

H-Net Reviews

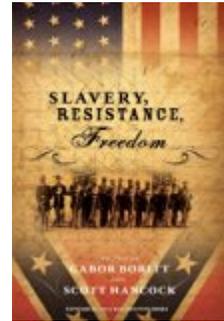
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

G. S. Borritt, Scott Hancock, eds. *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xix + 165 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-538460-4.

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A Crisis of Race

Slavery, Resistance, Freedom, a fine collection of essays edited by Gabor S. Borritt and Scott Hancock of Gettysburg College, grew out of that college's twentieth-anniversary Civil War Institute. The institute, perennially a wellspring of new scholarship on the war, in 2006 gathered a star group of historians and devoted an entire week to the theme of African American history. This slim volume represents the result of that meeting, and as well offers readers fresh perspectives on "the difference that slavery and freedom made to African Americans, and how African Americans resisted slavery and responded when it crumbled" (p. xiii). The essays collected within, examining the role of slavery in the public imagination; runaway slaves; free blacks in the North; the African American experience on the North-South border; the Union Army's only all-black division; and black political leadership during Reconstruction, will without a doubt prove very useful to anyone teaching undergraduate courses on African American history, the U.S. survey, and especially courses focused on the Civil War era.

The book opens with a critical meditation by Ira Berlin on the role and importance of slavery in both U.S. history and in ongoing public debates about history. Berlin sets the tone for this volume in arguing that "American history cannot be understood without understanding slavery" (p. 6). Therein lies one of the great strengths of this collection—forcefully reinserting slavery into the discussion of the Civil War era—a breath of fresh air in the classroom, where students' knowledge of the era often extends little beyond having seen the movie

Gods and Generals (2003) and having attended battle reenactments. These essays will surely help students understand the importance of abandoning a hagiographic focus on Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Stonewall Jackson, William Tecumseh Sherman, and even Abraham Lincoln.

Further, this volume represents a useful corrective in reminding readers that "behind the interest in slavery is a crisis of race" (p. 8). Ira Berlin's thoughtful analysis implies a need for updating W. E. B. DuBois's conviction that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." [1] Indeed, the 2008 presidential election has demonstrated that race remains an American dilemma even in the twenty-first century, and reminded Americans of the power of history and memory in structuring even our modern conceptions of race and identity. As Berlin argues, "slavery lives—and will continue to live—in both history and memory ... perhaps by incorporating slavery's memory into slavery's history—and vice versa—Americans, white and black, can have a past that is both memorable and—at last—past" (p. 20).

Slavery, Resistance, and Freedom's value to contemporary educators, however, goes far beyond simply alerting readers to the importance of slavery in understanding even present-day America. The collected essays also represent a fantastic introduction to some of the best recent scholarship on the experience of black Americans in slavery and in freedom, and do so in a highly accessible and readable fashion. The second essay in the volume, by

John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, represents a powerful distillation of the findings of their Lincoln Prize-winning monograph *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*.^[2] This essay and the one by Scott Hancock on black construction of memory in the prewar North, by examining the antebellum foundations of the post-war black experience and expectations, when slaves and free blacks “challenged the system ... struggled to attain their freedom,” and subsequently sought to maintain and define that very freedom, lays the groundwork for the essays that follow, which focus solely on the black experience in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras (p. 23). Hancock, by focusing on storytelling, oral traditions, memory, protest, and ideas about identity and citizenship, offers the undergraduate reader an excellent introduction to newer modes of historical interpretation and forces students to see African Americans as extremely active participants in the history of the early republic.

Edward L. Ayers, William G. Thomas III, and Anne Sarah Rubin attempt to de-emphasize the forced dichotomy of North and South in an essay that compares the black experience in two locales, one in Pennsylvania and the other in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, at the onset of the Civil War. This essay represents yet another entry in an increasingly crowded field of literature growing out of the Valley of the Shadow Web site.^[3] In particular, students will find this essay illuminating, as it does such an admirable job of asking large questions in examining small places. As a result, it will prove especially useful for those seeking to encourage students to engage in their own research projects, whether through the Valley of the Shadow portal or by investigating another locale on their own.

Noah Andre Trudeau’s “A Stranger in the Club: The Army of the Potomac’s Black Division” charts “the brief history of the only black division organized in the Civil War to be made part of what is arguably the best-known Union force of the period: the Army of the Potomac” (p. 96). Although in many ways making the most traditional contribution to the volume by presenting a narrative-driven account of the formation and battle experiences of that black division, Trudeau’s essay nonetheless continues to highlight black action and black thought during the Civil War while demonstrating rather forcefully that the black identity formation charted earlier by Hancock was in fact national in scope—“the experience of fighting within the Army of the Potomac was central to what the black community hoped would be a transformation of American society” (p. 117).

The final essay, contributed by eminent historian Eric Foner, examines black political participation and office-holding during Reconstruction. Foner’s essay highlights the promise inherent in the immediate postwar period, the incredible obstacles to black equality that remained firmly ingrained in American society and culture, and ultimately, the energy, agency, and skill with which African Americans attempted to become part of America’s political nation. For scholars of the era, this essay sheds little new light, but for anyone teaching the era, it will help in the struggle against what appears to be one of the most enduring of myths about the time period—one in which black officeholders were portrayed (and still are by many undergraduates) as “ignorant and propertyless, lacking both the education and the economic stake in society supposedly necessary for intelligent governance” (p. 119).

Taken as a whole, the essays contained within the pages of *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* represent an incredibly valuable resource for anyone teaching a Civil War-era course and seeking to keep the focus consistently on the broader meanings of the war. The volume also would fit well with anyone seeking a single comprehensive examination of the contours of the black experience in that era as a supplementary text in a more traditionally-structured Civil War course centering on military and political history. Ultimately, *Slavery, Freedom, Resistance* forcefully reminds the reader that the Civil War represented a crisis of race, one that America had been wrestling with for decades before the onset of war and one that it continues to work out symbolically on the contested terrain of historical memory more than 140 years after the war ended.

Notes

[1]. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1907), vii.

[2]. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3]. In addition to this essay, the Valley of the Shadow Web site (winner of the eLincoln Prize in 2000, at <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu>) has represented the chief archival source for Edward L. Ayers and Andrew J. Torget, *Two Communities in the Civil War (A Norton Casebook in History)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007); Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), which won the Ban-

croft Prize; and Edward L. Ayers and Anne Sarah Rubin, & Co, 2000), which includes a searchable CD-ROM with primary documents.
The Valley of The Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War—The Eve of War (New York: W. W. Norton

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