

Perspectives Fromafield and Afar:Liberation Historiography:African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1781-1861

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Feature Essay

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Ernest, John *PERSPECTIVES FROMAFIELD AND AFAR:Liberation Historiography:African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1781-1861*. University of North Carolina Press, \$59.95 ISBN 080782853X

In a strange land

Scholar reunites American

and African-American histories

Between 1787 and 1791, Americans created, adopted, set up and amended a new constitution for a young country that had been founded in an established society which belonged to an old and traditional civilization. In spite of the silly Enlightenment delusion that states and societies can be remade on demand to conform to improved blueprints, the new constitution reflected an America already old rather than the self-proclaimed new order in the world. The new constitution guaranteed freedom and self-government to those long free and self-governing, and it retained in bondage those already slaves. As is always the case, the new resided in a pervasive context of the socially familiar and acceptable.

No social institution in America was older than slavery, which long antedated Columbus but received a new lease on life from the European colonies. A tropical phenomenon, slavery existed in every American state in 1789 except Massachusetts, and would continue in the northeast into the 1830s. The land of the free had more slave than free states for most of its antebellum existence, although slavery gradually retreated to where it remained a thriving social institution. In the lower South, slavery expanded and prospered, and by 1860, nearly half of the population in the cotton states was enslaved. In America, all the slaves were black and most of the black persons were slaves, making America a land of black subordination and white supremacy where race augmented and embodied the aphorism in Gaius' *Institutes* that the greatest

difference in persons was between slave and free.

John Ernest places his examination of prewar African-American political/historical literature firmly within this cultural and social context. Three fundamental assumptions on antebellum African-American culture underlie this important book. The first of these concerns rejection of the prevailing white supremacy, which African-American writers regarded as unjust morally and unjustified through black achievement. Secondly, African-American books and periodicals viewed black America as one community with one voice, and the difference between slave and free was not greater than the difference between black and white. Thirdly, abolition was the great cause, on which all depended and toward which all hearts and hands must be devoted. In each case, Ernest has correctly understood the cultural context of antebellum African-American political and historical writing.

Most historians of antebellum African-American political life center their work on the towering figure of Frederick Douglass, who dominated the enslaved response to slavery. Ernest has looked beyond Douglass to figures who worked in his shadow for the common cause, focusing particularly on the historian William Nell, who wrote *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) and Martin Delany, who wrote biography in *The Condition Elevation Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1853). Both were substantial efforts to rescue African-American history and achievement from cultural forgetfulness.

The impact of books was not unimportant, as Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrated, but the periodical press formed both the main channel of public communication as well as being a barometer of important political issues, locally and nationally, along with the rise and fall of political groups and personalities. The genres of history, biography, and oratory which Ernest discusses, fit into the format of the periodical press, with its interest in public meetings and political opinion. The protest against slavery, white supremacy, and white disdain for African-American attitudes and achievements found outlets in the abolitionists' journals, but also appeared in journals run by African Americans. The existence of an African-American presence in this arena, dating to the twenties, before the *Liberator*, indicates that race and slavery were ongoing political interests that expanded beyond a local constituency and entered national politics as the fundamental issue of the last antebellum decade.

Ernest is more interested in ideology than chronology, though his work clearly shows a rising curve of African-American protest, beginning in the late twenties and reaching an ideological maturity in the 1850s. Liberation was the great cause, while adverse racial attitudes, which were overwhelmingly common in free as well as slave states, proved in time of war to be of lesser importance. The ideology of abolition appealed to the free states in the mid-century years; the ideology of equality, social inclusion, and political participation did not. For some, freedom was only the beginning of the movement; for most of contemporary America, freedom was its conclusion. Ernest leaves no doubt that 19th century African-American writers knew this, and regarded freedom from slavery as only the first battle, the indispensable preliminary for the protracted movement to come.

Historically, the two decades from the crisis of 1850 through war, to the 15th century amendment marked a transient time when national political agenda overlapped significantly with the African-American goal of freedom. Before and after, the two diverged, if not completely then nearly so, with the result that American history and African-American history seemed essentially separate stories. In **Liberation Historiography**, John Ernest tries to reunite the two views on the American chronicle.

James D. Hardy, Jr. is a professor of history in the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on both history and literature, including one on baseball.