

## **The Future of Civil War Era Studies:**

### **Race**

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Unlike many eras in U.S. history, writing about the history of black people during the Civil War has significant contemporary implications. While the War of 1812, for example, matters significantly in the history of the United States, its bicentennial celebrated this year will likely receive little fanfare compared to the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation in 2013.<sup>1</sup> The current historiographical tendency to portray black people as robust political actors during the Civil War is not only a reaction to specific, if long dead, schools of thought but is also part of a, usually unspoken, political agenda that seeks for laudable reasons to counter present-day racism. Historiographically, such appreciations of black activism began to proliferate in the 1970s and shattered the then prevailing racist discourse of the Dunning School and its portraits of indolent and inferior freedmen; politically these narratives provided a crucial historical antecedent to the civil rights movement and became part of a larger effort at the time to craft a so-called usable past.

In addition to redefining the roles of freed slaves, this generation of scholars also powerfully demonstrated the possibilities of archival research—uncovering repositories, locating sources, and developing clever and creative ways to find black people in records left mostly by white people. The 1976 founding of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland boldly represented this radical achievement. Ira Berlin led a team of talented social historians into the National Archives, where they

pored over millions of records left by the Freedmen's Bureau, the agency created by the War Department to help former slaves in their transition from slavery to freedom. These historians brilliantly organized and annotated these records, and many of them went on to write field-defining books based on the project's larger research objectives.

The triumph of this work began to lose some of its momentum in the 1990s with the rise of postmodernism, the emergence of critical race theory, and the silent disavowal of objectivity.<sup>2</sup> Those who took residence in archives became shunned as “archive rats,” in comparison to their fancier contemporaries who turned to theory. Currently, the field seems somewhat divided between those who continue to employ the methods of social history and those who draw more heavily on cultural theory.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this split, historians typically imply that freedpeople were all-but-unsinkable political actors. They either invariably promote a romance narrative that posits an image of enslaved people as heroes who have valiantly escaped from the oppression of chattel slavery and intrepidly made their way into a postwar world or they acknowledge the economic, legal, and political constraints and, at times, utter failures freedpeople endured, yet these scholars conclude that freedpeople, nevertheless, exhibited a certain indefatigable autonomy or political will—thereby making “agency” a happy ending to an otherwise unfortunate and often inconclusive set of circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

In general, these studies operate under the unspoken assumption that the mere existence of racism in the nineteenth century produced a population of people who no matter what choices they made they eventually ended up on the right side of history. Yet, much of the work on black people during the Civil War fails to explain why black people had agency, which implies that this was almost an inherent default position of humanity

or assumes that black people have always been political.<sup>5</sup> Raising the issue that freedpeople may not have had agency or were not political does not then naturally lead to a claim that black people were thereby innately inferior or subordinate; if anything, such a claim does exactly the opposite and reveals the full complexity and uniqueness of their situation and their humanity. The idea that just because racism existed everything that black people did was right, justified, or an example of their self-will seems more like a caricature. Sometimes in history, voting was not the remedy, and sometimes black people simply did not care about politics. Sometimes people did not want to work, and at other times they were indeed lazy. Sometimes kin networks were not the shelters that protected black people but the very thing that caused many black people to run away from the South.

Well-intentioned historians have not dared raise these questions or examine in-depth sources that detail these less than exemplary moments in history because they likely fear that in doing so they would be considered racist. They also likely ignore such images because they remain embroiled in a historiographical fight that actually ended decades ago, but they remain committed to a political fight to combat the very real racism that continues today. Unfortunately using history to wage a battle against contemporary racism has led to stale, static, and woefully under-representative histories of black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction; these interpretations neither transform nor revolutionize the historiography on the Civil War and Reconstruction but only endlessly reproduce previously established conclusions.

Historians seem to be tangled in this mess, but fiction writers often are not. Many writers—from Zora Neale Hurston to Lorraine Hansberry to Toni Morrison—reveal

black characters who make mistakes, take the “wrong path,” or are not candidates for sainthood. More to the point in a great deal of literature, there are not happy endings or glimmers of hope that attempt to make readers feel good at the end. Yet, the writing of the history of Civil War and Reconstruction hasn’t this range of humanity.

