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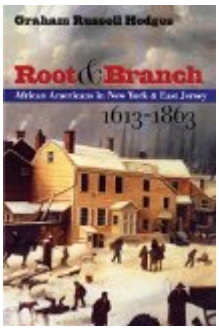

Graham Russell Hodges. *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xii + 413 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2492-4.

Reviewed by Liam Riordan

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Root & Branch is a welcome addition to a growing scholarly literature on African American experience outside the southern staple-crop regions of early America.[1] It makes an especially important contribution by emphasizing black agency and by focusing on the area around New York City, the most significant region of black settlement north of the Chesapeake. New York and New Jersey were home to thirteen percent of the total U.S. black population in 1990, and today the country's greatest concentration of African Americans resides in the New York City metropolitan area. While this pattern is largely the result of twentieth-century developments, the region's early African American presence was much stronger than generally known, with blacks composing nearly 20 percent of colonial New York and fifteen percent of East Jersey (pp. 1, 2). Clearly this is a significant subject and with the exception of Shane White's 1991 monograph, early black New York has not received recent book-length treatment. Furthermore, Graham Hodges's presentation of black experience outside the plantation world can help to reshape a simplistic national narrative that erroneously projects a persistent sectional divide between slave south and free north.

This book is a sweeping work of synthesis. While black experience in New York City generally provides the best evidence and sets the pace of change throughout, Hodges rightly breaks out of strictly urban confines to place metropolitan patterns within a rural context that includes nine counties surrounding the city, four in New York and five in East Jersey. This breadth increases the variables under consideration, but appropriately reflects the experience of people in the region. Hodges also adopts a long temporal view beginning in 1613 with the first documented African to arrive on the island later named Manhattan and carries the reader all the way to the Draft Riots of 1863. The book's eight chronologically-organized chapters are each composed of several shorter sections that present discrete subjects in each period. Every chapter ends with a section of conclusions, and other recurring topics include white and black religion, city and rural work, black revolts, the slave trade, free black society, and slave culture.

The author's intended audience is critical in assessing the book. The two-and-a-half century scope will likely frustrate specialists due to the brevity with which Hodges must present a huge range of material, while a more general audience (as well as scholars critical of narrow monographs) will appreciate his range. Hodges's decision to write a synthetic overview is surely an appropriate one and in this day of specialization may even be a necessary corrective. He writes intelligently and provides an excellent guide to the current and emerging shape of early African American studies. Indeed, Hodges possesses unmatched credentials to meet the challenges posed by this looming survey. His three previous books, three edited document collections (one of them co-edited), and five published essays all provide material directly relevant to this study.[2] He knows his subject first hand and makes central use of a large secondary literature which is carefully accounted for in an extremely useful fifty-five page bibliography.

Just as audience is key to the success of ***Root & Branch***, an electronic review is a distinctive genre. This post is meant to generate discussion among H-SHEAR subscribers who have not necessarily read the book and who have a special interest in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. While the extended length permitted in this medium has obvious advantages, scrolling through long email messages often becomes tedious; thus, a little sign posting is in order. The review's next section comments on the overall organizational strategy of the book, while five shorter sections, each set off by a title, take up more specific issues drawn primarily from the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary chapters.

Principal Themes and Organizational Categories

Analysis of demographic and economic change benefits from, and probably requires, a long-range view. While Hodges attends to such material throughout his study, population shifts and economic developments are not what matter most to him. Instead, cultural and especially religious factors provide his key forces to explain historical change. Hodges consistently strives to place African Americans at the center of this study even while recognizing that the oppressive slave system and nature of surviving evidence require close attention to white actors. Nevertheless, African Americans and their culture(s) play the decisive role in this book, and Hodges's most frequent criticism of previous scholarship stems from its failure to emphasize black agency.

"Slave religion" and "slave culture" provide the causal agents at the heart of this study. As Hodges states in the Introduction's closing sentences, "Faith and frolics were the flesh of black societies . . . and these activities energized the slaves' dynamic resistance to their plight and prepared them for freedom. That pilgrimage to liberty is ultimately the story of this book" (p. 5). How these cultural forces informed African-American actions and senses of self provides the central conceptual framework for the study, which this review turns to in more detail after this section.

Hodges also provides two general categories to help explain white attitudes toward blacks by contrasting "paternalist" and "pietist" traditions as the central division among white Christians in Protestant North America. In Hodges's scheme, paternalists had a cosmopolitan and liberal belief system wherein slaves could achieve salvation and that at least technically required masters to provide Christian instruction to their slaves. For pietists, such decisions were the sole domain of household patriarchs, who generally blocked slave access to Christianity out of spiritual and legal doubts about the legitimacy of enslaving a baptized person.

