving the condition of mankind" by encouraging Black youth to learn manual labor and trade skills, with the aim to become self-sufficient proprietors.⁷ Among the issues discussed at the convention were the necessity to petition Congress and state legislatures so that "free people of color" could be afforded the same rights, protections, and privileges afforded to all

(white male) American citizens. Additionally, the committee encouraged "every lover of freedom" to abstain from using the products of enslaved labor in attempts at loosely guided boycotts. Perhaps the most notable thing to come out of this convention was the recommendation by Whipper and Robert Purvis, a mixed-raced, white-passing, wealthy abolitionist who chose to identify exclusively with the Black community, to abandon the use of the words "colored" and "African" when speaking or writing in reference to themselves. In the meeting minutes, it states:

On motion of W. Whipper, seconded by R. Purvis,

Resolved, That we recommend as far as possible, to our people to abandon the use of the word 'colored,' when either speaking or writing concerning themselves; and especially to remove the title of African from their institutions, the marbles of churches &c.

Which motion was under consideration when the Convention adjourned. [...]

⁶ Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: a History of Abolition*. (Yale University Press, 2016), 195-228.

⁷ Ibid.

William Whipper's resolution in relation to us, using the words 'colored' and 'Africans,' was called up, and after an animated and interesting discussion, it was unanimously adopted."⁸

There is little explanation within the meeting minutes explicitly naming the political motivation behind this unanimous decision, though the minutes note that "an animated and interesting discussion" played out for hours before reaching a resolution. While attendees reached a resolution at the 1835 Convention regarding terms to avoid in reference to Black people, this was but the start of a years-long conversation among Black northern elites. Specifically, Whipper's and Purvis' push towards the "Americanization" of free Black people and the removal of the word "colored" from abolitionist vocabulary was indicative of a larger, much-contested effort to reject racial categories in order to elevate and unify *all* Black Americans through universal moral reform. While Whipper's theoretical objections to Black racial monikers did not

make sense to most Black abolitionists, he remained steadfast.

Additionally, some ironies play out in the language of the meeting minutes. Specifically, the word "colored" appears fifteen times after the abandonment of the word was unanimously adopted. However, it seems that conscious efforts were made to use Black-blind (as opposed to race-blind) language as a replacement Black moniker, as phrases such as "our race," "friends of our race" and "our oppressed and suffering brethren" are used repeatedly to denote Black people and distinguish between those free and enslaved.

Upon founding his 1838 newspaper *The National Reformer*, Whipper began expressing his views on color-blind abolition. Specifically, in one editorial, Whipper wrote: "In our reciprocal duties to each other, we should never be guided by national or complexional preferences," for the fight for racial equality was dependent on the "white man's heart not the colored man's mind."⁹ Whipper's ideals for the AMRS mirrored this sentiment by encouraging Black and Christian virtuousness and social

⁸ "Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States; Held by Adjournments, in the Wesley Church,

Philadelphia; from the first to the fifth of June, inclusive." (Philadelphia:1835), 14-5

⁹ *The National Reformer*, No. 2, Volume 1, Philadelphia, October 1838; 17-8

responsibility to enhance the Black image in the eyes of white people through four cardinal principles: education, temperance, economy, and universal liberty.¹⁰ Moreover, he felt that Black people's place in society arose from their own complacency, and that simply by *being* better, African Americans would receive better societal treatment. However, in his prospectus of *The National Reformer*, Whipper alludes to racial differences while attempting to utilize race-blind language. Specifically, he addresses his audience, who was predominantly Black, as "fellow citizens," and maps the common enemy facing the "fellow citizens" not as white enslavers, but as "human governments, earthly tribunals, penal codes, and enactments."¹¹ By uplifting Black people through moral reform and education, Whipper felt it would redeem Black people from their own "dissolute, intemperate, [and] ignorant" condition which resulted from their degradation under slavery. Only through devising plans for personal and mental elevation, moral suasion, and white mimesis

could Black people render themselves "acceptable in the eyes of God [and] the civilized world."¹²

Many were outspoken in their criticism of Whipper's motions to eliminate "colored" from racial discourse. Among the staunch critics of Whipper's position was Samuel Cornish, editor of abolitionist paper *The Weekly Advocate*, which later changed names to *Colored American* three months into its publication and at the height of the moniker debates. Chronicling the exchanges between Whipper and himself using his newspaper, Cornish argued that in order to better the conditions of Black people in America, as Whipper aimed to, he had to understand his position and identity, and adapt his measures accordingly. In another scathing review, Cornish outright declared that Whipper was "vague, wild, indefinite, and confused in [his] views," suggesting that Whipper held shame in his Blackness.¹³ To retort, Whipper wrote: "To confine our Society now, within the precincts of complexional domains would be to render it

¹⁰ Bell, Howard H. "The American Moral Reform Society, 1836-1841." *The Journal of Negro Education* 27, no. 1 (1958): 34-40. Accessed November 18, 2020.

