

“There Is a North”: Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Brooke, John. *"There Is a North": Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War.* University of Massachusetts Press, 2019. PAPERBACK. \$26.95 ISBN 9781625344472 pp. 442

In the aftermath of Massachusettsian Nathaniel Banks's ascension to Speaker of the House in 1856, newspapers across the region confidently declared that "there is a North." How that "North" came to be, and, more specifically, how it came to adopt the self-conscious sectional politics of the late 1850s that set the stage for Civil War, is the question animating John L. Brooke's most recent monograph. *"There Is a North": Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War* argues that between 1850 and 1854, white northerners experienced fundamental political and cultural shifts that pushed enough of them towards an active antislavery politics that a conflagration with the slaveholding South became almost inevitable.

Brooke's manuscript artfully blends the well-trod ground of 1850s political history with a cultural analysis of the same era. The most critical period for him, 1850-54, is bookended by the Compromise of 1850 on one side and the Kansas-Nebraska Act on the other, and he carefully documents the political fallout from each. But he also argues that "culture in novel, song, and theater in the liminal space between the twin crises of 1850 and 1854 played a powerful transformative role" in the North's "final antislavery mobilization" (21). Brooke's blending of methodologies results in an innovative look at one of the most-studied periods of American history: the run-up to the Civil War.

There is a North proceeds in a roughly chronological way. After some scene setting, the real analysis begins with the Compromise of 1850. The "debates over the so-called Compromise," as Brooke explains, "would take more than eight months and destabilize the Union profoundly," ultimately sacrificing the rights of African Americans on the altar of

sectional harmony (70). Crisis erupted almost immediately following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, beginning with James Hamlin’s arrest in New York just ten days after its signing. Highly publicized recaptures of self-emancipated men and women like Hamlin drove home how far the Slave Power extended into the supposedly “free” states. And as thousands of African Americans began to make their way out of the U.S., fleeing for Canada from the northern towns where they had resided, Brooke argues that white Americans came to realize, many for the first time, just how much rendition laws threatened northern communities. Thus began a powerful sea change in public opinion in the white North. Politicians, however, failed to capitalize on this shift.

Into this void stepped one Harriet Beecher Stowe. It would be difficult to overstate the effect that her 1852 magnum opus, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had on the public, as Brooke tells it. After finishing the novel—sometimes in just one, trancelike sitting—“Readers emerged from their immersion in a different emotional state,” he writes. “Boundaries were disrupted and shattered, assumptions were critically challenged” (142). Noting that Stowe played into racist tropes and concluded her work with a pro-colonization appeal—one she later seemed to regret—Brooke nevertheless concludes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* unleashed a fever of feeling amongst the northern white reading public, bringing hordes of converts to the antislavery cause. Brooke does some of his most innovative work in his sections on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, charting its popularity by metrics like the skyrocketing popularity of the name Eva (one of the novel’s heroes) in the 1850s and the emergence of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*-themed Christmas memorabilia. He also follows its enormously popular stage adaptations, which brought the story to new, perhaps less literate audiences. These performances introduced audiences to songs by Stephen Foster, whose enormous impact on American music features heavily in *There Is a North*. The evils of slavery, then, took center stage—often quite literally—in the northern white imagination in the mid-1850s. It should have been no surprise, then, that “great swaths of the northern public rose up in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act ... in the wake of the first great modern media event in American history” (160-1).

The final three chapters of *There Is a North* focus on the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the partisan realignment that followed. As Brooke sees it, the Kansas-Nebraska debates had two major consequences: “a massive response from the newly expanded antislavery public in the North,” and, eventually, “if not immediately, the formation of the Republican Party” (203). First,

though, the would-be Republicans would have to out-organize the Nativists. Which new party could offer a serious opposition to the Democrats, and on what terms, were open questions from roughly 1854 to 1856. While the Republicans lost the presidential race in 1856, their surprisingly strong showing in the North revealed that alignment on the basis of a sectional antislavery politics was possible. As Brooke writes, after the election of 1856, the “ground of antislavery had been transformed; what remained was confirmation and consolidation” (278). Events from bloody skirmishes in Kansas, to the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scot* ruling, to the assault on Harper’s Ferry by John Brown and his company made that consolidation possible. What followed, as we know, was Abraham Lincoln’s ascension to the presidency and the outbreak of secession and Civil War.

Throughout the monograph, Brooke deploys the anthropological concept of liminality. Self-emancipating African Americans exist in a state of liminal flight; a reader of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* lives, for a few hours, in a liminal state, only to emerge changed upon setting the novel down. Liminality is most important to his argument in its grandest application, the idea of 1850-54 being a time of “liminal rupture,” a profoundly destabilizing period after which a new politics emerged (15-16). At the end of this “critical juncture,” he says, “room for political maneuver and compromise had narrowed to the point where decisive conflict loomed on the horizon” (10). By 1856, Americans had reached the end of a period of liminality during which the structure of their politics was fundamentally altered. All that remained was for partisan politics to catch up to the new reality.

Less successful is Brooke’s borrowing of Christopher J. Smith’s concept of “creolization.” Brooke does show, particularly through his examination of Stephen Foster’s work and the theatrical adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that minstrel-style songs could be deployed in ways that suggested sympathy for the enslaved. Whether the popularity of these works among the northern white working class amounts to a true process of creolization seems less sure. In justifying his argument about the creolizing nature of minstrelsy, Brooke leans heavily on an 1855 statement from Frederick Douglass about finding “allies in the Ethiopian songs...in which anti-slavery principles take root, grow and flourish,” which is quoted several times in the monograph (4, 39-40, 174-5, 200). If other African Americans shared in Douglass’s admittedly reluctant acceptance of these performances, it is not made clear.

Nevertheless, Brooke has produced a well-argued and well-written monograph. *There Is a North* will no doubt spark conversation in graduate courses; many of its chapters would be suitable to assign for undergraduates, as well. In addition to speaking to those in other disciplines such as American studies and literature, it will be useful for cultural and political historians alike.

Kellen Heniford is a PhD candidate at Columbia University. She is currently writing a history of the "free state" as a political construct.