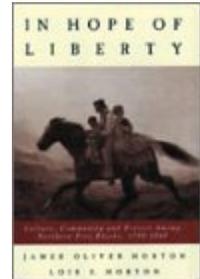


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xii + 340 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-512465-1; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-504732-5.

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In this the latest of several collaborative projects, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton offer an ambitious—and largely successful—interdisciplinary synthesis of several decades of scholarship relating to free blacks in the colonial, early national, and antebellum North. The central premise of the book asserts that the “story of African Americans is deeply embedded in the history of America,” a history which “from the beginning” blended African, Native American, and European cultures “to create a distinctive American culture” (p. ix). As they emphasize blacks’ active, complex, and integral role in shaping this syncretic cultural development, the Hortons refuse to restrict the importance of the black presence to mere “contributions” or to oversimplify the multifaceted nature of Africans’ experiences in North America. Their analysis of those experiences demonstrates that free black Americans occupied a unique vantage point from which to assess the nation’s early development and its professed ideals, and that historians’ understanding of the period can, at the very least, become more nuanced by evaluating it from a black-centered perspective.

The Hortons utilize much of the best recent scholarship on American and African American history as well as some venerable, and still useful, classics from earlier in the twentieth century. They draw not only upon historical research, but also upon works from anthropology, historical archaeology, folklore, religious studies, and other disciplines. While primarily a work of synthesis, *In Hope of Liberty* also rests its argument on a solid foundation of primary sources, including government records, autobiographies, diaries, city directories, etiquette manuals, sermon texts, correspondences, newspapers, novels, travel literature, and a variety of ephemeral materials. In

synthesizing these diverse sources, the Hortons go well beyond merely summarizing others’ conclusions. They fuse primary and secondary sources imaginatively in offering a fresh interpretation of free blacks’ central place in early American history.

The book is organized in ten substantive chapters which present the complex and overlapping experiences of northern blacks both chronologically and thematically. The first two chapters on the colonial North illustrate this book’s contribution of novel perspectives on familiar material. Chapter One provides a thoughtful overview of the slave trade, slavery, and Africans’ acculturation in shifting social environments. Slavery is often given scant treatment in discussions of the colonial North, and one of the Hortons’ compelling insights is that, despite the relatively small number of slaves held in the region, the institution’s role in the Northern economy deserves more attention than it has received. The importance of the slave trade to merchants, shippers, and financiers in northern ports by the eighteenth century may have made slave *trading* as economically vital to northern elites as slave *holding* was to those in southern colonies.

In Chapter Two, the authors use the research of Sterling Stuckey, Robert Farris Thompson, William Piersen, and others to affirm the persistence of West African cultural patterns in America, not only among blacks, but also, through Africans’ visible presence in urban public culture, for colonial American society as a whole. Most of the chapter concentrates on the interplay of race and class, particularly the considerable cross-racial interactions among the “lower sort” that so disturbed colonial elites, north and south. Blacks mixed socially and sexually with both European indentured servants and with

Native Americans, giving rise to a growing mixed race population by the eighteenth century. The Hortons argue that black-Indian unions in particular are worthy of far more scholarly attention than they have received, and they use the Pequot War to illustrate their point. After the virtual elimination of male Pequots in 1637, many women and children were sold into domestic slavery where they mixed with an African slave population dominated by young males. Social status and racial identity in the colonial North was further complicated by the frequent white-black or white-mulatto unions that often resulted from intimate mixed race socializing in saloons, in the workplace, and on the streets. Biracial sexual alliances challenged elites' emerging views of racial hierarchy and threatened to generate biracial political alliances which might, with Great Awakening and republican rhetoric in the air, dislodge the deferential social structure of the day.

The authors segue into a discussion of the Revolutionary era by extending Gordon Wood's and Edmund Morgan's complementary arguments regarding "middling" Americans' concerns that a loss of liberty would put them on a par with the lower orders. This assertion, the authors argue, fails to address the "concrete reality" of the various unfree and marginalized people who comprised the numerical majority of the colonial population. An interesting discussion of biracial interaction among seamen and dockworkers in northern ports posits a more significant activist role for Crispus Attucks and others of his status who fanned the flames of anti-British sentiment at Boston and elsewhere in the 1760s and 1770s. The decline of such biracial alliances during the postrevolutionary generation marks an important turning point for black Americans and for the nation's racial ideology and social structure.

