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Introduction

The blacks are the labourers, the peasants of the Southern States.

—CHARLES PINCKNEY AT THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL
CONVENTION (1787)¹

Domestic slavery is the most prominent feature in the aristocratic countenance of the proposed [U.S.] Constitution. The vassalage of the poor has ever been the favorite offspring of Aristocracy.

—GOUVERNEUR MORRIS AT THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL
CONVENTION (1787)²

Slavery is an institution of the dark age! Did the monarchs, patriarchs, and prophets of the south ever think of this?

—JAMES W. C. PENNINGTON (1841)³

Look to the old Patriarchs and their slaves, to the feudal lords and their vassals, or come to the South and see our farms.

—GEORGE FITZHUGH (1854)⁴

Up through this American feudalism the Negro began to rise.

—W.E.B. DU BOIS (1915)⁵

ACROSS ITS PAGES, *American Dark Age* seeks to answer three questions. (1) Why did so many prominent antebellum-era Black abolitionists and their enemies describe slavery in the South and racial hierarchy throughout the country using metaphors invoking the medieval world? (2) What were the implications of these depictions during their own time and for the history of political thought? (3) What can early Black efforts to overthrow what W.E.B. Du Bois would later call “American feudalism” by reconstructing the premises of American liberalism teach us today? This introductory chapter will put these questions in context and provide historical examples of the feudalistic language African Americans used before sketching preliminary definitions of “racial feudalism” and “Black liberalism” that subsequent chapters will illuminate in greater detail.

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Americans generally understood they were no longer under a monarchy, but many recognized that they did not live in a fully democratic republic either. “Feudalism” was the most historically proximate system of social organization against which to compare their ostensibly modern way of life. Their competing interpretations of the ambiguous term provided some means through which to clarify or criticize the nation’s budding liberal democracy. This is not to say that Americans did not meaningfully engage with other political and cultural models. Both supporters and detractors of slavery also drew inspiration from classical slaveholding republics in Greece and Rome, the Hebrew Bible, caste systems in India, and contemporary societies around the world to affirm or oppose the presence of slavery and racial hierarchy in the burgeoning United States.⁶ Abolitionist David Walker, for example, powerfully compared ancient slavery and notions of political tyranny with modern racial slavery to great effect.⁷ However, this book is chiefly concerned with the place of medieval European “feudalism” in the antebellum American imagination due to the salience of feudal analogies in Black abolitionist writing that underscored the powerful contradictions at work in a nation purportedly rooted in liberal Enlightenment ideas that early American leaders represented as the antithesis of feudalism.

In the decades leading up to emancipation, African American abolitionists in both the slaveholding South and in Northern states used a variety of feudalistic terms and analogies that I will briefly preview here and explicate more fully in chapter 4, including “vassalage,” “serf[dom],” “Dark Ages,” “crusade[s],” “chivalry,” “lords,” and “nobles.” Altogether, these Black thinkers were describing the social and political conditions they confronted by drawing parallels between their experiences in the United States and the circumstances they envisioned Europeans facing since the Middle Ages. In 1827, for example, Nathaniel Paul—a Black minister—questioned the veracity of the ideas expressed in the American Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution when there were “no less than fifteen hundred thousand human beings still in a state of unconditional vassalage.”⁸

Confirming this sentiment against the backdrop of the turbulent anti-monarchical European political climate in the late 1840s, the fugitive slave William Wells Brown asked: “Shall the American people be behind the people of the Old World? Shall they be behind those who are represented

as almost living in the dark ages?”⁹ For him, racial slavery “has given the serfs of the Old World an opportunity of branding the American people as the most tyrannical people upon God’s footstool.”¹⁰ Frederick Douglass would likewise compare the conditions Black people faced in the United States to “all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world.”¹¹ In 1855, he used similar terms to African American abolitionist and philosopher Hosea Easton, who contended that the U.S. racial hierarchy emerged after “European slavery” under “the Feudal system” where “slaves [were] fixed to the soil.” Douglass, in turn, claimed that the Maryland plantation on which he was enslaved “resemble[d] what the baronial domains were, during the middle ages in Europe.”¹²

Underscoring this notion, John Mercer Langston—the first Black U.S. congressional representative from Virginia—would claim shortly after Reconstruction that “the tendency of political thought in the South has always been towards aristocracy and feudal institutions—the right of the few to govern, the right being founded upon wealth, landed estates, and consequent social position and influence.”¹³ These and other Black American thinkers drew from their perceptions of illiberal feudal power structures remaining in Europe beyond the Middle Ages to articulate the actual social conditions they experienced within the antebellum United States as a function of racial difference. This merger of space and time suggests more in the way of continuity than rupture. In seeking to expose the prevalence of unbroken connections, these early advocates for racial justice invited reflection on the progress America has made toward achieving a liberal democracy and finally overcoming the legacy of feudalism. Though abolitionists—particularly Black abolitionists who had faced slavery and oppression firsthand—used such comparisons to great rhetorical effect, proslavery advocates and supporters of White supremacy relished in the act of pointing to the stratified history of medieval Europe to justify America’s ongoing racial hierarchy.