Historians may not be entirely to blame; the problem can also be traced to the archive. That the Freedmen and Southern Society Project has unearthed the most voluminous and rich account of black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction needs to be more rigorously interrogated. So much of the hype about these records, which are deeply important to the understanding of the period, may tell us more about the image federal officials and the military wanted to portray to the federal government and less about the reality of what transpired on the ground during the period. The bulk of the Freedmen’s Bureau records in many ways imitate the same concerns post-civil rights historians had about freedpeople in the 1970s and tends to follow in the same rhetorical pattern that portrays emancipated slaves as indefatigable heroes. In other words, when many bureau agents, former abolitionists, and military officials reported on the condition of freedpeople during the Civil War and Reconstruction, they were writing during a time when the prevailing discourse about emancipation centered on one paramount question: Could freedpeople be independently employed and self-sufficient without white instruction? On one level, the entire operation of the bureau suggests that freedpeople could be. Freedmen’s Bureau officials served in the South based on the assumption that freedpeople could be independent but that they and their former masters required the temporary assistance of the federal government to facilitate the transition. Government officials mediated contracts, settled disputes, and, in more general terms, helped with the

reorganization of the South by building schools and establishing hospitals. Therefore, an archival record developed that portrayed black people as principal actors—they provided affidavits in court, they negotiated employment contracts, and they drafted correspondence (at times ventriloquized through white pens) that captured the myriad ways they began to take an active role in reconstructing the South.

A century later, historians in search of archival evidence to overturn early-twentieth-century racist stereotypes discovered a virtual goldmine in the Freedmen's Bureau records. Buried in the National Archives on folded brittle paper, bounded by red string and written in black and blue ink now faded to yellow, a deluge of images of black people as principal actors emerged. Historians and Freedmen's Bureau agents, while separated by a century, were animated by a similar objective: to show how freedpeople were indeed principal actors in the reconstruction of the South.

These interpretations, both those presented in the 1860s and those relayed post-1960s, have not been challenged. There is not a scholarly discourse, like there is surrounding the WPA records, that has seriously evaluated both the merits *and* the limitations and possible drawbacks of these sources. The use of the WPA records, a similarly voluminous archive about black life in the nineteenth century, has spurred serious historiographical debate. Some historians see these documents as critical gems that offer brilliant insight into the lives of black people during slavery and freedom, while others dismiss them outright as anachronistic and the product of a prurient white fascination with the South. Still others find value in the ability of these records to reveal something important about vernacular culture.<sup>6</sup> A similar debate or discourse about the Freedmen's Bureau documents does not exist; instead these records are uncritically

heralded as priceless, based on the heroic efforts of the historians who have found and organized them. In many ways, such historians unquestionably reproduce the major themes of these documents without rigorously interrogating their existence and function.

Newer work will and should bravely attempt to move beyond these constraints. In her forthcoming book on freedwomen during the Civil War, Thavolia Glymph provides haunting depictions of freedwomen being shot at by Union guards and raped in contraband camps while prayers were summoned for their children who had died in a war that was meant to give them an escape from oppression.<sup>7</sup> One of the many virtues of Glymph's new work is its formulation: by her own admission, the book rests on a collection of scattered notes and fractured pieces of evidence that do not offer a clear narrative or argument. Yet, her audacious effort to offer up a meditation might do more for Civil War historiography than the publication of a more clearly defined monograph. In writing a reflection, Glymph foregrounds the historian herself—no longer the omniscient narrator but an actor excavating those chilling and crushing details that often find little place in historical narratives hell-bent on seeing freedpeople as heroes.<sup>8</sup>

Glymph's use of first person combined with the elegant tone of her new work eloquently evokes Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*—a book that powerfully placed Hartman as scholar in the center of her analysis of the history and legacy of the Atlantic slave trade. Glymph justifies the meditative qualities of her project by calling it a work in process; yet scholars should not shy away from this approach in bigger book projects. Using meditation as a framework enables Glymph to discuss nuance, raise questions that typically do not get asked, allow the historian to enter the story, and, most of all, permit her to introduce fragmentary evidence where most historians build their book projects

around a fairly complete set of archival data that (over)promises the most thorough and complete portrait of a person, experience, or movement.

