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Inhuman Bondage by David Brion Davis

Marshfield is not an ethnically diverse community. This lack of diversity has had an impact in the classroom. The English Department has embraced a multicultural approach to their curriculum with a strong dose of black literature in an attempt to make students more aware and sensitive to race relations in this country. My fear is that this approach is having the opposite effect. By the time a student graduates from Marshfield High School, they will have read a number of books in English class that deal with racism and the oppression of African Americans. An academically talented student said to me last year, “I’m tired of reading about the black man’s struggle. What about the struggle of the white man?” I was baffled by this question. I slowly began to realize the English Department’s attempt to educate students about racism was having the opposite effect in a number of students; it began to fuel more racist thoughts and beliefs. Without the literature being framed in the proper historical context, many students were unable to comprehend the origins and seriousness of racism in this country.

David Brion Davis, author of *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* is an in depth look at the origins of slavery and racism and how this evil institution served as one of the main reasons America grew into a powerful nation. In his book, Davis continually stresses the significance of slavery to our nation’s success. “We

must face the ultimate contradiction that our free and democratic society was made possible by massive slaver labor” (6). Davis compares American slavery to the domestication of wild animals. This process of dehumanization, coupled with the negative stigma of black skin, helped keep a race of people oppressed while solidifying the superiority of the white race. Davis continually discusses the horrors of slavery and he emphasizes the physical and psychological torment slaves were forced to endure.

Davis’ book traces the origins of New World slavery to ancient times, although he mentions it was not until the seventeenth century when slavery became predominantly associated with black Africans. Davis pays particular attention to the misinterpretations of biblical stories, in particular the “Curse of Ham” that gave a “divine authority” for black slavery (66). Davis is clear to point out though “it was not an originally biblical script that led to the enslavement of ‘Ham’s black descendants,’ but rather the increasing enslavement of blacks that transformed biblical interpretation” (67). Davis paints a rather morbid picture of the 16th century claiming that people viewed the world as a “very cruel, sinful, and brutal place” and although there were some critics of slavery, nobody ever spoke of eradicating the institution (96). In fact, “racial slavery became an intrinsic and indispensable part of New World settlement,” a point that Davis emphasizes throughout his book (102). He highlights the ultimate paradox; a society based on liberty and equality only made possible by the forced slave labor of Africans. “Slavery became the dark underside of the American dream – the great exception to our pretensions of perfection, the single barrier blocking our way to the millennium, the single manifestation of national sin” (102).

Davis' commentary on slavery in colonial North America mentions the economic necessity of black slavery in Northern cities, and despite the small percentage of slaves in the North, "in the mid-eighteenth century black slaves performed at least one-third of all physical labor in New York City" (128). The American Revolution brought an important ideological shift that emphasized the ideals of liberty and equality, paving the way for the gradual emancipation of black slaves in the North. Davis stresses though the important economic link between the industrial North and the slaveholding South and how slavery fueled the national economy. This period did see the beginnings of the abolitionist movement, where in previous centuries, some would speak out against the harsh treatment of slaves, but rarely if ever questioned the institution itself. This shift caused the south to begin to defend the institution of slavery, but "arguments used to defend slavery were neither of Southern nor of nineteenth-century origin," Davis claims. He continually emphasizes the importance of biblical interpretations of slavery as a justification for the institution. Davis pays particular attention to the abolition movement towards the latter part of his book. He points out that the abolition movement did not have much history at all, unlike the institution of slavery, but that the American and French Revolutions in addition to slave uprisings in the Western Hemisphere helped bring about this new sense of morality that was able to properly identify the unnatural and abhorrent institution of slavery.

Davis' most interesting writing occurs in the first few chapters. His discussion of the origins of slavery helps provide readers with an understanding of how slavery in the Americas came to be based on race. He does not minimize the role that slavery had in making this country prosperous and powerful. He does a great job explaining the

emergence and evolution of the abolitionist movement. Although abolitionists were considered extremists, “by the early years of the Civil War, many Northerners were coming to see the abolitions of slavery as the only hope of purging the land of a deadly legacy of selfishness and injustice” (266).

Davis emphasizes the important role that slavery played in American politics and foreign policy. The North viewed slavery as a huge obstacle that prevented America from pursuing the principles of our Founding Fathers, while the South viewed the preservation of black slavery “as the necessary base on which freedom must rest.” Despite these differing sectional beliefs, anti-black racism was prominent in both the North and the South. And although abolitionists were extremists at the time, their ability to frame slavery in moral terms was able to convince more moderate individuals, namely Abraham Lincoln.

Emancipation was made possible by the Civil War but freedom under the law for all people did not occur during reconstruction. Davis cites the Civil War as a revolutionary event that saw “armed black Union troops liberating slaves” (322). And even though racism continued to pervade all areas of this country, the Civil War served as the first step of demolishing this horrible institution.

Davis’ book is comprehensive and might appear daunting to high school students, but his narrative is clearly written and he provides a global perspective to slavery. Although I might consider using this book for summer reading, I feel it may be too broad in scope. For high school students, I would most likely use certain chapters to highlight key points, particularly Davis’ fourth chapter, “How Africans Became Integral to New World History.” I feel students would benefit greatly from an understanding of how

racial slavery was at the center of America's success and how it cannot be viewed as a unfortunate accident or byproduct. I would also use Davis' comparison to the domestication of animals to highlight the brutality, physical, and psychological torment that black slaves had to endure. Davis does not shy away from the fact that this country has a great deal of poison and students must not minimize the impact of black slavery in the country as to why racism still exists today.

Works Cited

Davis, David Brion. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.