Despite the unwieldy connotations often attached to these terms, the general distinction offers useful interpretive possibilities. However, they sometimes seem problematic here, since the pietist label almost exclusively refers to the Dutch

Reformed Church. Anglicans, meanwhile, are the clear standard-bearers of Hodges's paternalists. Hodges fairly includes Lutherans as well, but Quakers are an awkward theological bedfellow. Quaker inclusion as paternalists seems especially strained, since blacks were basically excluded from membership in the Society of Friends, while Anglicans and Lutherans granted sacraments to blacks and allowed them as members, however subordinate, of their congregations. Meanwhile, Presbyterians, whose important presence in East Jersey is not explored in sufficient detail, appear on both sides of the divide as pietists (p. 126) and as paternalists (pp. 165, 213). A more persuasive account, in my view, would have simply let the black relations of the primarily urban Anglican churches stand in sharp contrast to the largely rural Dutch Reformed; then the position of these leading groups could be examined in closer detail.

Hodges presents Anglican attitudes quite effectively, but the Dutch Reformed side is too often reduced to mean caricature, as when the "Dutch predilection for torture and abuse of corpses" is accused of shaping severe anti-slave laws under English rule in both colonies (p. 53). Indeed, it may be that "pietism" was invoked to try to shield such sharply anti-Dutch judgments. Without question slave-holding was especially strong among middling Dutch farmers, thus Hodges's lack of original research on Afro-Dutch culture is disappointing. The well-known black celebration of Pinkster gets attention, but its African roots are more important to Hodges than its syncretic significance. A similar missed opportunity to explore how "Dutchness" and "Africanness" came together to produce a novel culture was the brief mention of the "learned slave" Jacobus Eliza Capetein, an African-born theologian whose 1742 dissertation at the University of Leiden posited what has since been labeled the "fortunate fall" thesis of black contact with Christianity (p. 122).

A work of this scope requires broad categorization that will often disappoint readers, such as myself, more committed to the focused monograph. Thus, I am perhaps not being fair to the spirit of this survey by calling for more information about specific issues. Nevertheless, since Graham Hodges will read this commentary in advance, and will presumably be posting a simultaneous reply, I see this less as a traditional review than an attempt to launch discussion about the important issues raised in this synthesis.

A Mid-Atlantic "Slave Society?"

Chapter One ends with Hodges asking whether or not the English had captured a "slave society" with their 1664 conquest of New Netherland. The initial black inhabitants of the colony, while surely laborers, occupied an ambiguous status, and by the 1640s and 1650s some moderate numbers were free and even owned land (pp. 13-15). Hodges argues at the start of the chapter that "How that initial generation gave way to a slave society is the terrible history of the period of Dutch control" (p. 8). But by the end of the chapter this judgment is modified: "By current definitions, New Netherland was not a slave society because slavery was an important part of the political economy but not the sole form of labor" (p. 31). Hodges appears equivocal here, which may stem from a lack of reliable demographic information. The number of blacks in the Dutch colony, and especially the ratio of free to slave, remains unclear, and Hodges offers no direct commentary on the limitations of the surviving sources. For instance, he discusses a 1664 tax list for the city of New Amsterdam with 254 taxpayers that seems to include an "African" population of 375 (p. 31). Might this constitute an urban slave society? I wonder if Hodges defers too much to Ira Berlin's influential recent formulation of the fundamentally economic distinction between "slave societies" and "societies with slaves."[3] Perhaps the regional case explored here calls for a revised sense of categorization?

Interestingly, Chapter Two concludes with New York and New Jersey having "created a slave

society" not by slavery becoming the sole form of labor, but through the critical passage of New York's Negro Act of 1712 and a similar Jersey law of 1713, which brutally clarified the enslaved status of blacks in response to the slave conspiracy of 1712 (p. 68). In my view, the significance here lies in the intensification of slavery and racism without the over-riding economic pressure and massive slave importation of the staple-producing colonies of the Chesapeake and Lower South. Hodges appears to sow some seeds of dissent from Edmund Morgan's canonical view of the economic determinants of American slavery and racism.[4] Such a revisionist argument fits my understanding of the main thrust of ***Root & Branch*** as stressing the importance of culture as a motive force intertwined with, but not always dependent upon, material and demographic factors. While this implicit stance informs Hodges's study, such an argument never emerges decisively.

Black Loyalists and the Revolution

Hodges's analysis of the American Revolution in Chapter Five [He calls it "the linchpin of the book" (p. 2).] and its relationship to gradual emancipation in the postwar period also raise complex issues about how culture shapes reality. The chapter on the Revolution, however, does not discuss Patriot ideology, since African Americans in New York and East Jersey were overwhelmingly Loyalist and acted with solid support from the British who held New York City for the duration of the war. Hodges's treatment of pro-British black paramilitary groups is particularly compelling (pp. 147-153). Essential information about the overall character of black Loyalists in New York is derived from the 3,000 person register of the African Americans whom the British transported to Nova Scotia in 1783. Perhaps because Hodges has worked closely with this source elsewhere (he edited it for publication), his analysis seems too brief, though we learn that just 19 percent of those listed came from the Mid-Atlantic (p. 156). How many of them were from the narrower region under study is not stated. It does seem, however, that the small (though unspecified) number of free blacks in his region overwhelmingly chose to leave with the British when the opportunity arose (p. 160).

