

MIXED MEDIA

The Northern Slave Trade

Americans excel at ego-boosting myths of exceptionalism: It's our ingenuity, energy and can-do attitude that explain our rise from frontier to world power. But what if slavery were the real secret of our success?

We like to condemn slavery as an exotic evil perpetrated by plantation Southerners, but two new books and a museum exhibit provide nightmarish reminders that slavery was the norm in the early years of this country, and that up through the eve of the Civil War, Northern bankers, brokers and entrepreneurs were among slavery's staunchest defenders.

In *Complicity*, a team of *Hartford Courant* journalists investigates this history, producing 10 stories that explore how deeply the fortunes of New York and New England were tied to the slave trade. "Slavery in New York," an exhibit at the New York Historical Society through March 5, reveals New York

as a city substantially built by slaves. The companion book of the same name, elegantly designed and illustrated, anchors the exhibit in a series of scholarly essays. Together, these works echo and amplify each other, providing a kind of surround-sound opportunity for an anguished identity crisis: If our supposedly freedom-loving forebears were not "good guys," what were they? And what are we?

From the get-go, Americans were profiteers, and plundering the New World was backbreaking work. Writing in 1645 to John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, his brother-in-law Emanuel Downing complained, "I do not see how we can thrive until we get a stock of slaves sufficient to do all our business." Further south, in New Amsterdam, slaves built Wall Street's wall and cleared what became Harlem and Route 1. When a new shipload of slaves proved insufficiently hardy, Director General Peter Stuyvesant expressed his displeasure to the Dutch West India Company, insisting that the company supply the best slaves to Christian and company enterprises, while unloading the feeble on

"Spaniards and unbelieving Jews."

For much of the 17th and 18th centuries, New York boasted the largest urban slave population in mainland North America. Slaves made up one-fifth the population. And white New Yorkers lived in terror of slave revolt. An alleged 1741 plot led to the jailing and torture of scores of slaves, 30 of whom were executed, 17 by burning at the stake.

For slaves, the Revolutionary War was a liberating experience—but only if they fought for the British, who promised them freedom. Though George Washington sought to reclaim the colonists' slaves,

Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged and Profited from Slavery, by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang and Jenifer Frank, Ballantine Books, 273 pages, \$25.95

Slavery in New York Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris, editors, The New Press, 403 pages, \$25

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This Is Beautiful is a photo and multimedia documentary project that showcases the innate beauty of all women. It creates dialogue about women's bodies, beauty and the lack of realistic images of women in media, a critical factor in the rise of eating disorders and distorted body image. The project empowers participants and viewers alike, injecting their environment with positive energy. It has exhibited throughout the Northwest and western Canada.

Amanda Koster launched *This Is Beautiful* in 2001: "I work in the media and wanted to contribute images that I think are beautiful, to show the beauty in every body and that our beauty belongs solely to us." The photographs, which have won countless international awards, will appear in the upcoming movie "Beauty Mark." Amanda is currently accepting proposals for exhibitions and from publishers for the book. To learn more about Amanda and *This Is Beautiful*, visit www.thisisbeautiful.org or www.amandakoster.com.

British General Guy Carleton oversaw the evacuation of more than 3,000 black Loyalists, who fled New York for Nova Scotia and other British outposts.

New York slowly and reluctantly abolished slavery; federal census figures showed slaves in the state until 1850. But the death of slavery in New York scarcely impeded the city's business in the slave trade. In the peak years of 1859 and 1860, two slave ships bound for Africa left New York harbor every month. Although the trade was technically illegal, no one cared: A slave bought for \$50 in Africa could be sold for \$1,000 in Cuba, a profit margin so high that loss of slave life was easily absorbed. For every hundred slaves purchased in Africa, perhaps 48 survived the trip to the New World. By the end of the voyage, the ships that held the packed, shackled and naked human cargo were so filthy that it was cheaper to burn some vessels than decontaminate them.

Law-abiding Northerners made money off slavery through the cotton trade. "King Cotton" was to antebellum America what oil is to the Middle East. Whole New England textile cities sprang up to manufacture cloth from cotton picked and processed by millions of slaves. In 1861, the United States produced more than 2 billion pounds of cotton, exporting much of it to Great Britain via New York.