Though the parallels between plantation slavery and serfdom were patent in the South, race-based social stratifications also existed in the North, which contained, according to Douglass, “lords” and “nobles” of their own.¹⁴ “In the Northern States,” he remarked in 1848, Black Americans “are not slaves to individuals, not personal slaves, yet in many respects we are the slaves of the community.”¹⁵ Such conditions prompted him to later exclaim: “In reality, there is not a free colored man in the United States. Theoretically, we are free—practically, we are slaves.”¹⁶ The Massachusetts Supreme Court case *Roberts vs. Boston* (1849)—in which Sarah Roberts, a five-year-old Black girl, was denied entry to a White-only school in her neighborhood

and made to attend an underfunded school for Black children across town—exemplifies the racially stratified milieu Douglass characterized as the Northern “*skin-aristocracy*” or what African American physician James McCune Smith represented as “caste-slavery in the north”—clear prefigurations of what I call *racial feudalism* in what follows.¹⁷

In 1858, Douglass intensified his contention that the North, in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law, had been “the mere cringing vassal of the South,” to assert that free Black Northerners were also persistently subject to “a cruel and malignant spirit of caste, which is at the foundation, and is the cause, as well as the effect of our American slave system.”¹⁸ Along these lines, African American writer Julia C. Collins’s novel *The Curse of Caste* (1865) framed U.S. racial hierarchy as “the twin evil” of slavery.¹⁹ All of these thinkers implicated racial difference as the primary driver of social subordination throughout the entire United States, suggesting that the operation of the White-over-Black racial hierarchy was just as strong in the North’s skin aristocracy as it had been in the South’s slave society.²⁰ As Douglass summarizes it, “the politicians and political parties of the North are connected with the politicians and political parties of the South; and hence, the political arrangements and interests of the North, as well as the ecclesiastical arrangements and interests, are adverse to the colored population.”²¹

In response to the laws and customs engendering these circumstances during the antebellum era, several influential Black liberals did not call for the dissolution of the United States nor for the dismantling of its founding principles. Though modern scholars have assailed racialized manifestations of capitalism and liberalism for enabling practices of slaveholding and systemic race- and gender-based discrimination, Douglass and other Black abolitionists—in their day—pointed to the vestiges of feudalism as another catalyst for systemic inequalities.²² They advocated for the completion of the nation’s initial separation from “feudal” Europe inaugurated by its Revolutionary-era founders, thus participating in what I will call the antebellum rise of Black liberalism.²³ Even after the Civil War, Douglass affirmed the object of his mission had remained to “free” the United States by working to “purge” its “Constitution” “from everything that looks toward monarchy,” including “all discriminations against any person, theoretically or practically” to make the nation “conform to the great truths laid down by the fathers.” This endeavor would establish a “genuine Republic” that would “keep no man from the ballot box or the jury box or the cartridge box, because of his color—exclude no woman from the ballot box because of her sex.”²⁴

Referring to what he saw as the illiberal “veto power” as well as other executive powers unscrupulously employed by President Andrew Johnson to perpetuate racial hierarchy, Douglass further contended that *actual* remnants of social orders “borrowed from the old world” and bearing “the character of monarchy or an aristocracy or an oligarchy” had actively been weakening America’s Republic.²⁵ He claimed that though the United States was conceived “in its ideas” as “a government of the people,” it was in reality “framed,” “projected and completed under the influence of institutions quite unfavorable to a pure republican form of government—slavery on the one hand, monarchy on the other.” Thus, in similar ways to how other nineteenth-century writers employed and conflated terms such as “monarchy,” “aristocracy,” and “oligarchy” to signify the oppressive “feudal” structures of Europe’s past assailed by thinkers such as Thomas Paine, Noah Webster, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson in the eighteenth century (see chapter 1), Douglass points to what he sees as the founders’ adulteration of American Enlightenment political ideas by Old World systems. He adds:

Born, as the Fathers of this Republic were, under monarchical institutions, they, very naturally when they came to form a government . . . were disposed to blend something of the old error with the new truth, or of the newly discovered truth of liberty asserted in the Declaration of Independence. . . . [The founders] gave us a Constitution made in the shadow of slavery and of monarchy, and in its character it partakes in some of its features of both those unfavorable influences.²⁶

And yet, Douglass, like the other Black liberals I will describe in this book, including William Wells Brown, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Harriet Jacobs, still did not recognize the circumstances of oppression Black people faced as evidence of unfreedom at the core of American liberal ideas. On the contrary, they held that a reconstructed version of liberalism could resolve the nation’s fundamental contradictions. After all, Black American liberals used the stark language of feudal metaphors to bring their fellow citizens to understand the practical shortcomings of the country’s founding principles and ongoing aristocratic tendencies. From this position, they advanced a variation of liberalism that, in their view, could practically overcome the racialized vestiges of feudalism in the United States.²⁷

Even more poignantly, many antebellum Black American liberals (whom I will also refer to as “Black liberals”) used the notion of feudalism as a photographic negative against which to develop novel expressions of

liberalism, a broad tradition whose unifying strands, according to political philosopher John Gray, emphasize individual liberties, egalitarianism, moral universalism, and meliorism (the belief in the possibility for social and political progress).²⁸ I agree with democratic theorist Michael Dawson's position on the overall relationship between American liberalism more generally and Black American liberalism, which holds true for many of the antebellum thinkers in *American Dark Age* just as it does for the (mainly) postbellum thinkers he examines.²⁹ As Dawson confirms: "There is no necessary contradiction between the [American] liberal tradition in *theory* and black liberalism. The contradiction exists between black liberalism, and how liberalism has come to be understood in practice within the American context."³⁰ Philosopher Kristin Waters has expressed similar views on Black liberalism in the nineteenth-century writings of David Walker and Maria Stewart, just as Dawson, Leslie Friedman Goldstein, Peter C. Myers, and Nicholas Buccola have done in their examinations of Frederick Douglass as a liberal thinker.³¹ Building on these ideas, I contend that antebellum Black Americans' distinctive liberal framework, among other things, opposed the illiberal expulsion of Black people from the United States (a process known as "colonization"), favored reform over revolution (except for the abolition of slavery), maintained an identity-aware as opposed to an identity-blind or identity-driven ethical disposition, and emphasized national political transformation through moral improvement. Altogether, antebellum Black liberals nurtured a spirit of cautious optimism as they worked to initiate new ways of knowing and being "American" that remain instructive today.³²