Chapter Three, which focuses on the revolutionary era, illustrates one of the greatest accomplishments of the book. The Hortons subtly shift the reader's perspective on familiar events so that "African American history" ceases to be marginal to the "main story," but rather becomes a lens through which that story takes on a whole new shape and meaning. Blacks fully imbibed of the republican ideology and the rhetoric of liberty that so captivated their white fellow patriots. Of course, thousands of enslaved blacks rejected the revolutionaries' cause in order to pursue their own freedom, fleeing to British lines in response to promises of manumission like that issued by Lord Dunmore in 1775. Regarding black participation on both sides of the conflict, the Hortons cover material that will be familiar to both generalists and specialists.

Their clear and accessible style makes this information—and indeed the entire work—available to a broader lay readership as well. This narrative is embedded in an elegant interpretive framework that emphasizes both continuity and change for northern blacks during the revolutionary era. Blacks' presence, participation, and cultural impact on American history at the nation's founding were in keeping with their role in the colonial period. But the Revolution was a watershed. On the one hand, widespread manumissions and emancipation in the North yielded hope and opportunity for many blacks even as many struggled to adapt to their new found freedom. Given the long history of biracial interaction during the colonial period and the growing white support for abolition, it seemed reasonable to many blacks—more reasonable than we can readily appreciate today—that they would become fully enfranchised citizens of the new nation. As David Grimsted and Gary Nash (among others) have pointed out, white Americans in the 1770s and 1780s had not yet fully embraced the doctrine of innate black inferiority. But the Founders' decision to protect slavery and the success of elites in splitting the lower classes along racial lines brought on a racial retrenchment that provided the "final irony" (p. 76) of the era: as deference and rigid social hierarchies declined among white males, race (along with gender) became more central in defining status and rights in the early republic. And where slavery remained intact it was guarded ever more closely. This development had obvious relevance for African Americans, but the Hortons make a strong case that it should be more widely recognized as a central defining feature of the early republic.

The next several chapters address blacks' transition to a circumscribed freedom in the North, dealing with family life, urbanization, crime, work, education, class structure, and the impressive institutional support mechanisms that were created to provide for the social and spiritual welfare of the community. Chapters Four through Six explore these themes from the Revolution to the 1850s, though the main focus is on the early national period. The Hortons weave the black experience firmly into the warp and woof of an American society that was experiencing population expansion, a revolution in transportation and communications, the growth of river towns in the West, a resurgence of evangelical religion, and the emergence of a market economy. Using the commentaries on white society by contemporaries like Tocqueville and historians like Richard D. Brown and Nathan Hatch, the authors show that African American community institutions developed apace with the broader soci-

ety, though they were at times distinctive in their particular emphases (e.g., burial and mutual aid societies). This rooting of the black experience in the American experience is one of the strengths of the book. One area where the authors could have done more to relate black patterns with those of the broader society is in their enlightening discussion of chain migration, long-term visiting, and boarding as vital mechanisms for dealing with urban growth and population movements. Putting up boarders, often migrants from the same region as the host families, provided both income for the hosts and a way for the community to care for the poor and dispossessed among them. Mary Ryan and others have noted the role of boarding among whites in urbanizing environments, and some attention to this practice would have provided a valuable reference point.

Chapters Seven and Eight move the narrative squarely into the antebellum period, giving particular attention to the emergence of what the authors properly describe as an ambivalent African American identity by the 1830s. One facet of this discussion relates to the questions of colonization, emigration, and black Americans' connections with their African heritage. Prior to the 1820s most Americans—black and white—who thought at all about African history generally acknowledged the significant impact of black African culture, filtered through Egypt, on Western civilization. By the 1830s, this positive view had been eclipsed by an interpretation of African history and culture that was more consistent with the ideology of racial inferiority that supported black subjugation in the United States. As white male rights to political participation advanced in the “era of the common man,” this racial ideology explicitly denied blacks' abilities to effectively exercise the rights of citizens. The 1820s were a watershed in the emergence of an African American identity as American-born blacks consciously moved away from an African identity in order to establish their claims to United States citizenship. Black Americans held more firmly than whites to a positive view of their African heritage even as they attempted to distance themselves from the contemporary African cultures that virtually all Christian Americans viewed as savage and heathen. The negative experiences of black American emigrants to the republic of Haiti, coupled with the increasingly suspect schemes of the American Colonization Society, further solidified African Americans' rejection of emigration and assertion of their essential American-ness.

