

A 19th-century French novel's insight into American racism

By [John D. Wilsey](#)

March 3, 2015

Between April 1831 and February 1832, two officials of the French government under Louis-Philippe toured Jacksonian America. These two officials—Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont—were on assignment to research prisons in the United States and later produced a report of their findings in 1833. But while traveling through America, Tocqueville and Beaumont were also carefully observing political and social life in the new republic. Both men published works on their observations. Tocqueville wrote [*Democracy in America*](#) (1835/1840) and Beaumont wrote a novel, entitled [*Marie or, Slavery in the United States*](#) (1835).

Most Americans are familiar with Tocqueville's work, but Beaumont's novel is less well known. Still, the two works were meant to complement one another. Beaumont wrote in his foreword that "M. de Tocqueville has described the institutions; I myself have tried to sketch the customs." Tocqueville admitted that he gave up the attempt of describing the "habits, ideas, and customs" of Americans, and held out his friend Beaumont's work on racial prejudice to "those readers who, above all else, desire a true picture of actual conditions."

Beaumont's *Marie* was a work ahead of its time. It was not the first abolitionist work in America, but it was the first one to go beyond slavery and look squarely at the broader problem of racial injustice in America. Not only that, but it presented racial injustice as being ingrained in American culture, reaching not only to African slaves but also to "mulattos," those in whose veins coursed the slightest hint of African blood. Beaumont told the story of Ludovic, a Frenchman who migrated to America in search of a new life invigorated by liberty. Ludovic fell in love with Marie, a lovely American girl of 1/32 African descent. Because of this, she was considered "colored," and she and her brother George were ostracized by society. Ludovic's marriage to Marie incited a race riot in New York, from which they barely escaped. Ultimately the couple had to flee prejudice to the wilderness of Michigan, where deeper tragedies awaited. The novel ended with a disconsolate Ludovic, having witnessed the destruction of the ones he loved most in what he believed was the land of the free.

Beaumont identified numerous tensions existing in Jacksonian America pertinent to race and prejudice. Within the story, George and Marie responded to their situations in contrasting ways. George was impelled by pride in his African heritage, while Marie was tormented by shame. George and Marie's father, Daniel, embodied the tension between overt condemnation of slavery and acquiescence to structural racism. More broadly, the tension between American political liberalism and unjust ascriptive hierarchies (or "institutions and customs") stood out starkly throughout the book.

This broad tension that Beaumont identified raises a profound question about American identity: are racism and prejudice constitutive of, or contrary to, American democracy? In other words, has racial inequality been necessary historically to American democracy? If so, was it futile for Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. to call America to faithfulness to its own creeds and ideals? And if so, was Tocqueville's conviction—"I do not believe that the white and black races will ever live in any country upon an equal footing"—remarkably prescient and correct?

American identity is more soundly defined by stated ideals than racial ancestry. These ideals are enshrined in the canon of American civil religion: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address, among many others. Douglass and King are two examples of African Americans who appealed to the documents of this canon as they argued for black personhood. Their appeals are meaningful, they resonate with the American public, because the stated ideals of American democracy—if they are understood objectively, and not pragmatically—do not allow for unjust treatment of persons on the basis of their race. As Diana Schaub [recently put it](#), "If we as a nation are dedicated to the truth of the Declaration's proposition, then the dignity of American blood requires behavior quite different than rigorous exclusion of any and all individuals of African descent."

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