Over the course of four centuries, approximately 12.5 million people were forcibly removed from the African continent and sold into slavery. Countries including Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, and the Netherlands relied on stolen labor, knowledge, and skills as they established new colonies. Slavery and white supremacy became the basis of colonial life as complex systems emerged to solidify slavery in the New World. On the Caribbean island of Barbados, for instance, the Slave Code of 1661 instituted brutal punishments, like being burned in the face, for enslaved people who were found guilty of crimes. Meanwhile, whites enjoyed legal protection for inflicting violence on the enslaved. In 1662, a Virginia law established that children born to Black women would inherit their mothers’ status as free or enslaved. As such, Black women’s reproductive labor became a market commodity. In 1685, the French government implemented the Code Noir, a detailed set of regulations that applied to all French American colonies. One restriction, presumably intended to quell slave rebellions, prohibited enslaved persons belonging to different enslavers from gathering at any time of day. Violators would be whipped, branded, or killed. Throughout the Americas, Black people had common experiences of enslavement.

Despite similarities in how Black exploitation functioned across continents, differences in regional slave systems emerged based on factors such as demographics, death rates, the natural environment, and demand for colonial exports. Additional distinctions existed regarding the types of labor that the enslaved performed, the gendered division of labor, the rigidity of racial stratification, cultural norms, and the legal protections that were available to Black people, regardless of how unreliable those protections were. Given that slavery was not identical throughout the New World, abolition necessarily adopted multiple forms as well.

One such form was a Pan-Africanist process that I term “Africana abolitionism.” I define Africana abolitionism as a shared set of practices that African-diasporic people deployed to dismantle systems of slavery throughout North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Africana abolitionism sought to eradicate not simply regional systems of slavery but also racialized epistemologies that justified the enslavement of African-descended peoples and Black people’s global subjugation. Africana abolitionism bridges the particular and the universal by offering a framework for understanding how localized abolitionist movements facilitated global emancipation.
This chapter first describes how Africana abolitionism can enrich the study of abolitionist movements by interrogating two questions: How might we understand abolitionism differently if we decenter colonizers and the roles that European nations played in undoing slavery? How might we understand abolitionism differently if we frame the movement’s internationalism not in relation to colonial powers but in relation to Black people’s shared visions for and approaches to freedom? Next, it highlights Black women’s participation in three arenas of Africana abolitionism: slave revolts, the Black press, and lecture circuits. To conclude, it describes how framing local and national struggles against slavery as Africana abolitionism can allow us to reevaluate the roots of Black transnationalism.

**Africana abolitionism**

Black people’s actions, whether conscious or unintentional, and whether they spurred material change or held symbolic value, were the driving force of the international abolitionist movement. Viewing these actions as Africana abolitionism allows us to consider how informal and decentralized modes of resistance became absorbed into the international abolitionist imaginary. Rather than casting enslaved people as the inspiration for abolition and colonial powers as abolitionists who combated slavery on an international stage, Africana abolitionism allows us to account for how the actions and worldviews of enslaved Black people and free Blacks bolstered transnational abolition.

Because the slave trade developed internationally, so too did abolitionist movements. Abolitionism was international in scope not only because of its impacts on trade and foreign policy but also because abolitionists understood that they needed support across national boundaries. As Manisha Sinha explains in *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition*: “Black abolitionists insisted that their struggle receive an international hearing.” American abolitionists participated in European lecture tours and published their work abroad in attempts to garner sympathy for their cause. They also aligned the abolition of slavery with other progressive causes, including that of European working classes (Sinha 2016, 351).

As various scholars demonstrate in *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, feminists throughout the United States, France, Germany, and Britain – countries that were among the world’s foremost colonial powers – framed their advocacy for women’s rights in relation to slavery. Anti-slavery activism offered some European women a first foray into the public sphere. This was also true of the white American women who organized the Seneca Falls women’s rights meeting in 1848 when they were denied a voice in the international anti-slavery movement. By traveling, publishing, and speaking abroad, African American women like Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Sarah Parker Remond simultaneously criticized slavery and opposed racialized, gendered norms that restricted Black women’s mobilization. As women participated in the abolitionist movement, they situated themselves as transnational figures.