No wonder then that as the South began to talk secession, so too did New York Mayor Fernando Wood, who proposed that Manhattan become an independent island nation, its cotton trade intact.

How do we reconcile these facts with our mythology of the Civil War and our convenient conviction that the evils of slavery were contained within the South? Obviously, we can't. Slavery was such a huge and gruesome enterprise, supported by so many, that it explodes inflated notions of American character. Instead, we might appropriately draw parallels between antebellum America and Nazi Germany.

This is not to assert that ordinary Americans were "evil," but rather that our insistent sorting of the world into "good guys" and "evildoers" distorts reality. Today, pro-

gressives are justly suspicious of the high-flown "freedom" rhetoric our government deploys to advance American empire. But we need always to be skeptical of reductive, righteous narratives. Far from promoting morality, such fictions allow us to hide our worst impulses from ourselves.

—Phyllis Eckhaus

HUMOR

TV of the Future

Although reality has been nipping at the heels of satire for many years, reality has increasingly been overtaking satire. I thought of a TV show called "Feng Shui Vigilantes," only to find out there are already similar series, such as "While You Were Out." So here I am, trying to extrapolate on industry trends in order to forecast programs of the future, while simultaneously hoping that none of them will be on the air by the time you read this.

"Tips for Terrorists"—This is a spin-off of those segments on the news, originally intended to inform American citizens about the plethora of vulnerabilities in our infrastructure. However, intelligence agents learned that international terrorists were busy taking notes, ever vigilant for weaknesses in this, their target country. When the first episode is

aired—disclosing the lack of security at the nine dams scattered around Los Angeles—it will be attacked as stretching the First Amendment too far, but defended as the risk of democracy.

"The Gay Mafia"—This series, "The Sopranos" meets "Will and Grace," has an all-gay cast.

The doubly-stereotypical gang extorts interior decorators and runs gay bathhouses. Soft-core-porn scenes with bumping buttocks occur each episode. Limp wrists are in, stiff dicks are out. Dialogue ("Who moved my soap opera?") and T-shirts ("It's OK to Be Hetero") serve as cute condiments.

"Pot Party"—An ongoing reality show for those who find themselves smoking marijuana alone, but feel more gregarious to at least see fellow stoners on the screen passing joints around the room, talking,

laughing, listening to music and munching the hours away.

"The D Files"—D, of course, is for disinformation. Ever since the Bush administration announced that there would be an Office of Disinformation—and then, as its first official act, the Office of Disinformation announced that there would not be an Office of Disinformation after all—folks have been wondering what they're clandestinely up to. This game show provides the answers, as contestants attempt to distinguish between facts and propaganda.

"Celebrity Enemas"—Executives at the Fox network will readily admit that it was a real challenge to develop this particular series. "It was important," according to one spokesperson, "that this program be presented in a tasteful manner." At first agents and publicists alike refused to return calls from segment producers. But when John Goodman agreed to participate in the pilot, then other celebs started volunteering. "I'm on a special diet," the portly actor stated—"low salt and high colonics." The program is sponsored by Starbucks to help promote their new coffee enema, the Anal Latte.

"The Reality Café"—Viewers will find this documentary series truly riveting, what with the ups and downs of a posh specialty restaurant which serves only those items that have been eaten by contestants on shows such as Fear Factor. The menu includes grubs, worms, huge hissing cockroaches, rancid cheese teeming with maggots, rat stew, reindeer testicles and horse rectums.

"Godspin"—Every Sunday morning, representatives from a variety of religions—including cult leaders and professional skeptics—will discuss spiritual matters in a lively fashion. Such topics as the following will be explored: "Does the Deity Have an Awareness of Itself?" "Can Blasphemy Be a Form of Prayer?" "What Motivates Suicide Bombers?" "Should 'Under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance Be Changed to 'Inside God'?" And, "Did Jesus Masturbate or Did He Merely Have Nocturnal Emissions?"

"Law and Frivolity"—Courtroom dramas of plaintiffs suing TV networks for forcing them to waste time, forgo reading, and remain poorly informed.

This article was adapted from One Hand Jerking: Reports from an Investigative Satirist, by Paul Krassner (Seven Stories Press).

—Paul Krassner

