

**1798. Abolition debate**, E. H. Smith, April 11, 1798 in D. Gellman and D. Quigley, ed. (2003). *Jim Cow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877*. NY: New York University Press, 46-51.

The occasion of our present meeting is solemn and affecting, melancholy but joyful. We are convened to celebrate the triumphs of benevolence; but we are convened also to the renewed exhibition of the long, extensive, and malignant usurpations of civil and domestic tyranny. . . . The justice, the humanity, the policy, the interest, of the enslavers of men have been eloquently appealed to; but with partial success! A few have listened and reflected; a few have felt and acted; but the many have continued unmoved, have persevered in the practice of their cruelties. Yet, startled and confused, in the midst of their career, by the surrounding progress of emancipation, they dread inquiry, are less assured of their future success, and have mitigated their severity, or doubled their precautions. In this state of public sentiment, our duty is obvious and simple—to preserve the vivid recollection of the enormities which mark the reign of oppression; of the efforts which have been made to shorten or destroy it; of the motives which should compel us to proceed in this exalted labour: to disseminate the knowledge of them far and wide, to the young as well as to the old, to the enslaved as well as to the free; and, for ourselves, to act with gentleness but with firmness, with zeal but with prudence.

...Whether we regard the political or the social condition of the States that have authorized slavery, whether we consider its effects on their happiness or their power, the conclusion is equally against it. The safety and durable felicity of a government depend absolutely on the attachment of its subjects or citizens; and attachment can only be founded on a sense of the blessings it confers. Power can never be steadily maintained, nor effectually exercised, for a long period, but from the united exertions of a whole nation. This union must flow from mutual confidence, of the people and the government, of the citizens in each other. The only solid basis of confidence is morality. The same means which perpetuate power, secure happiness. . . . The degree of power is diminished with its extent, as its security is by its injustice; and as no nation has hitherto attempted to obtain universal dominion on equitable principles, so none has hitherto been able to preserve what little it has gained. . . .

The fate of the practice of oppression has been similar to that of every other vice; the more it has been investigated, the less defensible, the more odious has it appeared. Plea after plea has been suggested; each, in its turn, has been controverted and set aside. Few slave-holders, capable of comprehending truth, have attempted to refute the reasonings by which the justice, the humanity, the policy of the slave-trade, and the subserviency of slavery to national and individual interest, have been disproved. Yet, so much are men the slaves of habit, so closely does selfishness cling to our bosoms, so difficult is error of eradication, that, soiled in these topics of defence, the advocates of slavery have resorted to another.—We admit, say they, that slavery is unjust, abominable; an outrage on humanity; contrary to all found maxims of policy; and hostile to the interests of a people: but, then, what shall we do? Most sincerely do we wish that this curse had never visited our country. But it is entailed upon us by our fathers; it is interwoven with every part of our social organization; and we can not erase the blot, without destroying the fabric. All things are fust, but all things are not expedient.—Alas! how multiform is error! . . . But, if slavery be a curse, let not time be lost in attempting to remove it. If its sudden removal be dangerous, let it be gradually accomplished; but let it be accomplished. What strange reasoning is that which would persuade us to continue and increase a mischief, because it has existence at this moment!—O men, free to acknowledge your errors, but indolent to reform them, put, at length, the axe to the root of this tree of evil! If you have fear lest its sudden fall bury you in its ruins, proceed with caution! Twig after twig, branch after branch, shall decay and fall; and your grateful posterity shall, without danger, cast down the bare and withered trunk. . . .

... It is the fate of error to lose strength and consistency by every examination; that all its pleas shall regularly diminish in effect, as they regularly succeed to each other. The moment that the

slave-holder acknowledged the injustice of slavery, that moment the slow, but certain, death-wound was inflicted upon it. The apologists for this pernicious system of domestic oppression, have now reached to the extremity of subterfuge. . . . [H]enceforward they must maintain by force, what they can

... Incapable of vindicating themselves, or of effectually misrepresenting the purity of our motives, the encouragers of slavery have fallen on the miserable Africans; as though their vices and their follies constituted a reason for subjecting them to bondage, and bending them with reiterated wrong. Shallow subterfuge! feeble malice! Every motive urged against them ought to interest us in their behalf. Are they dull and stupid, it is ours to startle them into thought, and rouse them to inquiry; are they ignorant, it is ours to cultivate and instruct them; base, ours to elevate; vicious, ours to reclaim them. The more forlorn and hopeless their condition, the more energetic and persevering should be our efforts. The measure of our benevolence should be capacious as their wants; and our zeal commensurate with their insensibility. Stupidity, ignorance, folly, vice, have each its several remedy; and our security as well as interest, our duty as well as happiness, demand the application. What must be the texture of his heart who can find reason in the ignorance, in the vices, and in the sufferings of men, in all that most can render them objects of compassion and of charity, for insuring that ignorance, augmenting those vices, and adding to these sufferings the yoke of bondage, and the sting of torture? Call you him man, or demon?

The experience of many years, evidence palpable to the most hardened and obstinate sense, has demonstrated the capacity of the Blacks. The very vices of which they stand so bitterly accused, demonstrate it. They, like all men else, are the creatures of education, of example, of circumstance, of external impressions. Make them outcasts and vagabonds, thrust them into the society of drunkards and of thieves, shut from them the fair book and salutary light of knowledge, degrade them into brutes, and trample them in the dust, and you must expect them to be vile and wretched, dissolute and lawless, base and stupid. . . .

But, notwithstanding the degraded condition of the Africans, and their descendants, among us,—a condition to which they have been reduced, or in which they have been retained, by those who reproach them with it, and would offer it as an excuse for their own inhumanity and injustice,—still they exhibit many examples of humble, but of cheering virtue. We not only see them irreproachably employed in various mechanic occupations, but, in some few instances, elevated to the illustrious offices of instructors of learning, and inculcators of morality. The desk, and the pulpit, have witnessed their triumphs over all the efforts of blind and malignant prejudice. Already they begin to feel their own worth as men; already are they impressed with some just sense of the nature of those exertions which are making in their behalf; already have they attained to some conception of that prudent and virtuous conduct which is the best reward for all our toils; already may they challenge the palm from many of their whiter brethren. Perceive you not that spirit of improvement, slow though it be, yet visible, which diffuses itself among them? Observe you not their growing knowledge, their increasing industry, their softening manners, their corrector morals? Hear you not that sigh, wakened by your benevolent sympathy? Mark you not that tear of grateful joy, silently descending? See you not that sable figure, that cast himself at your feet, that kisses your hand, that clasps your knees, "fathers and benefactors of our race," that exclaim "the sons of Africa feel your virtue at their souls;—their hearts, their hands, their lives, are devoted to your service."

"Go! hapless progeny of a violated parent! cultivate peace, order, knowledge. Let your patience grow with your wrongs. Let your hearts learn forgiveness, your hands labour for your tyrants, your lives refute their calumnies. Go! assured, that, as for us, we have well considered what awaits us,— the extent of surrounding obstacles, and their duration, and have resolved, never to quench our zeal, to withhold our care, to intermit our labours, never to drop the language of persuasion, and forge the tone of justice, till we behold you disenthralled of bonds, reinstated in your rights, blessed with science, and adorned with virtue."

Sources: Samuel Miller, *A Discourse Delivered April 12, 1797, at the Request of and before the New-York Society for the Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, Protecting Such of Them as Have Been or May Be Liberated* (New York, 1797); E. H. Smith, *Discourse, Delivered April 11, 1798, at the Request of and before the New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been or May Be Liberated* (New York, 1798).