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Reflection: Black Boston and the Making of African American Freemasonry: Leadership, Religion, and Fraternalism in Early America

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Reflection on Work Accomplished as a Consequence of the Social Transformation Research
Collaborative (STRC) Faculty Research Fellowship, 2022-2023

Chernoh M. Sesay, Jr.
February 16, 2024

I cannot emphasize enough how important the STRC Fellowship has been for helping me progress in my academic career, especially for moving toward the rank of full professor at DePaul. I am incredibly grateful to the co-directors of the STRC, Dr. Julie Moody-Freeman and Dr. Bill Johnson González and the STRC Steering Committee for all their effort in writing the successful grant to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and creating the STRC Faculty Research Fellowship. An entire year free of teaching and service allowed me to review previously collected archival materials systematically, and it provided me the time to consider whether I needed to restructure the book manuscript. Although, I did not achieve my goal of completing the book manuscript, I am nearing completion, and I have maintained contact with editors at academic presses regarding the project.

The study of African and Black American life, especially before 1800 and even in a place that kept thorough records of all sorts, like colonial and early American Boston, demands the time-consuming construction of databases to allow derive the benefits of social history. To fully understand the political and cultural thought of the early Black Freemasons requires foregrounding their writing against broader social forces of emancipation, migration and community formation. To this end, this book manuscript combines methods and perspectives from social history, political history, cultural history, literary studies, and religious studies. Combining different disciplinary approaches as made the writing process more complex. For example, rewriting and revision lead me to take the previous version of chapter 2 “Baptism, Religion, and the Social Networks of Early Black Freemasonry,” and incorporate it into what was previously chapter chapter 1, ““in every nation he finds a friend’: Settlement, Mobility and the Social Origins of Black Freemasonry.” In addition, the placement of this previous chapter 1 has changed, and it is now chapter 2. What was formerly chapter 3, “Freemasonry in the Age of Revolution,” is now the book’s first chapter. The current chapter 3, “The Early Development and Legitimacy of the African Lodge,” is effectively a new chapter, including material from the book’s previous iteration and new material. This new chapter gives full attention to how the first group of Black Freemasons organized themselves into a formal Masonic lodge and successfully gained a charter of recognition from Freemasons in London. Fortunately, solving these significant problems of organization within the first three chapters has not affected the order or content of the last three chapters. A year without teaching or service allowed me to pay consistent attention that included a constant zooming in and out from chapter to overall organization. Chapters 1 and 2 are effectively finished. Chapters 4 requires minor revision. Chapters 5 and 6 require more revision.

During my fellowship, I also conducted additional research at the Huntingdon Library in San Marino, CA. I examined collections of printed material produced by and about Freemasons

that related Freemasonry to the growth of partisan politics in the United States beginning with the ratification of the Constitution by the separate states and extending into the rise of the Federalist and Republic parties. This political context is crucial for understanding the ways that free Black Americans, and Freemasons in particular, were caricatured by as naïve and gullible political actors. I'll use some of this material in chapter 5, "The Emergence of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge."

My writing informed and benefited from a presentation given after the fellowship leave. I was invited to present material from the book manuscript at a conference, titled "The Declaration of Independence at 250." The conference took place from November 16 to 18, 2023 at the University of New Hampshire. My presentation, titled "Freemasonry, American Independence, and the Transatlantic Dimensions of Black Patriotism," asked the audience to consider a kind of Black declaration of independence and to think critically about current narratives stressing Black allegiance to American nationalism. Three years before the thirteen British colonies declared their break with the English Crown, in early 1773, a group of Black abolitionists, probably writing with the support of sympathetic White leaders, asked for support to emigrate to Africa. This request was its own declaration that some Africans and American Africans wanted to fashion sovereignty outside of English and White dominion. Amongst these Black writers were men that, in either 1775 or 1776, formed the first all-Black lodge of Freemasons. I presented material from the current chapter 1, "Freemasonry in the Age of Revolution" and chapter 3, "The Early Development and Legitimacy of the African Lodge." I outlined how the development of African American Freemasonry just before and after the Declaration of Independence forces us to consider patriotism less as a position of principle and more as a political strategy in answer to questions of settlement and political belonging. This argument is central in my current book project, that Black Freemasonry was a critical feature of early Black abolition. Freemasonry provided an institution and an ideology that reflected late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Black abolitionists' interlocked concerns with transnationalism, sovereignty and local settlement. Given that there have been relatively few historical examinations that sustain an analysis of the relationship between Black abolitionists, Freemasonry, and a broader Black community, some in the audience were hearing for the first time that Black Freemasons played critical political roles during the American Revolution. In addition to this positive reception, I received insightful feedback regarding my description of sovereignty. This constructive critique has led me to revise chapter 3.

In partial consequence of my participation at this conference, I have been invited to present more of my book project at an history conference taking place at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies in October of 2024. Without the STRC Research Fellowship, I would not have had the time for nearing completion of my manuscript nor would I have made as impactful a presentation as I did last November.

It goes without saying that the STRC Fellowship provided invaluable time for writing and research. Prior to receiving the fellowship, my progress on the book project was continual but also hampered by the interruption demanded by teaching and service work. Although I did

not complete the book manuscript, the STRC Fellowship allowed me the crucial time to review the entire manuscript structure. Despite not having the completed the manuscript the manuscript spine is coherent and will not change going forward. This means that even as I have returned to teaching and service, I am still writing with the momentum gained from the leave. The entire organization of the project makes sense, and this is allowing me to maintain a consistency in my writing output because I no longer have questions about the major outline of the manuscript's primary arguments.