Given this clear characterization of the black Revolution in the region as fundamentally anti-Patriot, the readiness with which Hodges sees African Americans staking a strong claim to Revolutionary values is startling. Despite the Loyalist evidence, the Revolution chapter concludes by suggesting that blacks were prepared to create "their own black republicanism from the ashes of war" (p. 160). Similarly, Chapter Six begins by suggesting that postwar celebrations "held as much danger as promise to local African Americans" (p. 162). But why these celebrations should hold any promise for blacks is unclear. Downplaying the disaster of Patriot success from the perspective of blacks in the region undermines the novelty and dynamism of a distinctive American nationalism that emerged among some African Americans in the early republic.

Gradual Emancipation and Public Black Institutions

The final three chapters of the book are buttressed by the more standardized demographic information from the federal census and examine the slow process of achieving freedom. Though similar gradual emancipation laws were passed in New York in 1799 and New Jersey in 1804, free black majorities would only be achieved in New York in 1810 and by the barest margin in New Jersey in 1820, leaving thousands still trapped in bondage. Scholarly interpretation of the causes behind gradual emancipation typically take one of two routes. Either ideological pressure stemming from Revolutionary egalitarianism could no longer tolerate the fundamental contradiction of slavery, or a broader economic transition to free labor was decisive. Hodges distinguishes himself from these alternatives by stressing that gradual emancipation came to pass "because of the coop-

eration of elite paternalists . . . and the unceasing efforts of blacks themselves" (p. 168). What motivated elite paternalists to participate in such an alliance is not entirely clear, although Hodges stresses that they were generally Federalists. While the Federalist anti-slavery commitment has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, opposition to slavery in the early republic still strikes me as an issue apart from party politics. For example, while Federalists were often among slavery's few white opponents, Hodges also notes that Democratic-Republican Governor Daniel Tompkins, in his last legislative session before becoming vice president in 1817, "pushed through" the law that "sealed the extinction of slavery in New York" (p. 193).

In spite of the halting limitations of gradual emancipation, it did allow black institutions to appear publicly as never before. Chief among these were a range of black churches, some wholly independent of white denominations, while others remained affiliated with their white brethren. The mostly male leaders of such churches, like Peter Williams Jr. and William Hamilton, provide the first sustained attention to individual blacks in the book. Despite many fundamental similarities, these two ministers held distinct understandings of their relationship to the American Revolution. While Williams publicly recalled his father's service as a Patriot in the war (p. 239), Hamilton praised black Loyalists in an emancipation day sermon on July 4, 1827 (p. 223). Another intriguing post-Revolutionary black leader was Pierre Touissaint, a successful Roman Catholic hairdresser who loaned money to his former owner and had an international clientele (pp. 201, 202). The richness of this material and the fact that we lack a recent scholarly monograph on black religion in post-revolutionary New York make me regret the compressed treatment it receives by necessity in this survey.

Class Identity and Diversity Among Free Blacks

The divergence of a generally Christian middle class and a more boisterous popular street culture was a central development among increasingly free African Americans in the early nineteenth-century, and builds on Hodges's central themes of slave religion and slave culture as key black resources in the colonial era. The emergence of these class-informed cultural distinctions within the black community, however, does not receive the convincing treatment that it needs. Black promenading, flamboyant dress, and formal balls sometimes appear as activities among "lower-class blacks," while at others are indicators of a rising "black middle class" (e.g., compare the text and illustration caption on p. 204).

Obviously the relationship between economic and cultural components of class identity requires subtle assessment that should not be forced into a fixed category, but how they intertwined for free blacks deserves more attention. Hodges states that there was little economic disparity among free blacks who mostly had very modest means (p. 205), but at other points he hints at black affluence with "estimated family incomes ranging up to $10,000" (p. 196, also see p. 225). Race, class, and culture provocatively overlap, but Hodges does not fully explore their cross-cutting influences. For example, he suggests that middle-class blacks' increasing contact with white society contributed to the respectable culture they championed and implies that the "urban street style" of "playful African Americans" had a more direct connection to slave culture (p. 205, also see p. 213). But as Hodges's borrowing from the work of Sean Wilentz and Christine Stansell suggests [not to mention the inter-racial nature of the major New York slave conspiracy of 1741 (p. 93)], working-class blacks were no more isolated from contact with whites than their middle-class counterparts.[5] This may be a distinctly regional dimension of black experience that merits more explicit consideration, because it can expand our sense of the variability of black identity.

