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Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery

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Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery Charles Johnson, Patricia Smith, and the WGBH Series Research Team, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, San Diego, & London, 1998. xv + 494 pp., notes, illustrations, figures, index, \$30.00 (cloth).

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A text companion for the four-part documentary series, *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*, offers readers a history of slavery in the United States from Jamestown through the Civil War. The authors tell the story of our nation's approval of slavery as a "tragic" one. A story of "ambition and greed overcoming justice and humanity" (p. xiii). *Africans in America* ably presents to a non-academic audience complex themes regarding the black experience in the colonial and antebellum U. S. Resistance and outright rebellion to slavery and racism are ubiquitous throughout the narrative, as is African Americans' search for an identity and place in the U. S. social hierarchy of the period. Other topics the book discusses include the development of the Atlantic slave trade, why the American Revolution failed to abolish slavery, slavery's importance in the South's and North's economic development, the growth of the antebellum free Black community, and the interstate slave traffic.

Africans in America's greatest strength is its focus on reformers and revolutionaries heretofore little known by most Americans. While heroes such as John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison are discussed, it is refreshing to see the book make mention of less-known figures, including: Gabriel, Jarena Lee, Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey, David Walker, and Phillis Wheatley. *Africans in America* explains how each of these characters shaped the political debates surrounding slavery and its abolition. Only by recognizing the important role of African Americans in the abolitionist movement can we truly understand politics and society in the colonial and antebellum eras.

This book, much like the video series, is written for a popular audience. While Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith claim authorship, thirteen experts including David Blight, Jon Elser, Barbara Fields, Sylvia Frey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, Winthrop Jordan, Leon Litwack, Gary Nash, Edward Reynolds, Margaret Washington, and Peter Wood advised the creators. To give a human voice to slavery, Johnson includes fictional short stories in each chapter that illustrate the crux of the section's message. One vignette includes a fictional description of Martha Washington's fear following her husband's death that her slaves might murder her. Another recounts a fabricated incident during the Haitian Revolution (the largest slave revolt in the history of the Americas) where a U. S. diplomat writes to President Thomas Jefferson of his fear that he might be "murdered in [his] bed" if he continued

to stay on the island (p. 261). The authors' use of fictional literature as a tool to depict the factual institution of slavery is nothing new. Historians have used historical fiction like Barry Unsworth's, *Sacred Hunger* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), Guy Endore's, *Babouk* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991, first published in 1934) and Harriet Becher Stowe's, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992, first published in 1852) to give voice to the largely mute captive population of the Americas. Because Johnson's stories are able to communicate the pain, fear, anger, and suffering experienced by an enslaved population, they are useful to understand the impact of slavery on both the enslaved and enslaver.

The scholarly implications for *Africans in America* are very limited. The book contains no bibliography, limited citations, and most importantly no new insights into the slave system. Nothing regarding African-American archaeology is mentioned. As with the televised series, moreover, *Africans in America* portrays Africa and the U. S.'s slave society as relatively homogenous cultures furthering the false Eurocentric representations of Africa, its people, and their legacy in the New World. Notwithstanding the brief mention of the U.S. Mexican War and the California gold rush, *Africans in America* presents no serious treatment of African Americans in the western U. S., Canada, the Caribbean, or Mexico.

Nevertheless, the book does have some applications. It would be practical as a supplementary text in an advanced undergraduate course on slavery or African-American archaeology. Lecturers may also find its narrative style, photographs and illustrations, and fictional short stories effective teaching devices. Further, while the book does not directly mirror the content of the televised series, it is a legitimate companion to the PBS series of the same name.