From the perspective of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans of all colors, a central feature of "feudalism" was its rigid organizational schema, one that might be said to correlate with the Great Chain of Being, an ancient and medieval construct that became conspicuously racialized during the fifteenth-century Age of Exploration to justify an ostensibly natural hierarchy rooted in racial difference.³³ At first glance, terms such as "pecking order" and "chain of being" suggest distinctive gradations in rank along a sliding scale. As one antebellum author put it in the popular agricultural and cultural magazine *De Bow's Review*, "the feudal system, which once overspread all Europe," had "implied a long gradation of ranks, from the king to the villein bound to the soil."³⁴ However, because of the ways skin color overdetermined social relationships in the United

States, these purportedly “long” gradations were often reduced to two visible racial categories: Black and White.³⁵ In 1837, English social theorist Harriet Martineau pointed out that in America’s “slave States,” there “are two classes, without any minor distinctions,” which provided a concerning exception to the otherwise “non-existent” “feudal qualifications for rank” in the country.³⁶

Nonetheless, many antebellum African American writers and orators recognized the existence of “two classes” far beyond the “slave states” and raised their voices to critique the country’s racially inflected remnants of a great chain of being.³⁷ In 1801, the abolitionist preacher Lemuel Haynes claimed that Black Americans, in “being subjected to slavery by the cruel hands of oppressors . . . have been taught to view themselves as a rank of beings far below others.”³⁸ Similarly, Frederick Douglass’s sometime rival, Henry Highland Garnet, repudiated America’s ranking system in an 1843 speech, declaring that “the humblest peasant is as free in the sight of God, as the proudest monarch that ever swayed a sceptre. Liberty is a spirit sent out from God, and like its great Author, is no respecter of persons.”³⁹ Douglass himself assailed the nation’s racialized chain of being for representing humans on “a sort of sliding scale, making one extreme brother to the ourang-ou-tang, and the other to angels, and all the rest intermediates!”⁴⁰ He later criticized the compressed “valuation” of Black people in the United States, writing that “men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being.”⁴¹ Ultimately, Haynes, Garnet, Douglass, and other Black abolitionists represented the two-tiered racial order separating people with White skin from a Black underclass as a reverse-echo of the hierarchical distinction between European ruling elites and commoners.⁴²

Black female abolitionists occupied particularly precarious positions within America’s antebellum social order, and they vehemently criticized the hierarchical arrangement’s specific impact on women. Some even pointed to medieval societies as being preferable to those women inhabited in modern America. The freeborn activist Maria Stewart, for instance, labeled the silencing of women in the antebellum United States as more retrogressive than the conditions faced by some women in the “13th” and “15th” centuries comprising the High and Late Middle Ages.⁴³ Writing at the precipice of the U.S. Civil War, Black female abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, and Harriet Jacobs described the unique oppressions that Black women faced under what Jacobs describes as the “wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”⁴⁴

These Black women also critiqued America's race-based hierarchy as a function of antiquated European social orders beyond the boundaries of gender and sex.⁴⁵ Frances Harper, for example, argued that Black people in the United States were living under "American despotism" and "the old oligarchy of slavery."⁴⁶ Harriet Jacobs (under the nom de plume Linda Brent), in her 1861 autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, cast her master as a paternalistic "tyrant" to whom she had to resign her "crown" to escape his predatory grasp. Without irony, she also labels the relative of her wealthy Northern benefactor "aristocratic and pro-slavery," as if the adjectives patently expressed a fundamental symmetry.⁴⁷ Even more tellingly, Jacobs describes an enslaved woman who, in positive terms, mistakes "'Merica" for being governed by a female monarch "to whom the President was subordinate."⁴⁸ Lauren Berlant's reading of this literary scene rightly emphasizes that Jacobs "shows how the slaves misrecognize, in potentially and sometimes strategically radical ways, what constitutes the nation."⁴⁹ All of this points to the rhetorical power of the connections antebellum Black Americans consciously drew between their contemporary society and what they represented as its continuity with European political systems such as monarchies and aristocracies that they—like American and French revolutionaries before them—generally understood to be remnants of antiquated feudal orders.⁵⁰ In this way, they wielded an effective mode of critiquing the purported successes of liberal democracy by contrasting its race-based limitations with vestiges of medieval systems that, for them, represented the antithesis of liberal ideas.

