



ARTICLE

Racial Feudalism

Keidrick Roy* 

Society of Fellows, Harvard University

*Corresponding author. Email: keidrick.j.roy@dartmouth.edu

(Received 10 December 2022; revised 4 October 2023; accepted 31 October 2023)

Recent scholarship has examined Alexis de Tocqueville's underexplored assertion that American racial stratification functioned as an extension of European feudalism. However, Tocqueville was not alone in his insights. At least a half-dozen nineteenth-century African American writers and thinkers, including Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Maria Stewart, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and especially Hosea Easton, have also described America's racial hierarchy as a continuation of antecedent European feudal social structures. Not only do their perspectives on what I call racial feudalism in America lend credence to Tocqueville's hypothesis that the afterlife of medieval social frameworks continued to persist in the post-Enlightenment United States, but also black Americans establish a distinctive body of knowledge that must be read alongside Tocqueville to render a more complete understanding of antebellum US social hierarchy.

I will never, knowingly, lend my aid to any such work, while our [enslaved] brethren groan in vassalage and bondage, and I and mine under oppression and degradation, such as we now suffer [in the North].

Martin Delany to Frederick Douglass (1853)¹

Until the North shall be as true to liberty as the South has been to slavery ... the North must continue to be the mere cringing vassal of the South; and she must expect to receive *the wages of her servitude*, in an accumulation of kicks and disgrace.

Frederick Douglass (1855)²

¹Martin Delany is chastising Douglass partly for consulting white abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe when, in Delany's view, black emancipation and elevation required uniquely black solutions. At the same time, Delany critiques the 1848 Colored Convention as an aberration from the ideal black-led discussions he desired because it featured "a coming together of rivals to test their success for the 'biggest offices.'" Despite these tactical concerns, Delany's letter suggests that the more significant threat to black people comprised the problems against which they were all striving: the "vassalage and bondage" of southern slavery and the "oppression and degradation" of northern prejudice. See Frederick Douglass, "Letter from M. R. Delany, Pittsburgh, March 23, 1853," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 5, *Supplementary Volume*, ed. Philip S. Foner (1853) (New York, 1975), 274–6, at 275.

²Frederick Douglass, "American Slavery Lecture No. VII, January 12, 1851," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5: 1–180, at 180, original emphasis.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

May God speed the flight of the slave as he speeds through our Republic to gain his liberty in a monarchical land.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1856–9)³

Introduction

In an understudied passage of *The Negro* (1915), W. E. B. Du Bois describes Thomas Jefferson's home state of Virginia as the birthplace of "American feudalism." He argues that the early American slave codes written to keep black people in bondage were "based on an attempt to reestablish in America the waning feudalism of Europe." Du Bois then details the architecture of American feudalism:

The laborers were mainly black and were held for life. Above them came the artisans, free whites with a few blacks, and above them the master class. The feudalism called for the plantation system, and the plantation system as developed in America, and particularly in Virginia, was at first a feudal domain. On these plantations the master was practically supreme.⁴

He goes on to contend that the image of American slavery redolent of European feudalism, which represented "the staid and gentle patriarchy, the wide and sleepy plantations with lord and retainers, ease and happiness," as well as the image depicting American slavery's "barbarous cruelty and unbridled power and wide oppression of men," were both "true." They existed in tandem.

Furthermore, Du Bois characterizes American slavery and European feudalism as two "kinds of slavery" that "represented different degrees in the development of the economic system." Eschewing the use of a simile, he writes that "house service was the older feudal idea of personal retainership, developed in Virginia and Carolina in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." While Du Bois claims that this feudal arrangement had the "advantage of the strong personal tie," it also bore the "disadvantage of unyielding caste distinctions, with the resultant immoralities." For him, "American feudalism" "at its worst" is "a matter primarily of human relationships" that are predisposed to perversion, distortion, power games, and other forms of psychological control that violate the dignity of those in the bottom racial caste.⁵

Curiously, though Du Bois detailed the lineaments of American feudalism, he also served as a pioneering theorist of racial capitalism. Contemporary studies of racial capitalism, including work by scholars such as Cedric Robinson, Walter Johnson, Sven Beckert, Seth Rockman, Edward Baptist, Caitlin Rosenthal, Calvin Schermerhorn, Justin Leroy, and Destin Jenkins, have staged interventions in the historiography of slavery by describing the accumulation of wealth through the monetization of racial difference that benefited southern planters, northern enterprises, and various groups of white immigrants.⁶ Du Bois's 1935 book *Black*

³William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872), 761.

⁴W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (1915) (New York, 2007), 86.

⁵*Ibid.*, 87, emphasis mine.

⁶W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) (New York, 2014); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) (Chapel Hill, 2000); Walter Johnson, *River of*

Reconstruction has provided a framework for understanding slavery as a fundamental feature of race-based economic extraction under the antebellum capitalist order. Reading Du Bois's insights on "American feudalism" in *The Negro* alongside his critique of the racialized dimensions of antebellum capitalism in *Black Reconstruction* two decades later exposes the institutionalization of racial hierarchy in the United States as both an exploitative economic process and a social arrangement with apparently feudalistic features calibrated to ensure cultural and psychological benefits to the dominant caste in addition to financial gain. In this way, racial capitalism and "American feudalism" might be seen as mutually reinforcing systems. In fact, to overlook what historical actors characterized as residual aspects of feudalism in America would be to miss the longer history of African American writers and thinkers *before* Du Bois who have been pointing to their existence since the antebellum era.⁷

Indeed, during the century preceding Du Bois's *The Negro*, other African Americans suggested that the idea of medieval feudal social hierarchies persisted in US race relations.⁸ They described slavery in the South and racism in the

Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860* (New Haven, 2015); Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, eds., *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (New York, 2021). Note that historian Eric Williams, who demonstrated how slavery had both protected and advanced the transatlantic circulation of capital, published another foundational work in the study of racial capitalism a decade after *Black Reconstruction*. See Eric E. Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (1944) (Chapel Hill, 1994).

⁷Some historians have argued that economic and financial development in slave societies such as the US South significantly lagged behind the growth of non-slave societies and that slavery persisted at the expense of economic dynamism. To the extent that these critics are correct (and it is unnecessary for my purposes here to delve too deeply into such a tangled debate), their conclusions would buttress the case for recognizing a material reality behind what I will call the *ideology of racial feudalism* that could be seen as resistant to capitalism. The ideology of racial feudalism, however, refers not to such material considerations but to how Americans chose to represent their social reality in terms of its cultural, theological, and metaphysical connections to medieval Europe and how they understood similar hierarchical instantiations along racial lines in the United States. See Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "Cotton, Slavery, and the New History of Capitalism," *Explorations in Economic History* 67 (2018), 1–17; Peter A. Coclanis, "Slavery, Capitalism, and the Problem of Misprision," *Journal of American Studies* 52/3 (2018), E46; Gavin Wright, "Slavery and the Rise of the Nineteenth-Century American Economy," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 36/2 (2022), 123–48; Gavin Wright, "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited," *Economic History Review* 73/2 (2020), 353–83; Nuno Palma, Andrea Papadia, Thales Pereira, and Leonardo Weller, "Slavery and Development in Nineteenth Century Brazil," *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics* 2/2 (2021), 372–426; Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello, "Slavery and the New History of Capitalism," *Journal of Global History* 15/2 (2020), 225–44. I thank Henry Clark for alerting me to this body of scholarship.

⁸Matthew X. Vernon—in whose path my work treads—compellingly details how African Americans navigated a postbellum US culture that had been steeped in racialized Anglo-Saxon mythologies predicated on notions of white supremacy. He illuminates how black writers created a "surrogated kinship" with the Middle Ages in opposition to these mythologies, thus forming a "convergence point where metaphorical relationships subsume literal ones." Importantly, he contends that "while white Americans often read the Anglo-Saxon period as an era of purity interrupted by the Norman invasion ... African-American scholars read the hyphen; they focused on the Middle Ages as a period of racial mixing and political possibility between Angles, Saxons, and Normans." While Vernon primarily focuses on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American engagements with medievalisms, my article resurfaces the

North using a variety of terms such as “feudal[ism],” “monarchy,” “chivalry,” “Dark Age,” “American despotism,” “aristocracy,” “lords,” “nobles,” “Old World,” and “a state of unconditional vassalage.” In fact, Americans correlated such terms with notions of feudalism so often that “feudalism” acquired a latent connotative drift that persisted even when the term was not directly invoked.⁹ In the South, everyone from plantation lords down to overseers, slave drivers, and enslaved people was ascribed their place on an Americanized great chain of being. In the North, free black people identified similar, if more implicit, race-based social hierarchies. Douglass, for example, called the northern white-over-black social arrangement the “aristocracy of the skin,” or what New York-born black abolitionist James McCune Smith called “caste-slavery in the north”—clear prefigurations of what I call *racial feudalism* in what follows.¹⁰ In 1858, Douglass intensified his earlier contention that the North, in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law, had been “the mere cringing vassal of the South,” to assert that free black northerners were also persistently subject to “a cruel and malignant spirit of caste, which is at the foundation, and is the cause, as well as the effect of our American slave system.”¹¹

Meanwhile, white enslavers and their enablers were routinely casting slavery as a “benevolent” and “honorable” “organic” institution rooted in “natural” social hierarchies, in effect invoking justifications for a feudal order. In 1858, for example, proslavery Georgia lawyer and primary drafter of the Constitution of the Confederate States Thomas R. R. Cobb succinctly captured this dimension of American feudalism by defining it against medieval European “slavery,” which he viewed as an unfortunate institution of racial equals. According to Cobb,

longer antebellum backstory, thus broadening the archive of texts to consider an array of African Americans writing before the Civil War. From this vantage point, I posit the significance of early black Americans in interpreting the foundations of political thought in the nascent United States against the backdrop of the nation’s racialized social hierarchy. Though Vernon rightly emphasizes the ways black writers, beginning with Frederick Douglass and James McCune Smith—as well as publications such as the *Anglo-African Magazine* (1859–62)—and continuing through later eras tended to invoke and hybridize the medieval past in order to challenge exclusionary narratives of Anglo-Saxon cultural purity by showing how black people could be part of the broader international story of the Middle Ages, I demonstrate how earlier black abolitionists, including Douglass, tended to use medieval metaphors to underscore the limitations of modern American democracy and highlight the distance between the nation’s liberal ambitions and its racialized practices, which they often pointedly characterized as remnants of an erstwhile Old World social order. See Matthew X. Vernon, *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (Cham, 2018), 29, 45–51, 3–5, 33, 60–62. Other pathbreaking scholarship engaging the legacy of race and medievalisms includes Cord J. Whitaker, “The Middle Ages in the Harlem Renaissance,” in Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O’Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe, eds., *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past* (New York, 2019), 80–88; Jonathan Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms: From “Yellow Peril” to Black Lives Matter* (Leeds, 2021). See also Michael Modarelli, *The Transatlantic Genealogy of American Anglo-Saxonism* (New York, 2018); Christopher Hanlon, *America’s England: Antebellum Literature and Atlantic Sectionalism* (New York, 2013).