Yet, what if the organizing principle of a book project lay in a commitment to the fragmentary and fractured evidence?<sup>9</sup> What if the scraps of evidence dictated the argument and the arc? Some few historians—Jennifer Morgan and Tera Hunter, for instance—have done this, but most continue to operate from the premise that only the fully complete archival dataset can properly tell the history of the period.<sup>10</sup> Yet, what if the glimpses provided by the incomplete archive are more accurate than the relentless focus of what was preserved for posterity?

So much of the records about black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction, as in the case of the Freedmen’s Bureau records, exist today for a reason. These documents are often the result of particular bureaucratic and administrative functions as well as the ideological positions of a cohort of federal officials who took the notes and kept the records. But just because this is the most voluminous archive does not make it the most accurate or objective. What if the history of black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction can only be told as a string of anecdotes that defy the coherence and logic of a monograph?<sup>11</sup> What if these scraps of evidence lead to a retelling of the Civil War?

Since the 1960s, the history of black people in the Civil War has broadened our understanding of the period and introduced a range of actors who would have otherwise gone unacknowledged. But it did something else perhaps equally as profound: it brought a number of historians to the table who had thought that the Civil War was simply the province of white men grown fat on a steady diet of Bruce Catton’s books and summer

vacations on the battlefields. It showed some of us that the history of the Civil War was also our story to tell. To identify the resulting historiographical transformation as simply the result of identity politics would be to sharply undercut what has happened to the field. The rise of various minorities writing about the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction meant that something hooked them to the story—it may have been the battlefields and the political history, but it likely was a detail that they uncovered, a scrap of evidence that made them understand the war in a way that had not been named. Something brought them to the field, and it was these hunches that ultimately led them to write books that redefined the field.

Yet, we are at an impasse now. With a few exemplary exceptions, the field reproduces similar historians with similar political commitments and historiographical objectives. As a result, those hunches, those moments of brave insight, those clues that might be able to tell the history differently are being drowned out in favor of the big book on the war or a volume that draws on a more comprehensive archive. The result has not been a redefining of the field but a continual regurgitation of the known. If we really want to think about the future of race studies during the Civil War and Reconstruction, we need to think harder about how and why we write.

### Notes

1. A number of historians in the United States have examined the troubled and troubling relationship among the production of history, the creation of racial ideology, and contemporary events. Yet, this is not a conundrum limited to the United States. In England, for example, a number of debates have developed in response to the black British community's demands for English government at both the federal and municipal



levels to develop historical narratives and memorials that acknowledge England's principal role in the Atlantic slave trade. On the U.S. context, see Barbara J. Fields, "Whiteness, Racism, and Identity," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 60 (Fall 2001): 48–56; Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (December 2003): 1397–405; Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May–June 1990): 95–118; Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–77; Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Clarence Walker, *Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). In the British context, see Douglas Hamilton, "Representing Slavery in British Museums: The Challenges of 2007," in *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery and Abolition*, ed. C. Kaplan and J. R. Oldfield (New York: Palgrave, 2010); Geoffrey Cubitt, "Bringing It Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions," *Slavery and Abolition* no. 30 (2009): 259–75.

2. With few notable exceptions, the 1997 publication of Tera W. Hunter's *To "Joy My Freedom"* marked the height of the post-civil rights generation's historiographical objectives by brilliantly weaving together the efforts of labor, gender, and African American historians. Hunter's meticulous excavation of Georgian newspapers about the washerwomen strike, powerfully illustrated the influence of post-civil rights historians examination of the archives, particularly the contribution of the Freedmen's People and Society Project. Her focus on labor cogently exemplified the

hallmarks of social history by paying attention to the “history from the bottom up,” while her efforts to center African Americans as principal actors in the reconstruction of the nation captured the major contribution of African American historians. Her masterful ability to find the lives of ordinary black women and her vivid descriptions of how they worked evoked Herbert Gutman’s scholarship but also recalled Christine Stansell’s magisterial book, *City of Women*. Hunter replaces Stansell’s New York with Atlanta and traces these women’s lives beyond the workplace to their neighborhoods, homes, and dance halls. One could even chart a genealogy from Gutman to Stansell to Hunter. What made Hunter’s book even more remarkable was the broader theoretical frame in which she situated her argument. In the book, she acknowledged that both she and Robin D. G. Kelly were attempting to think about the broader dialectic of repression/resistance. Thusly, the book did not just portray black women as triumphant or innately political but rather it operated within a broader theoretical conceit that attempted to reconcile how resistance emerged out of repression. See Tera W. Hunter, *To “Joy My Freedom”: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). Within the broader field of U.S. history, other historians have made similar contributions by examining the confluence of race, gender, and class. For the early republic, see Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). For the Jim Crow period, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For the civil rights movement, see Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the*