Across these invocations of Old World structures to diagnose and assail the persistence of slavery and prejudice in antebellum America, we see the rise of what I propose to name *racial feudalism*. This concept, which comprises both a network of terms and an assumed ideology that conditions and reflects their use, does not suggest that American slavery and racial hierarchy were, strictly speaking, feudal. Indeed, modern historians have gone to great lengths to show European feudalism to be a construct representing an aggregation of variegated and localized systems defined by privilege of birth as well as loyalties, duties, and obligations that were often reciprocal.⁵¹ Instead, the concept of racial feudalism accounts for the language that proslavery advocates, antislavery activists, abolitionists, and politicians of all stripes deployed when they drew on their perceptions of feudalism and its associated metaphors as a starting point to critique—or affirm—slavery and racial hierarchy. Abolitionists used the language of racial feudalism to characterize the limitations of liberalism in a hierarchical society stratified along racial lines. Conversely, enslavers

and supporters of racial hierarchy employed the same terms to cloak the pernicious operation of slavery and social death (that is, the estrangement of individuals from a society to which they cannot “belong”) behind treacherous sentiments of a medieval past.⁵² All of this is not to say that the rhetoric of racial feudalism was somehow bound by America’s national borders and did not have resonance throughout other parts of the Atlantic world.⁵³ The purpose of this book, however, is to diagnose its manifestations and consequences within the United States.

Though early and antebellum American thinkers (those active from the Revolutionary period through the Civil War) did not chiefly relate “feudalism” to a historical mode of economic development (aside from forceful criticisms of primogeniture and entail), the term and its associates served as a retrospective way of characterizing forms of domination tied to the past, sometimes through abolitionists’ deliberate acts of misrecognition, as we saw in Jacobs.⁵⁴ Historian Elizabeth A. R. Brown helpfully reminds us that feudalism “is, always has been, and always will be” a “construct devised in the seventeenth century and then and subsequently used by lawyers, scholars, teachers, and polemicists to refer to phenomena, generally associated more or less closely with the Middle Ages, but always and inevitably phenomena selected by the person employing the term and reflecting that particular viewer’s biases, values, and orientations.”⁵⁵ While Americans’ use of feudalistic analogies throughout the early and antebellum eras might appear imprecise by today’s historical standards, the fact that abolitionists and their opponents alike returned to such metaphors and underscored their potential for reckoning with slavery and prejudice is worthy of further engagement.

But racial feudalism represents more than just the *language* antebellum Americans used to describe the operation of racial stratification in the United States vis-à-vis medieval social hierarchies. The concept also indexes a shared *ideological framework* constituted by notions of paternalism, mutual obligation, and “natural” hierarchy that form the foundation of what I call—using the insights of Black abolitionists—*racial fealty*, *racial honor*, and *racial order* (see chapter 4).⁵⁶ The pervasive ideology of racial feudalism rendered the use of medievalisms intelligible to Americans who were reckoning with the reality of living in a burgeoning nation that was neither feudal nor entirely liberal but seemed to manifest aspects of both societies.⁵⁷ In brief, then, racial feudalism alternatively (1) points to the rhetorical associations antebellum Americans made between their perception of medieval social stratifications and color-based pecking orders in the United States and (2) represents an ideological construct

that linked historically distant ideas of feudalism to racial hierarchy in ways that made the fusion appear *natural* and thus determinative of social reality.

From the perspective of proslavery thinkers, the hegemonic scheme of racial feudalism—what we saw pre-articulated in the characterization of slavery as a “state of unconditional vassalage” and prejudice as “caste-slavery in the north”—represents the transatlantic transfer of an ideological social structure based mostly on class and caste to make it give form to a belief system in the United States determined to establish the supremacy of an Anglo-Saxon race over those differently “colored.” All of this operated under the assumption that those other people, especially Black people, resembled the lower classes or castes of feudal societies. In summary, the language and ideology of racial feudalism contain these primary features:

- While the *language* of racial feudalism was comprised of various medieval metaphors used by Black and White Americans, the overarching *ideology* of racial feudalism that it indexed was grounded in pervasive notions of paternalism, mutual obligation, and “natural” social hierarchy (or what I will dub racial fealty, racial honor, and racial order). The points below are elaborations of this essential premise.
- Specifically, the ideology of racial feudalism was made visible through a web of terms that early and antebellum Americans associated with notions of European “feudalism,” a concept popularized by Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu, David Hume, and Adam Smith.⁵⁸ Influential American thinkers including Noah Webster, Thomas Paine, James Kirke Paulding, Hosea Easton, and Frederick Douglass believed that the legacy of feudalism extended from sometime during the Middle Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century—or, as Thomas Jefferson firmly believed given his affinity for “Saxon” culture and laws, from after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066—and persisted in various forms throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European monarchies and aristocracies.⁵⁹ Terms Americans used to signify feudal concepts included: “aristocracy,” “baron,” “caste,” “chivalry,” “chain of being,” “crusade,” “dark age,” “entail,” “fealty,” “homage,” “honor,” “lord,” “manor,” “monarchy,” “mortmain,” “noble,” “oligarchy,” “peasant,” “primogeniture,” “serf,” “villain,” and “vassalage.” Though some might object that

expressions such as “aristocracy” are more historically proximate to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century descriptions of the *ancien régime* (à la Tocqueville), evidence points to early and antebellum Americans’ using these terms to indicate their perception of feudal vestiges more broadly. Such evidence stems from their context of use, frequency of interchangeability, and the prevalence of co-occurrence with “feudalism,” as can be seen in the writings of Webster, America’s greatest lexicographer, as well as in Jefferson, Adams, Paine, Paulding, Montgomery Blair, and others. As I will show, American writers correlated terms such as “aristocracy” with notions of feudalism so easily that “feudalism” acquired a latent connotative drift that persisted even when the term was not directly invoked.⁶⁰

