

“WE NEED CHARACTER!”: Remembering Alexander Crummell’s Appeal to Postbellum African Americans

LAURA GIMENO PAHISSA

Institution address: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística. Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres. Campus UAB. 08193 Bellaterra. Barcelona, Spain.

E-mail: laura.gimeno@uab.cat

ORCID: 0000-0002-3750-4769

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Abstract: The following article offers a study and reassessment of the controversial figure of Alexander Crummell, an African American leader whose influence has been neglected by most scholars. His postbellum ideas on the advancement of black people influenced some of his contemporaries like Booker T. Washington and even later leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois. The article also offers an interpretation of two of Crummell’s most famous speeches on the future of his race, which suggest possible solutions to the tensions and problems experienced by his people after the end of the Civil War.

Keywords: African American history; memory; slavery; American Civil War; Crummell; negro problem.

Summary: Postbellum African American memory. Alexander Crummell: Advancement through character and morality. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo estudia y reexamina la figura del controvertido líder afroamericano Alexander Crummell, cuya influencia ha sido ignorada por muchos estudiosos. Sus ideas, escritas en la posguerra, sobre el progreso de los ciudadanos afroamericanos influyeron en algunos de sus contemporáneos como Booker T. Washington y en otros posteriores tales como W. E. B. Du Bois. El artículo también ofrece una interpretación de dos de los discursos más famosos de Crummell sobre el futuro de su raza. Estos sugieren posibles soluciones a las tensiones y problemas vividos por los afroamericanos al terminar la guerra civil.

Palabras clave: Historia afroamericana; memoria; esclavitud; Guerra Civil americana; Crummell; el problema negro.

Sumario: La memoria afroamericana tras la guerra civil americana. Alexander Crummell: El progreso por medio del carácter y la moralidad. Conclusiones.

1. POSTBELLUM AFRICAN AMERICAN MEMORY

In the last twenty or thirty years of the nineteenth century, African Americans faced the collapse of most Reconstruction governments in the South and experienced the consequences derived from this failure. African American influence in local governments in the whole South diminished after several Southern states took measures such as literacy tests to discourage blacks from voting. So, although the Fifteenth Amendment had been successfully ratified in 1870, there was no guarantee that all blacks would be able to exercise their democratic rights. As a result, these rights were steadily eroded and there was discrimination and prejudice against them in both sections of the country. This should not be surprising at all since Northerners

had never had any exalted notions of racial equality, and once memories of war had begun to fade, and the political and economic exigencies of keeping a solid Republican South had passed, reconciliation and nationalism quite naturally became the order of the day. Reconciliation between the sections was correlated with a rising anti-Negro prejudice. (Meier 21)

As both August Meier and David Blight have highlighted in their respective works, the reconciliation between North and South was carried out largely at the expense of the African Americans. That is to say, once the Emancipation Proclamation was passed in 1863, the “Negro problem” was thought to have disappeared—or was voluntarily erased—from the minds of most Northerners, as if with the—theoretical—end of slavery all the problems that affected blacks had miraculously vanished. After the war, then, North and South concentrated on their reconciliation and African Americans were entirely abandoned to their own fates. As a result, the central focus of all black leaders was to encourage and find ways to promote black American economic advancement, for respect and social progress could only be achieved by obtaining a respectable economic situation. Some periodical publications such as the *Washington Bee* overtly advocated a promotion of economic activity among African Americans to motivate their advancement. However, most blacks were relegated to minor unskilled jobs in both North and South. On top of this, labor unions also generally stimulated anti-black feelings because blacks represented direct competition for white immigrants in big industrialized

cities. For some black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, economic advancement meant adopting a conciliatory philosophy towards white Southerners. For some others, the acquisition of wealth would lead to an improvement in black people’s morality. One of the main defenders of this link between economic progress and morality was Alexander Crummell, an African American thinker who has been largely neglected by contemporary scholars. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to offer, first of all, an overview of this forgotten African American leader who greatly influenced the debate on identity, memory and destiny, and, secondly, to analyze two of his most relevant speeches which show the evolution of his political agenda for black Americans.

