

## Race Absorption

In his 1901 essay “Race Absorption,” Fortune puts forth his belief that the race problem will ultimately be solved by the absorption of the black population into the “American race.” According to Fortune this process has already begun. There is no longer a Negroid population; there is only an Afro-American population, he argues.

### Race Absorption —*AME Church Review* 18, no. 1 (1901): 54–66

A race problem is an unfortunate and dangerous thing for any nation to have. The Irish people have frittered away their best intellect and energy and weakened and harassed the British Empire for years as a distinctive race problem. The Jewish problem is a source of menace and weakness to Germany and Russia. We have expended untold treasure and life in exterminating the Indian races of the American Continent. For more than a century we have been harassed and perplexed by the Afro-American problem, and every effort we have made to settle it upon the philosophy of injustice and selfishness has been frustrated, sometimes by fire and sword.<sup>1</sup>

What will be the Afro-American’s future? Will the Republic absorb him, or will he preserve his race integrity?<sup>2</sup> It must either absorb him, or eject him. The opponents of the theory of absorption are as numerous as leaves in Vallombrosa; while those who favor the theory of ejection are among the first to recognize the impossibility of the undertaking. The expatriation of eight millions of people after quite two centuries of residence, would be an achievement miraculous from every point of view. The presumption that the Afro-American will remain here, a homogeneous and disturbing element, to the end of the chapter, is one that the most ultra opponent of the theory of absorption would reject.

There is abundant evidence on every hand that the Republic is absorbing the Afro-American, and that he will contribute in no small degree, as Victor Hugo prophesied, to the formation of the future race type of the United

States, about which speculation will yet busy itself. It could not logically be otherwise. We might just as reasonably ignore the influence being exercised in the same direction by other alien races of the population.

The Honorable Charles A. Dana,<sup>3</sup> after a hasty tour through some of the Southern States, gave it as his opinion that the Afro-American is growing darker instead of lighter in complexion; and Mr. James Bryce,<sup>4</sup> Member of Parliament for Aberdeen, has stated it to be his belief that the social relations of whites and blacks in the Southern States are growing less intimate and general every year.

These opinions, even if true in every respect, are no argument against the theory of ultimate absorption. The first step towards an honorable social status is the development of a virtuous manhood. This can never be accomplished by the promiscuous intercourse of races brutalized by miscegenation laws. If the Afro-American is growing darker in complexion, it is good evidence that the license practiced under the slave code is spending its power for evil and that the men and women of both races are becoming more amenable to the higher conception of the marital relation and the parental obligation.

The influence of climate upon physical development, and of culture upon cranial and facial refinement, have been sufficiently demonstrated. The transformation wrought by these influences has been shown to be marvelous. They have had a large influence upon the Afro-American during the past century or more, and they will continue to exercise it, absorbing agents constantly at work, until the Afro-American will bear small resemblance to his African cogener as the latter now bears to his European brother. Other influences, of course, than climate and culture, will contribute to the ultimate absorption of the Afro-American into the warp and woof of American life.

If the accident of color had been eliminated from the problem when the African in the United States was emancipated,—as the badges of servility and servitude hitched upon the Angles by the Norman conquerors were laid aside as fast as they absorbed the invaders into their national life, a half century would have suffered to place the Afro-American upon civil and industrial equality in our population alongside all other elements. Prejudice against the Afro-American is more the result of previous servitude and present conditions than inherent race antipathy. Gentlemen who believe in the fundamental isolation of the Hamitic race will reject this position; but the facts, which are not governed by race prejudice, sustain it.

The universally accepted dogma of the unity of the human family has

nowhere had stronger confirmation than in the ready amalgamation of dissimilar race types in the United States. The African has not been exempt from the absorbing processes. He is not exempt now. He will be far less so in future years, because of improvement in his intellectual and material condition. A social organism capable of receiving and digesting an Indian or Chinaman has not, in times past, shown any incapacity to receive an African and gradually bleach him out.