*Civil Rights Movement, from Rosa Parks to the Black Power Movement.* (New York: Knopf, 2010)

3. Hannah Rosen is one of the few historians who has brilliantly blended together cultural theory with deep archival research. Throughout the footnotes of her landmark study, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, Rosen explicates how she balances the demands of archival research with the challenges of cultural, particular gender and feminist, theories. See Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). For an insightful analysis of the broader historiographical trends in the study of slavery in the nineteenth century, see Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 1–20.

4. Walter Johnson has incisively examined the subject of agency, see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003): 113–24.

5. One of the most valuable if understated hallmarks of Eric Foner’s landmark study of Reconstruction is that Foner implicitly argues that certain conditions led freedpeople to become political. The end of the war, the promise of Reconstruction, the possibility of suffrage fueled black political mobilization—whereas in *A Nation under Our Feet*, Steve Hahn formulates black political mobilization as part of broader genealogy that begins in slavery, culminates during Reconstruction and continues well into the Great Migration. While Foner and Hahn’s understanding of politics differ, they nevertheless each posit an implicit argument about the origin of black politics. The problem lies in the scholarship that neither traces the roots of black activism nor explains

why and how people became political based on their particular context or situation. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Business, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

6. Edward E. Baptist, “‘Stol’ and Fetched Here’: Enslaved Migration, Ex-Slaves Narratives, and Vernacular History,” in *New Studies in the History of Slavery*, ed. Edward Baptist and Stephanie Camp (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (August 2003): 623–58; Sharon Ann Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly*, 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 1–31; Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (Autumn 1996): 247–61; John Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (November 1975): 473–92.

7. Thavolia Glymph, “The Liberty to Be Free: The Problem of Freedom as a Problem of American Exceptionalism,” paper presented at Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation conference, Yale University, November 11, 2011.

8. Felicity Kornbluh has written an eloquent blog entry about a talk historian Barbara Young Welke gave to the Committee of Women’s Historians at the AHA in Chicago in 2012. Kornbluh explains how Welke allowed herself as an historian to enter

the history that she was writing. Kornbluh explains, “When we write about horrible things that happened to people in the past (as in the case of Welke’s own work on the disabling and other effects of flammable fabrics, or mine on poor people facing benefit denials and cuts), we need to keep the rich, even tear-jerking details in view, rather than draining them out (as I’ve certainly tried to do) to get at legal principle, or historiographic intervention.” See Felicity Kornbluh, “Blogging the AHA: Kornbluh on Welke, ‘Telling Stories,’ *Legal History Blog*, <http://legalhistoryblog.blogspot.com/2012/01/blogging-aha-kornbluh-on-welke-telling.html>, January 9, 2012.

9. In her analysis of the Great Migration, Darlene Clarke Hine encourages historians to “tease” and “squeeze” the sources in order to uncover the history of black women migrants from the South to the urban Midwest. Historians of the Civil War could follow Hine’s cue in their search for black lives during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Literary critics have also provided innovative ways to examine black history. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Meridian, 1990). Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915–1945,” in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

10. Jennifer Morgan pieces together scraps of evidence in her effort to examine how gender participated in racial formation and redefined labor relations in colonial slavery. Tera Hunter reconstructs the washerwomen strike by piecing together disparate newspaper articles. See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender*

*in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom."*

11. Elsa Barkley Brown, one of the most astute historians of the nineteenth century, has only published her work in article form, which may be an instructive way for historians to consider writing a history whose main point could be overstated or diluted or reproduce previously published conclusions in book form. See Elsa Barkley Brown, "To Catch a Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865–1880," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 124–46; Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 610–33.