Already in antebellum times, blacks started defending themselves from those who claimed that they were illiterate beasts. Therefore, the written word became their most powerful weapon to contest any claims against their theoretical inferiority. As Henry Louis Gates states, the African American wrote “not only to demonstrate humane letters, but also to demonstrate his/her own membership in the human community” (1). Thus, black Americans wanted to prove their capacity to reason, to articulate their achievements and show their potential as a group. This posed a clear challenge to whites; if blacks could excel at the arts and sciences, “then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related” (Gates 2). African Americans put forth all kinds of scriptural and historical arguments to defend their race and argue in favor of equality. They often made reference to their descending from Ham, one of the three sons of Noah. This idea was usually strengthened with other arguments which claimed that some of the most important figures of Western history had been black or had had dark skin, among them Cyrus, Plato, Caesar, Jesus and more modern examples such as Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Dumas and Robert Browning (Meier 52).

Other arguments were also mustered to demonstrate the importance of Africans in the creation and progress of the Western world, such as the role of black slaves in the rise of Western economies, and the active role and self-sacrificing nature of blacks during armed conflicts involving the United States like the American Civil War and the Spanish-American War. These arguments related to the specificity of black achievements were put to a variety of uses both by those who saw the need to collaborate with whites and by those who advocated the complete separation of the races in American society. Among the first group, Meier mentions former slave William Wells Brown, author of *The Rising*

Son or the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race (1874), and the first black scholarly historian George Washington Williams, author of *History of the Negro Race in America* (1883), who proclaimed that “there shall be no North, no South, no Black, no White—but all American citizens, with equal duties and equal rights” (15). Others presented a more race pride-oriented attitude in their writings, such as William T. Alexander (*History of the Colored Race in America*, 1890), Joseph E. Hayne (*The Negro in Sacred History*, 1887), Reverend Rufus L. Perry (*The Cushite; or the Children of Ham*, 1887), and E. A. Johnson (*School History of the Negro Race in America*, 1890). These writers emphasized that blacks were “a race of people once the most powerful on earth” (Johnson 7). Among the most radical ones in this latter group, some, like J. H. Smythe, were in favor of a complete racial separation. It seems that the presentation of arguments in defense of black identity and its dignified past brought about a proud emphasis on black scholarly and semi-professional history writing and also stressed the urgent necessity to shape a black national identity. However, the postbellum period was a time of huge uncertainty when African Americans had to put all the pieces of their lives as former slaves in order. Not only were their identities as individuals at stake, but also their collective identity as a race—or “nation.” It was a period when very important decisions had to be made, decisions that involved the directions black American efforts would have to take by the end of the nineteenth century, the challenges they would face in the twentieth century, and their position in relation to economic, political, educational and social issues. African Americans had to face at least two crucial matters: first, how they would fit in the (re-) United States and, secondly, how they would remember their past in slavery and come to terms with it. In fact, what to remember and how to do so became the most important group-defining element that was discussed after Emancipation both by black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and by postbellum African American writers. These two leaders’ well-known ideological confrontation, and above all, Du Bois’s questioning of Washington’s leadership—“easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington” (240)—as well as of his accommodationist strategies, have become the epitome of this crucial debate generated among African Americans with the end of slavery and the achievement of freedom. However, scholarly focus on the figures of

Washington and Du Bois has tended to push other black thinkers such as Crummell into the background.

2. ALEXANDER CRUMMELL: ADVANCEMENT THROUGH CHARACTER AND MORALITY

Though Alexander Crummell is not as well-known as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, his influence was very significant and it can now be traced back in their writings. In fact, Crummell was Du Bois’s mentor and represents one of the first attempts to find a solution to the so-called “Negro Problem” after the Emancipation of slaves. Initially, he seemed to advance some of Booker T. Washington’s ideas, though the Wizard of Tuskegee’s doctrines were to take a very different direction. Crummell was alarmed by the conditions under which African Americans worked and lived in the South. As a consequence, he devoted his life to the defense of what he considered to be the main pillars on which the success of the African Americans should be based: moral discipline, order and the family. His way of understanding the progress of the black race was very much a combination of his much-admired Victorian England and his own religious upbringing. His trips to England and Africa and his own experience as a free black in the United States played a key role in the development of his philosophy. His influence on many black leaders was so important that as J. R. Oldfield—the editor of Crummell’s texts—highlights, “if we are to understand Du Bois and those who followed him . . . we must begin by understanding Crummell and those who came before” (2). He was never popular, above all due to his lack of tact, his radicalism and his identification with strongly disciplinarian moral methods. However, Crummell greatly contributed to the ongoing debate on the status of the black Americans after slavery, and his philosophy and enduring influence can also be appreciated in the writings of some African American authors of the time. As Du Bois wrote in the *Souls of Black Folk*:

The fire through which Alexander Crummell went did not burn in vain . . . Deep down below the slavery and servitude of the Negro people he saw their fatal weaknesses, which long years of mistreatment had emphasized . . . He did his work—he did it nobly and well; and yet I sorrow that here he worked alone, with so little human sympathy. His name today, in this

broad land, means little, and comes to fifty million ears laden with no incense of memory or emulation. (358–62)

Crummell, who became one of the champions of Southern freed blacks, was born free in New York City in 1819 to parents of black descent. His father was an ex-slave who had ascended to New York's middle class by working as a grocer—a job he later traded for that of oysterman. Though Crummell's father was illiterate, he sent all his children to school. Alexander Crummell was therefore raised in a relatively privileged atmosphere. However, his first traumatic racial experience as an African American took place in 1835, when he enrolled in a biracial boarding school in New Hampshire and was forced by anti-abolitionists to leave the school. He changed institution and started his studies at Oneida, New York, where he went through a religious awakening. Crummell started instilling his writings with abundant Biblical and classical references and with a deeply moral and strict point of view. He applied to enter the General Theological Seminary in New York City, but was rejected. For Crummell, this represented a further experience of what it meant to be an ambitious black man in nineteenth-century America. A second application was again unsuccessful, so Crummell tried other theological schools, finally being accepted by Yale, from which he graduated in 1841. His early work as a minister was undertaken in black Episcopal churches in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and New York. In 1847, he decided to travel to England to obtain funding for his congregation.

J. R. Oldfield relates that, once in England, Crummell established contact with the Evangelical section within the Church of England, which later decided to send him to Cambridge where he studied at Queen's College. Evidently, this represented an extraordinary achievement since it was not usual for African Americans to have access to higher education at the time. In Cambridge, Crummell established good connections and was surrounded by an entirely novel social environment.

In 1853, after having spent some years in England, he decided to leave for Africa and establish himself in Liberia, where he worked for the Protestant Episcopal Church. In Liberia, Crummell encountered a radically different society from that of England. When he arrived, about 3,000 people inhabited the country. Most of these were immigrants who came from the South of the United States (Oldfield 6). Crummell's eight years in Africa were not peaceful, mostly because he disagreed with the

Episcopal authority in the country. Crummell envisioned Liberia as a black state that could be transformed along the lines of Victorian England. In fact, during his English years he had acquired what would become a life-long love affair with England, of which he once wrote: “I am almost over-powered with the impress of greatness, magnificence and power which comes upon me, at every turn! How wonderful is this great city of London” (qtd. in Oldfield 12). By 1873, Crummell had come to the conclusion that Liberia had “turned out to be not the ‘grand theater of the Negro’s civilization’ but a microcosm of America’s racial attitudes” (Oldfield 9). He returned to the United States where he both worked as a minister and actively promoted emigration to Liberia, first for the American Colonization Society, and afterwards on behalf of the Liberian government. Despite his fears of Liberia becoming a small-scale copy of American racial attitudes, he continued to believe that emigration to the West African country was the only possible solution for American blacks, whose situation in the United States had increasingly deteriorated.

One of Crummell’s achievements was the creation of the American Negro Academy (1897–1924) upon his return to the United States. The idea behind this organization was to oppose Booker T. Washington’s emerging policy of accommodationism and industrialism. In the ANA, Crummell brought together some of the best black intellectuals of the times such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, John Wesley Cromwell, Kelly Miller and a promising young scholar, W. E. Du Bois (Oldfield 11). The ANA was an organization of intellectuals that promoted black Americans and their culture by means of its members’ publications and scholarly research. To paraphrase J. R. Oldfield’s words, Crummell was an idealist who embodied the belief in black intellect, a position that was radically opposed to that of Booker T. Washington, who represented the new generation of black leaders, more concerned with money and material status: “Crummell never lost his faith in the ability of blacks to progress and fulfill their own unique destiny. The question in his mind related *to means, not ends*; hence his difference with Booker T. Washington” (Oldfield 25; my emphasis).

Part of his moral program for blacks involved the way black Americans had to think about slavery. As far as the remembrance of slavery is concerned, Crummell’s own thinking about the institution underwent evolution. At first, Crummell understood slavery as a trial sent by God to test the black race and its capacities. In fact, he saw it as a way of being in touch with a “superior” civilization (i.e. the Anglo-Saxon)

from which they could learn much. However, as time went by, Crummell started to change his interpretation of slavery and he progressively concentrated on its negative aspects. If the black man had become lazy and corrupt and pursued immoral behavior, it was because he had been exposed to the corrupting effects of such an institution.