If the Aborigines of the American Continent had possessed the elements of civilization, if they had been a less belligerent race, instead of having been annihilated by European contact and encroachment, they would have been, very largely, absorbed into the life of the Republic. But the Indian is a child of the forest, not of the boulevard; a child of impulse, not of reflection; a child of leisure, not of toil. The felled forests and the exterminated buffalo drive him into "the Happy Hunting Grounds" of his hopes. That the absorption of the Indian was possible and probable, we have only to recall the case of Rolfe and Pocahontas.<sup>5</sup> But the Indian would not tolerate it. Being a savage in all his fiber, he preferred annihilation to absorption, not through any process of ratiocination, but instinctively.

The Afro-American is different in all his nature from the Indian. His mental aptitudes are similar to those of the white race. He is eloquent, musical, poetic, and philosophical. Like the white races, he will toil when necessity compels him and rest from labor when he can afford to do it. He is accused of being an imitative race; but what race in history has withstood the destructive tendencies of civilization that did not possess in a high degree facility of imitativeness,—adaptivity to environment and receptivity of its influences of whatever sort? Because the Afro-American is imitative, because he absorbs to himself the influences dominant in his surroundings, is one of the strongest arguments that can be advanced in support of the theory that the Republic will eventually absorb and assimilate him, along with the other race forces of the population. Why should we accept this theory in the case of the Celt and the Teuton and reject it in the case of the African? Because, forsooth, the latter has a black and the former has a white skin? Then, what becomes of the accepted dogma of the unity of the human family? No; rather because the Afro-American had been a slave race, and because he is now, in large measure, an ignorant and impecunious race, with a prescribed social status: disbarments which time and opportunity will effectually remove, as they are now doing. They do it in the case of other races. Has experience shown, in this country, that they will not do it in the case of the African?

Slavery taught no more impressive and significant lesson than that, if nature has set up barriers between the black and white races, they are by no means impassable ones, and are contingent, entirely, upon the absolute isolation of the races. Human nature is the same the world over. Like forces gravitate towards each other and are absorbed and resolved by the contact. It is a natural law. As a result, the Afro-American is already a mixed race; otherwise he would not be an Afro-American, but an African. Two hundred and eighty years of isolation from the parent stock, with a century of absolute cessation of reinforcement from the fatherland, and with instant contact with a masterful class whose passions were not restrained by either statute or moral law, could not have resulted otherwise than in corruption of blood. Theory must here give way to demonstrated facts, however, disagreeable. The extent to which this vitiation has obtained, while underrated by superficial theorizers, is not easily ascertainable. Mr. Robert P. Porter, the Superintendent of the eleventh census,<sup>6</sup> is reported to have declared it as his belief, in accounting for the apparent decrease of the Afro-American population as compared with the tenth census,—that quite half a million mixed-blooded Afro-Americans had been counted as white because the census enumerators could not determine that they were black! Professor W. S. Scarborough,<sup>7</sup> an accomplished Afro-American scholar, estimates that twenty per cent of the Afro-American population is of mixed blood. I think this estimate entirely too small. Thirty per cent. would be nearer the truth.

Many gentlemen, who are determined to solve the race problem in accordance with their preconceptions, prejudices and what not, stop a few days in the black belts of Alabama and South Carolina and the Yazoo belts of the Mississippi, and, because they see two millions of Afro-Americans, from the olive to the coal black shade, straightway lose sight of the other six or seven millions scattered all over the Republic, a majority of them residing in urban centers, where the denseness of population works irresistibly for race contact and consequent absorption.

If it be accepted that no more than thirty per cent. of the Afro-American population is of mixed blood, is it not logically deducible that, without further adulteration, the processes of absorption have already gone so far that nothing short of wholesale deportation can avert the ultimate extinction of the African as an integral type in the United States? This may be delayed, but not prevented. If the Afro-American population were reinforced every year by accessions from Africa, such as we have from Italy or Germany, or other European States, the situation would be further complicated; but there is no such reinforcement. Few emigrate, and fewer immigrate.