⁹For a full explication of this key assertion and the historical use of various feudalistic expressions by black and white thinkers up through the Civil War, see Keidrick Roy, *American Dark Age: Racial Feudalism and the Rise of Black Liberalism* (Princeton, 2024).

¹⁰Frederick Douglass, “Citizenship and the Spirit of Caste: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1858,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 3, 1855–1863, ed. John W. Blassingame (1858) (New Haven, 1985), 211; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), xx.

¹¹Douglass, “American Slavery Lecture VII,” 180; Douglass, “Citizenship,” 209.

“the slaves of Europe during the middle ages, and of Britain prior to the Norman invasion, were many of the same race with their masters, their equals in intelligence and in strength, and nothing but the accidents of their birth distinguished them apart.”¹² However, in America, slavery depended on maintaining a “mass” of laborers with black skin who were visibly distinct from the white “citizens” inhabiting the upper rungs of America’s racial hierarchy. He asserted that a person with white skin “feels that he belongs to an elevated class. It matters not that he is no slaveholder; he is not of the inferior race; he is a freeborn citizen.” Under America’s bifurcated racial hierarchy, then, “The poorest [white citizen] meets the richest as an equal; sits at his table with him; salutes him as a neighbor; meets him in every public assembly, and stands on the same social platform. Hence, there is no war of classes. There is truthfully republican equality in the ruling class.”¹³ Black people, of course, had no place in a “ruling class” of the wealthy white people or even among the white working poor. White Americans, regardless of income, had earned equal status in the US racial hierarchy by virtue of being white.

In recent years, Jennie Ikuta and Trevor Latimer have excavated a crucial, yet understudied, strand within the history of American political thought by demonstrating how Alexis de Tocqueville, the great observer of American society, also represented racial hierarchy in the United States as “structurally isomorphic” with European feudal social orders.¹⁴ They describe the French thinker’s explication of four key features of feudal aristocracy during the *ancien régime*—heritability, membership, privilege, and exclusion—as both a precursor to and a mirror of America’s system of racial hierarchy. The goal of this article, which complements what Ikuta and Latimer rightly identify as Tocqueville’s vision for “racial aristocracy,” is to reveal how African American writers and their white American enslavers accounted for what they claimed was the extension of the medieval feudal social frameworks in the United States and how black Americans, in particular,

¹²Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery: In the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1858), 18.

¹³Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, *An Historical Sketch of Slavery: From the Earliest Periods* (Philadelphia, 1858), 213.

¹⁴Similarly, intellectual historian Holly Brewer has indexed the connection between European feudalism and the practice of American slavery through the lens of legal studies. In another vein, political scientist Karen Orren and literary historian Robert Rabiee have demonstrated how the intersections of medieval feudalism and nineteenth-century American liberalism can still be felt today. Other historians, such as Reginald Horsman, Robert Bonner, and Ritchie D. Watson Jr, have established how American planters viewed themselves as connected to the bloodlines of their medieval ancestors, which reinforced and amplified their belief in a medieval European heritage. See Holly Brewer, “Entailing Aristocracy in Colonial Virginia: ‘Ancient Feudal Restraints’ and Revolutionary Reform,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54/2 (1997), 307–46; Brewer, “Slavery, Sovereignty, and ‘Inheritable Blood’: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 122/4 (2017), 1038–78; Brewer, “Creating a Common Law of Slavery for England and Its New World Empire,” *Law and History Review* 39/4 (2021), 765–834; Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (New York, 1992); Robert Yusef Rabiee, *Medieval America: Feudalism and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Culture* (Athens, GA, 2020); Robert B. Bonner, “Roundheaded Cavaliers? The Context and Limits of a Confederate Racial Project,” *Civil War History* 48/1 (2002), 34–59; Ritchie Devon Watson Jr, *Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2008).

conceived of American feudalism differently from Tocqueville to advance their abolitionist cause.¹⁵

In examining African American invocations of Old World structures to diagnose and assail the persistence of slavery and prejudice in early and antebellum America, we see the rise of a concept I propose to name *racial feudalism*. This concept, which comprises both a network of terms and an assumed ideology that conditions and reflects their use, does not suggest that American slavery and racial hierarchy were, strictly speaking, feudal. Indeed, modern historians have gone to great lengths to show European feudalism to be an aggregation of variegated and localized systems defined by the privilege of birth as well as loyalties, duties, and obligations that were often reciprocal.¹⁶ Instead, the concept of racial feudalism accounts for the language that proslavery advocates, antislavery activists, abolitionists, and politicians of all stripes deployed when they drew on the notion of feudalism and its associated metaphors as a starting point to critique—or affirm—slavery and racial hierarchy.

Though antebellum American thinkers did not primarily relate “feudalism” to a historical mode of *economic* development, the term served as a retrospective way of characterizing the past, sometimes through activists’ deliberate acts of misrecognition.¹⁷ As historian Elizabeth A. R. Brown helpfully reminds us, feudalism “is, always has been, and always will be” a “construct devised in the seventeenth century and then and subsequently used by lawyers, scholars, teachers, and polemicists to refer to phenomena, generally associated more or less closely with the Middle Ages, but always and inevitably phenomena selected by the person employing the term and reflecting that particular viewer’s biases, values, and orientations.”¹⁸ While Americans’ use of feudalistic analogies during the antebellum era might appear imprecise by today’s historical standards, the fact that abolitionists returned to such metaphors and highlighted their potential for reckoning with slavery in the South and prejudice in the North is worthy of further engagement.

But racial feudalism represents more than just the *language* that antebellum Americans used to characterize the function of racial hierarchy vis-à-vis medieval social hierarchies. The concept also describes a shared ideological framework

¹⁵Jennie C. Ikuta and Trevor Latimer, “Aristocracy in America: Tocqueville on White Supremacy,” *Journal of Politics* 83/2 (2021), 547–59, at 547.

¹⁶Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (New York, 1994); François Louis Ganshof, *Feudalism* (1944) (Toronto, 1996); Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “Feudalism: Reflections on a Tyrannical Construct’s Fate,” in Jackson W. Armstrong, Peter Crooks, and Andrea Ruddick, eds., *Using Concepts in Medieval History: Perspectives on Britain and Ireland, 1100–1500* (Basingstoke, 2022), 15–48. See also Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008). I thank James Engell and Nolan Bennett for helping me clarify this point.

¹⁷I draw the concept of “misrecognition” from Lauren Berlant’s reading of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which I will return to below. See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC, 1997), 225–6. On the persistence of feudalism from the perspective of political and economic development see Orren, *Belated Feudalism*. I thank James Engell and Nolan Bennett for helping me clarify this point.

¹⁸Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79/4 (1974), 1063–88, at 1086. See also Brown, “Reflections on Feudalism: Thomas Madox and the Origins of the Feudal System in England,” in Tracey L. Billado and Belle S. Tuten, eds., *Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White* (London, 2010), 135–56; Brown, “Tyrannical Construct’s Fate.”

constituted by notions of paternalism, mutual obligations, and “natural” hierarchy that form the foundation of what I call—using the insights of black abolitionists—*racial fealty*, *racial honor*, and *racial order*. The pervasive ideology of racial feudalism rendered the use of medievalisms intelligible by Americans who were reckoning with the reality of living in a burgeoning nation that was neither feudal nor entirely liberal but seemed to manifest aspects of both societies. In brief, then, racial feudalism alternatively (1) indexes the rhetorical connections that antebellum Americans made between medieval social hierarchies and skin-based color stratifications and (2) represents an ideological construct that linked historically distant ideas of feudalism to racial hierarchy in ways that made the fusion appear to be *natural* and thus determinative of social reality. While proslavery advocates heralded “natural” race-based hierarchies as part and parcel of their ideas about the medieval social orders, black abolitionists pointed to America’s racialization of the concept of feudalism as a condition that was fundamentally at odds with the highest ideals of the nation’s liberal project.

Though Tocqueville’s vision for “racial aristocracy” acutely captures some of the *characteristics* of America’s racial hierarchy in the US as he encounters it, the ideology of racial feudalism points to the *operation* of America’s racial hierarchy. That is, while Tocqueville’s rendering of racial aristocracy attempted to represent what racial hierarchy *means* in the United States by way of a critical outsider’s review of homologous class structures between America and feudal France, the voices of enslaved people and their black American allies, from another perspective, reveal their attempt to explain how racial hierarchy *works* from within by way of feudal metaphors. What Tocqueville might portray as “racial aristocracy” and what I have called the ideology of racial feudalism both depend on three overarching assumptions: (1) the idea of promoting organic or “natural” hierarchies appealed to people in power in the United States, (2) maintaining such social divisions became possible by perpetuating a race-based pecking order, and (3) this racially stratified arrangement appeared most saliently on local plantations in the South and—as black Americans specifically argued—in practices of segregation and other forms of prejudice in the North, thus permeating the whole of antebellum US society and culture. Investigating the ideology of racial feudalism, as expressed through the language and actions of abolitionists and their proslavery enemies, exposes three primary dimensions of what they represented as the racial feudal architecture of the United States: racial fealty, racial honor, and racial order.

