History 75200 – Warriors against Slavery: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass

Wed. 2-4 p.m. 3 credits

Prof. David S. Reynolds, reyn.sn@gmail.com

This course examines three leading antislavery figures of the Civil War era. The three took action against the slave power’s increasing dominance of the U. S. government—Lincoln through politics, Douglass through authorship and lecturing, and Brown through violence. Douglass’s autobiographies, which span much of the nineteenth century, provide a vivid record of slavery, abolitionism, and Reconstruction. His speeches and journalism illustrate his unceasing commitment to the cause of African Americans. Equally devoted to that cause was John Brown, of whom Douglass said of, “I could live for the slave, but he could die for him.” We will trace Brown’s evolution, from his days as an Underground Railroad operative through his antislavery battles in Kansas to his doomed raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, which he hoped would lead to the fall of slavery but which instead resulted in his martyrdom on the gallows. Lincoln worked within the political system to end slavery. His speeches, debates, and public letters stand as timeless declarations of freedom and equality. His firm leadership of the nation during its most divided time established him as American’s greatest president. Despite their different approaches to slavery, these three antislavery leaders were connected in surprising ways. This course explores both the linkages and dissimilarities between the three. It also considers them against the background of the American Revolution, the Constitution, proslavery and antislavery thought, and cultural phenomena such as religion and popular literature. We will read key primary and secondary texts related to the three, including a definitive biography of each.

Syllabus

August 28 Introduction

September 4 Douglass, Narrative in Douglass, Autobiographies. 3-102; Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom Blight, Introduction, chs. 4-9, 11-12.


September 18 Douglass, selections from Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, in Douglass, Autobiographies, 703-886; Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, chs. 18-24.

September 25 Douglass, selections from Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, in Douglass, Autobiographies, 887-1045; Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, chs. 25-31, Epilogue

October 2 Trodd and Stauffer, eds., Meteor of War, 1-75; Reynolds, John Brown Abolitionist, Preface, chs. 1-6.

October 9 No class scheduled.

October 16 No class scheduled.

October 23 Trodd and Stauffer, eds., Meteor of War, 77-107; selections from Reynolds, John Brown Abolitionist, chs. 7-10.


November 13 Selections from *Lincoln’s Selected Writings*; selections from Reynolds, *Abe*

November 20 Selections from *Lincoln’s Selected Writings*; selections from Reynolds, *Abe*

November 27 Selections from *Lincoln’s Selected Writings*; selections from Reynolds, *Abe*

December 4 Selections from *Lincoln’s Selected Writings*; selections from Reynolds, *Abe*

December 11 Selections from *Lincoln’s Selected Writings*; selections from Reynolds, *Abe*

**Readings:**


David S. Reynolds, *Abe: A Cultural Biography of Abraham Lincoln* (forthcoming, Penguin Random House); selected chapters on CUNY Commons

**Course requirements**

1. For each class period, read (a) the works listed on the syllabus; (b) the student book review for that day. If you wish, when reading the student book review, jot marginal comments, queries, and/or suggested edits.

2. Write a book review (1,000-1,500 words):

   Select a book of history, biography, criticism or cultural studies on a topic related to this course. Write a review of the book, and, by 7:p.m. on the Monday before the Wednesday class that is assigned to you, post the review in the Files folder on the class’s CUNY Commons site. The review should be c.1,000-1,500 words in length, or longer if you wish. The rest of the class will read your review, write comments on it, and ask questions about the book you’ve reviewed.

3. Term Paper: 4,500-5,500 words (to be discussed) DUE December 15