One belief that linked him to Booker T. Washington was his insistence on the dignifying dimension of manual labor. According to both men, many blacks rejected it because they thought it was degrading, since it reminded them of their times on the plantation. The rejection of manual work as part of the memory of slavery was only one of the attitudes that Crummell wanted to fight against. At the same time, though, he believed that Washington was too focused on manual labor (i.e. his “industrialism”). For Crummell, this was dangerous since whites would systematically associate blacks with the “unthinking and uncultivated, [who] raise cotton, tobacco, etc.” (qtd. in Oldfield 19). Crummell believed in the power of education to uplift the African Americans, although he endorsed the learning of the very few, the bright promising blacks. He believed that those who showed a capacity for learning should study and become part of the black intelligentsia,¹ whereas others who were not as intellectually gifted should help the race by working in other more manual tasks. Together, the intellectuals and the common workers would help in the uplifting of the race with their different contributions. For Crummell, there were several things inherited from life on the plantation, such as immorality and lack of discipline, which had to be eradicated. This is why he dreamt of a black milieu, such as that promoted by the ANA, that would introduce a moral revolution, especially in the South, capable of leading African Americans in the ways of virtue and morality. Again, as in the case of the birth of the slave narrative, blacks were forced to prove that they were civilized enough to achieve intellectual parity. This was important, since for Crummell blacks had to have the same opportunities as whites and the crucial starting point was education.

¹ Crummell’s belief that his community was in need of a black intelligentsia certainly influenced Du Bois’s idea of the “Talented Tenth” some time later. Du Bois claimed that it was necessary for black America to be “saved by its exceptional men” who showed “intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it” (Du Bois, qtd. in Marable 34). For him, the advance of the community depended on the “leadership ... from a trained minority” (Aptheker, qtd. in Marable 76).

In their different ways, Crummell, Washington and Du Bois all believed African Americans were destined to show their value in American society. In other words, they all thought that blacks had to demonstrate how much they had already contributed to American society and should make evident that they were capable of further contributions, which would eventually help them prove their status as full-fledged US citizens.

2.1. Two texts by Alexander Crummell

At this stage I believe it is important to analyze two of Alexander Crummell’s speeches: “The Destined Superiority of the Negro” (1877) and “The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era” (1885). These texts have been chosen because they exemplify the author’s intellectual evolution in his understanding of the problematic relationship between blacks and the memory of slavery. Besides, they also illustrate specific aspects of his discourse which influenced other African American leaders.

“The Destined Superiority of the Negro” is a sermon delivered at St. Mary’s Chapel in 1877 in which Crummell demonstrated his belief in the predestined role bestowed by God on the black race. Employing Biblical parallels between African Americans and the people of Israel—a recurrent strategy already used in the first slave narratives, sermons, and spirituals—Crummell insisted that slavery had not been a bad experience for his people, but rather a test sent by God who had chosen them to fulfill a very special mission. In fact, God had never abandoned them:

for all their long-continued servitude and suffering, God, in the end, would make them abundant recompense. Great shame and reproach He had given them, through long centuries; but now, when discipline and trial had corrected and purified them, He promises them honor and reward. (Crummell, “Destined Superiority” 44)

Crummell went so far as to say that God had not only tested blacks through slavery but that after the Civil War He was testing American democracy through the destiny of African Americans. In fact, his whole sermon is built around the idea that God is a source of discipline as well as of retribution. Crummell’s profoundly moralistic discourse elaborates on the idea that God punishes depravity. In fact, Crummell believed that

the “destiny of any given race was determined by a seamless combination of religious and racial attributes” (Bay 98). He gives several instances of civilizations that God had destroyed for their degeneracy, such as ancient Egypt and Babylon. However, according to Crummell’s thesis, there are certain human groups that God, despite their denial of Him, nevertheless decides to save:

He disciplines; but when discipline has worked out its remedial benefits, he recompenses them for their former ignominy and gives them honor and prosperity . . . the Almighty seizes upon superior nations and, by mingled chastisements and blessings, gradually leads them on to greatness . . . But when the Almighty sees in a nation or people latent germs of virtues, he seizes upon and schools them by trial and discipline; so that by the processes of divers correctives, these virtues may bud and blossom into beautiful and healthful maturity. (“Destined Superiority” 45–47)