- The ideology of racial feudalism was consonant with a current in nineteenth-century British and American ideas that historian Reginald Horsman calls “racial Anglo-Saxonism.” This belief system, among other things, valorized the Germanic origins of an Anglo-Saxon “race” before the Norman Conquest as superior to all other groups and cultures.⁶¹ Importantly, the language that African Americans invoked to assail the ideology of racial feudalism was generally distinct from their subversive uses of medievalisms to identify themselves with “Anglo-Saxon” people and their history. Even so, such modes of identification served to trouble implicit hierarchies and advance their racial standing in order to, as Matthew X. Vernon puts it, “renegotiate the terms of belonging in the nation in ways that planted intercultural contact and fusion within the core of American identity.”⁶²

All told, racial feudalism’s constitutive frameworks of racial fealty, racial honor, and racial order (chapter 4) were rooted in notions of natural hierarchy (chapter 2), paternalism, medievalisms, and mutual obligations (chapter 3). As for proslavery thinkers who positively appealed to the discourse of racial feudalism, the familial and paternalistic notions they invoked served to conceal the reality of social death that barred Black people from attaining the promises of American liberalism (chapter 5). As the prologue of this book has shown, the language and ideology of racial feudalism have persisted through the present moment. Nevertheless, African Americans who recognized and rejected its attendant configurations of power by advancing the tenets of Black American liberalism (chapters 6 through 9) against the ideology of racial feudalism provide

a transformative means of reimagining the possibilities of U.S. political thought (epilogue).



Feudal metaphors used during the early and antebellum United States can be described on two levels: the *representational* level and the *racial* level. At the representational level, feudal terms and analogies index a perception of feudalism that was unfavorable among certain influential patriots during the Revolutionary era before becoming more generally positive throughout the opening decades of the nineteenth century. It was perhaps feelings of nostalgia for an erstwhile time during the latter period that tended to give legitimacy to the ideology of *racial* feudalism. While supporters of slavery and color-based hierarchy attempted to justify their racialized practices by tying them to a longer medieval history, abolitionists of all races—particularly the Black abolitionists I examine—used feudalistic metaphors to depict such social structures as fundamentally at odds with the highest ideals of the American republic.

During the late eighteenth century, Americans such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine, and Noah Webster often used the language of feudalism on the representational level to denounce the abuses of modern European monarchies and aristocracies, often with little explicit concern for addressing racial hierarchy in America. However, during the early nineteenth-century “medieval revival,” which was coextensive with the blossoming Romantic movement, Europeans and Americans witnessed a proliferation of sanguine references to the Middle Ages across various print media.⁶³ The writings of Edinburgh-born historian, poet, and novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832)—including his widely read novel *Ivanhoe* (1819), his nine other “medieval novels,” and his medieval-themed poetry—were immensely popular in the antebellum United States and coincidentally helped rehabilitate the image of the medieval world in American culture.⁶⁴ Scott’s works struck a particular chord with readers in the South who projected aspects of their own mores and values into the medieval scenes he crafted. As a pair of historians recently put it, “*Ivanhoe* became so wildly popular that southern white people reimagined their society in its image.”⁶⁵

On the whole, the representational register of feudalism, which accounts for polemical critiques of the perceived vestiges of feudalism within the monarchies and aristocracies of Britain and France during the Revolutionary era and the embrace of feudalistic analogies by the general

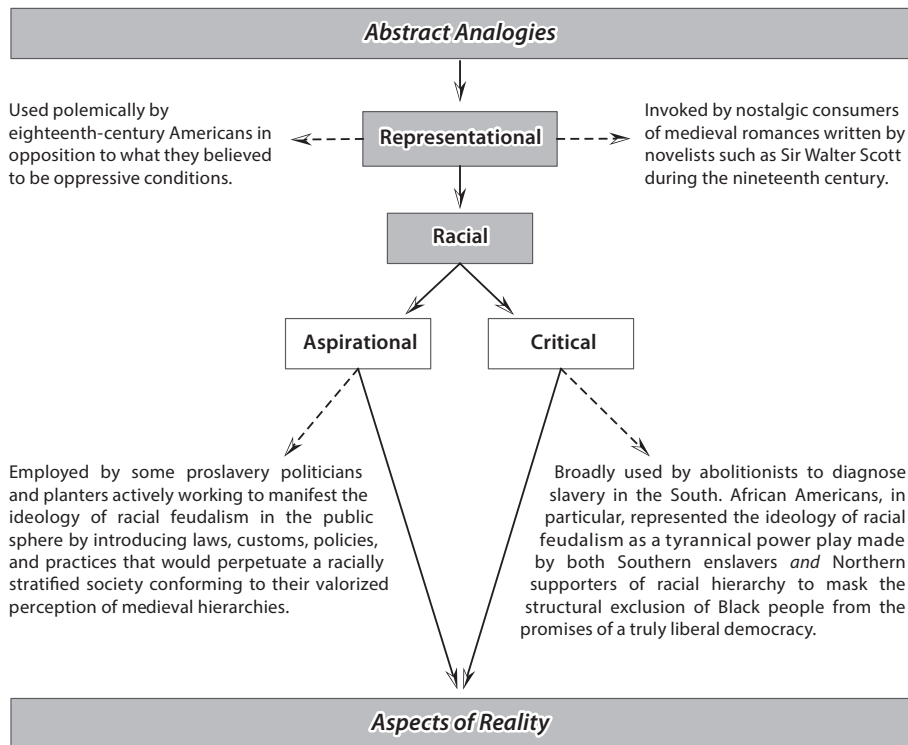


FIGURE 1.1. Two uses of feudal metaphors in early and antebellum America. Chart by the author.

public in antebellum America who enjoyed imagining themselves as part of a medieval world was relatively benign. While these manifestations of feudal language and symbols bolstered the subsequent ideological framework of *racial* feudalism, they only did so indirectly. As such, the representational uses of feudal language will only receive brief treatment across the following chapters. More important to this book is the question of when and how feudal metaphors acquired *racial* associations, which reflected both abolitionists' critical perceptions of slavery and racial hierarchy as well as proslavery thinkers' aspirational embrace of an imaginary past.