While *racial fealty* captures the theological, metaphysical, and pseudoscientific superstructural beliefs governing the white-over-black *racial order* that functioned under the sanction of US laws and customs, the obligations of *racial honor*, which were animated by reverence for ideas of chivalry and tradition, operated in the quasi-material interstitial space as a type of social glue (see Fig. 1).¹⁹ After

¹⁹Robert Rabiee has similarly conceptualized “*the feudal idea of order*” as the abstract “structural influence feudal precedent played on the U.S. social imaginary.” Conversely, what he calls “practical neofeudalism,” which operates alongside this abstract notion of order, “manifests in legal decisions pertaining to land ownership, women’s roles, and master/servant relations that were inherited from the Middle Ages and filtered through the common law.” Though the central focus of Rabiee’s *Medieval America* is not on race and slavery, his explanation of the broader social and cultural influence of medieval Europe on modern America and his reading of Harriet Jacobs provide an important context for this project. Moreover, I find Rabiee’s claim that “the southern propagandist’s characterization of the plantation as a feudal demesne cannot be taken seriously” to be persuasive—

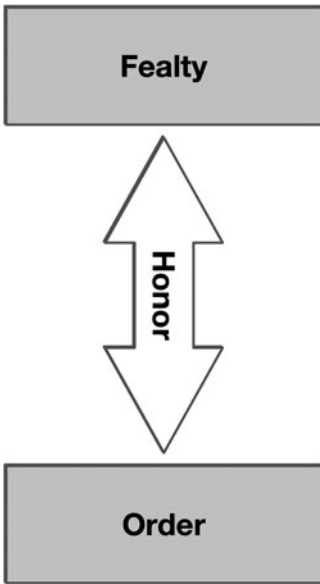


Figure 1. Relationship among notions of fealty, honor, and order under the ideology of racial feudalism. Image by the author.

all, proslavery US representative and future senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina pointed to the confluence of racial fealty, honor, and order in the halls of the United States Congress in 1836. He argued that antislavery proponents were “right” in asserting that the American “institutions of slavery” had been “most assimilated to an aristocracy.” For Hammond and many of his proslavery colleagues, a race-based aristocracy was “a government of the best combining all the advantages, and possessing but few of the disadvantages, of the aristocracy of the old world.” Expatiating on this thesis by acknowledging *racial* slavery as the enabling condition of possibility for a prosperous hierarchical society, he continues:

Slavery does indeed create an aristocracy—an aristocracy of talents, of virtue, of generosity and courage. In a slave country every freeman is an aristocrat. Be he rich or poor, if he does not possess a single slave, he has been born to all the natural advantages of the society in which he is placed, and all its honors lie open before him, inviting his genius and industry. Sir, I do firmly believe that domestic slavery, regulated as ours is, produces the highest toned, the purest, best organization of society that has ever existed on the face of the earth.²⁰

especially given the context of the global capitalism in which enslavers participated. However, my study considers how and why antebellum black abolitionists *themselves* creatively invoked various feudal metaphors to characterize slavery and prejudice in generative ways to ultimately abolish the institution. See Rabiee, *Medieval America*, 15–16, 27–30, 116–53, 46, 47. More generally, David Hackett Fischer has also helpfully detailed the influence of the Old World on the social landscape of early colonies, especially Virginia, where “order was fundamentally a hierarchical conception.” See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989), 443. For another excellent examination of Old World influences on the nineteenth-century United States see Hanlon, *America’s England*.

²⁰United States Congress, “Speech in the House of Representatives, February 1, 1836—24th Congress, 1st Session,” in *Register of Debates in Congress* (Washington, DC, 1836), 2460.

South Carolina lawyer and politician William Harper, who had served brief stints in the US Senate and the South Carolina House of Representatives, expressed a similar sentiment in an 1836 speech as state chancellor. While Harper referred to the United States as having a “republican” government, he nonetheless asserted that “ours is indeed an aristocracy, founded on the distinction of races, and conformable, as we believe, to the order of nature.”²¹

The following pages, then, account for such language and describe the ideology of racial feudalism in America that both white proslavery thinkers and black abolitionists often acknowledged as more potent than traditional European feudalism because of its uniquely racialized (antiblack) foundations, which had been confirmed by a pervasive belief in a race-based social order ostensibly put in place by nature and reinforced by proslavery appeals to theology, philosophy, and science. In each section, I show how African American writers levied important critiques against systems of racial fealty, honor, and order in an effort to reshape the nation’s future by powerfully associating the injustices of its hierarchical arrangement with purported remnants of feudalism.

The fealty of racial feudalism

In a fiery speech delivered on 5 July 1827, Nathaniel Paul, a black preacher and political thinker, condemned slavery as “a state of unconditional vassalage” precisely twenty-five years to the day before Douglass wryly invited his own auditors to “roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world” in search of a system comparable to the evils of American slavery.²² During the historical Middle Ages, powerful European lords conducted ceremonies with their vassals (subjects made to pledge ultimate loyalty to their ruler) that transformed them into social, political, and spiritual subordinates. Such rituals usually involved vassals kneeling and placing the palms of their hands in a steeple face-to-face with their lord, who put his hands over theirs to solidify the bond (see Fig. 2). This ceremony, called “homage,” in as much as it established the superior as “lord” over their subordinate vassal, took a religious shape following the eighth century through the process of fealty, wherein the vassal also put his hand on a sacred text or relic while performing this ceremony, thereby pledging faithfulness of body and soul to the master.²³

This *spirit* of fealty—if not the ritual—was also portrayed as a feature of slaveholding America during the nineteenth century. The aura of spiritual domination superimposed itself upon the relationship between property-holding masters and the enslaved people who served as their chattel. The eponymous protagonist of southern novelist Nathaniel Beverley Tucker’s *George Balcombe* (1836) is instructive here as he characterizes an ambient sentiment of racial fealty in

²¹William Harper, *The South Carolina Society for the Advancement of Learning Anniversary Oration in the Representative Hall, Columbia, S.C., Dec 9, 1835* (Washington, DC, 1836), 10.

²²Nathaniel Paul, *Address, Delivered on the Celebration of the Abolition of Slavery, in the State of New-York, July 5, 1827* (Albany, 1827), 11. For more on Paul see Manisha Sinha, “To ‘Cast Just Obliquy’ on Oppressors: Black Radicalism in the Age of Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 64/1 (2007), 149–60, at 156–7.

²³Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (1940) (New York, 2014), 156–7.



Figure 2. Thirteenth-century rendering of a feudal homage ceremony. “Homage au Moyen Age” (1293). Courtesy of Archives départementales de Pyrénées-orientales via Wikimedia Commons.

American culture.²⁴ Early in the novel, George Balcombe celebrates the natural “aristocracy” of white American men emerging from “the ancient cavaliers of Virginia” as possessing the highest racial “honour.”²⁵ Like other defenders of a racial social hierarchy supposedly instituted by nature, Balcombe sees no place for black people in such an “aristocracy” because of their “inferiority,” which emerges, in a theological or metaphysical sense, from their “instinct of blood.” This justification for subordination barred them from associating with white people except through a relationship reminiscent of homage defined by the “interchange of service and protection” or a “filial and parental bond.”²⁶ Later, Balcombe recounts the “prostration” of a “poor negro’s spirit” to the white male narrator. Balcombe asks the narrator, “is there nothing analogous to this” and “the humility of the angels who cast *their* crowns at the feet of God?” He continues, “If the duties of heaven require these sentiments, and its happiness consist in their exercise, which of us is it that is but a little lower than the angels—the negro or the white man?” “Let women and the negroes alone,” Balcombe concludes, “leave them in their humility, their grateful affection, their self-renouncing loyalty, their subordination of the heart, and let it be your study to become worthy to be the object of

²⁴Tucker, a jurist, professor, and writer, was a popular antebellum American novelist, particularly among southerners. He went by the name Beverley Tucker.

²⁵Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, *George Balcombe: A Novel in Two Volumes* (New York, 1836), 1: 24, 22. The Cavaliers supported the monarchy of King Charles I during the English Civil Wars.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 2: 164.

these sentiments.”²⁷ In these ways, *George Balcombe* embodies the racialized (and gendered) dimensions of the Americanized spirit of fealty—a belief in the inherent theological or metaphysical power of white men, justified by God, which renders them superior to all other beings in the social order.

Indexing the historical reality of commitments to racial fealty that appeared in Tucker’s fiction, the renowned proslavery southerner and physician Samuel A. Cartwright published an 1851 article in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* that insisted on maintaining the racial subordination of black people because of their corporeal and spiritual inferiority to white people, which he also claimed to substantiate through modern scientific arguments. Echoing Balcombe’s assertions about the “inferiority” of black people as a feature of their “instinct of blood” using biological terms, Cartwright claims, “it is not only in the skin, that a difference of color exists between the negro and white man, but in the membranes, the muscles, the tendons and in all the fluids and secretions. Even the negro’s brain and nerves, the chyle and all the humors, are tintured with a shade of pervading darkness.”²⁸

Further elaborating the antebellum sentiment expressed in the character of Balcombe (and perhaps more distantly the metaphysical power of kneeling at the feet of the lord in a pledge of spiritual fealty), Cartwright advances that it is the “Creator’s will” that “the negro” be a “submissive knee-bender ... we see ‘*genu flexit*’ written in the physical structure of his knees, being more flexed or bent than any other kind of man.” Because Cartwright believed that black people had fixed qualities of submission built into the mechanics of the bones and muscles that *God* created in them, he argues that “if the white man attempts to oppose the Deity’s will, by trying to make the negro anything else than ‘*the submissive knee bender*’ ... by trying to raise him to a level with himself, or by putting himself on an equality with the negro ... the negro will run away.” Cartwright adds that “the ‘*genu flexit*’—the *awe and reverence* [for white skin and spiritual headship], must be extracted from them.” In this way, he suggests that the physical constitution of black people spiritually conditions their fealty to whiteness. Put differently, the “Creator’s will” has inscribed reverence for people with white skin into the skeletal structure of black bodies.²⁹ Cartwright thus blends antebellum conceptions of erstwhile social hierarchies erected and underwritten by divine order with modern racial science to perpetuate the ideology of racial feudalism in the United States.

Though slaveholders such as Cartwright believed that God created free white people to exist at a higher position on the Americanized great chain of being than enslaved and free black people, Frederick Douglass repudiates such claims when he condemns “the slaveholding ministers [who] preach up the divine right of the slaveholders to property in their fellow men.”³⁰ Douglass also caricatures American slaveholders’ responses to the failed revolt of the Parisian working class in 1848, whose protests against the feudal remnants of Old World tyranny

²⁷Ibid., 166, original emphasis.

²⁸Samuel A. Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” in *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* (S. Woodall, 1851), 691–715, at 692.

²⁹Ibid., 708. See Fig. 3.

³⁰Frederick Douglass, “The Church and Prejudice,” in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 1, *Early Years*, ed. Philip S. Foner (1841) (New York, 1950), 103–5, at 104.



Figure 3. Enslaved woman genuflecting (or supplicating). This figure, which was taken from *The Liberator's* printing of a lecture that Maria Stewart delivered in 1832, is one of many widely circulated images that generally depicted a black man in the same position. The year 1787 marked the initial distribution of such portrayals by way of the London-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slave Trade, which was led by Quakers. Courtesy of Digital Commonwealth, Massachusetts Collections Online. On the origin and ubiquity of the kneeling slave image as well as black abolitionist responses and reinterpretations of its meaning—including Frederick Douglass's—see John Stauffer, "Creating an Image in Black: The Power of Abolition Pictures," in William Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2011), 70–74. For the image see Maria Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21st, 1832," *The Liberator* 2/46 (1832), 183.

in the name of liberty and equality resulted in a bloody civil war that did not establish their rights. Rhetorically connecting the concept of fealty still extant in modern Europe to American slavery, Douglass writes,

Tyrants of the old world, and slaveholders of our own, will point in proud complacency to this awful outbreak, and say "Aha! aha! aha! we told you so—we told you so: this is but the result of undertaking to counteract the purposes of the Most High, who has ordained and anointed Kings and Slaveholders to rule over the people."