Many historians have described how interracial coalitions of activists turned to international audiences to foster abolitionist sentiments abroad. Scholars have also discussed the role that European actors played in campaigning against slavery. Audrey Fisch, for example, explains how white activist J. B. Estlin distributed Frederick Douglass’s narrative in Britain “as part of a larger effort to inform the English public about American slavery and raise international support for American abolition” (Fisch 2009, 3). I take such contributions as my starting point for theorizing Africana abolitionism. The wealth of research on how abolition involved a diverse cast of actors who mobilized on a global stage has created two particular opportunities to expand the historiography of the international abolitionist movement.
First, existing scholarship can more fully investigate how empire shapes historians' conceptualization of internationalism within the abolitionist movement. Historians have successfully shown how a dynamic interplay of forces precipitated the downfall of transatlantic slavery. However, in examining the international abolitionist movement, some scholars have overemphasized white activists' efforts to influence how imperial power is manifested in the Americas. Consequently, their discussions of international abolitionism center the colonial powers that were responsible for the systematization of Black subjugation. Rather than framing internationalism as a liberation strategy that African-diasporic peoples used to confront their oppression, scholarship on abolitionism portrays internationalism as a strategy that predominantly white actors used not to redistribute power but to reinforce colonialism in service of abolition. For example, J. R. Oldfield writes that white British activist Thomas Clarkson “established important links with French abolitionists” and “reinforced his identification with the French Revolution” after visiting Paris in 1789 (Oldfield 2013, 37–9). Oldfield continues: “strangely, [Clarkson] seems to have made little effort to cultivate American abolitionists … Clarkson showed little interest in America or in the potential of American abolitionism” (Oldfield 2013, 39). Given that colonialism lay at the heart of slavery, locating colonialism at the core of abolitionist internationalism neglects how Black abolitionists advanced their own brand of internationalism.

Second, scholarship on Black abolitionists' internationalism frequently centers African American men. Historians and literary critics have deftly illustrated how Black abolitionists participated in global activism. Yet, their discussions of Black internationalism rarely encapsulate how it was imagined and practiced by women and by activists outside the United States. While scholars have published texts on African American women abolitionists’ internationalism, such works generally feature a single woman. Furthermore, scholarship on Black abolitionist women’s internationalism focuses on travel, speeches, and essays – forms of abolition that were more accessible to the Black elite and Black men than to the rest of the Black population. If we consider how abolitionist internationalism existed beyond formal, male-dominated modes of resisting slavery, this can reveal new entry points for examining Black women’s abolitionist internationalism.

This chapter therefore centers Africana abolitionism as an alternative framework for enhancing our understanding of the international abolitionist movement. Black women’s participation in three forms of opposition to slavery – slave revolts, the Black press, and lecture circuits – highlights how Africana abolitionism manifested in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Each strategy demonstrates how Africana abolitionism encompasses Black people’s internationally recurring liberation strategies, their conscious appeals to transnational abolition, and the global impacts of regional Black resistance. Slave revolts were the most consistent form of abolition throughout the Americas. Their reappearance across geographic boundaries showcases enslaved people’s shared commitment to their liberation. The Black press, comprising Black-owned publications and the work of Black writers/editors, facilitated the transnational exchange of ideas. It provided sites for Black abolitionists to practice and publicly debate the merits of internationalism. Similarly, by lecturing to coed, interracial, and international audiences, abolitionists embodied the liberatory promises of their work. I emphasize women’s participation in these three forms of resistance not because they were the only Africana abolitionists, but to normalize their participation in the international abolitionist movement.

### Slave revolts

Violent resistance to slavery was as common as slavery itself. Individual slave revolts belonged to a larger pattern of global anti-slavery mobilization. Slave revolts throughout the Americas did
Black women and Africana abolitionism

not exist in a vacuum; it was not unusual for reports of rebellions abroad to circulate to other countries. Enslavers in the United States and the Caribbean, for example, feared that news of the Haitian Revolution would incite local insurrections. Slave revolts may be understood as a form of Africana abolitionism because they occurred throughout the New World, influenced international debates about slavery and abolition, and generated transnational racial solidarity. Such was the case with a thwarted slave revolt in Cuba.

