CHAPTER 2

Paschal Beverly Randolph in the African American Community

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Introduction

Because I happen to differ from the Boston standard, I am, forsooth, everything that is bad!...Yet whenever opportunities occur, in or out of the pulpit, I shall be found doing still in my own quiet way for the race whose blood, as well as that of the Anglo Saxon, fills my heart.

– P.B. RANDOLPH, 1858 (RANDOLPH 1858)

How often do we look in wonder at the course of other men's lives, whose paths have diverged so widely from the beaten track of our own, that, unable to comprehend the one spring upon which, perhaps, the whole secret of the diversity hinged, we have been fain to content ourselves with summing up our judgment in the common phrase, ‘Well, it’s very strange; what odd people there are in the world to be sure!’

– Pauline Hopkins, 1903 (HOPKINS 2004, 37)

Texts, Contexts, and Canonicity

Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875) is one of America's most important occultists, and he is the foundational figure of African American esotericism. That Randolph did not primarily minister to the African American community should not preclude historians from ascribing to him such an exceptional title. This essay argues that Randolph was a controversial African American celebrity whose legacy was not preserved by the black community on account of his radical spiritual beliefs and questionable racial politics. While Randolph proved heavily influential on such white occultists as H.P. Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, and R. Swinburne Clymer, his visionary genius would seem to have had no memorialist in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century black communities. However, a 1903 novel by Pauline Hopkins pays tacit homage to Randolph, thereby contradicting the assumption that Randolph's occult career
made no impression on his African American peers. Hopkins (1859–1930), an accomplished African American writer and editor, honors Randolph’s particular spiritual innovations in *Of One Blood*, a text which claims that ancient Africa is the wellspring of all occult arts.

Little known today, P.B. Randolph was that rarest of beings: a man who consistently saw and lived beyond the limitations imposed on him by his times. His impressive erudition shines through the forty-five publications he is known to have authored, and he was a popular orator in Spiritualist circles. Randolph was one of a small number of nineteenth century African Americans to travel independently overseas, first to Europe as an emissary of Spiritualism, and then to the Middle East to learn the occult secrets of Egypt and Syria, in imitation of the fabled Christian Rosenkreutz. He was an unabashed proponent of women’s sexual rights, and it was Randolph who ushered in the New Age in advance of the pugnacious H.P. Blavatsky, by articulating the transition from passive to active mediumship in the spiritual sub-culture. Randolph accomplished all this during an age when the color of his skin was thought to render him intellectually stunted, morally degraded, or otherwise inferior. It is no wonder that P.B. Randolph has acquired a superhuman status among the occult groups that lionize him; that he largely avoided the violence and persecution perpetrated on black bodies that dared to defy their lot of second-class citizenship, is in many ways miraculous.

Because Randolph’s status as an occult innovator has been well-documented in the biography by John Patrick Deveney (Deveney 1997), I focus my attention here on Randolph’s lesser-known activity as a “race man.” Randolph may have been consternating and contradictory on the subject of race, but that he advocated for black emancipation and spoke out against racial oppression both before and after the Civil War are facts too often neglected in his biography. Establishing Randolph as a celebrated African American orator, one known to both the abolitionist and Spiritualist communities whose memberships frequently overlapped, can mitigate the perception that he somehow evaded identification, and involvement, with others of his race. To be sure, Randolph offended both black and white abolitionists by endorsing a gradualist approach to slavery’s end at an 1858 Philanthropic Convention in Utica. He also constructed his own fantastic racial identity, claiming at times to have seven different bloodlines running through his veins, while denying that any of these were black (Randolph 1939, 72). Such assertions do not accord with our current ethic of political correctness, nor did they suit the nineteenth century emphasis on racial solidarity as the surest road to racial uplift. Yet Randolph is the same man who, as a youth, wrote to prominent white abolitionists in inquiry of how he might use his considerable talents to best serve his race. As a middle-aged