

Colored Conventions Project Teaching Guide for College/AP

EXHIBIT:

Prosperity and Politics: Taking Stock of Black Wealth and the 1843 Convention

Prepared by Samantha de Vera in collaboration with P. Gabrielle Foreman

Reviewed by Janel Moore Almond

This teaching guide can be taught in conjunction with Sarah Lynn Patterson's article "As the True Guardians of Our Interests: The Ethos of Black Leadership and Demography at Antebellum Colored Conventions," which appears in the volume *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (2021), edited by P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, published by the University of North Carolina Press. For more information on the contents of the volume and where to find it, [click here](#).

"Prosperity and Politics: Taking Stock of Black Wealth and the 1843 Convention" curated by Sarah Lynn Patterson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst ([link](#))

Questions:

1. *How does this exhibit contribute to our understanding of the role of free African Americans in the growth of American "worth," "value," and racial capitalism?*
2. In its [Tables and Maps](#) page, this exhibit renders the convention's statistical findings into tables and charts. *What can we make of the delegates' use of statistical reports as the field of statistics became accepted internationally as a window into understanding society and (cultural, national, and ethnic) value? How do you think these reports, presented at the conventions, aided Black communities? How does this exhibit illuminate the status of skilled Black laborers in the nineteenth century?*
3. As Sarah Patterson notes, "These reports define [Black Americans'] participation in nation building as inhabitants, landowners, skilled workers, parents and club and church members, among other categories."¹ However, these reports excluded "orphans, child laborers, imprisoned juveniles, the aged and infirm, and invalids and widowed parents who struggled with poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment."² *What do you make of this exclusion in light of the fact that the 1840 census acutely misrepresented free*

¹ Sarah Lynn Patterson, "As the True Guardians of Our Interests: The Ethos of Black Leadership and Demography at Antebellum Colored Conventions," *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 213.

² Patterson, 219.

*African Americans, falsely showing high rates of “insanity and idiocy”?*³ What do these reports say about how Black delegates envisioned the future of Black communities?

4. How does this exhibit conceptualize Black women’s role in sustaining both an activist community and culture? What methods does the author/curator use to examine Black women’s roles?
5. This exhibit includes biographies of businesswoman [Elizabeth Gloucester](#), activist and educator [Julia Williams Garnet](#), activist and organizer [Sydna E. R. Francis](#), and physician [Dr. Sarah Loguen-Fraser](#). Why do you think it is important to highlight the lives and work of Black women who were shaped by convention culture but did not directly participate in the conventions?
6. CLASS ACTIVITY: If your class were to create/hold a convention today, what issues would be its focus? Write a convention call that outlines the convention’s objectives, urgent issues at hand, and the active measures delegates and attendees would need to consider, discuss, and plan. Write a comprehensive call and brief version of it (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)). Prepare to address the following questions:
 - a. How would your convention be organized?
 - b. What organizations and which leaders would be invited? Who are the non-famous people who would need to be there and from what communities/entities would they draw? Consider how an [unprecedented number of Black women participated in the 1854 Emigration Convention](#) and how their presence informed the issues that were discussed and the resolutions that were passed.
 - c. What objectives do you think most attendees would agree on?
 - d. What major differences in approaches do you think delegates might have?
 - e. How do you think it would be covered by the press?

This teaching guide was created by Samantha de Vera in collaboration with P. Gabrielle Foreman.

Suggested Readings:

- Ball, Erica L. *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*. University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- Foreman, P. Gabrielle. *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

³ Both scholars and journalists have long noted that the 1840 census was riddled with intentional inaccuracies to reflect pro-slavery advocates’ claims that being free rendered African Americans prone to insanity. Proslavery forces exploited the 1840 census to argue that slavery protected African Americans from mental illnesses and poverty. See Paul Schor, “The Census of 1840: Science, Politics, and ‘Insanity’ of Free Blacks,”³⁰ and Peter Whoriskey, “[The bogus U.S. census numbers showing slavery’s ‘wonderful influence’ on the enslaved](#),” *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2020.

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Peterson, Carla L. *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Schor, Paul. "The Census of 1840: Science, Politics, and 'Insanity' of Free Blacks," *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017: 30-42.