He then quips, "So much for attempting to make that equal, which God made unequal!"³¹ Douglass's sense of the intercontinental and transhistorical link between "tyrants of the old world" and American "slaveholders" who assumed a similar divine right to subordinate the bodies and souls of those they enslaved

³¹Frederick Douglass, "The Revolution of 1848, Speech at West India Emancipation Celebration, Rochester, New York, August 1, 1848," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 1: 321–30, at 325–6.

and who believed they had been “ordained and anointed” to rule over them underscores the ongoing resonance of ideas connecting past and present feudal social hierarchies in the minds of antebellum Americans.³²

Much as medieval notions of homage and fealty signified the lord’s paternalistic responsibility and the vassal’s faithfulness, the idea of racial fealty in antebellum America signaled the subordination of black people validated by the sacred fiat of those with white skin. Indeed, many enslaved people have described their enslavers’ demands for expressions of racial fealty as a desire to lay claim to both their *bodies* and their *souls*. Moreover, they described the material circumstances of slavery as the “hottest hell” and an “atmosphere of hell.”³³ Writing in despair, Douglass lamented these conditions even as he recognized that the only thing keeping racial fealty’s spiritual power over his “body and soul” in place is “physical power”: “I am ... still a slave, still wandering in the depths of spirit-devouring thralldom. My faculties and powers of body and soul are not my own, but are the property of a fellow mortal, in no sense superior to me, except that he has the physical power to compel me to be owned and controlled by him.”³⁴ Similarly, African American philosopher Hosea Easton wrote in 1837 that “there is no pretext too absurd by which to justify the expenditures of [slavery’s] soul-and-body-destroying energies” than by using natural characteristics to justify it, such as “complexion, features, pedigree, customs, and even the attributes and purposes of God.”³⁵ The formerly enslaved author of the first novel composed by an African American, William Wells Brown, decries the evils of racial slavery for “keeping the Slave in subjection” and “obliterating the mind,” “crushing the intellect,” and “annihilating the soul.”³⁶ Frances Harper, a freeborn black poet, author, and abolitionist, also condemns slavery and its physical and theological effects, arguing that the institution “spreads its baneful influence over body and soul; which dwarfs the intellect, stunts its development, debases the spirit, and degrades the soul.”³⁷

The ownership of enslaved peoples’ “body and soul” took on a different meaning for enslaved women subjected to domination under the ideology of American racial feudalism. As Harriet Jacobs put it in 1861, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have

³²For other historical commentaries by black writers about the relationship between the divine right of kings, revolution, and racial slavery, see, for example, James McCune Smith, “Lecture on the Haytien Revolutions” (1841), in *The Works of James McCune Smith*, ed. John Stauffer (New York, 2006), 25–47; Smith, *The Destiny of the People of Color, a Lecture, Delivered before the Philomathean Society and Hamilton Lyceum, in January, 1841* (New York, 1843), 52, 54.

³³Douglass, *My Bondage*, 220; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston, 1861), 63.

³⁴Douglass, *My Bondage*, 272.

³⁵Hosea Easton, “A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and the Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; and the Prejudice Exercised towards Them; With a Sermon on the Duty of the Church to Them” (1837), in *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*, ed. George Price and James Brewer Stewart (1837) (Amherst, 1999), 104.

³⁶William Wells Brown, “A Lecture Delivered before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem at Lyceum Hall, Nov. 14, 1847,” in *The Works of William Wells Brown: Using His “Strong, Manly Voice”* (repr.) (New York, 2006), 4–5.

³⁷Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Philadelphia, 1857), 53–4.

wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”³⁸ Even when slavery’s physical chains did not bind her, Jacobs reports the psychological distress she suffered while under the constant and perverse supervision of her enslaver. She finds her master, Dr Flint, “gazing” at her when her door is ajar as he stalks her like prey, persistently demanding the fealty he felt she owed him. She writes,

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother’s grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there.³⁹

Dr Flint also, in line with Cartwright’s commitment to the innate divinity of whiteness, put himself on par with God (who existed at the top of ancient and medieval conceptions of the Great Chain of Being), telling Jacobs that if she deceived him regarding her relations with another man, she would “feel the fires of hell.” Resisting Flint’s claims to ownership of her body and soul, Jacobs retorts, “I have sinned against God and myself ... but not against you.” Even so, she recounts how “Dr. Flint had sworn that he would make me suffer, to my last day, for this new crime against *him*, as he called it,” thus underscoring the dual spiritual and physical subordination of his racial feudal subject.⁴⁰ Further confirming his absolute “right to rule [her], body and soul,” Flint bellows, “Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?”⁴¹

Douglass also describes the environment of degradation vis-à-vis the ideology of racial feudalism existing beyond the bounds of an enlightened system of law and in which enslaved people could be whipped, beaten, or killed at any time because they were under the total physical and spiritual power of their captors. As he puts it, “crimes, highhanded and atrocious, could be committed [on his plantation] with strange and shocking impunity.”⁴² Moreover, masters “could cripple or kill without fear of consequences”; they were rarely, if ever, convicted of murdering those they enslaved. Punctuating this view with regard to his own plantation, Douglass adds, “I speak advisedly when I say that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot Co., Maryland, was not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community.”⁴³ As historian David Brion Davis notes, medieval French legal scholars also recognized European serfs *in the legal sense*, if not always in practice, as “subject to the almost absolute authority of his owner, and as alienable by sale, exchange, or gift.” Likewise, the English equivalents of serfs—called villeins—were legally viewed as distinct from citizens. According to Davis, “in theory the villein was a chattel who could be sold apart from the manor and whose labor was unregulated by law.”⁴⁴ Citing the “meaningless fiction” of familial mutual obligations between

³⁸Jacobs, *Incidents*, 119.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 90–91, 119, emphasis mine.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 62.

⁴²Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT, 1881), 27.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 37, 58, 59.

⁴⁴David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) (New York, 1988), 33–4.

master and slave in early modern thought, Davis adds that a servant “had no rights whatsoever and was obliged to obey every command of his lord. For disobedience he might even be killed with impunity.”⁴⁵

Meanwhile, Jacobs, in having endured Flint’s particular demands for racial fealty, assailed the absolute superiority assumed by racialist thinkers such as Cartwright and racialist conceptions of spiritually inferior blood exemplified in Tucker’s *George Balcombe*. She writes that the “doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves” had been “a libel upon the heavenly Father, who ‘made of one blood all the nations of men!’” She also applies pressure to ideas constituting what historian Reginald Horsman calls racial Anglo-Saxonism, whereby nineteenth-century Americans valorized the origins of an Anglo-Saxon “race” before the 1066 Norman Conquest as superior to all other groups and cultures. Destabilizing the alleged purity of this prevalent belief, Jacobs pointedly asks, “And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?”⁴⁶ Thus, in addition to highlighting the coercive sexual relationships between enslaved black women and their white enslavers through her questions, Jacobs additionally renounces fealty to white skin on a theological level by contending that all human bloodlines flow from one creator. Douglass, too, aimed at a similar mark in an 1854 speech where he claims, “For myself I can say, my reason (not less than my feeling, and my faith) welcomes with joy, the declaration of the Inspired Apostle, ‘that God has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell upon all the face of the earth.’”⁴⁷ Even so, Jacobs, Douglass, and myriad enslaved or subordinated African Americans still had to contend with other dimensions of the ideology of racial feudalism in the US, including the malignant notion of *racial honor*.

The “honor” of racial feudalism

The US Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) indicates the scope and scale of “honor” as a tool to justify the ideology of racial feudalism in America. In his written opinion on the seven-to-two landmark decision against Scott, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney claimed that African Americans were devoid of a “sense of honor.” Though Taney praises “the men who framed [the Declaration of Independence],” chief among whom was Thomas Jefferson, he writes that “the enslaved African race were not intended to be included” among “great men—high in their literary acquirements—high in their *sense of honor*, and incapable

⁴⁵Ibid., 117, 60–61. Historian Edmund Morgan has also usefully described early American laws regarding the killing of enslaved people. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) (New York, 2003), 312–15. Note that apprentices, by contrast, did have rights in early modern Europe.

⁴⁶Jacobs, *Incidents*, 69. On the concept of racial Anglo-Saxonism see Reginald Horsman, “Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37/3 (1976), 387–410. See also Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981).

⁴⁷Frederick Douglass, “The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, 12 July 1854,” in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, ed. John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman (1854) (New Haven, 2018), 116–50, at 127.

of asserting principles inconsistent with those on which they were acting.”⁴⁸ Ironically, Taney praises the founders’ moral consistency and incontrovertible “sense of honor” in an opinion widely regarded as the most odious ruling in the history of the United States Supreme Court.

Having a “sense of honor” connoted a particular set of meanings in the antebellum South, where slaveholding leaders were most patently committed to ideas of paternalism and mutual obligation in ways that masked the political and economic benefits of maintaining the white-over-black social hierarchy underwritten by racial fealty, sexual domination, and physical violence, as we saw in Jacobs.⁴⁹ In addition to prominent black and white Americans of the antebellum era, some historians have also argued that the concept of honor and the use of various forms of violence to buoy it up in order to maintain a stratified social order were holdovers from European societies. In describing a litany of shocking acts of “hierarchical violence” in early Virginia as “commonplace,” historian David Hackett Fischer, for example, writes that “altogether, this system of violence was itself an order, as elaborately hierarchical in Virginia as it had been in southern England. In both places its social function was very much the same.”⁵⁰ Describing medieval Europe in particular, historian Marc Bloch calls violence “the distinguishing mark” of the feudal “epoch and social system.” Indeed, “war, murder, and the abuse of power” appear on “almost every page” of his analysis of the medieval world.⁵¹

According to Bloch, medieval men were “very prone to make it a point of honour to display their physical strength,” and family feuds based on violations of honor had been “responsible for countless bloody tragedies.”⁵² Cedric Robinson further notes that the ruling class of nobles “imprinted its character on the whole of European society. And since much of that character had to do with violence, the lower orders were woven into the tapestry of a violent social order.”⁵³ Therefore, the *telos* of a medieval feudal society would be the imposition of a rigid social arrangement to quell blood feuds, interrupt violent power struggles, and halt political assassinations in a turbulent and disorderly world.⁵⁴ To achieve social and political stability, various medieval lords undertook three primary duties. They sought to (1) ensure the spiritual salvation of their subjects, (2) actively maintain “justice and internal peace” within their spheres of influence, and (3) defend their subjects from foreign foes to project their power and protect

⁴⁸Roger Brooke Taney, “U.S. Reports: Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393,” 1856, 410, emphasis mine.