The trilogy that makes most for absorption of a minority race in contact with a majority race is formed by the following elements: Habitat, language and religion. In a learned article, published not long since, upon the important subject of European immigration. Professor Alessandro Oldrini (of the Geographical Society of Italy and of the Ethnographical Society of France) said: "The man is the son of the land where he is born, above all. Then of his father and mother." If therefore, "the man is the son of the land where he is born:" if he speaks the common language and conforms to the common religion, then, the Afro-American is already a fixed fact in the national life, and must, with the disappearance of the adventitious conditions of ignorance and poverty, which prescribe the industrial and social status, come within the operations of the assimilating agencies constantly at work evolving the national race type. Indeed, as I have already shown, he has been subjected to these agencies, and sensibly and visibly affected by them. The African here is an American by birth, education and religious belief. He takes only an American's interest in Africa and what goes on there. He has no disposition to go to Africa, because he knows nothing of the country, aside from book information. He dreads the climate. He speaks none of the many languages of the country. He is a Christian, not a Mohammedan or heathen.

Professor Oldrini asserts, further, that "It does not take more than a generation to transform an Italian into an American citizen." But the Afro-American has been here not one, but ten, generations. If that has not sufficed to make an Americo-African of him, then, habitat, language and religion avail nothing, and a man is not "the son of the land where he is born, above all."

If the foregoing aspect of the subject had been weighed properly a writer in a recent magazine article would have saved himself the trouble of complaining that Afro-Americans take no interest in Africa and the regeneration of its people. They take as much interest in the subject as other Americans,—the interest that the descendents of an Amsterdam burgher in the tenth generation take in the affairs and the people of Holland. Upon the same theory Bishop Henry M. Turner,<sup>8</sup> of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is mistaken, when he makes such declarations as the following: "The only remedy is for the self-respecting, self-reliant Negro, conscious of his own worth, to return to the land of his fathers, taking his civilization and Christianity with him, to establish colonies and build up civilized nations in Africa."

Bishop Turner imagines that he is talking about a Negro population,

when as a matter of fact, there is no such population in the United States, the absorbing process having evolved an Afro-American population, of which the good Bishop is a distinguished ornament. In Africa, where the Bishop has been in the interest of his church, he was probably regarded as a white man by the natives, or, at least, not as a Negro. The Bishop's dream will hardly materialize. The futile attempts of the American Colonization Society<sup>9</sup> to populate Liberia, on the West Coast of Africa, demonstrates the soundness of the proposition that "the man is the son of the land where he is born."

Another element of absorption has not been sufficiently considered by those who give attention to the solution of the race problem. The bulk of the Afro-American population is concentrated in the Southern States. The whites have always regarded their presence as a source of industrial strength and of social and political weakness; hence they have combined against the Afro-American in all matters of a social and political nature. This had, and is having, its logical effects. Every year the most restless and aspiring of the population of both races are leaving the rural districts and concentrating in the larger cities and towns or removing to the Northern and Westable. The steady depopulation of Memphis, Tenn. of its Afro-American population, beginning with the cowardly lynching of three men a few years ago, is a striking and pointed example.<sup>10</sup> This tendency not only makes for race absorption, because of reasons stated, but it creates a scarcity in the agricultural labor supply, which must be made good for some source. Recourse is had, of course, to the foreign labor supply, a redundancy of which flows into our Atlantic seaboard cities every year,—fifteen millions being Europe's contribution to our labor force from 1820 to 1890. Very few of these fifteen millions have gone to the Southern States. They have taken Horace Greeley's<sup>11</sup> advice and gone West and helped to verify the prophesy of Bishop Berkeley.<sup>12</sup> But there has come a new turn of affairs. The available lands of the great West have been, for the most part, pre-empted. Opportunities in that section are no longer as tempting as in past years. The large cities of the Atlantic seaboard are actually congested with this labor supply. At this juncture the farmers, manufacturers and mine owners of the Southern States are clamoring for laborers. The Italian, it has been found, is more adapted to the farm work of the South than any other European to take the places of the Afro-Americans. In the phosphate and pumice mines of South Carolina and upon the sugar plantations of Louisiana this Italian labor supply has been extensively drawn upon. In a few years other European races will enter the

Southern field and adapt themselves to the requirements of its industrialism.