The parallel with African Americans is here quite straightforward. Blacks had suffered under slavery, and although some of them still exhibited part of the faulty character acquired while they were enslaved, God still regarded them as superior people. Although Crummell rhetorically asks at one point which category blacks belong to—chosen or unchosen—he finally answers his own question by exclaiming that “the Negro race, nowhere on the globe, is a doomed race!” (“Destined Superiority” 49). The black race is strong and has survived all kinds of humiliations; the black man “stands to-day in all the lands of his thralldom, taller, more erect, more intelligent, and more aspiring than any of his ancestors” (“Destined Superiority” 49). The minister presents a deeply nationalistic program for the advancement and uplifting of the colored race based on self-esteem, but also on hard work. He also describes the African race as an extremely flexible one, a race capable of adjusting to all occurrences. The African knows how to bend “adverse circumstances to his convenience” (“Destined Superiority” 50). Certainly, Crummell’s enthusiastic words from the pulpit must have had a powerful effect on his audience. He shows his own faith in the African race by praising blackness and thus raising blacks’ self-esteem.

As mentioned in the previous section, Crummell understood slavery as a school—similarly to Booker T. Washington’s assertions on the same topic—and explained to his followers that the peculiar institution had only been a preparation for a brilliant future: “it is the education that

comes from trial and endurance . . . When God does not destroy a people [it] is an indication that he wants to make something of them” (“Destined Superiority” 52). He concludes his speech by encouraging blacks to embrace all disciplines and never feel constrained by the color of their skin: “let us lay hold of every element of power, in the brain; in literature, art and science, in industrial pursuits; the soil, in cooperative association, in mechanical ingenuity and above all, in the religion of our God” (“Destined Superiority” 53).

His main objective in this sermon is to challenge blacks’ low self-esteem and he does so by telling them that God put them to the test to prove their worth. Consequently, blacks should honor the Almighty and show they are worthy of His trust by excelling in all areas, each according to their abilities. Crummell’s ideas certainly echo those presented by postbellum autobiographers such as Elizabeth Keckley, James L. Smith and Susie King Taylor, who saw both in economic and intellectual achievement the means for the black race to survive and prosper. These authors and Crummell emphasized the importance of acknowledging the heritage of slavery, but at the same time stressed the need to go beyond that stage in African American history and seek new opportunities.

The second text by Crummell which I want to briefly analyze is a speech delivered to the graduating class of Storer College in 1885. Although the tone of “The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era” is one of optimism and encouragement to young black graduates, the author is more critical and shows his own development as a thinker. In this discourse, he elaborates on the notions of “recollection” and “memory” of slavery. Crummell starts by acknowledging that blacks live trapped between two worlds: on the one hand, the past (i.e. slavery) and, on the other, their duty regarding the future of the race. The minister articulates his discourse on slavery around the idea that although the past can and should be inspirational, black Americans should not live immersed in it. He tells African Americans that it is good to acknowledge the past as something that existed and shaped their identities, but that blacks should look into the future and take responsibility for their future development. That is why, he argues, the speech is entitled “The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era.”

Crummell starts the body of his argumentation by emphasizing that one of the most pervasive problems among African Americans is the “irresistible tendency in the Negro mind . . . to dwell morbidly and

absorbingly upon the servile past” (“New Ideas and New Aims” 121). Crummell here also appeals to the responsibility of both political leaders and the church, since he maintains that part of this painful insistence on slavery is provoked from the pulpit. Going beyond the contents of his sermon of eight years before, he criticizes the perpetual identification of blacks with the children of Israel, although, ironically enough, he himself followed this tradition: “We are fashioning our life too much after the conduct of the children of Israel . . . They kept turning back, in memory and longings, after Egypt, when they should have kept both eye and aspiration bent toward the land of promise and freedom” (“New Ideas and New Aims” 121). The children of Israel are not a good model for blacks to look up to, since, according to Crummell, African Americans are now also dwelling on their past and forgetting their new aspirations in their own promised land: America. For Crummell, the continuous evocation of slavery can only bring degeneration and destruction to African Americans. He insists that although the peculiar institution cannot be erased from their collective or individual memories, this memory can be used as a stimulus to target higher aims. At this point Crummell presents his dichotomy between “recollection” and “memory”:

What I would fain have you *guard against is not the memory of slavery, but the constant recollection of it*, as the commanding thought of the new people, who should be marching on to the broadest freedom of thought in a new and glorious present, and still a more magnificent future. . . . There is a broad distinction between memory and recollection. Memory, you will observe, is a passive act of the mind. It is the necessary and unavoidable entrance, storage and recurrence of facts and ideas to the understanding and the consciousness. ‘Recollection’ however, is the actual seeking of the facts, is the painstaking endeavor of the mind to bring them back again to consciousness. . . . What I object to is the unnecessary recollection of it [i.e. slavery]. This pernicious habit I protest against as most injurious and degrading. As slavery was a degrading thing, the constant recalling of it to the mind serves, by the law of association, to degradation . . . ‘Language is as truly on one side the limit and restraint of thought’, as on the other side that which feeds and unfolds it.’ My desire is that we should escape ‘the limit and restraint’ of both the ‘word’ and the ‘thought’ of slavery. (“New Ideas and New Aims” 123–24; my emphasis).

“Memory” is then inescapable because it is an intrinsic part of the epistemological process, whereas “recollection” is based on the

individual’s choice. It is interesting to note that Crummell’s concept of “recollection” constitutes the basis for any autobiographical writing, since he describes “recollection” as a conscious choice of past events, which is what an autobiographer does in his/her writing. Recollection is an active and creative process that works on certain raw facts of the past.

Following his discussion of remembrance, Crummell presents a series of “new ideas” for this “new era” that blacks have entered after enslavement. Crummell places all the responsibility on blacks as an American race that has reached maturity and warns that in the future “it will be ours to demand all the prerogatives and all the emoluments which belong to American citizenship, according to our fitness and our ability” (“New Ideas and New Aims” 125). That is, the minister makes African Americans responsible for their own progress. They now own their lives and must act accordingly. As a result, Crummell outlines what he thinks the weakest points of the black race are: (1) the family, (2) the working conditions, and (3) morality. Crummell is deeply worried about the way in which the institution of the family has been neglected. He defines it as the pillar upon which human life and society are built: “despoil the idea of family, assail rudely its elements, its framework and its essential principles, and nothing but degeneration and barbarism can come to any people” (“New Ideas and New Aims” 127). According to Crummell, the family embodies the idea of organization, stability and structure. Its moral dimension plays a central role in Crummell’s plans for the advancement of the colored race since it helps preserve the moral dimension of the individual. So, it is in the interest of the African Americans to protect this institution.

The second element that Crummell introduces as a crucial issue to improve in black life is labor. After the family, work is the next dignifying element for the individual. Thrift and hard work will raise African Americans from their ignominious past in slavery. This will bring dignity and manliness to the race. Here Crummell works at two different but nevertheless interrelated levels. In the first place, the minister points to the disorganized and rude nature of black work in the United States: “the black labor of this land is, of necessity, crude, unskilled and disorganized labor” (“New Ideas and New Aims” 129). This is not because black people are lazy—they are rather like diamonds to be morally polished—but because of the untutored and unregulated nature of work which is not protected by national institutions. At this point Crummell introduces an idea closely connected to the vindication

of workers' rights. It is the need for "scholarly men, who come out of the schools trained and equipped by reading and culture; they are the men who are to handle this great subject . . . to raise and elevate the most abject and needy race on American soil" ("New Ideas and New Aims" 129). As has been previously mentioned, Crummell directly appeals to the need for a black intelligentsia to lead the race in the right direction. Again, this is a plan that involves combining the complementary efforts of two social groups: on the one hand, "common" people would improve themselves by means of hard work—thus collaborating in racial uplifting—and, on the other hand, the intellectually gifted would improve the race from the political sphere.

The last idea that Crummell introduces is that of morality: "the need of a higher plane of morality" ("New Ideas and New Aims" 130). Slavery was a corrupt, evil institution designed by whites which perverted the dignity of the Africans. For Crummell, African Americans should not only occupy themselves with the improvement of their intellectual dimension—completely neglected in the time of slavery—but should also be concerned with the degraded moral condition of the race. To illustrate this degraded morality, he mentions divorce and the all too common birth out of wedlock. What the black race needs, according to Crummell, is a "moral revolution" that would give blacks "dissatisfaction with ignoble motives and sensual desires" ("New Ideas and New Aims" 132), and the basis of this revolution is "character."