⁴⁹On the role of honor and violence in the US South see, for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 2007). Historian Edward Ayers also underscores the relationship between honor and slavery in *Vengeance and Justice*, where he argues that slavery was the condition of possibility for the often violent defense of honor advanced during the years leading up to the Civil War. See Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984).

⁵⁰Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 403–4.

⁵¹Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 409–10. For a more recent nuanced reading of the concept of violence in the Middle Ages see Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

⁵²Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 411.

⁵³Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 21.

⁵⁴Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 126–8, 408–12.

their “honor.”⁵⁵ These duties mirrored many of the aims of their successors in the US South who were committed to upholding the ideology of racial feudalism.⁵⁶

In fact, historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown characterizes the concept of honor as comprising a robust social system that pervaded all aspects of white American culture in the South. At length, Wyatt-Brown conceptualizes the ethical code of southern honor as

(1) immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) [maintaining the] opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances.⁵⁷

Though Wyatt-Brown does not address the particular lineaments of the ideology of racial feudalism that I have been outlining, I suggest that maintaining southern honor under his framework *also* depended on perpetuating white supremacy over a race of people upon whom Roger Taney and others contended it could not be bestowed because they had “no sense” of it. As Union colonel Samuel Thomas characterized this sentiment, “Men who are honorable in their dealings with their white neighbors will cheat a Negro without feeling a single twinge of their honor.”⁵⁸

Condemning the condition of general dishonor imposed upon enslaved people, Harriet Jacobs points to the emphatic irony at work when slave owners invoked the term *honor*. She asserts that “[s]laveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men; but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity.”⁵⁹ She also points to the lack of honorableness among slaveholders and their blatant duplicity when interacting with black people as common knowledge, writing at the beginning of her narrative, “the reader probably knows” that “no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, being property, can hold no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave!”⁶⁰ While the concept of honor purported to index an incontrovertible system of integrity among white citizens in the

⁵⁵Ibid., 408–9.

⁵⁶For alternative readings of other forms of continuity between Great Britain and American cultures and worldviews in different regions of the United States see Fischer, *Albion's Seed*; Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, 1988).

⁵⁷Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 34.

⁵⁸Samuel Thomas, “To General Carl Schurz,” in *Senate Executive Documents for the First Session of the Thirty-Ninth Congress of the United States of America, 1865–’66* (Washington, DC, 1866), 81. As sociologist Orlando Patterson has shown, the state of general dishonor had always been a defining feature of slavery. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 13, 77–104.

⁵⁹Jacobs, *Incidents*, 67.

⁶⁰Ibid., 13.

South, the ideology of racial feudalism prevented the rites of honor from being extended to black people.

The concept of racial honor also reveals how the fear of losing power over subordinated black Americans threatened not only the power structure of white masculinity but also the very foundations of southern honor more broadly, which had real-world political implications.⁶¹ The 1856 caning of US senator and abolitionist Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in the halls of Congress by Preston Brooks, a proslavery US representative from South Carolina, exemplifies the extent to which slavery, honor, and white masculinity had been imbricated in the antebellum South. Brooks's selection of a cane to viciously beat the northerner for his criticism of a slaveholding cousin and slavery as a total institution represented what he understood as the superior order of white southerners punishing the spokesperson of subordinate black slaves, thus defending the honor and manhood of his family and, by extension, the South. If Brooks had viewed their positions as equal, he would have challenged Sumner to a duel.⁶²

In addition to racial honor's usefulness in diagnosing the political performance of white masculinity in the public sphere among proslavery southerners, the concept is also helpful for examining the operation of racial feudal ideas in the private sphere throughout the US, including in the North. To be sure, Wyatt-Brown represents southern chivalry as the "defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman." However, as Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist who was born enslaved in New York shows, chivalry of this nature knew no sectional bounds and contained both gendered and racialized premises. In the 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman?"—which she delivered in Akron, Ohio—Truth reprises the British abolitionist phrase "Am I not a man and a brother?" to criticize the unequal distribution of chivalry and honor in the United States. She argued that the American social hierarchy did not recognize her black womanhood as tantamount to white womanhood and thus deemed her unworthy of receiving the same allocation of honor as white women. In one version of Truth's speech, she laments the fact that no one helps her "into carriages" over "mud-puddles" or gives her a place of honor yielded to white women.⁶³ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who was also living in the North, similarly denounces the "power whose ethics are robbery of the feeble and

⁶¹Glenda Gilmore and Walter Johnson have argued that the masculinity of white men had been confirmed through the domination of African Americans more generally. See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920*, 2nd edn (Chapel Hill, 2019), 61–90; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 88, 151, 200. For a critique of chivalry and "cavalier manhood" in the US South and the argument that such manhood emerges from a type of medieval masculinity see Tison Pugh, *Queer Chivalry: Medievalism and the Myth of White Masculinity in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge, 2013).

⁶²On the caning of Charles Sumner see "Investigation of the Assault on Senator Charles Sumner, 1856: U.S. Senate Report from the 34th Congress, 1st Session (Rep. Com. No. 191.)," 28 May 1856, 6, at www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/image/SumnerInvestigation1856.htm. For a complementary reading of the symbolic register of the attack see Manisha Sinha, "The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23/2 (2003), 233–62. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this connection.

⁶³Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?," *Modern History Sourcebook*, 1851, at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

oppression of the weak, the trophies of whose chivalry are a plundered cradle and a scourged and bleeding woman.”⁶⁴ Together, Truth and Harper might have asked, what to black women is American honor?⁶⁵

In an 1833 speech, Maria Stewart, another prominent black abolitionist in the North, anticipated the critiques that Truth and Harper later levied against the concept of honor as an aspect of the ideology of racial feudalism. She goes so far as to claim that the hierarchical society that Americans were reproducing had been more retrogressive for women than even the social conditions of the medieval “13th” and “15th” centuries from which she implies such hierarchies descended.⁶⁶ In this way, Stewart suggests that women living in the wake of European feudalism across the Atlantic were treated better than black women in America in a similar sense to how Douglass identified America’s social hierarchy as even more pernicious for black Americans than the vestiges of “monarchies and despotisms” had been for the people of the Old World.⁶⁷ Opposing this configuration, Stewart attempts to resignify the concept of “honor” in the United States as concrete care for *all* individuals, regardless of gender or skin color, instead of a system rooted in antiblack social domination.

To transform the meaning of honor, Stewart represents the idea in spiritual rather than secular political terms. In the final speech she gave before being exiled from Boston because of her bold activism, Stewart cites Romans 9:21, which proclaims that God “hath formed one vessel for honor, and another for dishonor.” Stewart may have disappointed many in the audience when she claimed that “the sovereign will of God” had allowed African Americans to be the second vessel in this fallen world. However, she also asserts that “all that *man* can say or do can never elevate us, it is a work that must be effected between God and ourselves.” In this way, Stewart uses a spiritual framework to render the notion of racial honor (rooted in the inegalitarian valorization of individuals based on skin color) inoperative. She contends that it had been God’s will to deliver black people from their tormentors by providing “a way for us to escape, and fight [God’s] battles.”⁶⁸

Stewart’s view of honor also links the concept to a practice of *personal* piety instead of *social* obligation. She believes that “the different grades [of people] rise to honor and respectability as their merits may deserve.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, she argues that temperance—fornearance from alcoholic drinks—establishes the foundations for an honorable life. Stewart maintains, “You have been told repeatedly of the glorious results arising from temperance, and can you bear to see the whites arising

⁶⁴Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 762.

⁶⁵Robert Rabie’s reading of Jacobs similarly reveals how she had been “denied protections that southern chivalry affords to women of the upper classes, transforming what ought to be fundamental rights (to freedom from sexual violence, for instance) into privileges afforded only to a narrow caste.” See Rabie, *Medieval America*, 117.

⁶⁶Maria W. Stewart, “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston,” in *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (1833) (Bloomington, 1987), 65–75, at 70, 69.

⁶⁷Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass*, 72.

⁶⁸Stewart, “Farewell Address,” 72, emphasis mine.

⁶⁹Maria W. Stewart, “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” in *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, 58.

in honor and respectability without endeavoring to grasp after that honor and respectability also?" Embracing a strategy of black moral uplift, she continues, "nothing would raise our respectability, as to our peace and happiness, and reflect so much honor upon us, as to be ourselves at the promoters of temperance, and the supporters, as far as we are able, of useful scientific knowledge."⁷⁰ In Stewart's eyes, the possibility that black people could achieve honor for themselves (as she says "the whites" have done) despite the prevalence of insidious beliefs that African Americans, by nature, could not possess what Taney later called "a sense of honor" points to the considerable threat that her views posed to antebellum America's racial feudal hierarchy.

Black abolitionist David Walker, Stewart's better-known mentor and Boston-area neighbor, understood the concept of honor quite differently, though both agreed that black people, in Stewart's words, must resist the conditions of their oppression by uniting in "hearts and souls" to undertake "mighty efforts to raise [their] sons and daughters from the horrible state of servitude and degradation in which they are placed."⁷¹ Walker repudiates the pretense of "honor" in American society so thoroughly that he mainly omits the American spelling of the word from his famous *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829). Where the American term does appear, it emerges from a quotation by US senator Henry Clay, a slaveholder. Walker also uses his signature typographic emphasis when deploying the word "HONORABLE" in a footnote, indexing and emphasizing the inherent irony of the concept as proslavery southerners used it. He writes,

The great slave holder, Mr. John Randolph, of Virginia, intimated in one of his *great, happy and eloquent* HARRANGUES, before the Virginia Convention, that Ohio is a slave State, by ranking it among other Slave-holding States. This probably was done by the HONORABLE *Slave-holder* to deter the minds of the ignorant; to such I would say, that Ohio always was and is now a free State.⁷²

For Walker, southern honor is a sham and a byword for the worst kind of hypocrisy.⁷³ Building on my examination of racial honor and racial fealty from the previous section, I will now explore the idea of racial order, which functioned through customs, laws, and institutions calibrated to perpetuate the ideology of racial feudalism.