Despite their emphasis on the gradual erosion of direct ties with Africa and African culture during the early

nineteenth century, the Hortons assert that the African past provided a greater foundation for African-American culture than the European past did for European Americans. The authors support this less than convincing claim by noting the persistence of African influences on black American speech, food, religion, music, and folk life. If attention were given to the same categories of European culture, it would be clear that European patterns were at least as prominent a part of “white” culture in the United States. The weakness of this particular assertion, however, does not diminish the larger argument, presented most explicitly in Chapter Seven, that “the mingling of European and African styles” defined what was becoming recognized in Europe as a “uniquely American culture” (p. 161) by the antebellum decades. As African Americans were becoming more Europeanized, European Americans were likewise becoming more Africanized. Using a wealth of primary and secondary materials relating to work songs, black military bands, dance halls, music dives, street culture, and the pervasiveness of minstrelsy in American popular entertainment, the Hortons ably document “the infusion of African music into everyday life” (p. 156) that was “symbolic of the multiracial society” that had emerged in the United States (p. 162).

But juxtaposed against this cultural amalgamation was the growing racial exclusivity of the political realm. This process is made evident through a fascinating analysis of shifts in mob behavior from the 1790s to the 1840s. In the late eighteenth century, mobs were quasi-legitimate vehicles for political activism, and blacks (remember Crispus Attucks) were often conspicuous participants. By the 1820s, the expansion of democratic, though racially exclusive, institutions had largely discredited mob action as an appropriate form of political expression. Between the 1820s and 1840s, mob violence in the North and West came to be identified with lower class white attacks, fueled by racism and economic competition, on the increasingly visible urban black community. As blacks began organizing in earnest to claim their rights as Americans, white mob violence was used to restrict their ability to make political statements in the public sphere. Old traditions like Election Day and Pinkster celebrations were banned, black parades were frequent targets of mob attacks, and the representation of black culture in public was largely controlled by whites in blackface perpetuating the degrading stereotypes of the minstrel show. In what is perhaps the strongest chapter in the book, this material on culture, politics, and anti-black violence reinforces the authors' overarching argument for the centrality of African Americans in defining

United States history and culture.

The last two chapters of *In Hope of Liberty* focus on black Americans' continuing attempts between the 1830s and 1850s to organize for the abolition of slavery and to assert their claims for full inclusion as American citizens. These chapters are the least stimulating in the book and provide few new insights into the growth of antebellum black abolitionism. The Convention Movement, the role of black newspapers, interactions with paternalistic white abolitionists, the Underground Railroad, and the increasing militancy and independence of black activists after the 1840s all receive their due. The Hortons point out the different contributions of whites and blacks in the movement: blacks brought passion, personal experience, and unqualified commitment, while whites provided money, reformist zeal, and a level of legitimacy which blacks could not have attained themselves after the 1830s. The key events of the tumultuous 1850s are covered adequately, with particular emphasis on black militancy, the rhetoric of black manhood that pervaded the movement, and the revival of emigrationist schemes as the Slave Power conspiracy eroded black hopes for freedom in the United States. Once again the authors emphasize the ambivalence of African-American identity: blacks recognized their own centrality in forming the nation even as the prospect of finding acceptance in their homeland seemed ever more remote. A brief and rather perfunctory Epilogue on the onset of Civil War adds little to the volume.

I am most impressed by the Hortons' ability to recast the central themes of early American history by assessing them through the lens of African-American history. The authors craft their arguments with reference to important recent scholarship on the American

and African-American past, and bring their narrative to life by rooting it in the well-documented experiences of dozens of African-American people—males and females; elites, middle classes, and the lower orders; the well-known and the obscure. Insightful analyses of multiracial interaction in colonial society, the meaning of the revolutionary era, and the centrality of black culture in shaping the nineteenth century United States challenge more traditional, racially exclusive conceptualizations of early American society. This ambitious work, then, is much more than a narrative of the experiences of free blacks in the North, yet it captures those experiences in all their variety better than any other volume to date. *In Hope of Liberty* should be read by specialists in both African-American history and the history of early America because of its success in integrating black history into the larger framework of the American past. It also will be useful as a teaching tool. The organization of the chapters makes each one (or, at times, two in conjunction) a fruitful source of lecture material on various topics and time periods. In addition, this book could work well as a text in both graduate and undergraduate classes. It accessible for undergraduates (as well as a broad nonacademic readership), yet contains some provocative ideas that are sure to generate discussion in graduate seminars. James and Lois Horton offer a profound interpretation of an emergent multiracial society that until recently has refused to see itself as such. More works like this one are needed to refine, or redefine, our understanding of just what sort of nation America is and how it came to be that way.

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