The introduction of foreign elements into the race and industrial problems of the South will work a three-fold result. (1.) It will break up the conservative aristocracy developed by the slave system, and consequently, democratize the sentiment of the master class and eventually destroy caste rule close of the War of the Rebellion, and are still working, with the old order fighting desperately against the resistless iconoclasm of the new forces. The influx of foreigners will revolutionize the social, political and industrial conditions, and produce an American civilization such as has of late years begun to appear in New England and which is as the breath of life to the great West and Northwest. The competition of foreign labor will compel the Afro-American to scatter himself into other States of the Republic. He has already begun to learn that his lot is made easier where he is found in fewest numbers, and hardest where he is congregated most numerously. In proportion as he isolates himself will the process of absorption be aided and hastened.

As governments are undermined by parasites working at the base, rather than the apex, of the structures, so, also, are races corrupted as to their blood by the contact of their proletarian rather than by their patrician elements. From extensive observations, in all sections of the country, I have reached the (2.) It will force the Afro-American into other occupations than those he has been held to and has monopolized for a long time. (3.) It will hasten the absorption of the Afro-American into the bone and sinew of the Republic.

The slave system, like all variations of the Feudal system, develops an aristocracy, creates large landed estates, and concentrates wealth and power. The Anglo-Saxon population of the Southern States has always been the most undemocratic element in the Republic. The slave system produced caste and class rule; and the consequent degradation of labor not only repelled foreign and New England immigration, but preserved in a remarkable degree the British characteristics and tendencies of the people. Such corruption of blood as obtained was the result of intercourse of the Anglo-Saxon male master and the African slave female. The abolition of slavery was a signal for the democratization of the social and political conditions of the Southern States and for the sub-division of the large landed estates. These forces began to work immediately upon the conclusion that the average European emigrant entertains no prejudice against color. Europeans sometimes acquire it, but always in a qualified degree, and marriages are

frequently contracted between them and Afro-Americans, especially in the large cities where they frequently occupy the same tenement houses.

When we consider the relative smallness of the Afro-American population to the whole population; the vitiation of blood that has already taken place; the scattering of the race throughout the States of the Republic, which will become far more general in the future than it has been in the past; and the tendency of races of like social status brought into close contact to contract legal or sentimental relations, the theory of ultimate absorption, and consequent extinction of the African as a race force in the United States will appear to be founded upon reasonable presumptions. The miscegenation laws that disgrace the statute books of most of the Southern States and that place a premium upon libertinism will gradually disappear as the forces I have indicated become more firmly rooted in the social and industrial conditions of those States. The time factor is all-important. Natural forces are never precipitous. They are neither accelerated nor retarded by the exigencies of States or of races.

While all the evidence is corroborative of the theory I have advanced, as far as the Afro-American is concerned, all the other distinct race elements of our citizenship have to confront the same destiny. They are doomed to extinction as race forces and to absorption into the body of the American people. Next to the love of country, the love of race is the strongest element in human nature. The idea of absorption, of extinction as a race, is repulsive. When this is done by a stronger race the repulsion is intensified. But, in a Republic such as ours, there is no other destiny possible to races than absorption. If there is a race element in the population incapable of being absorbed, that element has no place whatever in American life, and will always be regarded as a national menace. We may desire race homogeneity as a matter of sentiment or pride of race as in the case of the Hebrew; a minority race in instant contact with a majority race will be either absorbed or exterminated. Absorption has proceeded so far in this country that the Negroid type has been very nearly destroyed. The cranium, the physiognomy, the physique and the mentality of the race have undergone a more than partial metamorphosis. We have a new type in the Afro-American race. It will not revert to the Negroid type, because it has no chance to do so, while the forces of absorption are in operation in every corner of the Republic, whether we like it or not.

The immorality of the Afro-American people is a theme with which wiseacres on the race question never tire of busying themselves. They never stop to consider that despite miscegenation laws, and despite the fact that



the whole race came out of slavery without homes and taught to regard with contempt and aversion the marital relation from a legal point of view, millions of homes have been built up on legal marriage relations since 1865, and are now the pride and the hope of the Afro-American race. It is just to say in this presence and at this time that nothing conduces more to encourage such immorality as the race is guilty of than the miscegenation laws which burden the statute books of all of the States of the South.