The order of racial feudalism

In the aftermath of the Nat Turner's Rebellion, an 1831 uprising of enslaved people in Southampton County, Virginia, that resulted in the death of over fifty white

⁷⁰Ibid., 60.

⁷¹Maria W. Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer*, 48. I thank the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing me to this reference.

⁷²David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (1829) (University Park, 2010), 71.

⁷³For another interpretation of honor among enslaved people see John C. Willis, "From the Dictates of Pride to the Paths of Righteousness: Slave Honor and Christianity in Antebellum Virginia," in Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis, eds., *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville, 1991), 37–55.

people, Harriet Jacobs described how wealthy white citizens commissioned poor white people to ransack the quarters of enslaved dwellers to find evidence of insurrection. She argues that the “subordination” of the poor white deputies to roles that would ensure the restoration of the racial order prevented opportunities for exchanging common grievances between the racial groups about the broader structures of domination impacting each of them. As Cedric Robinson separately notes, “the tactic of composing armies from mercenaries and from marginal peoples and social strata extended back into the Middle Ages and earlier” and had been the best-documented mode of congealing social hierarchies among a variety of others that had been calibrated to protect the wealthy classes and maintain the broader social order.⁷⁴ The poor white residents Jacobs describes had been manipulated into viewing black progress as the unmerited inversion of America’s racial (feudal) hierarchy and thus of the nation’s fundamental social arrangement.

Jacobs emphasizes the acuity of the resentment that poor white racial order-enforcers exuded during their raid, observing, “I knew nothing annoyed them so much as to see colored people living in comfort and respectability.” In one instance, a “grim-looking” white man “without any coat” inspected her grandmother’s bedding and tablecloths, addressed her as “mammy,” and claimed, “you seem to feel mighty gran’ ’cause you got all them ’ere fixens. White folks oughter have ’em all.”⁷⁵ Jacobs recalls that the entire ransacking had been a “grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation.”⁷⁶

Douglass describes a similar hierarchical ordering phenomenon among the lower-class white overseers who “were as distinct from the slave-holding gentry of the south as are the fish-women of Paris, and the coal-heavers of London, distinct from other grades of society.” This “separate fraternity at the south” had been deputized into a “distinct class” well suited to their “malign and brutal propensities” of maintaining the supremacy of white people by ensuring that enslaved black people remained in a subordinate position at the true bottom of the social hierarchy.⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Douglass defines the South’s racial hierarchy in more starkly medieval terms. For him, not only did the plantation’s pristine grounds mirror “the residences of English nobility,” but its entire system “resembled in some respects descriptions I had since read of the old baronial domains of Europe.”⁷⁸ The plantation’s “whole public” had been “made up of and divided into three classes, slaveholders, slaves, and overseers,” with all other jobs such as blacksmiths and shoemakers being relegated to enslaved people. The plantation operated as “a little nation by itself, having its own language, its own rules, regulations, and customs,” and any “troubles and controversies arising [there] were not settled by the civil power of the State” but by white overseers representing the will of the plantation’s

⁷⁴Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 23.

⁷⁵Jacobs, *Incidents*, 100.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 98.

⁷⁷Douglass, *Life and Times*, 55–9.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 29, 28.

lord by serving as “accuser, judge, jury, advocate, and executioner.” Moreover, on plantations, “rank and station was rigidly maintained” and, ultimately, “civilization was in many respects shut out.”⁷⁹

Douglass’s experience on a plantation and his subsequent division of its social hierarchy into slaveholders, slaves, and overseers as three distinct classes might be read in dialogue with the medieval trifunctionary social framework examined by French historian Gregory Duby. Under the three-part organizational schema, society could be understood in terms of those who pray (the clergy), those who fight (warriors and, later, the nobility who inhabited this class position), and those who work (the peasants). However, as I have been arguing, the ideology of racial feudalism in America relied on an even simpler visual hierarchy: white over black. As Thomas R. R. Dew—the future thirteenth president of William and Mary—put it in 1832, “Color alone is ... the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy, and all who are white are equal in spite of the variety of occupation.”⁸⁰ International visitors to the United States, such as Harriet Martineau, echoed this analysis (though she remained blind to the racial feudal divisions in the North where African American thinkers such as Harper, Stewart, Jacobs, and Douglass did not). Martineau writes in 1837 that “the feudal qualifications for rank are absolutely non-existent in America (*except in the slave States*, where there are *two classes*, without any minor distinctions).”⁸¹

None of this is to say that Douglass’s tripartite representation of the feudal structure of his plantation was incorrect. He was describing American feudalism—as he saw it—at the scale of the slaveholding landed estate, where precise class distinctions among white people were more patent. At the same time, even these fine-grained distinctions among the dominant racial caste on plantations were in broad general alignment with America’s bifurcated racial order wherein a black person could be subjected to arbitrary domination by a white person in either section of the country. The numerous abuses precipitated by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and Taney’s 1857 *Dred Scott* ruling are two examples of this possibility. These instances of the national institutionalization of a rigid racial order and the numerous state laws, legal cases, and local customs preceding and bolstering them restricted the life and liberty of presumably free black people in the North (see Fig. 4).⁸²

Affirming the sentiment of other black abolitionists, Douglass claimed that “lords” and “nobles” perpetuated the racial order in the North just as plantation owners had

⁷⁹Ibid., 26–7.

⁸⁰Thomas Roderick Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond, 1832), 462.

⁸¹Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, vol. 3 (London, 1837), 28–9, emphasis mine.

⁸²A commonly held view among those in bondage was that escaping the South would make enslaved people free before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. However, runaways could be captured in the North and returned to their enslavers by right of comity and cooperation among the states. On the various state comity and cooperation laws and an examination of cases involving the return of fugitive enslaved people see Paul Finkelman, *Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism and Comity* (Chapel Hill, 1981). As Solomon Northup’s slave narrative has shown, black people could also lose life and liberty through kidnapping. See Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn, 1853).



Figure 4. “Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law,” a political cartoon published by Hoff & Bloede in 1850. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

perpetuated the system in the South.⁸³ In 1843, James McCune Smith described the operation of racial feudalism in Ohio (and, by extension, other parts of the North) as a condition under which “our people (the people of color)” were “shut out from the pale of citizenship, excluded from giving testimony before the courts of *Justice* (?) and barely suffered, under a heavy bond, to maintain a foothold on the soil, in short, dehumanized as far as laws could reach.” Summarizing this view, he described the unique manifestations of racial hierarchy that black people encountered as “northern hate” and “southern fear.”⁸⁴ The imposition of a racial order through the enslavement of black people in the South and their concomitant subordination in the North prompted Douglass to exclaim in 1847, “In reality, there is not a free colored man in the United States. Theoretically, we are free—practically, we are slaves.”⁸⁵

The Massachusetts Supreme Court case *Roberts v. Boston* (1849)—in which Sarah Roberts, a five-year-old black girl, was denied entry to a white-only school

⁸³Douglass, “What to the Slave?,” 76.

⁸⁴James McCune Smith, “The Destiny of the People of Color” (1843), in *The Works of James McCune Smith*, 48–61, at 56. On the racial climate in Ohio before the Civil War see also Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done: America’s First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York, 2021).

⁸⁵Douglass, “Citizenship,” 209, 211.

in her neighborhood and made to attend an underfunded school for black children across town—exemplifies the racially stratified milieu Douglass characterizes as the North’s “*skin-aristocracy*” or what James McCune Smith represents as “*caste-slavery in the north*.”⁸⁶ In fact, the future US senator Charles Sumner was among the first to explicitly invoke “*caste*” in the American context while advocating for Roberts in the case. Sumner argued that “*the separation of children in the public schools of Boston, on account of color or race, is in the nature of caste, and is a violation of equality.*”⁸⁷ Three years after the *Roberts* case, the *Scotch Independent* published an article praising the intellect and abolitionism of William Wells Brown, Alexander Crummell, and Frederick Douglass, whom it said endeavored to “*rebuke that spirit of caste, on the other side of the ocean, which excludes from society the man of true merit on account of his color.*”⁸⁸ In 1858, Douglass affirmed that free black northerners were persistently subject to “*a cruel and malignant spirit of caste, which is at the foundation, and is the cause, as well as the effect of our American slave system.*”⁸⁹ Along these lines, African American novelist Julia C. Collins’s novel *The Curse of Caste* frames caste as “*the twin evil*” of slavery.⁹⁰ They all implicated racial difference as the primary driver of social subordination throughout the entire United States, suggesting that the operation of the white-over-black dimensions of racial feudalism was just as strong in the North’s skin aristocracy as it had been in the South’s slave society.⁹¹ As Douglass put it, “*The politicians and political parties of the North are connected with the politicians and political parties of the South; and hence, the political arrangements and interests of the North, as well as the ecclesiastical arrangements and interests, are adverse to the colored population.*”⁹²

⁸⁶Frederick Douglass, “The Colonizationist Revival: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 31 May 1849,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 2, 1847–1854, ed. John W. Blassingame, Richard G. Carlson, and Clarence L. Mohr (1849) (New Haven, 1982), 203–17, at 211; Douglass, *My Bondage*, xx. See also Luther S. Cushing, ed., “Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston,” in *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, vol. 5 (Boston, 1855), 198–210; Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, *Sarah’s Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston, 2006).

⁸⁷Cushing, “Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston,” 202; Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York, 2020), 24. Isabel Wilkerson defines caste as “an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning” (*ibid.*, 17). Kenneth Stampp identifies an even longer history of racial caste hierarchy in America. He writes, “by the eighteenth century, color had become not only the evidence of slavery but also a badge of degradation. Thus, the master class, for its own purposes, wrote chattel slavery, the caste system, and color prejudice into American custom and law.” See Kenneth M. Stampp, *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (1956) (New York, 1989), 23.

⁸⁸William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York, 1863), 29.

⁸⁹Douglass, “Citizenship,” 209.

⁹⁰Julia C. Collins, *The Curse of Caste, Or, The Slave Bride: A Rediscovered African American Novel* (1865) (New York, 2006), 77.

⁹¹Douglass, “Citizenship,” 209.

