

Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies Of Slavery And The Quest For Black Freedom

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Review

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Link, William A. and Broomall, James J.. *Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom.* Cambridge University Press, \$29.99 ISBN 9781107421349

Reconstruction Reconsidered

How did American slavery end, and what meanings can be derived from its demise? What did emancipation mean both to emancipated, and to the country as a whole? How was emancipation both threatened and defended during the Reconstruction Era? In what ways is the historical memory of emancipation contested, and what do the nature of these remembrances signify? In *Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom*, editors William Link and James Broomall offer nine essays from an impressive lineup of scholars, both established and up and coming, who examine these and other questions. Divided into three parts—Claiming Emancipation, Contesting Emancipation, and Remembering Emancipation—the volume is well organized and ideal for classroom use. Link, a Professor of History at the University of Florida, is the author of numerous books on Southern history ranging from the antebellum era through modern conservatism, and Broomall, Assistant Professor at Shepherd University, has published multiple articles on the Civil War. These two noteworthy scholars have done a fine job in framing the volume around the contested narrative of emancipation. As they ask in page 2 of the introduction, “was emancipation accomplished by political and military policies from above, or by self-emancipation from below? How important were slaves’ actions versus those of Congress, the president, and military authorities?” Considering emancipation from a variety of geographic and theoretical perspectives, the essays in the volume provide case studies to illuminate larger patterns in the contested terrain of emancipation and the malleable nature of freedom.

Although the entire volume is excellent, the real strength lies in the middle section, Contesting Emancipation, which focuses on the competing definitions of

emancipation. This section, featuring essays by Allison Fredette, Carole Emberton, and Justin Behrend, is innovative in its approach, ranging from Fredette's examination of changing gender roles in white households in to Behrend's analysis of the 1876 election in Concordia Parish, Louisiana. Fredette, an adjunct professor at Appalachian State University, uses a comparative approach, using emancipation's effects on white marriages as a lens to understand emancipation in Kentucky and Virginia. Fredette's close reading of marriages in Kentucky allows her to, as she says on page 95, "shed light on the early construction of an altered white memory of emancipation." Justin Behrend, Associate Professor at SUNY—Geneseo, uses talk of re-enslavement during the 1876 election in Concordia Parish, Louisiana to reinforce the point that emancipation was a process, and "not merely a definitive moment." Behrend notes that racial political violence and the imposition of white supremacy meant freedpeople's fears of re-enslavement were not unfounded.

In the third section of the volume, *Remembering Emancipation*, the essay by Paul Ortiz of the University of Florida is particularly noteworthy. Ortiz globalizes the idea of emancipation, noting that African Americans saw emancipation not only as a struggle within the United States, but also as an international conflict. He notes that in 1825, African Americans gathered in Baltimore to commemorate the twentieth-first anniversary of Haitian independence, and newly free African Americans in South Carolina paid attention to events in Cuba and Mexico in the months following the Civil War. Although there have been some important exceptions, not enough has been done to examine African American's relationship to the Global South. Ortiz' essay, ranging from emancipatory internationalism to Jim Crow abroad is an important contribution to this conversation.

A real strength of this entire volume is although the essays are stand-alone case studies, they are really in conversation with one another. Behrend's essay refers to Link and Ortiz, Yael Sternhell and Carole Emberton in separate essays engage Gregory F. Downs's essay, and Ortiz builds off of Emberton's essay. All too often, collections like this feel as if they are somewhat cobbled together. This volume's cohesiveness makes the reader feel as if they are in the middle of a top-flight conversation among experts in the field rather than reading separate contributions. This characteristic will be especially useful in the university classroom, as students can see historians engaging each other's work, building upon and critiquing arguments and bringing multiple perspectives to a single subject. As a professor, I plan on making great use of *Rethinking American*

Emancipation, in both my undergraduate and graduate classes. As a scholar, the essays in this volume will shape my thinking for a long time to come.

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