Indeed, some slaveholders and their supporters with immense political and social capital did more than merely imagine themselves as the inheritors of an elite European feudal aristocracy. From the halls of Congress and state legislatures to the lecture stages in colleges and the pages of agricultural journals, they lobbied for legislation, encouraged practices, and supported institutions that would attempt to re-create—in law and culture—a society that mirrored their vision of a feudal past, with Black people now

serving as the peasants in the lowest caste. They consciously deployed the nostalgic language of feudalism as a political smokescreen to obscure their moves to consolidate the social, political, and economic power that would inevitably sustain their own elevated social position and their collective political ascendancy.

U.S. representative and future senator James Henry Hammond, for instance, confirms that his antislavery proponents were “right” to assert that American “institutions of slavery” had been “most assimilated to an aristocracy.” He believed such a skin-based aristocracy constituted “a government of the best combining all of the advantages, and possessing but few of the disadvantages, of the aristocracy of the old world.”⁶⁶ As literary historian Robert Rabiee puts it in terms of political economy, “By connecting the plantation system with feudalism, proslavery authors softened the truly exceptional atrocities committed by the U.S. slaveocracy—and disguised the reality of slavery as a structural component of nineteenth-century capitalist economics.”⁶⁷ Indeed, the language of racial feudalism could also be employed to justify the financial benefits fostered by what some scholars call capitalist slavery or, more broadly, racial capitalism.⁶⁸

Not without controversy, Cedric Robinson, a central figure in the literature of racial capitalism, has contended that modern capitalism’s harmful effects were shaped by its racialist precursors during the Middle Ages, which he defines under the rubric of “the social, cultural, political, and ideological complexes of European feudalisms.”⁶⁹ For Robinson, these “feudalisms” stemmed from ersatz hierarchies constructed in medieval Europe that were based on differences in languages, speech patterns, regions, and tribal affiliations—all of which, including the designation of “barbarians” to define outsiders, prefigured racial distinctions. As he puts it, “capitalism was less a catastrophic revolution (negation) of feudal social orders than the extension of these social relations into the larger tapestry of the modern world’s political and economic relations.”⁷⁰ While taking a position on Robinson’s proposition is not the purpose of this book, examining how antebellum Americans described the United States vis-à-vis their own perceptions of feudalism may be illuminating for Robinson’s supporters and critics.

Meanwhile, the westward push of the early and antebellum American expansionist engine routinely suppressed or eliminated inhabitants of North America outside the White-over-Black framework sanctioned by the ideology of racial feudalism, such as Indigenous people and Mexican landholders. Indeed, some Black Americans in the mid-nineteenth century likened the attacks on native peoples and Mexicans to medieval

campaigns. In 1837, Hosea Easton, for example, resoundingly condemned “the late unholy war with the Indians” and the “wicked crusade against the peace of Mexico.”⁷¹ Along these lines, African American abolitionist Martin Delany excoriated future president Zachary Taylor, of “Indian-murder, bloodhound, and Mexican-slaughter notoriety,” in an 1849 letter to Frederick Douglass. Denouncing Taylor’s fanatical supporters in feudalistic terms, he writes, “The extent to which the American people carry this glorification of military crusaders, is beyond a parallel. . . . The extent to which this homage is carried, ceases to be respectful, since it is neither kind nor complimentary, but like the homage of the serf to the noble, or the vassal to his lord, it is ludicrous.”⁷² In recent years, scholars of settler colonialism have also examined the conquering of Indigenous people and lands within the context of crusades and other medievalisms.⁷³ The task of exploring the applicability of racial feudalism as a diagnostic frame to parse the experiences of non-Black racialized groups is beyond the scope of this book. Even so, I hope *American Dark Age* can serve as a resource for such discussions.⁷⁴

Finally, as I will show in the coming chapters, examining the ideology of racial feudalism illuminates the imbrication of a constellation of other analytical frameworks such as racial liberalism, racial Anglo-Saxonism, scientific racism, racialist theologies, and social death.⁷⁵ It also captures how and why antebellum Americans of all colors yoked their perceptions of a medieval past to the reality of racial stratification in the United States in order to describe and actively reshape a social world suspended between narratives of feudalism and the promise of liberalism in ways that continue to resonate today. Still, as thinkers from Oliver Cromwell Cox to Charisse Burden-Stelly have demonstrated, modern scholars’ imposition of ideas (such as “caste”) from other countries and periods onto American slavery can tend to elide important historical, social, and cultural differences that can obscure rather than illuminate issues of race within the particular context of the United States. Bearing these critiques in mind, I have turned to the language of early and antebellum writers themselves to examine the words *they* used in their own time to reckon with the problem of racial hierarchy.⁷⁶

