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**John Ernest.** *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiv + 426 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5521-8; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2853-3.

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On January 23, 1794, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen appeared at the office of United States clerk for the district of Pennsylvania with a copy of their recently completed pamphlet, "A Narrative of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia." The clerk duly entered their claim onto the federal register, thereby making Allen and Jones the first African-American copyright holders in American history. Not merely an historic work, Allen and Jones's pamphlet was itself deeply concerned with the notion of historical consciousness. Worried that a white printer's negative portrayal of the African-American community during Philadelphia's Yellow Fever epidemic would echo through the ages–and become firmly entrenched in white Americans' historical consciousness–Allen and Jones offered their own story of black heroism to correct the historical record.

As John Ernest argues in his illuminating and deeply engaging book *Liberation Historiography*, Allen and Jones were part of a vanguard of black history writers in the early Republic. Working from a range of political and ideological perspectives through time and space, African Americans nevertheless molded a coherent historical consciousness. While many scholars date formal black history writing to the works of William Wells Brown and William C. Nell in the years just before the Civil War, Ernest makes a compelling claim that African-American writers displayed a deep commitment to historical understanding from the post-revolutionary era onward. From Allen and Jones's work in the 1790s to David Walker in the 1830s to Martin Delany in the 1850s, black authors attempted to re-imagine the process of doing and telling African-American history in a Republic devoted largely to denying its existence.

Ernest has written a bold and wide-ranging study, with copious references to cultural and literary theorists, not to mention much recent work by historians of black public protest (including such luminaries as Patrick Rael and John Stauffer). *Liberation Historiography* also reflects Ernest's mastery of all manner of black literary history. Indeed, among the many virtues of the book is its capacious view of what constituted antebellum black historical writing. Ernest celebrates the reprinted sermon–not the antebellum slave narrative–as perhaps the most widely available black protest document prior to the Civil War, and thus one of the richest modes of conveying African-American history. He also pays considerable attention to politically minded pamphleteers, digging deep into the secondary (or less well-known) works of such figures as Martin Delany and William Wells Brown. For these reasons alone, Ernest's book is a most welcome addition to the bulging historiography of African-American writing and public protest.

But Ernest's book is compelling for another reason. For it is much less concerned with filling in gaps in our historical knowledge of antebellum black writers and more interested in probing the deeper meaning of black historical consciousness prior to the movement towards professionalism at the end of the nineteenth century, a professionalism that touched history writers across racial lines. In his epilogue, Ernest explains that after the Civil War many black writers turned from oppositional to institutional history writing, hoping that their scholarly histories of churches, black abolitionism and other issues would legitimize black achievement in, and contributions to, the American republic. Antebellum history writers, on the other hand, offered a more challenging framework for understanding the past, a discourse "in accordance

with the terms and conditions of oppressed communities" (p. 331). While scholars may quibble with his readings of various writers, it is surely Ernest's meta-claims about antebellum black history writing–its oppositional style and intent–that may elicit the most interesting debate. Yet even here, Ernest's conscientious style will instruct and inform those who perhaps disagree with him.

Ernest makes three main points in *Liberation Historiography*. First he argues that antebellum African-American historical consciousness revolved very much around sacred themes, most prominently Biblical stories emphasizing black redemption at the hands of a just God. Second, liberation historiography–defined as the accumulated body of historical writing aimed at black redemption–sought to underscore the centrality of a communalism which not only formed the foundation of past African glories but could be recaptured to confront the daunting challenges posed by slavery and racial injustice. Third, he contends that the modes of black historical writing–characterized by, among things, fragmentary analytical styles and sampling techniques–were every bit as important as the content, for African Americans fashioned a historical consciousness that was in many ways distinct from those of mainstream culture. In five chapters and an epilogue, Ernest spins a tale that is at once broadly familiar and yet refreshing.

At the heart of Ernest's book lies the concept of sacred history. According to Ernest, African-American history writers blended sacred and secular themes in their books, essays and reprinted sermons. Where secular history meditated on temporal events, such as fighting against the domestic slave trade and colonizationist movement, sacred history transcended the here-and-now and placed African-American struggles in a Biblical context. Exodus, Ernest asserts, formed a key thread in African Americans' rendering of their past. Like the ancient Israelites, black history writers pictured African-descended people as an oppressed and wandering group, a chosen community that would be redeemed by the Lord.

Other scholars have made similar connections but Ernest digs much deeper into black writers' sacred allusions than the book of "Exodus." Black history writers, he shows, mined "Ezekiel," "Hebrews," "Isaiah," "Psalms," and several other parts of the Bible to build an expansive spiritual perspective on black oppression and redemption. Allen and Jones, he notes cogently, referred to Psalm 68 ("Ethiopia" shall "stretch out her hand to God") when thanking white reformers for aiding enslaved people in the post-Revolutionary era (p. 48). More than merely a thankful nod to abolitionist allies, whose benevolence would hopefully speed black liberation in both the North and South, Ernest claims that this allusion placed black troubles in a healing sacred context, for those reading the pamphlet understood that Allen and Jones had invoked God–and not corrupt secular authorities–as the ultimate arbiter of truth, justice, and redemptive action.