⁹²In addition to criticizing the political order, Douglass is also critiquing what he calls the North’s racially segregated “*caste-religion*” that sanctions a white-over-black social hierarchy. Even so, Douglass had remained hopeful nearly a decade before the Civil War, claiming that the racialized confluence of “*political and ecclesiastical power is on the wane,*” with the contradictions of “*American religion and American*

The final dimension of racial feudalism, the white-over-black *racial order*, thus sets black people apart as a separate caste from those who did not have black skin in both the South and North. To be sure, manifestations of the ideology of racial feudalism in the South especially seemed to mimic the lineaments of European feudal societies that had weak central governments and powerful local fiefs. American plantation owners possessed nearly absolute control over the laws and governance of their domains and believed in the necessity of maintaining a permanent black underclass.⁹³ Just as European nobles created laws, decided matters of justice, and enforced punishments, wealthy planters (and those to whom they delegated power, such as overseers) had virtually absolute control over their landed estate and its inhabitants. In particular, they maintained unmitigated power over enslaved people whose bodies and souls were tied to the land and the person of the master. Exemplifying this state of total domination, Samuel Thomas, a Union officer, remarks that conditions were such in the South that “to kill a negro they do not deem murder; to debauch a negro woman they do not think fornication; to take the property away from a negro, they do not consider robbery.”⁹⁴

As white indentured servants became increasingly scarce in the seventeenth century, southern planters embraced a society premised on rigid aristocratic hierarchies subtended by the enslavement of black subjects. For philosophically attuned leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, the entrenched racial order of America’s white-over-black society reflected what he believed to be the inferior biological properties of black skin (in a way, prefiguring some of Cartwright’s ideas). While praising the “superior beauty” and “elegant symmetry of form” of white people in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson assails the “eternal monotony” of black skin, which is a “difference [that is] fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us.”⁹⁵ Just as serfs in the Middle Ages inherited their subordinated status from their parents, there was little room for the social advancement of enslaved Black Americans. Their descendants would be permanent members of the underclass whose social position was as unlikely to change as their skin color.

Asserting this point on 4 March 1858, former South Carolina governor and proslavery advocate James Henry Hammond called for the perpetuation of a “mud-sill” that maintained a fixed racial order predicated on black subordination. Hammond believed that “all social systems” must contain a class of people who possess “a low order of intellect” to perform “menial duties.” This “class” of people forms “the very mud-sill of society” so the “other class” can lead a life of “progress, civilization, and refinement.” Invoking the ideology of racial feudalism, Hammond claimed that such a class had already existed in the South: “our slaves are black, of another and inferior race,” which forms “the highest proof of what is Nature’s

democracy” becoming increasingly “glaring.” See Frederick Douglass, “A Letter to the American Slaves from Those Who Have Fled from American Slavery,” in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5: 163–70, at 165.

⁹³For a description of the operation of fiefs, vassals, manors, and the symbiotic relationship among these entities in medieval Europe see Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 163–75, 190–210, 241–54.

⁹⁴Thomas, “To General Carl Schurz,” 81.

⁹⁵Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1788), 147, 148.

law.”⁹⁶ In this way, he joins Jefferson and Cartwright in asserting that “nature” itself imposes the permanent racial subordination of black people.

Capturing the specificities of the terms of order that the ideology of racial feudalism imposed on African Americans in the North during the 1830s, Maria Stewart writes that “as servants, we are respected; but let us presume to aspire any higher, our employer regards us no longer.”⁹⁷ Whereas the urgent calls of black writers such as Walker and Douglass demanded the immediate abolition of slavery and racial subjugation, Stewart claimed that a divine reconfiguration of the society would come “in God’s own time, and his time is certainly the best, he will surely deliver you with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm.”⁹⁸ Stewart’s Connecticut-based black abolitionist contemporary and future Boston-area neighbor Hosea Easton, in part, had agreed with her in an early speech and cautioned his black audience “against any revengeful or malignant passions” to break the racial order. Instead he urged them to “stand still and see the salvation of God.” While he opposed physical violence, Easton did not proscribe the use of rhetorical barbs to spur his audience to “become united” and make “the voice of our community” “heard as the voice of one man” in order to “control the principles of indolence and immorality of every species, and inculcate those of industry and virtue, with all the qualifications necessary to enable us to control the effects of our own labor, and make it subservient to the benefit to our own community.”⁹⁹ In this way, he suggested that encouraging the moral and spiritual improvement of *all* Americans would transform the specific material conditions for black people.

Easton believed with such certainty in the execution of God’s final judgment against slavery partly because he, like many African Americans in the 1820s and 1830s, including Stewart, saw evidence of abolitionism’s relative success and slavery’s gradual diminution in the northern states. However, in Easton’s “Treatise,” which he composes closer to the end of the presidency of Andrew Jackson, he calls for “immediate abolition.” He further notes that “the work of emancipation is not complete when it only cuts off some of the most prominent limbs of slavery, such as destroying the despotic power of the master.” It must also give enslaved people a means to recover from the “several hundred years” of racial hierarchy that held them back.¹⁰⁰ Rather than merely calling for the abolition of slavery, Easton demands “nothing short of an entire reversal of the slave system in theory and practice—in general and in particular,” to “accomplish the work of redeeming

⁹⁶James Henry Hammond, “On the Admission of Kansas, under the Lecompton Constitution. Delivered in the Senate of the United States, March 4, 1858,” in *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond: Of South Carolina* (1858) (J. F. Trow & Company, printers, 1866), 318–19.

⁹⁷Stewart, “Franklin Hall,” 47.

⁹⁸Maria W. Stewart, “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” in *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, 28–42, at 41. By Stewart’s last speech in 1833, she was advancing the Garrisonian view regarding the insufficiency of the government to provide freedom for black people because it was predicated on proslavery premises. She argued that “all political discussions” should be “dropp[ed],” and “when our day of deliverance comes, God will provide a way for us to escape, and fight his own battles.” See Stewart, “Farewell Address,” 72.

⁹⁹Hosea Easton, “An Address: Delivered before the Coloured Population, of Providence, Rhode Island, on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 27, 1828,” in *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*, 59–61.

¹⁰⁰Easton suggests a form of what we now call reparations. See Easton, “Treatise,” 118–19.

colored people of this country from their present condition.” Through this reversal, emancipated people must be given “all that slavery has taken away from them.”¹⁰¹

In contrast to Easton’s progressive approach, Stewart believed that reaching a solution to the ideology of racial feudalism in the United States involved avoiding “political discussions” regarding black liberation, which “sow the seeds of discord and strengthen the cord of prejudice.”¹⁰² However, as it comes, Easton claimed that black people *should* wield political power as an instrument to demolish America’s racial order. He pointed out that even the most exemplary young black students in the North had little hope for surmounting the structural barriers limiting their social advancement and laments that when black students who are otherwise “well qualified for the common business of life” gain their education, they actually “know enough only to feel sensible of their misery.” Despite the intellectual force of “their minds being expanded, their perception brightened, [and] their zeal ardent for promotion; they look around for business” and “find that custom cuts them off from all advantages.” As the target of these racialized customs, they find themselves constantly being “rejected” by the various industries that would bring them “honour and respectability” among law offices, shops, businesses, and seafaring occupations simply because “it is customary,” despite the purportedly “expanded minds” of white northern leaders.¹⁰³

Indeed, there existed among northerners seduced by the ideology of racial feudalism a pervasive fear of black people and their rise within the social order.¹⁰⁴ Easton believed that the tyranny of “custom” was so strong in the North that he writes, “should it become customary to cut off a black man’s head, (as it is already at the south), then, of course, we must lose our head, if custom says it is right.”¹⁰⁵ Further exemplifying the racial feudal ideology of caste distinctions confronting black people across both sections of the country, Easton writes that an aspiring black businessperson “will not pass ten miles” when traveling through the “northern states” “without meeting with insults.” Such abuses include being forced to ride next to the driver instead of with the passengers on a stagecoach, which not only relegates the black business traveler to “suffer the severity of the weather,” but since he is restricted to traveling with the *driver*, he was also prevented from engaging in potentially lucrative business discussions with white fellow passengers.¹⁰⁶

As a debased casualty of the ideology of racial feudalism in the North, the black “man of business” would be further displaced from his White colleagues’ networks of power because “when the passengers stop to dine, he must take his fare in the cook room, with the cook. And for a sitting parlor, he must take the bar-room” to mingle with the “tavern haunters and drunkards.” His sleeping place would also be “in the garret, or black clutter chamber.” The totality of these conditions and slights, combined with the relative paucity of opportunities to intermingle

¹⁰¹Ibid., 119.

¹⁰²Stewart, “Farewell Address,” 72.

¹⁰³Easton, “An Address,” 56, 57.

¹⁰⁴For a historical perspective on this phenomenon see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) (London, 2007).

¹⁰⁵Easton, “An Address,” 56–7.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 57.

with people across racial lines, produced an entire group of people who could not transcend the ideology of racial feudalism in the realm of business for the “want of society.” To be sure, “society is the very mother who supplies men of business with useful knowledge” that was being withheld from black people. These circumstances “discourage and depress his mind still further,” make black underachievement appear just as *natural* or *organic* in the North as it was in the South, and cause white people who do not face such obstacles to ask, “Why is it that Negroes cannot do business like other people?” For Easton, full integration forms the critical foundation for destroying what I have been calling the ideology of racial feudalism. He believed that mere aspirations of racial uplift undertaken by black people would not be enough because “the coloured ‘brother,’ however able to provide for himself, must have a place provided for him” that is on equal footing with that provided to his enterprising white colleagues to achieve social parity.¹⁰⁷ Such a form of egalitarianism was hardly possible under inflexible social divisions based on skin color.

Hosea Easton, public sentiment, and undoing the “deep design” of racial feudalism

Hosea Easton believed that racial hierarchy had been sustained throughout the United States by an enduring “public sentiment” militating against the acceptance of black people by myths and legends permeating popular culture, many of which have yet to be expunged to this day.¹⁰⁸ Anticipating Herman Melville’s satirical commentary on the “Indian-hater,” Easton claims that “children in infancy receive oral instruction from the nurse.”¹⁰⁹ He continues, “the first lessons given are ... go to sleep, if you don’t the old *nigger* will carry you off; don’t you cry—Hark; the old *nigger*’s coming—how ugly you are, you are worse than a little *nigger*. This is a specimen of the first lessons given.” Other means of reinforcing these beliefs take the form of inspiring

half grown misses and masters to improvement ... They are told that if they do this or that, or if they do thus and so, they will be poor or ignorant as a *nigger*; or that they will be black as a *Nigger*; or have no more credit than a *nigger*; that they have hair, lips, feet, or something of the kind, like a *nigger*.¹¹⁰

Confirming the existence of these tropes in both slaveholding and free states that serve as persistent popular cultural manifestations of racial feudal ideology,

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁸For a parallel reading of Easton’s concept of public sentiment vis-à-vis the status of black people in American democracy see Melvin L. Rogers, *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought* (Princeton, 2023), 105–12, 125–9; Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 170–96. Frantz Fanon and Toni Morrison take up this idea in different contexts during the twentieth century. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952) (New York, 2008), 91, 120–94; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰⁹Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) (Evanston, 1984), 149; Easton, “Treatise,” 105.