In 1818, British businessman Joseph Marryat published a pro-slavery pamphlet about the causes of slave revolts and the effects of emancipation. Writing that “Domestic conspirators were also aided by foreign emissaries,” Marryat claims that “natives of St. Domingo” attempted to provoke rebellions in Barbados and Cuba. He asserts:

In 1812, a conspiracy was set on foot in Cuba, by some emissaries from St. Domingo, who … contrived to evade the vigilance of the Spanish Government, and to enter into the city of the Havannah undiscovered. The slaves readily listened to their instigations, and engaged in the enterprize [sic] of obtaining their freedom by the assassination of their masters.

(Marryat 1818, 17)

Marryat places responsibility for the intended rebellion with Haitian ringleaders. His preoccupation with foreign influence on enslaved people reflects enslavers’ anxieties about the international impact of the Haitian Revolution. Regardless of whether such fears were substantiated or baseless, they illustrate that knowledge of international slave revolts circulated among enslavers and was thought to be accessible to the enslaved.

As Marryat describes the intended uprising, he claims that a Black woman informed the Spanish governor of the revolt, thus foiling the rebels’ plans. According to Marryat, the woman “cohabited with one of the leading conspirators” and “felt alarmed lest she should be abandoned for a white rival.” He concludes that “her jealousy became so violent, that she determined to give information of the plot to the Spanish Governor, only stipulating for the safety of her paramour” (Marryat 1818, 17). Marryat’s discussion of Black women’s fear and jealousy reinforces stereotypes that often preclude Black women from being understood as abolitionists. As Camilia Cowling explains, “Whether marronage, violent crime, or violent uprisings are the focus, we tend to find fewer women mentioned” in accounts of self-manumission. Likewise, Marryat frames the unnamed woman as a bystander whose emotions trumped her desire for freedom. He ultimately relegates Black women to the peripheries of violent resistance to slavery.

Marryat’s anti-abolitionist text contains insights about the international significance of slave revolts. First, it shows that enslavers feared the possibility of African-diasporic peoples collectively resisting slavery. Second, it highlights how pro-slavery advocates used slave revolts to influence public sentiment about slavery and abolition. Third, it suggests that enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples at times forged international connections in their efforts to abolish slavery.

Contrary to Marryat’s analysis, women throughout the diaspora participated in violent struggles against slavery. In her discussion of women’s roles in an 1843 rebellion in Cuba, Aisha K. Finch explains:

traditional narratives of slave insurgency implicitly recount not only the collective passage from passivity to defiance, but also the passage from “slavehood to manhood.” … Together the highly visible male icon and the masculinized rank-in-file become pivotal to the slave rebellion’s conceptual existence and therefore part of the collective inheritance of slave rebellion histories.
Despite masculinized portrayals of slave revolts, scholars have documented how women facilitated rebellions by spreading news of impending revolts, securing weapons, and taking up arms. Bernard Moitt explains that women joined a rebel army during an 1812 slave revolt in the French colony of Guadeloupe, while Rebecca Hall describes how women provided the impetus for revolts on slave ships; in a 1712 New York rebellion; and in an 1812 Virginia uprising that she terms “Celia’s Conspiracy.” From the inception of the transatlantic slave trade, women were eager to challenge its existence.

**The Black press**

Black-owned publications, Black writers, and Black editors were vital to the international abolitionist movement. The Black press exemplifies the global significance of Africana abolitionism because it offered a forum for Black people to build community and for Black thinkers to shape discourse on racial oppression. Some newspapers, like the *Liberator*, were interracial publications that amplified the voices of Black writers. Others, like the *North Star*, targeted Black audiences and granted greater autonomy to Black writers and editors. Such was the case when Mary Ann Shadd Cary, an African American abolitionist and suffragist, founded the *Provincial Freeman*.