The home is the foundation of the State. This is recognized in all civilized lands. It is a scandal of the largest magnitude that every State in this Republic has marriage and divorce laws of its own when the whole matter should be controlled by a Federal marriage and divorce law which should be uniform throughout the States of the Republic. Reform in this respect would do more to improve the morality of the nation than any other reform that occurs to me, and I believe the time is not remote when the people who create public opinion will force this issue to its only logical conclusion. I make reference here to this important matter because the Afro-American people suffer more in their morals and in the rights that inhere in the child from its parent by the existence of miscegenation laws and the diverse marriage and divorce laws of the several states than in any other elements of our citizenship. In the development of the future American type of manhood and citizenship by the irresistible elements of absorption at work constantly and everywhere there should be no barriers in the law which operate disastrously upon the morality of the community or the rights of the child.

## Notes

1. Fortune published this article in longer form in 1893 in both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Herald*; see *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1893, and *New York Herald*, July 9, 1893.

2. A number of Fortune's contemporaries also believed that the race would one day merge into "the American race." For example, see Frederick Douglass, "The Future of the Colored Race," *North American Review* 141 (May 1886): 437–40; Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Future American," *Boston Transcript*, August 18; August 25; and September 1, 1900. See also Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

3. Charles A. Dana (1819–1897) was an American journalist who became nationally recognized as the editor and part owner of the *New York Sun*, a position he assumed in 1868. For more on Dana, see Janet E. Steele, *Sun Shines for All: Journalism and Ideology in the Life of Charles A. Dana* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993). For his relationship with Fortune, see Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

4. James V. Bryce (1838–1922) was a British jurist, historian, and politician. For more on Bryce, see Edmond S. Ions, *James Bryce and American Democracy, 1870–1922* (London: MacMillan, 1968). For Fortune on Bryce's views, see T. Thomas Fortune, "Prof. James Bryce's Prejudice against African and Polynesian Races," *AME Church Review* 15 (1898): 503–12.

5. John Rolfe (1585–1622), an early colonist in North America, is known for marrying Pocahontas (ca. 1595–1617), daughter of the chief of the Powhatan Confederacy, in 1614.

6. Robert P. Porter was the superintendent of the 1890 census. He resigned in 1893.

7. William Sanders Scarborough (1852–1926) was an educator and civil rights activist who served as president of Wilberforce University from 1908 to 1920. For more on Scarborough, see W. S. Scarborough, *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*, ed. Michele Valerie Ronnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); William Sanders Scarborough, *The Works of William Sanders Scarborough: Black Classicist and Race Leader*, edited by Michele Valerie Ronnick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Francis P. Weisenburger, "William Sanders Scarborough: Early Life and Years at Wilberforce," *Ohio History* 71 (1962): 203–26, 87–89; and Weisenburger, "William Sanders Scarborough: Scholarship, the Negro, Religion, and Politics," *Ohio History* 72 (1963): 25–50, 85–88.

8. Henry McNeal Turner (1834–1915) was a bishop in the African Episcopal Church (AME) in Georgia after the Civil War. He was briefly elected to the Georgia legislature during Reconstruction and later advocated African Americans to emigrate to Africa. For more on Turner, see Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969); and Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

9. The American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed in 1817 to send free African Americans to Africa as an alternative to emancipation. In 1822, the society established on the west coast of Africa a colony that in 1847 became the independent nation of Liberia. By 1867, the society had sent more than thirteen thousand emigrants. For more information on the ACS, see Amos J. Beyon, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991); Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969); and Claude A. Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

10. Fortune is referring to the lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, friends of Ida B. Wells who were lynched in March 1893. See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 47–55; Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130–49.

11. Horace Greeley (1811–1872) was a founder and the editor of the *New York Tribune*. For more on Greeley, see chapter 6, note 17.

12. George Berkeley (1685–1753) was an Anglo-Irish Anglican bishop and philosopher. In his *Verses, on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* (1752), Berkeley wrote, “Westward the course of empire takes its way; / The first four acts already past, / A fifth shall close the drama with the day; / Times noblest offspring is the last.”