

Abraham Lincoln and White America

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Review

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Dirck, Brian R. *Abraham Lincoln and White America*. University Press of Kansas, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1827-9

A New Introspective into Lincoln's Views on Race

A surfeit of scholarship exists on Abraham Lincoln. On one hand, he is viewed as the Great Emancipator, the man who freed enslaved African Americans with a stroke of his pen. On the other hand, we have Lincoln's candid reflections on black inferiority, his bigoted jokes, and his plan to colonize African Americans outside of the United States. But Americans still remember Lincoln and revere him for his likability on a personal and political level, for his courage and constancy. The field of Lincoln studies continues to expand, especially with renowned historian Eric Foner's recent Pulitzer Prize winning *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, which traces the evolution of Lincoln's views on slavery within the context of the antislavery movement, and now with Brian Dirck's *Abraham Lincoln and White America*.

Brian Dirck, an emerging Lincoln historian and author of three other books on Lincoln, examines Abraham Lincoln's ideas and views on race and slavery through the lens of whiteness studies. At first glance, one unfamiliar with whiteness studies scholarship and the work of scholars such as David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson might expect Dirck to tackle the question, "Was Lincoln racist?" Such a question is not answered in this book precisely because Lincoln's views on race evolved over time, which Dirck so aptly demonstrates. Rather, Dirck poses the following provocative question, "How did Lincoln understand white Americans and whiteness?" and he answers by arguing that whiteness "defined [Lincoln], his presidency, and his era" (2-3). Not only does he place Abraham Lincoln in his proper historical context, but he also places him in the racial context of antebellum America.

Dirck is most convincing in his use of this whiteness studies framework when he explores Abraham Lincoln's upbringing. Born in 1809 in the slave state of Kentucky, Lincoln grew up on a farm and later moved to Indiana and then Illinois. Considering his humble beginnings, some, including intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, called Lincoln "poor white trash," an epithet used in the antebellum era to refer to poor whites. Dirck traces the lineage of this epithet and then defines it, placing it in its time and place—the antebellum South. Equated with immorality, laziness, primitiveness, ignorance, and most of all poverty, this epithet, Dirck argues, represented the racialization of poverty. But, as with the category of race, this term also changed over time; Dirck does not conclude that Lincoln was definitely considered "poor white trash," but instead he attempts to understand Lincoln, the white man from humble beginnings, within a broader racial context. Lincoln's ambition pushed him to excel; he became a bookworm and began to perform respectability by adopting new attire and being a teetotaler. He then went on to study law and got involved in politics; law and politics in the antebellum era were culturally defined as white. Here Dirck is convincing when he claims that Lincoln, the white man, cared deeply about white people's thoughts and reactions; he was firmly invested in the meanings of whiteness.

In the first chapter of this book, Dirck describes Lincoln's racial encounters, specifically his encounters with African Americans. While he mentions that Lincoln likely heard stories from his family about Native Americans and their supposed savagery, Dirck believes that Lincoln himself had some compassion for Native Americans. Toward African Americans, the issue is foggier. The first encounter in 1828 was a story of a flatboat assault whereby seven armed African American rushed Lincoln's flatboat and attempted to rob him and his friend. In the second encounter in 1831, Lincoln, a crewman on a flatboat traveling to New Orleans, witnessed slavery firsthand, including the auction of a slave girl. The third encounter happened some ten years later when Lincoln, a passenger on the steamboat, *Lebanon*, encountered a coffle of twelve enslaved African Americans (33). It was likely during this encounter that Lincoln became antislavery, calling the institution of slavery "the worst of human conditions" (56). At the same time, Lincoln also came to realize how unsupportive white America was to a multiracial nation.

During the tumultuous decade of the 1850s, white America wrestled with its own anxieties and fears concerning the white man's republic and white racial purity. Stephen Douglas, a politician and Lincoln's opponent in the 1858 Senate race in Illinois, fanned the flames of white racial anxiety through race baiting.

He accused Lincoln of being an abolitionist and he accused the Republican Party, which he dubbed the Black Republican Party, of favoring black civil rights. While Dirck carefully and thoughtfully analyzes Douglas' comments and Lincoln's retorts in the Senate race in Illinois, he skips over the election of 1860 and the specific strategies and tactics used by the candidates, which could reveal interesting insights about white America more generally. Nevertheless Dirck does provide some illustrations in the book, including a cartoon from the election of 1860 depicting Lincoln walking on a tightrope with an African American man on his shoulders. This image of Lincoln walking a tightrope, though, had just as much to do with African Americans as it did whites. While Lincoln praised black military service and contributions during the Civil War, he was actually more worried about effect of the Emancipation Proclamation on white America.

Dirck tells this story of Lincoln and white America chronologically, but that decision has one serious disadvantage. The first chapter of Dirck's book focuses on race and African Americans, which reifies the myth that whiteness is normative and universal, and only blacks have race. Dirck rejects this myth, but it still creeps into the very structure of his book. It may have been worth telling a non-chronological story to stress that Lincoln, the white man, had race, whites have race, and, historically, whiteness pervaded antebellum America. Still, *Abraham Lincoln and White America* is a valuable contribution to the ever-growing field of Lincoln studies and this book will be of interest to scholars who study the history of race, racial formations, and presidential politics.

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