¹¹ *The National Reformer*, No. 2, Volume 1, Philadelphia, October 1838; 17-8

¹² McCormick, Richard P. "William Whipper: Moral Reformer." *Pennsylvania History* 43 (January 1976); 22-46.

¹³ *Ibid.*

ridiculous, by destroying its moral bearing on universal principles, and its nationality in measures.” In other words, Whipper felt that Cornish drew a distinction between the moral standard Black men were held to as opposed to white men, while he, himself, embraced all men without paying attention to their complexion.¹⁴ In this, Whipper showed how he attempted to establish the beginnings of a post-racial society through language. By eliminating racial monikers from abolitionist discourse, Whipper felt that equality, regardless of racial differences, could be realized. Naming color, to Whipper, denoted both an “otherness” to Americanness and intrinsic inferiority. Denying blackness, via language, then, was Whipper’s attempt at Black deculturalization, under the pseudonym of “moral reform,” in order to better integrate free Black people into a white-dominated society.

In overt criticism of Whipper’s stance, teacher and activist William Watkins, writing as “A Colored Baltimorean” in *The National Reformer*, opposed Whipper’s insistence on eradicating the word “colored” from abolitionist discourse. Specifically, he

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *The National Reformer*, No. 3, Volume 1, Philadelphia, November 1838, 33

wrote that censoring “colored” and other Black monikers contradicted with the purpose of Whipper’s AMRS, which was not to uplift the entire society and country, but to use its finite resources to uplift the *colored* population. He challenged Whipper’s insistence that the term “colored” conveyed an idea of degradation, and claimed that the AMRS’ name was “too sweeping” in that it acted on behalf of colored Americans.¹⁵ Here, Watkins attested to what scholar Stuart Hall said centuries later in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* when he wrote that “identity” should be thought as “‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”¹⁶ In other words, in order for newly- and nominally-free Black people to elevate themselves in society, they needed to see and realize their potential through Black representation and specific (as opposed to vaguely named) racial affinity groups to form their own realized sense of self, place, and identity.

Astonished by the backlash, Whipper defended AMRS by claiming that “American” signified “national attachments,”

¹⁶ Hall, Stuart, and Ghazoul, Ferial.

“Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 32 (2012), 257.

and that no man, regardless of race, was barred from joining. In this, Whipper asserted his ideals for the AMRS to serve as a post-racial utopia under the pretense of national unity. He supported this claim in a later article, entitled “Universal Liberty”:

The sin of slavery, in this nation, is not wholly confined to any single grade or complexion—all, both *white* and *colored*, the nominally free, as well as the enslaved, are interwoven in the same network. True it is, that there are different degrees of crime and suffering between the tyrant and those oppressed, yet all share the same effect of its pollution.¹⁷

While Whipper makes a valid point about how nuanced complexion was when it came to determining one’s status as either enslaver, enslaved, or nominally free, where his argument unravels is his failure to recognize that the onus of oppression and Black people’s degradation via enslavement did not lay on both Black and white people equally. Certainly, Black and white people were “interwoven” in the same complex network, though the effect of enslavement’s “pollution” was not, by any degree, equally shared, for white enslavers built their wealth on the

backs and through the terrorization of Black people. The importance of a unified Black racial moniker then, was that it asserted blackness and acknowledged historical and current Black oppression on account of complexion alone. Moreover, in order to acquire the position, status, and comfort that enslavers came to know, enslavers had to degrade themselves and succumb to barbarity in order to uphold the enslaving system. In this, enslavers practiced the violence and barbarity that was typically reserved to depict and justify the enslavement of Black Americans. Therefore, although a degree of “pollution” resulted from enslavement for both enslavers (who had to neglect all morals and turn to violence to uphold enslavement) and the enslaved (who were degraded at the hands of enslavers and the system to which they were subject), the “effect” was by no means comparable for Black people and their white oppressors. Additionally, in this essay, Whipper utilizes the word “men” to indicate men of all races when “men,” as enshrined in U.S. founding documents, was legally known and understood to mean white, property-owning, male citizens. In this, Whipper deemed sex as a primary identifier and attempted to remove racial distinction from