Interpreting Culture and the Place of Africa

However one chooses to interpret the lines of black unity and division in the early republic, I am struck by the ways in which African American public expression drew heavily upon central strains of American experience. Whether through black Christian respectability or black theaters (evocatively discussed on pp. 197-198), these were mediations on American life by insiders. As Hodges explains in the final sentence of the Epilogue, African Americans' "conversation with the larger white society spoke with an American tongue inspired by an African soul" (p. 270). Presented in such an eloquent manner, the point is unarguable, but how one finds evidence for, and then interprets, an African soul is easily the most controversial element of current African American scholarship.[6] The book's final chapter examines the brutal expression of a new "negrophobia" (p. 227), stretching from the anti-black race riots of 1834 to the 1850's decline of black rights marked at the national level by the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision. Yet even here, most of the material presented indicates, in my reading, a fundamental black participation in main currents of American life. From black schools to black newspapers to the Negro Convention and even the Committee of Vigilance that organized to resist slave catchers, there was a seemingly deep self-understanding as American.

The final section in Chapter Eight, "Rethinking Africa," takes a strikingly different tack. Here Hodges argues that black intellectuals began "to reclaim the legacies of the African past" in response to an increasing awareness that white racism was so deep that American blacks could never achieve equality (p. 258). Of all the arguments about how culture becomes a causal force in the world, the place of Africa in the self-understanding of African Americans is surely among the most compelling. Because of this, I want to know more about how Hodges sees it taking shape. In particular he describes three black burial grounds with West African and Kongo decorative elements, but does not fully explore when such sites were created nor for whom they were made. He sees certain black leaders moving "closer to an Afrocentric perception of history" in the 1850s, but I would like to know more about who these people were, especially the 177-person group who left New York and New Jersey for Liberia in 1859 (p. 258, 259). Do we know what shaped their decision to emigrate? What became of their journey? Was their experience distinctively shaped by their Mid-Atlantic background, or did they move easily among other black Americans in Africa?

W. E. B. Du Bois's powerful assertion of the "double consciousness" of African Americans who selectively embraced both western and African traditions is one of the fundamental building blocks of African American scholarship. It has been revitalized by recent attention to the demographic and cultural connections reaching across and integrating the Atlantic World. But moving from DuBois's crucial insight to new research that elaborates its meaning remains to be done. Hodges adroitly handles such themes, as when he comments that African Americans used Enlightenment ideals and Revolutionary republicanism as a "cloak" beneath which "lay a bedrock of Africanity upon which black intellectuals and ordinary people formed their lives" (p. 225). ***Root & Branch*** presents a host of material to support this claim, but the limitations of a broad survey will not persuade skeptical readers. Graham Hodges has given us a clear and reliable overview; I hope he has a more intensive study planned for his next project.

Notes

[1]. The most directly relevant secondary literature to the book under review is Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991). Other important recent studies on African Americans outside the south in-

clude Joanne Pope Melish, ***Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860*** (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, ***In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, ***Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), William D. Pierson, ***Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*** (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), and, especially, Gary B. Nash, ***Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Also deserving mention is Vivienne L. Kruger, "'Born to Run': The Slave Family in Early New York, 1626-1827" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1985), which Hodges cites extensively.

[2]. Hodges's previous books are ***Slavery, Freedom and Culture among Early American Workers*** (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), ***Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865*** (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House Books, 1997), and ***New York City Cartmen, 1667-1850*** (New York: New York University Press, 1986). His edited primary source collections are ***The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution*** (New York: Garland Press, 1996), ***Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White*** (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House Books, 1993), and, with Alan Edward Brown, ***"Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey*** (New York: Garland Press, 1994).

[3]. For Ira Berlin's distinction between "societies with slaves" and "slave societies," see ***Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*** (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998), pp. 7-11. For Berlin the transition hinges on "the slaveholders' seizure of power" (Berlin, p. 10) which causes "the master-slave relationship" to become "the model for all social relationships" (Berlin, p. 8). While this seemingly places the key to the transition upon issues of law, power, and social authority, Berlin clearly emphasizes that "the driving force behind the evolution of slavery remained the ever-changing nature of production" (Berlin, p. 10). Hodges read Berlin's book in manuscript and generally appreciates its argument; see Hodges, pp. xii, 288-289 note 83.

[4]. Edmund S. Morgan, ***American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*** (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), especially chapters 15-18.

[5]. Christine Stansell, ***City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Sean Wilentz, ***Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[6]. The best work on African identities in early America is Michael Gomez, ***Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). For a praising review by Ira Berlin that nevertheless offers substantial criticism of its demographic analysis and assumptions about assessing cultural influences, see ***William and Mary Quarterly***, 3d ser., 56 (July 1999), 616-619.

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