The United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which ruled that African Americans who escaped slavery could be captured and returned to their enslavers, including in states where slavery was outlawed. This legislation endangered free Blacks who had never been enslaved because they were subject to heightened scrutiny, particularly if they could not prove their status as free. After 1850, fugitives from slavery and free Black people increasingly emigrated to Canada, some famously ushered across the border by self-emancipated abolitionist Harriet Tubman, a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, who may not have been literate but would have accessed news from the Black press. The *Provincial Freeman* catered to emigrants like Tubman in addition to African Americans who remained in the United States. The newspaper regularly featured articles intended to facilitate the transition to Canada and articles supporting abolition. As Dann J. Broyld notes, Tubman and other new arrivals to Canada were occasionally disillusioned to discover that racism did, indeed, persist in the then-British colony. The *Provincial Freeman* and Cary herself extolled the virtues of life in Canada rather than grappling with how the British crown was embroiled in the ongoing oppression of Black people.

Cary emigrated to Canada in 1853 and launched her newspaper shortly thereafter, making her the first Black woman newspaper editor in North America and the first woman editor in Canada. She published the *Provincial Freeman* in the United States and Canada. The newspaper was transnational in its publishing practices, content, and audience. Cary’s written work and editorship of the newspaper exemplify how the Black press enacted Africana abolitionism. Like other abolitionists, and despite Britain’s lengthy participation in the slave trade, Cary encouraged African Americans to leverage British influence in hopes that international pressure on the United States would advance abolition. However, she mobilized Africana abolitionism as she explained how emigration would promote abolition and pan-Africanist solidarity.

In 1852, Cary asserted that in the British West Indies, “Much has been done by the colored people of those islands to improve their condition, and much more may be done conjointly with emigrants from the States.” Two years later, Cary established that the *Provincial Freeman* “wish[es] to help create a sentiment in Canada, and out of Canada, that shall tell against Slavery.” An 1856 editorial encouraging readers to attend an upcoming emigration convention also explained that emigrationists “would be enabled to do Anti-Slavery work more effectually” by leaving the United States. For Cary, emigration was intimately tied to abolition and transnational Black liberation.
In addition to facilitating transnational movement, the Black press galvanized the international abolitionist movement by publicizing Black resistance abroad. Just as slave revolts, whether real or imagined, shaped international attitudes towards slavery, so too did Black uprisings, whether they occurred pre- or post-emancipation. Symbols of Black resistance were vital to fostering Africana abolitionism throughout the diaspora. On January 28, 1842, the *Liberator* reported on a deadly uprising against police in Kingston, Jamaica. Although slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1834, the *Liberator* framed this rebellion as aligned with the struggle against American slavery. An observer who witnessed the riot writes that on December 22, 1841, “a crowd of women, children, and half grown boys were assembled, and the women began to throw stones and broken bottles at the police, who were obliged to run for their lives.”20 The observer portrays women as the heart of the revolt, explaining that the crowd was further “incited by the gestures and inflammatory language of the women.” To American abolitionist audiences, this uprising highlighted the global nature of enslaved and Black oppression. It was not simply a revolt in Jamaica but an inspirational symbol of resistance that abolitionists embraced around the world. As this insurrection demonstrates, Black women’s local mobilization had international implications – some of which were unpredictable but nevertheless positioned Black women at the center of abolitionist internationalism.

**Lecture circuits**

Lecture circuits enabled the autonomous creation and circulation of an African American public discourse that connected Black speakers with Black audiences. They also granted African American speakers a platform to embody new narratives of race to white audiences, both domestically and internationally. Some Black women lecturers, like Maria Stewart, rose to prominence during the 1830s at a moment when individual women successfully accessed abolitionist circles. As Martha Jones explains, debates about women’s participation in African American public culture from the 1840s to the 1860s circumscribed and later reimagined Black women’s roles.21 Against this backdrop, women such as Sojourner Truth fused their abolitionist speeches with religious ministry; Black women insisted on their inclusion in the male-dominated Colored Conventions Movement; and women like Sarah Parker Remond launched international lecture tours.

Remond was born to a free, wealthy family in Massachusetts in 1826. After beginning a European lecture tour in 1859, Remond eventually immigrated to Italy, where she became an obstetrician (Salenius 2016, 2). Having delivered anti-slavery lectures in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, and Scotland, Remond exemplifies the internationalist impulses that existed among Black abolitionists.