Deeply connected to liberation theology–the belief that God is on the side of the oppressed–liberation historiography thus sought to translate African-American struggles into a sacred context capable of sustaining the black community through the vicissitudes of American slavery and even freedom. Indeed, community building was a critical aspect of blacks' sacred historical consciousness. According to Ernest, black history writers from Allen and Jones in the early national period to Henry Garnet and Martin Delany in the late antebellum era sought not merely to correct misperceptions of black history and achievement but "to create the community that could serve as the visible manifestation of history" (p. 57). William C. Nell's work, to take one prime example, offered a stirring "vision of community, a biblical vision of gathering together a scattered community" (p. 137). Nell's historical visions bolstered community building activities on the ground (in the building of autonomous black churches and benevolent groups in Boston and many other northern locales). Similarly, Ernest reads Delany as not simply a prophet of black emigrationism but "African [communal] destiny" (p. 128). Remove even Africa from emigration plans (in favor of, say, central America), Delany might have said, and "African" still connoted a powerful vision of communalism. History, in short, taught black writers like Delany and Nell that the concept of "community" might have been more important than even that of an African "homeland."

These concepts of sacred history and historically informed community building, as Ernest nicely points out, joined black history writers through time and space. Part of his task as an historian of black historians, then, is to find the fundamental logic informing African-American historical discourse before the Civil War. Where did it come from? The black church was clearly one source for inculcating sacred history views among African Americans. Freemasonry, Ernest argues, offered another, perhaps still undervalued institutional well-spring of these ideas. For example, the work of both Martin Delany and Robert Benjamin Lewis–the former a well-known author, the latter less so–was deeply rooted in Masonic

discourse. "Freemasonry offered Lewis and Delany alike a tradition of historical interpretations that, as they believed, extended back to the Egyptian mysteries and offered as well frameworks for understanding relations among community, historical consciousness and individual character" (p. 117) As more than a few antebellum black writers would put it, Masonry's five virtues–truth, justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude–offered the architectural metaphors necessary for black community building in the here and now. Scholars should take seriously, then, the significance of black fraternal organizations and black Masonic discourse.

Liberation historiography involved more than allusions to a sacred past and divinely inspired destiny. Ernest argues that African-American historical writing aimed at deconstructing broader historical narratives taking shape in the early republic–those that effaced black achievement and participation. "The rise of the white republic," he writes in a chapter entitled "The Theatre of History," "involved the rise of white nationalist history–approaches to history in which developing racial ideologies played a defining role" (p. 53). Black writers recognized that American history itself was in the process of being made; they sought to create a body of work capable of countering the fables of liberty on the march. Citing work by writers as seemingly divergent as emigrationist James Theodore Holly and ex-slave turned abolitionist James W. C. Pennington, Ernest notes that early black history writers took apart "one version of history"–a myopic and racist view of the American nation as a lily-white–"so that [they] would have the materials to construct a new historical consciousness" (p. 56). That historical consciousness would emphasize black achievement, the legitimacy of black claims to citizenship, and the efficacy of African-American self-determination strategies. In short, African Americans constructed a history which validated past, present, and even future struggles and missions.

In this sense, Ernest claims that black historical writing must be understood not merely as a dialogue with dominant discourses but as an oppositional act through and through. As he provocatively puts it in "Autobiography as History," "What is white [in black historical writing] is not simply the people but the system; what is black is not simply the people but the activist response to the system. Black is a verb, a historically contextualized performance, the process of life" (p. 217). Here Ernest's argument parallels that of Joanna Brooks, who has recently argued that early black writing constituted a "counter-public," or oppositional discourse.[1] In their myriad pamphlets of protest, black authors used the printed sphere, but for a vastly different purpose than did most white writers.

As much as Ernest's thesis impresses, it begs serious questions. For sacred history could transcend the needs of liberation theology. It could also serve as a delicate bridge of inter-racial understanding among God's children. Thus Richard Allen not only warned masters that the Lord would someday smite them but reminded emancipated slaves that they were similarly compelled to listen to the Almighty's edict of living in harmony with one another. Religion, Allen believed, offered former masters and former slaves a universal language by which to communicate and live. So too did black abolitionists use sacred history as a bonding agent on antebellum lecture circuits and in slave narratives (with slave narrators, like Douglass, artfully challenging white Christians to confront the snake of slavery in the Garden of America). In addition, Ernest might consider more the problem of audience. Did African-American writers, like all historians then and since, tailor their messages to specific audiences and modes of writing? For example, was an oppositional discourse more readily found in pamphlets and reprinted essays as opposed to slave narratives–and precisely because black pamphlet writers retained more control of their documents than most slave narrators?

But these questions should in no way detract from Ernest's impressive and wide-ranging book. For *Liberation Historiography* must be considered an essential part of second-wave literary and historical studies of black public sphere activism. Where first generation works (by Henry Louis Gates, Frances Smith, and William Andrews, among others) established the black literary cannon and emphasized the remarkable creativity of canonical writers from Douglass to Harriet Jacobs, new generations of scholars have both expanded the canon and deepened the study of black writing as a cultural (not merely individual) exercise. For historians, too, Ernest's book is instructive. *Liberation Historiography* offers a way to bridge the seemingly enormous gap between "community studies" scholars (whose approach to black identity and history revolves around traditional conceptions of African communalism) and "modernists" (those like Patrick Rael, who emphasize the exceptionalism of free black northerners and the significance of printed protest). For Ernest, African-descended writers utilized print to convey a range of tactical concerns and messages, including the saliency of sacred themes and black communalism in the struggle for justice. In this sense, Ernest has created a book that touches many facets of

African-American historical writing, from its dawning in the eighteenth century to the present, and it will itself endure in the historiography for years to come.

Notes

[1]. Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (January 2005).