

Introduction



Josephine Smith



There is little doubt that “race” is *the* American issue, the one that saturates the nation’s past and continues to bedevil its present. It is this fact, of course, that has helped to give studies of slavery their edge, that has contributed to making the historiography of slavery so conflicted but also so impressive. Part of the reason why courses about slavery and African American culture are so popular in institutions outside the United States, and why so many non-American scholars specialize in black history, is that “race” provides a quick way into America’s soft moral underbelly, laying bare in the starkest of fashions American sanctimony.

Writing about slavery presents special problems—how can a writer deal with something so all-encompassingly evil?—and the usual difficulties associated with attempting to recover the past of people who, in the main, did not leave written records. For the most part, historians—perhaps still sheltering under lingering tatters of “scientific objectivity”—have dealt with the latter problem rather better than with the former. Generally, scholars have ignored or glancingly touched on issues such as the immorality of slavery or the ethics of slave life; indeed, probably the best recent treatment of slavery in these terms is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (New York, 1987).

“Writing about slavery presents special problems—how can a writer deal with something so all-encompassingly evil?”

The writers contributing to this roundtable were asked to use their particular expertise to ponder the dilemmas of how slavery may be represented. Hardly surprisingly, given the variety of backgrounds and interests of those involved, the resulting brief essays are quite disparate in their focus. [A. J. Verdelle](#), a novelist, explores the contested terrain that authors mine to build tales of American slavery—the narrow discursive ground between what she calls “stories overdone” and “tragedies understated.” [Karen Sutton](#), a historical interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg, meditates on the challenge of remaining “truthful but tasteful” when presenting the uncomfortable history of slavery to tourists. Historian [David Blight](#), too, is concerned with the issue of how slavery is represented to the public, discussing both feature films and, from his experience as an adviser, historical documentaries. The last pair of essays take a different tack, pointing to facets that are mostly absent from our

understanding of the slave past. [Alex Bontemps](#) considers the very few visual representations of American slavery and, in an attempt to correct history's deafness, [Graham White and I](#) suggest ways in which we might access slavery's hitherto largely soundless world. For all their eclecticism, however, the essays demonstrate the continuing ability of the history of slavery to engage and deeply challenge those scholars and writers who feel impelled to take it up.

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