¹¹⁰Easton, “Treatise,” 105–6.

Easton posits that if anyone doubts “the truth of what I write, let them travel twenty miles in any direction in this country, especially in the free States, and his own sense of hearing will convince him of its reality.” Even “higher classes” of black people, Easton notes, be they “full grown persons” or “sometimes professors of religion,” had been “frequently instructed in school rooms by referring them to the nigger-seat, and are sometimes threatened with being made to sit with niggers, if they do not behave,” with “the same or similar” terms used to designate “nigger pews or seats in meeting houses.”¹¹¹ Douglass similarly writes in 1850, “The priests and churches of the North, are, with comparatively few exceptions, in league with the priests and churches of the South; and this, of itself, is sufficient to account for the fact, that a caste-religion and a Negro-pew are found at the North, as well as at the South.”¹¹² Incidentally, designated pews were also a holdover from early modern Europe as they represented seats accessible only to society’s upper caste.¹¹³

In addition to physical objects such as pew seats, other customary designators of the ideology of racial feudalism in the North included “cuts and placards descriptive of the negro’s deformity” that are “every where displayed to the observation of the young, with corresponding broken lingo,” that fill “show windows” in “popular book stores” as well as “the bar-rooms of the most popular public houses in the country.” Some of these even “have their ceiling literally covered with them.” Easton repines that such a public display is “under daily observation of every class of society,” not just in the South but “even in New England.” This form of “education” was not only “systematized, but legalized,” in the South, which circulated “public newspapers” that are “teeming through the country, bearing negro cuts.”¹¹⁴

Pointing to the “deep design” of racial feudal ideology in America, Easton claims that forcing black people to work in the fields owes both to the “avarice” of the enslavers and to the premises underwriting “the production of modern philosophy, bearing date with *European slavery*.” This philosophy of racial hierarchy that established a “natural” order in the United States was “the almost sole cause of the present prevailing public sentiment in regard to the colored population.” It has “given rise to the universal habit of thinking that [black people] were made for the sole end of being slaves and underlings.” Easton adds, “There could be nothing more

¹¹¹Ibid., 106.

¹¹²Douglass advises fugitive slaves that if they join a church, “let it not be one which approves of the Negro-pew, and which refuses to treat slaveholding as a high crime against God and man. It were better, that you sacrifice your lives than that by going into the Negro-pew, you invade your self-respect—debase your souls—play traitor to your race—and crucify afresh Him who died for the one brotherhood of man.” See Douglass, “Letter to the American Slaves,” 164–5, 167–8.

¹¹³John Coke Fowler, *Church Pews, Their Origin and Legal Incidents* (London, 1844).

¹¹⁴Easton, “Treatise,” 107. A decade after Easton, William Wells Brown adds that though “public sentiment” against slavery was the only thing that could “save” him in the South, the system of racial hierarchy had become so strong and the prevailing public sentiment so deeply ingrained that the “Constitution,” the “law,” and “public sentiment” would not be “effectual” in “protect[ing] the Slave.” Even more pointedly, he writes that law and public sentiment are “all a dead letter to the Slave.” See Brown, “A Lecture,” 13, 5–6. All told, Wells Brown—alongside thinkers such as Easton, Jacobs, and Douglass—relates a sense of the pervasiveness of the racial feudal ideology in the North and South that thwarted black advancement and frustrated racial progress during the antebellum era in ways that both complement and extend Tocqueville’s observations.

natural, than for a slaveholding nation to indulge in a train of thoughts and conclusions that favored their idol, slavery. It becomes the interest of all parties, not excepting the clergy, to sanction the premises, and draw the conclusions, and hence, to teach the rising generation.”¹¹⁵

Easton believed that the root of the public sentiment underlying racial feudal ideology emerged from ideas about racial inferiority based on how Africans and Europeans had been described in the history books.¹¹⁶ To correct the historical record, he retells the story of Europe vis-à-vis Africa, contrasting the overlooked history of ancient Africa with Europe’s turbulent past. He cites “a writer” claiming that the Greeks, “who in later ages became the patterns of politeness and every elegant art, were descended from a savage race of men, traversing the woods and wilds, inhabiting the rocks and caverns, a wretched prey to wild beasts and one another.” Building on this assertion, Easton concludes, “It is a little singular that modern philosophers, the descendants of a race of savages, should claim for their race a superiority of intellect over those who, at that very time, were enjoying all the real benefits of civilized life.”¹¹⁷ In particular, he points to the “barbarity” of Europe during the Middle Ages after “the decline” of the Roman Empire, claiming that between AD 395 and 571, “all Europe exhibited a picture of most melancholy Gothic barbarity.” Up through the “sixteenth century,” “literature, science, taste, were words scarce in use.”¹¹⁸

In his most explicit attempt to expose the continuity of feudalism from medieval Europe to racial feudalism in the modern United States, Easton asserts that it was during this extension of “Gothic barbarity” that “European slavery” was introduced under “the Feudal system” through an environment in which “it seemed to be the whole bent of their mind to enslave each other.” Under this form of government, the leaders of European “barbarians became intolerable” because they “reduced the great body of them to actual servitude.” This feudal system made those at the bottom of the social hierarchy “slaves fixed to the soil.”¹¹⁹ While Easton claimed that “European slavery” had “existed in the highlands of Scotland, as late as the year 1156,” he tied the European “Feudal system” to the American ideology of racial feudalism through this claim: “it is not a little remarkable, that in the nineteenth century a remnant of this same barbarous people should boast of their national superiority of intellect, and wisdom of religion; who, in the seventeenth century, crossed the Atlantic and practised the same crime their barbarous ancestry had done in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.” In the same vein, settler colonialism, for him, had not been a function of the European Enlightenment. Instead, it resembled European feudalism, which he characterizes as “the late unholy war with the Indians” and the “wicked *crusade* against the peace of Mexico.”¹²⁰

Anticipating the pyrotechnic exchange of ideas and bullets during the Civil War a quarter-century later, Easton writes that because of the existence of slavery, a government “like this” in the United States “is at any time liable to be revolutionized by

¹¹⁵Easton, “Treatise,” 107, emphasis mine, 114.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 72.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 72–3.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 73–4.

¹²⁰Ibid., 74, emphasis mine.

the people, at any and every time there is a change of public sentiment.” He adds, however, that “when subjects of a republican government become morally and politically corrupt, there is but little chance remaining for republicanism.” For him, America cannot fully embrace the Enlightenment principles underlying the “Constitution” and “articles of confederation” while operating under the ideology of racial feudalism because the framework was “morally and politically” debauched. Thus there can be no “honest” interpretation of these documents, which is why Easton sees the nation’s moral revival as the necessary condition for dismantling the feudalistic remnants of American society.¹²¹

Indeed, for Easton, because Americans had not been honest enough to render “a fair construction of [the] letter and spirit” of the founding documents, “Good laws, and a good form of government, are of but very little use to a wicked people, further than they are able to restrain them from wickedness.” Easton further contends that even a “fallen angel” would “explain away” the “nature of [heaven’s] laws” because while he could not alter them, he could “pervert their use, in himself, and act them out in this perverted state.” Even an “infinitely perfect government” can be distorted by malicious interpreters.¹²² This is all to say that the ideals of the US Constitution, no matter how perfect they had been, were still vulnerable to vitiation by a corrupt populace that has displayed an ongoing commitment to maintaining racial hierarchies. Like other early and antebellum black writers, Easton thus concludes that demolishing the ideology of racial feudalism would require not only political change but also a widespread moral revolution.

Conclusion

Though Tocqueville shed light on the recessed continuities between European feudalism and US racial hierarchy, we must also turn to the writings of black Americans who powerfully critiqued America’s purportedly enlightened social and political system by reference to what they characterized as the illiberal remnants of medieval Europe. Reading Tocqueville in concert with those he describes as excluded from America’s white racial aristocracy provides new insight into how abolitionists and proslavery advocates alike represented Americans’ ideological commitments regarding racial fealty to white skin, the relentless operation of race-based hierarchical ordering mechanisms, and the system of racial honor that upheld these mutually reinforcing elements of domination. Additionally, we should read the aspects of the ideology of racial feudalism that antebellum Americans described as supporting slavery in the South and prejudice in the North—those of racial fealty, racial honor, and racial order—in concert with the growing body of literature on racial capitalism if we are to get a fuller picture of slavery and racism as they experienced it, which goes beyond the immense economic benefits generated by global institutions and processes.

As I have shown, black thinkers of the antebellum era cataloged the effects of the ideology of racial feudalism and charted a path toward its dissolution through myriad interconnected ways. More work is being done on this score to assess the

¹²¹Ibid., 90.

¹²²Ibid., 90–91.

correctives advanced by writers such as Hosea Easton, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and others vis-à-vis the assertions of their proslavery opponents.¹²³ These African American thinkers suggest that staging both an intellectual *and* moral revolution in the United States would help deracinate the deep roots of the nation's embedded racial feudal ideology. Perhaps Douglass sums it up best when he writes that “the *moral* growth of a nation, or an age, does not always keep pace with the increase of knowledge, and suggests the necessity of means to increase *human love* with *human learning*.”¹²⁴

In the wake of overlapping contemporary crises across the US conditioned by extensions of the ideology of racial feudalism—income inequality, voter suppression, and ongoing housing discrimination—we should turn to understudied African American sources that have, from the beginning, rejected the hegemony of a putative natural hierarchy and embraced the broader promises of America's founding documents alongside efforts to bring about a collective moral transformation so that the United States might one day, as Martin Luther King Jr later reiterated, “be true to what [it] said on paper.”¹²⁵

Acknowledgments. For their feedback on various portions of this article, I thank Sonu Bedi, Nolan Bennett, Robert E. Bonner, Holly Brewer, Henry C. Clark, Adam Dahl, Katie Ebner-Landy, Cecilia Gaposchkin, James Engell, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Jerrold Hogle, Jeannie Ikuta, Gregory Laski, Karintha Lowe, Adelaide Mandeville, Darrin McMahon, Russell Muirhead, Myra Rivera, Melvin Rogers, Julie Rose, Helena Rosenblatt, John Stauffer, Harmon Siegel, Lucas Swaine, and Brandon Terry. I am also indebted to Brandon Byrd, his fellow editors at *Modern Intellectual History*, and my anonymous peer reviewers.

¹²³For such a treatment see Roy, *American Dark Age*.

¹²⁴Douglass, “Claims of the Negro,” 125, emphasis mine.

¹²⁵Martin Luther King Jr, “‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’: Address Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple,” April 1968, at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>.