

The Other Side of American Independence: Public Speeches of the Minority

American history often recounts the heroism surrounding the revolutionary struggle that threw off British tyranny and established a free and independent nation. The Declaration of Independence, which accounts for such, has been one of the most celebrated documents in our history since its enactment in 1776. As a nation, we continue to celebrate this document of our heritage every Fourth of July.

As an established democracy, contemporary society may take for granted the principles set forth in the Declaration and look back at its history with a sense of national pride. However, the natural rights that are asserted in the Declaration, were not always as *self-evident* as they appear today. In the beginnings of the newly independent nation, the Declaration was not extended to all Americans. Those making up the minority, such as Native Americans and slaves, were not allowed citizenship or the rights set forth in the Declaration and subsequent Constitution. By the 19th century, the minority voice was beginning question these injustices through public speech. In the early 1850s both John Quinney, a Native American tribal leader, and Frederick Douglass, a fugitive slave, assumed a public role in politics that was unusual for minorities at the time. Each of these men used the Fourth of July as the date and motif of a speech that reflected the inequality between the notion of American independence and his situation as a minority.

John Wannaucon Quinney became a tribal leader of the Mahican people in the early 19th

century. The Mahican tribe originally resided along the Hudson River Valley, from New York to Connecticut. However, after first contact with Europeans in the 17th century and the subsequent introduction of the fur trade, the tribe began to disperse among other parts of the country (Konkle 1465). By the 18th century the Mahicans had migrated to Massachusetts, residing in the Housatonic River Valley. The Europeans had labeled the tribe the “River Indians,” and in 1734 sent a missionary from the Scottish Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge to establish a mission village. The village was called Stockbridge, which became the name for the newly converted tribe as well (Konkle 1466).

As a child Quinney and two other boys were chosen to receive an “English education,” which was funded by the American government. He became a teacher; however, he was eventually called upon by his tribe to perform political duties on its behalf. Although he claimed that he was “poorly qualified for public employment,” Quinney took on the responsibility of trying to negotiate land issues with the federal government (Konkle 1466).

Quinney spent most of his life trying to protect the Stockbridge tribe and its land from annihilation by the white man, buying into the commonly held myth of the “vanishing native” (Konkle 1465). Although the tribe had acted as a political ally to America during the Revolution, it was not granted the same rights as others were through the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution (Konkle 1466). This irony was not lost to Quinney, who reflected upon the inequality of his tribe’s position in society in a speech that he gave on July 4, 1854 in Reidsville, New York (Konkle 1465).

In “Quinney’s Speech,” he immediately introduces himself as “an Indian” of a race that will soon “have ceased to exist” (Quinney 1468). This speech, which was given towards the end of his life, focuses not only on looking back at the story of the Mahican people, but also the “train of terrible miseries” that continued to be inflicted upon the tribe by the white men in power (Quinney 1468). Quinney uses the national pride of the audience regarding the holiday of independence as a way to point out the inequality of his tribe’s position as a minority.

Quinney explicitly refers to the 4th of July as a holiday belonging to the white man, only effecting the native by causing him to recollect the “transfer of the miserable weakness and dependence on [his] race from one great power to another” (Quinney 1468). However, the motif of the American struggle for independence can also be seen in the structure of the story Quinney tells of the Mahicans. He tells of the native’s “pilgrimage” into North America in which they established “many colonies” along the way. He also speaks about tribal traditions in terms related to the founding of a government (Quinney 1469). The implicit connections Quinney makes between the Native and European experiences works not only to relate to his audience, but to point out the inequality of the two positions as well.

However, the goal of Quinney in this speech is not to be implicit or vague about the injustices suffered by the Mahicans. Quinney, concerned about the extinction of his race, is responding to what he had witnessed during his thirty-year career as a political representative of his tribe to the federal government of America (Konkle 1467). Quinney speaks of the injustice and inequality of the Native American situation, by proclaiming “what a mockery!! to confound justice with law” (Quinney 1471).

According to Quinney, the basis of the injustice to his people comes down to economics.

He recalls the details of land transactions as “nothing that deserved the name of purchase” (Quinney 1471). Quinney’s intent was to confront his audience and “shake [them] by the hand” in order to show them the inequality between the European-American and Native American view of national independence (Quinney 1469). However, Quinney concludes with a message of hope, reflecting his belief that justice will eventually prevail.

During the same time period, issues of American slavery were beginning to dominate the public debate, foreshadowing the looming Civil War. One of the most prominent controversies in the early 1850s regarded the Fugitive Slave Act, which bound Northerners to aid in the return of escaped slaves to their owners in the South. The law was denounced by abolitionists and particularly disdained by those it effected the most: fugitive slaves living in the North, such as Frederick Douglass.

Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland in the early 19th century. He quickly learned the horrors of slavery through his own experiences working and living on plantations in the South. Douglass also learned the importance of literacy at an early age. After teaching himself to read and write, Douglass began to equate education with liberty (Miller 1879). Eventually, Douglass used the knowledge that resulted from his self-administered education in order to successfully escape to the North and remain free throughout his lifetime.

In the North, Douglass was drawn to the abolitionist movement and seriously took up the cause by the influence of William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass spent his life as an abolitionist as well as advocate for women’s rights, journalist, and public speaker. Much like Quinney, Douglass felt he was poorly qualified to take up such a public role that he was called upon for,

but he turned out to be one of the most eloquent and effective voices of the abolitionist movement (Miller 1880). An 1852 speech, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” given by Douglass in Rochester, New York exemplifies the significance of the date as it relates to the inequality between the notion of American independence and slavery.

Although Douglass begins the address with proclamations of his “limited powers of speech,” he quickly shows that he is very knowledgeable as well as passionate about his subject. He addresses the holiday of independence as the “birthday of *your* National Independence,” referring to the white men of power that made up part of his audience (Douglass 1946). He uses the language and history of the white man, such as the story of their “struggle” as well as biblical references, not only to relate to the audience, but to point out the inequalities between their notion of independence and his own.

Like Quinney, Douglass sees the root of the inequality of his position in economics. Just like the land of the Native Americans, the federal governments was only concerned about “what can be had cheap” in regards to slavery (Douglass 1948). Although it seems wrong to compare a human being to a piece of land, the American government of the 1850s regarded them both in the same way: as property. The speech by Douglass reflects his own experience as a slave as well as the hypocrisy of the government regarding the notion of American independence at the time. However, like Quinney, Douglass expresses hope over the situation. In this speech Douglass is adamant that “the doom of slavery is certain” and that his people will one day find justice (Douglass 1963) .

Quinney was reflecting upon that past in his speech and Douglass was trying to illicit

change. However, both speakers used the pride of his audience regarding the concept of American Independence to point out the inequality of the minority position. Although the contemporary reader may look back upon these speeches with a sense that the hope each speaker had for justice has finally been accomplished, that is not actually the case. In New York, descendants of the Mahican tribe are still battling over their land in Federal Court (Konkle 1466). And throughout the country, in the midst of affirmative-action laws, African Americans are still striving to find an equal place in society.