In an 1862 speech delivered in London, “The Negroes in the United States of America,” Remond advocates for British intervention to abolish slavery. She asserts that “the negroes and their descendants, whether enslaved or free, desire and need the moral support of Great Britain.”22 After informing listeners that approximately four million persons are enslaved in the United States, Remond implicates Britain in the perpetuation of slavery and attempts to foster camaraderie between the British and the enslaved. She explains that slavery is a transnational system, stating:

> The free operatives of Britain are, in reality, brought into most personal relations with slaves during their daily toil. They manufacture the material which the slaves have produced … although three thousand miles of ocean roll between the producer and the manufacturer and the operatives.

*(Remond 2017, 89)*
Remond portrayed abolition as an international imperative precisely because the products of slave labor were consumed around the world. Like Cary, who traveled abroad and argued that the British could be allies to the enslaved, Remond emphasized that nothing should “prevent the people of Great Britain from maintaining their position as the friend of the oppressed negro” (Remond 2017, 89). By criticizing British use of items produced through enslavement and emphasizing that British support would be indispensable to African Americans, Remond illuminated how slavery and abolition both depend on transnationalism.

Remond was not alone in embarking on international lecture tours; other notable abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, also employed this strategy. Remond’s lectures demonstrate how Black abolitionists practiced and conceptualized internationalism in relation to slavery. As her work shows, lecture circuits are significant to theorizing Africana abolitionism because speakers’ self-representation and the content of their lectures privileged Black people’s knowledge production in the fight to end slavery.

Conclusion

Examining African-diasporic people’s resistance to slavery through the lens of Africana abolitionism allows scholars to reconceptualize abolitionist internationalism. Slave revolts, the Black press, and public lectures were three anti-slavery strategies offering opportunities for Black people to mobilize transnationally. Marryat’s pamphlet highlights how enslaved people’s real or imagined collaboration with each other across geographic boundaries threatened the slaveholding order, while the Liberator’s discussion of a Jamaican riot demonstrates how uprisings offered important symbols of resistance to abolitionists abroad. Shadd Cary’s work with the Provincial Freeman shows how the Black press provided abolitionists with a discursive space to debate transnationalism and an opportunity to practice transnationalism in their publishing strategies. Likewise, Remond’s lecture analyzed slavery’s internationalism, while Remond herself cultivated an internationalist presence.

Africana abolitionism includes, but is not limited to, slave revolts, the Black press, and the lecture circuit, and the examples contained in this chapter are not exhaustive. As such, future research might consider how Africana abolitionism was enacted through other anti-slavery strategies, such as filing freedom suits and participating in abolitionist associations. Future scholarship must also continue to explore the gendered dimensions of Africana abolitionism. Examining abolitionist internationalism differently can provide scholars with a new way to understand Black women’s activism. While Black women were at times excluded from fully participating in organized abolition because of their race and gender, looking at Black women’s Africana abolitionism can reveal how they advanced abolition internationally, albeit by participating in resistance strategies that are infrequently recognized as abolition, such as truancy, maintaining familial bonds, poisoning enslavers, or work stoppages.23 In addition, future research on Africana abolitionism should evaluate the concept’s implications in different eras. How may Africana abolitionism enrich the study of the twentieth-century movements for independence from colonial powers? Might Africana abolitionism influence the ways in which contemporary activists conceptualize and enact prison abolitionism? Answers to these questions, and more, illustrate how abolitionists’ struggles against slavery have consistently mirrored Black people’s resistance to racism, sexism, and class exploitation.

Further inquiry into how Africana abolitionism manifested in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America has the capacity to reshape scholars’ understandings of the origins and forms of African-diasporic people’s transnationalism. It will enable historians to interrogate abolition’s internationalism, not to reveal how Black and white abolitionists appealed to colonial
powers but to uncover how Black peoples had common understandings of how transnational approaches to abolition would advance their cause. Africana abolitionism allows scholars to consider how Black people adopted a bottom-up approach to eradicating slavery, and it encourages us to center Black people’s links to each other rather than white abolitionists’ links to colonizers. Africana abolitionism locates internationalism within the African diaspora, not in the long freedom struggle’s relationship to colonial powers. By shifting focus towards Africana abolitionism rather than abolitionist internationalism more broadly, scholars can center Black actors and their global struggles against anti-blackness.

Notes


References


Primary sources