Despite the proliferation of studies regarding racial capitalism during the decades following the publication of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983), a growing number of works across a variety of disciplines have gestured toward the underlying connection between notions of medieval

feudalism and the practice of American slavery.⁷⁷ Previously, historians such as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have surveyed the concept of “feudalism” as it appeared in the writings of White slaveholders and literate classes, including politicians, preachers, and teachers.⁷⁸ More recently, historians of the South such as Robert E. Bonner and Ritchie D. Watson Jr. have demonstrated how American planters viewed themselves as deeply connected to the bloodlines of their ancestors from the Middle Ages, which reinforced and amplified their belief in a medieval European heritage.⁷⁹ Furthermore, medievalists and scholars across numerous disciplines, especially Matthew X. Vernon, Cord Whitaker, Jonathan Hsy, Geraldine Heng, Michelle Warren, Mary Rambaran-Olm, Elizabeth West, Sierra Lomuto, Adam Miyashiro, Mariah Min, Christopher Hanlon, Michael Modarelli, Noémie Ndiaye, and Reginald Horsman, have shed interdisciplinary light on the relationship between the medieval world and modern ideas. In so doing, some have troubled the traditional continental and chronological boundaries of medieval studies and even notions of “the medieval.”⁸⁰ During the last few years, political theorists Jennie Ikuta and Trevor Latimer examined Alexis de Tocqueville’s international perspective and his critique of feudal remnants in the United States during the nineteenth century to characterize the “aristocratic nature of American race relations” and “racial aristocracy.”⁸¹ Intellectual historian Holly Brewer has also indexed the connection between European feudalism and the practice of American slavery through the lens of legal studies.⁸² Among these scholars, Karen Orren and Robert Rabiee—in productive tension with Louis Hartz’s influential book *The Liberal Tradition in America*—have additionally suggested that reverberations of the collision between aspects of medieval feudalism and nascent manifestations of American liberalism can still be felt today.⁸³

In conversation with this burgeoning body of scholarship, *American Dark Age* turns to an underexplored archive of writings produced by antebellum-era Black Americans, including Lemuel Haynes, Nathaniel Paul, Maria Stewart, David Walker, Hosea Easton, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Sojourner Truth, James McCune Smith, James W. C. Pennington, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Frederick Douglass, to argue that antebellum African Americans did more than *describe* the circumstances of their oppression using feudalistic metaphors to posit powerful critiques of U.S. racial hierarchy. They also synthesized their experiences under the conditions of oppression, their religious faith, and their homegrown political ideas to reform and reimagine America’s founding principles. In these ways, they participated in the antebellum rise of the Black American liberal tradition.

In terms of disciplinary approach, *American Dark Age* is grounded in the history of political thought. Therefore, this book is not so much concerned with the proximity to which nineteenth-century historical actors approach an idealized meaning of “feudalism” theorized by scholars during and beyond the twentieth century. Instead, it focuses on what prominent historical Black and White American thinkers meant when they consciously employed the language of feudalism to make sense of their particular social and political experiences within the broader world in which they wrote and spoke, a world that had been nonetheless influenced by the forces of racial slavery, social stratification, and free-market capitalism, whose contradictions they attempted to understand and, at times, exploit. In developing the concept of racial feudalism, I do not merely examine Americans’ specific use of the word “feudalism”; rather, I investigate the discursive conditions of possibility that elicit the production of the term and its associated expressions as a plausible means of describing the social conditions of free and enslaved Black people in the United States.⁸⁴

Chapter Outline

Part 1 of this book details the lineaments of antebellum racial feudalism from the perspectives of Black and White Americans since the Revolutionary era. Accordingly, chapter 1 provides an overview of the term “feudalism” by showing its association with early American perceptions of feudal vestiges within contemporary political systems such as monarchies, aristocracies, and, as the subsequent chapter will demonstrate, America’s own budding republic. Moreover, chapter 1 shows how scholars since the twentieth century have invoked the term “feudalism” and circumscribed its use for specific technical applications that differed from how early and antebellum Americans employed the concept. Though “feudalism” has fallen out of favor in recent historiography, I maintain that the term must be recovered for us to more perceptively examine the world inhabited by Americans since the eighteenth century and properly discern how *they* interpreted the afterlife of Old World hierarchies in a purportedly liberal society.

Chapter 2 contends that the eighteenth-century American Enlightenment tradition often associated with the life and writings of Thomas Jefferson was more deeply connected to notions of feudalism than has been previously acknowledged because of the founder’s desire to maintain race-based social hierarchies he deemed “natural.” In this way, I set the stage

for reading Jefferson not solely against the backdrop of liberal or republican Enlightenment ideas but as a product of the same “feudal” notions he claimed to supersede.⁸⁵ Indeed, though Jefferson claimed to oppose “feudalism,” he remained blind to the ideology of racial feudalism, which his contradictory positions on race tended to sanction. In consequence, chapter 3 begins by examining how Jefferson’s affirmation of natural hierarchies had been taken up by subsequent defenders (and opponents) of racial slavery and how these mainly nineteenth-century figures used feudal metaphors to represent slavery and prejudice as remnants of Old World structures of domination. In the end, I detail how proslavery political figures attempted to systematize the ideology of racial feudalism at all levels of government either directly from their seat of political power or through their extracurricular speeches and writings.