His idea of "character" is most easily clarified by reference to his essay "Tracts for the Negro Race No 2: Character, The Great Thing." which he published in 1898. This text was written to be part of a series of ten tracts on topics such as family, marriage, and the home. This particular article is structured around three main sections: (1) the losses of the race, (2) character: the great thing, and (3) the care of daughters. Since the essay dwells on some of the main ideas already discussed previously in this same section, our attention will be limited to the second part of the article. Here Alexander Crummell writes in capital letters: "WE NEED CHARACTER!" ("Character" 220), thus laying stress on the fact that material improvement on its own is not enough. That is to say, there is no use in planning a racial uplifting if the benefits are expressed only in material and not in moral terms. Material gains help the race, but do not elevate by themselves: "True elevation of man comes from living forces. But money is not a living force . . . character is an internal quality; and it works from within, outward, by force of nature

and divine succours” (“Character” 220–21). Crummell is not saying education and property are to be undervalued, but rather pointing out that material benefits alone are nothing if they do not go hand in hand with an individual moral improvement, since only character can truly regenerate a race. Character gives credit to the man and compels others to respect him: “Character is the motive power of enterprise and the basis of credit; character is the root of discipline and self-restraint; character is the cement of the family; character is the consummate flower of the true religion; and the crowning glory of civilization” (“Character” 221). Without character there is nothing. To achieve this higher state of being, man must fight to be free from self-defeating habits and dangerous ideas, and practice virtue, purity, hard work and discipline. Again, Crummell’s ideas are shared by most postbellum African American writers, who in their writings not only emphasize the necessity of hard work in order to succeed in America, but also stress the intrinsic moral qualities of the black race.

CONCLUSIONS

Having discussed two of Crummell’s most important speeches, it is now time to provide a general evaluation of his contribution and relevance. At first sight, it might seem difficult to reconcile Crummell’s belief in the “destined superiority of the negro” with his admiration for Victorian England. In fact, his goal was to apply the Victorian emphasis on the family, the home, and respectability to the African Americans. For Crummell, blacks should “emulate the ideals of bourgeois democracy with its ethos of hard work . . . and competitive enterprise . . . Anglo-American society represented the highest point of evolutionary progression on an ascending cultural scale” (Moses 110).

Crummell also presents Christianity as a key element for the advancement of the black race. He considers religion to be a fundamental element in the life of a proper citizen, since he is convinced that “Christianity was the source of Britain’s military might and economic power” (Moses 88). One might also venture to say that he would want to use religion as a way of overcoming the trauma of slavery and Reconstruction. By looking into the experience of slavery as a positive phase and catalyzing it through religious language (i.e. that it was a test sent by God), Crummell tries to heal the pain of African American collective memory. He attempts to transform pain into something

dynamic and productive, to summon African Americans into action through his conviction that they are the chosen people of God.

In his writings, Crummell encourages the material progress of the race through manual labor, but at the same time he asserts the need for character building and the need for a sense of morality. In his sermons he can be very pessimistic but at the same time he shows his hope in the advancement of his people. This double dimension of Crummell's work can also be observed when he draws African Americans' attention to their own responsibility in their progress, while he also emphasizes the need for institutional support. Part of black people's responsibility comes from their remembrance of slavery. Crummell appeals to their sense of duty again by emphasizing the fact that a civilization that is always lamenting its past can never move forward. For Crummell, the constant recollection of slavery becomes a degrading experience because while blacks are complaining about their unfortunate past, they are forgetting about the fulfillment of their most pressing needs. In other words, he turns their pain into something productive. W. J. Moses explains Crummell's attitude in the following way:

His position entailed a striking combination of Calvinistic realism and evangelical optimism, for while he recognized black powerlessness, he maintained a faith in the "destined superiority of the Negro." When speaking publicly he did not avoid addressing what he called "these dreadful wrongs and outrages" that black people faced during the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, he constantly advised self-help—both individually and collectively—for *while sharply denouncing white injustice, he resisted the urge to focus entirely on black grievances.* (111; my emphasis)

Crummell understood that if his people wanted to advance, they would have to rapidly adapt to all the new challenges posed by the postbellum scenario, a context that did not allow for nostalgia and the constant recollection of the past. Alexander Crummell's ideological legacy should be further studied, as he was a very relevant American intellectual of the late nineteenth century who advanced some of the most challenging—and controversial—theories regarding the role and place of the African Americans in the United States.

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