¹⁷ *The National Reformer*, No. 3, Volume 1, Philadelphia, November 1838, 35

acting as an adjectival precursor. Nonetheless, Whipper continued to utilize language that alluded to race without explicitly putting it into Black and white terms. In writing words such as “slave” and “slaveholder,” Whipper therein undermined his race-blind argument by utilizing language that indicated not only race, but power and class, within the enslaving system. Another irony in Whipper’s writings is his clarification that the “oppressed” and the “oppressor,” to whom he refers, are “the colored and the white man,” respectively.¹⁸ Here, Whipper proves that the elimination of racial monikers in discussions about race is near-impossible. Certainly, words can be suggested in favor of others, and certain monikers can be deemed antiquated, but a self-referencing vocabulary was necessary for Black people to talk about race and their place in an evolving racial climate.

Even in his advocacy to adopt a race-blind approach in abolitionist discussions, Whipper still needed to define the terms he would use to skirt around race by using the very racial monikers he wanted to abolish. Still, he remained fixed in his position as evidenced when he wrote: “Raise neither party lines nor complexional banners to

distinguish yourselves from the rest of your countrymen. Let your interests be national and your principles universal. Drown in the cup of oblivion all remembrance of the past, for the hopes of the future.”¹⁹ Here, Whipper suggests forgetting the abominable acts that white people involved in the enslaving system had inflicted upon the Black body in favor of forging a path towards a moral, post-racial future in which all Americans were united by universal morality and a common nationality. However, even Thomas Jefferson knew a race-blind society could never occur in a nation with a history as racially divided as the United States’ when he wrote, almost 60 years prior to the debates in *The National Reformer*, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 45

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787, 145

While Jefferson was advocating for the removal of a free, mixed-race society via colonization rather than the removal of a racial vocabulary, he hypothesized what Whipper failed to register: that Black people could (and here I add: *must*) never forget the “injuries they have sustained” at the hands of not only the “deep rooted prejudices entertained by whites,” but also, the horrors, torture, and trauma they inflicted over hundreds of years upon Black minds and bodies. Whipper’s suggestion erased hundreds of years of Black history in favor of post-racial “oblivion.”

Though Whipper was not alone in his opinion. Lewis Woodson, an educator and minister in Pittsburgh, wrote in *Colored American* that moral elevation was up to free Black people to impose upon themselves, for they were in a “degraded condition.” Additionally, he noted that “negroes” who were moral in society were respected and subject to little prejudice.²¹ This ultimately led to Woodson’s conclusion to align with Whipper in his belief that condition, rather than color, was the primary cause of Black suffering. Interestingly, these arguments, all of which were published in newspapers, never amounted to physical altercations, thus

speaking to his ideals and notions of nonviolent protest and Black virtue. In this, Whipper stayed true to his ideals of moral reform by favoring scathing missives as opposed to physical violence, and also lauding abolitionists who favored appeals to reason rather than fighting slavery with violence, as well.

As the debates played out through the 1830s, Whipper eventually took to *The National Reformer* in 1839, four years after the Fifth Convention, to amend his previously steadfast position to eliminate the word “colored” from all Black institutions and writings. Rather, he insisted on limiting its usage “as far as possible,” to overthrow enslavement “by the power of truth and love as morally certain,” and to seek the end of division based on complexional differences.²² Later that year, in the *Reformer*, Whipper recanted his views completely, asking “pardon for [his] former errors,” acknowledging that it was complexion, not lack of morality, that deprived men of color of protections and equal treatment under the law. He went on to explain that neither religious, moral, nor intellectual elevation would secure full protections for people of color “because we are all *black*.” In a final plea,

²¹ *Colored American*, February 16, 1839.

²² “Our Elevation.” *The National Reformer*, December 1839.