Concluding part 1, chapter 4 traces how African Americans themselves described the U.S. color-based hierarchy through the language of racial feudalism in ways that should be parsed alongside recent studies of the global economic dimensions of capitalism to reveal the elaborate operation of slavery and prejudice as well as the ideas being used to dismantle it. In particular, it examines how Black thinkers illuminated the feudal shadows of the American Enlightenment tradition—shadows I expose as nationwide demands for racial fealty, racial honor, and racial order—to begin charting a path toward reimagining American liberalism in ways that could remain unencumbered by prevalent ideological commitments to paternalism, mutual obligations, and “natural” social stratifications. I show that while the economic exploitation of slavery led to persistent financial profits, the ideology of racial feudalism accounted for the metaphysical power enslavers attempted to wield over the “body and soul” of those they enslaved, which extends the economic abuses of slavery into social, theological, and philosophical realms.

Serving as this project’s “middle passage” interlude, chapter 5 reexamines the idea that Africans and their descendants experienced what sociologist Orlando Patterson has termed “social death” through their capture and conveyance across the Middle Passage, which physically severed them from their past lives. In positing a process that I call “cheating social death,” I argue that through openly avowing and embracing their physical separation from Africa, Black American liberals—who were working to establish organic political, social, religious, and intellectual communities within the United States—asserted their status as full citizens in a country they declared to be their own. Their efforts worked toward the revision and expansion of the U.S. civic ideals to which they asserted equal claim.

Building on these premises, part 2 argues that to fully recognize the promise that liberal ideas continue to hold for the multiracial and multicultural future of the United States, we should examine the contributions of the Black antebellum-era writers and orators who were reinterpreting liberal values in the wake of the nation's founding. It shows how Kentucky-born William Wells Brown (c. 1814–84), North Carolinian Harriet Jacobs (1813–97), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper of Baltimore (1825–1911), and Frederick Douglass (1818–95) of Talbot County, Maryland, presented distinctive but interrelated visions for dismantling racial hierarchy by advancing the general tenets of a nineteenth-century Black American liberal tradition that could serve as a corrective to slavery and racial hierarchy.

Framing the interventions of these four writers, chapter 6 outlines a model for Black American liberalism, presenting the tradition as one that can effectively diagnose the ideology of racial feudalism and provide a means for addressing the practical shortcomings of conventional manifestations of liberalism in the United States. The tradition features six elements, including antebellum Black liberals' (1) anti-feudal, anti-prejudice, and anti-patriarchal political philosophy; (2) rejection of illiberal colonizationist demands that sought to send Black people away from the United States against their will, which violated their foundational conceptions of liberty; (3) emphasis on the practical philosophy of political reformism as opposed to radical political upheaval; (4) ethical outlook attentive to how one's socially constructed identity shapes individual outcomes; (5) abiding commitment to individual and collective moral improvement as the source of lasting political transformation; and (6) spiritually communitarian worldview that represents all of humanity as "one blood" and reflects an openness to recovering and employing prophetic frameworks to amplify the theological register of liberal political concepts.

Foregrounding these principles by way of the first novel written by an African American, chapter 7 explores how William Wells Brown worked to transcend conditions in America that were worse than the "dark ages" by examining the political origin story of the United States through literature. I show how Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel* not only confronts Jefferson's and other slaveholders' contradictory commitments but also refutes the former president's philosophical arguments affirming a natural racial hierarchy. Chapter 8, by contrast, takes up Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) alongside the antebellum writings and speeches of fellow abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to throw light on transgressions uniquely tied to sex and gender

that were exacerbated by the ideology of racial feudalism. Their work illustrates how Black women, as Jacobs puts it, face “wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” and addresses these ills through an intersectional reconstruction of the American liberal tradition.

Chapter 9, in turn, draws on Frederick Douglass’s childhood inquiries to argue for the utility of what I call *identity awareness* for balancing competing interests in a democratic society. It is grounded in this central concern: What can the questions Douglass asks himself as a child teach us about the role of one’s identity for examining contemporary political ideas when liberal thinkers conventionally tend to lean toward identity-blind approaches that elide racial difference and certain critics of liberalism tend to emphasize identity-driven solutions that can alienate potential allies outside narrowly defined groups? The concept of identity awareness challenges Charles Mills’s emphasis on racial identity as central to the reconstruction of liberalism by remaining attentive to recent critiques advanced by philosopher Derrick Darby regarding the limitations of Mills’s “race-first” approach and philosopher Lidal Dror’s criticism of standpoint theory. Reading Douglass vis-à-vis Mills, Darby, and Dror can help citizens and scholars operationalize the productive aims of an identity-aware approach to reimagining liberalism’s generative possibilities. Against tendencies toward pessimism and nihilism, the epilogue posits embracing a commitment to early Black American liberal ideas that can serve as a provisional bridge to a more egalitarian future.

By introducing two frameworks—racial feudalism and Black liberalism—*American Dark Age* reveals how those who wish to change the world as it now exists might again take up the anti-feudal commitments of Black Americans living near the brink of the Civil War who promoted a variant of liberalism that may yet provide strategies for easing the racial tensions, divisions, and inequalities of the present moment. Indeed, nineteenth-century Black liberals effectively used feudalistic metaphors to illuminate contradictions in the practical deployment of liberal principles. Today, we might follow their lead, building on their clear-eyed insights to consider the ways we have yet to escape the long shadow of racial feudal ideas in our own time. Thinking about America’s functional shortcomings as maintained, at least in part, by ideological holdovers of a social system analogous to certain aspects of feudalism instead of as inextricable flaws within a liberal framework premised on freedom, equality, and justice may help us become more attentive to how we might reimagine liberalism’s productive possibilities without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

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