

# Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery

Kathryn Angelica

*University of Connecticut*, [kathryn.angelica@uconn.edu](mailto:kathryn.angelica@uconn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Angelica, Kathryn (2021) "Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.1.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss1/10>

## Review

Angelica, Kathryn

Winter 2021

**Reidy, Joseph P.** *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery*. University of North Carolina Press, March 2019. HARDCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN9781469648361 pp. 520

It is undeniable that the shadow of slavery continues to impact the social, economic, and political structures of the United States. For scholars of the Civil War, a closer look at the process of emancipation and the failures of Reconstruction can reveal how the remaining tendrils of prejudice and systemic racism shape our historical memory. In *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery*, Joseph P. Reidy argues for viewing the process of emancipation as complex, uneven, and far reaching. Centering the testimony of formerly enslaved people and their understanding of wartime emancipation, Reidy demonstrates that the end of slavery in the United States took a winding, troubled, and uncertain path.

Professor emeritus of History at Howard University, Joseph P. Reidy's former work on African American military service and his 1995 monograph *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Plantation South, Central Georgia 1800-1880* speak to his broader engagement with questions of political and social transformation around the Civil War. *Illusions of Emancipation* is part of a series funded by the UNC Press and the Littlefield Fund for Southern History, University of Texas Libraries and edited by Gary W. Gallagher and T. Michael Parrish. The series emphasizes the Civil War as a defining moment in U.S. history that continues to shape conversations of race, citizenship, and society.

Reidy approaches the destruction of slavery from a unique methodological perspective, one that takes into account both practical and theoretical understandings of emancipation. Importantly, the book emphasizes the personal, individual accounts of the people thrust, whether willingly or unwillingly, into the center of these debates. Reidy's attention to micro-biography demonstrates the heart-wrenching choices made by enslaved Americans to support family and

children even if it meant sacrificing their own safety or freedom. Reidy's description of freedom as illusory is found within these stories of heartbreak and violence, removed from the military and political machinations of the State.

With lyrical and powerful language, the book confronts the challenges of emancipation from the overlapping frameworks of time, space, and the concept of 'home.' Organized around these ideas, the book is divided into three parts. This thematic organization allows Reidy to look at a variety of perspectives of emancipation including those of refugees, soldiers, politicians, ministers, journalists, and activists.

By using time as a framework, Reidy provides a new perspective to the experience of confinement and slavery as well as how the measuring of time allows those without power to challenge those systems. He speaks both to the literal experience of time such as the recurring passage of seasons, weather patterns, and impacts on the physical environment, as well as the chronology of emancipation. Time also speaks to historical memory, and how narratives of emancipation are anchored to moments in time in ways that deemphasize their place in broader social movements. Reidy also describes the nature of 'revolutionary time' and the construction of political narratives such as the transformation of enslaved men from refugees to soldiers in national conversation. Poignantly, *Illusions of Emancipation* illustrates the frustratingly slow pace of emancipation, as well as its sudden stops and starts.

Space becomes an equally dramatic framework to study emancipation. Reidy echoes Stephanie Camp's work on 'rival geographies' and Thavolia Glymph's analysis of the plantation household as a field of power relations. Reidy expands this by demonstrating that space is not always fixed. Within this context, he juxtaposes the role of military geography as well as the geography of emancipation as elastic spaces that traverse the physical landscape. Crucial to this conversation is the forced and voluntary relocation of Black Americans as servants and workers in the Confederate forces, as laundresses and laborers in refugee camps, and as soldiers in the United States military.

Importantly, Reidy's final framework around the concept of 'home' demonstrates how Americans imagined a post-war future. He argues that the 'common language of home' did not encompass the different assumptions and expectations for those that would construct and occupy that space. The transience of access to home is reflected in debates over land ownership as well as those over the barriers to civic equality. Highlighting the voices of Black political leaders,

Reidy illustrates how Black Americans envisioned freedom, their relationship with the federal government, and their communities. The activism of newly formed and established Black communities is shown to drive conversations about political and civic rights, particularly Reidy's emphasis on convention and club building.

*Illusions of Emancipation*, while providing many examples and micro-biographical accounts of Black men's experience of emancipation, does not provide the same lens into the emancipation of Black women. Although the writings of Charlotte Forten, Frances Gage, and Mattie J. Jackson are incorporated throughout, they are not given the same micro-biographical treatment as Reidy's other central figures, such as free-born minister and politician Henry M. Turner or enslaved laborer Louis Hughes. Reidy's emphasis on the transformation of Black men's citizenship claims as a result of military service furthers a patriarchal narrative of emancipation. Having said this, there is a dearth of Black women's experiences in the archive, and Reidy does attempt to address these silences. His fifth chapter addresses Black women's claims to freedom in Washington D. C, and he highlights the activism of Black women in churches, benevolent societies, and in their communities in his final chapter. *Illusions of Emancipation* ultimately succeeds in demonstrating the truly labyrinthine—and perhaps unfinished—journey to freedom.

***Kathryn Angelica*** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation examines the ways women's organization, reform, and activism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. reflect evolving conceptions of civil rights, the responsibilities of the state, and citizenship.