Whipper ended with a request for white people to “take their feet *‘from our necks,’* that we may stand free and erect like themselves.” In amending his stance abruptly in late 1839 after nearly a decade, Whipper not only acknowledged that his argument for Black men to elevate themselves in the face of whites was an acceptance of inherent Black inferiority, but also showed that racial monikers were never free from controversy.²³ Whipper’s change of mind underscored the importance of Black representation, for naming blackness in writing not only mimicked the visibility of blackness in a predominantly white America, but also asserted an American experience that was uniquely Black. Furthermore, Whipper’s assertion of blackness cannot be understated, for it was the beginnings of a rhetorical position associated with late-antebellum slave narratives and later, Black-led 20th century movements.

As Whipper rose to prominence and became a controversial figure in the Black abolitionist movement, AMRS’ productivity dwindled with poor attendance and internal controversy that mirrored the larger conversations Whipper engaged in with other abolitionist activists. Three years later, in 1839, the AMRS dissolved, which allowed

Whipper to reinsert himself right back into the discourse surrounding Black racial monikers in 1840 with a series of letters to *Colored American*, requesting that they remove “Colored” from the title in favor of “Oppressed.”²⁴ Perhaps Whipper felt that “Colored” was not sufficient enough of a term to encompass the phenotypic variability of blackness, as many mixed-race Black northern elites, some of whom were in Whipper’s circles, presented as more white than colored. Nonetheless, some deemed Whipper’s idea of changing the title to “oppressed” a “poor decision.” Others claimed that any organization working for the political and social uplift of Black people should never be “vaguely styled” and that colored-only organizations were necessary in response to a white-centered and white-dominating society.

In a series of four letters addressed to Whipper himself and published in *Colored American*, a reader writing anonymously as “Sidney” wrote, “Surely, the term colored is not disgusting to Mr. W and his friend. They cannot be ashamed of their identity with the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 299-338.

negro race!"²⁵ Whipper, infuriated, declined to reply, causing the lengthy "colored controversy" to subside.²⁶ Nonetheless, there was clear diversity in opinion among Black leaders in the antebellum abolitionist movement, though no real consensus on a unified Black epithet.

As shown, William Whipper was not only a moral reformer, but also foregrounded a local discussion amongst Black, northern elites, concerning an appropriate and fitting terminology for Black people to refer to themselves. Through newspapers, Black northern intellectuals and abolitionists publicly disseminated the local conversation surrounding Black monikers to the general, literate, free Black population. The desire to escape and critique words that had been historically used to identify and "other" Black Americans— words like "colored" and "African," were quickly met with pushback, counter-critique, and inconsistency. Though an outlier in his ideologies, Whipper was an exemplar of attempts to think through the moniker question amongst Black abolitionist circles. As others watched the debates unfold, some organizations paid heed to Whipper's motion at the 1835 Convention, including

Robert Purvis, who had seconded the motion, and helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Later, through the 1840s, Purvis also presided over the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society—which, like AASS, encouraged an integrated approach to abolition as opposed to race-based affiliation. Contrastingly, writers who engaged on the opposing side in the moniker debate such as Samuel Cornish and the aforementioned "Sidney," became members of both integrated Anti-Slavery Societies as well as societies and publications that found racial-affinity groups, and the reclamation of blackness, empowering. As "Sidney" wrote, and Cornish printed, in *Colored American*:

That we are colored , is a fact, an undeniable fact. That we are descendants of Africans - colored people - negroes if you will, is true. We affirm there is nothing in it that we need be ashamed of, yea, rather much that we may be proud of. There is, then, on our part, as identified with the negro race, no

²⁵ Stuckey, Sterling. *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 149-64.

²⁶ McCormick, Richard P. "William Whipper: Moral Reformer." *Pennsylvania History* (January 1976), 39

reason why the term should be repudiated.²⁷

Undoubtedly, a vocabulary to construct and define a public Black identity and to contest notions deployed in Black degradation became an increasingly urgent concern among Black abolitionists and northern elites throughout the 1830s. While a cornerstone of Black elevation, to many, was through moral reform, an extreme concern and emphasis was placed on the reformation of terminology used to reference, value, and denote Black people. Clearly, Whipper was not just an example of newspaper drama, but an object lesson of the implications of the denial of one's blackness for all paying attention.

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²⁷ "WILLIAM WHIPPER'S LETTERS."

Colored American, March 13, 1841.

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