Review

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Over the last decade Lerone Bennett’s anti-Lincoln polemic, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream*, has been a consistent foil for historians examining Abraham Lincoln’s relationship to race. First in a series of blistering reviews and later in monograph-length responses such as George Fredrickson’s *Big Enough to be Inconsistent*, historians have sought to analyze—and usually refute—Bennett’s claim that Abraham Lincoln was a rabid white supremacist who never really opposed slavery or worked to eliminate it. Bennett’s claims regarding Lincoln’s views on slavery have not held up well. Recent studies by George Frederickson, James Oakes, Eric Foner, and others clearly demonstrate Lincoln’s longtime opposition to slavery and the important role his presidency played in destroying the institution. Bennett’s emphasis on Lincoln’s devotion to racism and white supremacy, on the other hand, has held up considerably better. In decidedly different ways, Richard Striner’s *Lincoln and Race* and Brian Dirck’s *Abraham Lincoln and White America* engage Bennett’s argument that Lincoln’s commitment to white supremacy guided his personal and political life.

Striner’s *Lincoln and Race* is a concise examination of Abraham Lincoln’s public speeches, letters, and actions with regard to race. Striner organizes his study around a simple chronological progression through the texts he uses as sources. Individual chapters are therefore devoted to the content and context of specific speeches. After briefly discussing Lincoln’s childhood and his role in the Black Hawk War, Striner devotes four chapters to analyzing most of Lincoln’s famous speeches of the 1850s. Another four chapters address Lincoln’s presidency and his involvement in emancipation, Reconstruction, and Native American affairs. In the final chapter, “Racist or Not?” Striner
weighs the evidence presented and concludes of Lincoln that “there was no racial malice in his soul.”

In *Lincoln and Race*, Striner directly challenges Bennett’s assertion of Lincoln’s racism, arguing that Bennett’s conclusions are completely erroneous. Striner declares in the introduction that he will “advance the conclusion that in all probability Lincoln had no racial bias,” and he focuses on three major themes. First of all, Striner argues throughout the book that a careful analysis of Lincoln’s words—the same ones Bennett used to condemn him as a racist—were in fact subtle political statements crafted by Lincoln to help his electoral chances by only *seeming* to be racist. Second, says Striner, Lincoln acted determinedly and consistently to eradicate the institution of slavery whenever possible, actions that Striner sees as inherently antiracist. The third and final point Striner emphasizes is that Lincoln steadfastly opposed the racist ideas put forward by ethnologists and by such political contemporaries as Alexander Stephens and Stephen Douglas.

In analyzing Lincoln’s political statements that touched on race, Striner echoes many of the arguments put forth in Harry Jaffa’s *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*. In a much more concise manner than Jaffa, Striner attempts to explain away many of Lincoln’s statements on race. In his 1854 speech in Peoria, for example, Lincoln stated that his “own feelings will not admit of” making recently freed slaves “politically and socially our equals.” That sentence, Striner concedes, “sounds racist.” But he quickly points out that Lincoln followed this statement by questioning “whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment.” Why would he say that, Striner asks, other than to call into question the entire proposition of racism? Later, in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Lincoln stated that he had “no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races” because of the “physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of a perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position.” Although Striner admits that this statement “looks very bad,” he argues that it is “full of exceptionally slippery, ambiguous, and legalistic language that could well be the language of evasion.” He notes that Lincoln “never committed himself . . . to maintain that position in the future” and therefore was purposely leaving himself a “loophole” for favoring black equality at a later time. Lincoln, Striner concludes, was a master politician who occasionally
acted racist in front of racist audiences but always wove in passages that seemed to question the wisdom or usefulness of the very racism he only appeared to embrace.

Striner’s description of Lincoln’s profound commitment to antislavery principles represents the second major point in his deconstruction of Bennett’s argument. Much like other defenders of Lincoln (and critics of Bennett) Striner examines the many antislavery declarations made by Lincoln before and during his presidency and concludes that he remained a committed opponent of slavery. Striner goes a step further than most Lincoln scholars, however, in implying that Lincoln’s opposition to slavery represented a fundamentally antiracist attitude. Confederate nationhood, Striner posits, “could have had a horrific effect upon the modern world: it could have served as the great racist prototype.” Lincoln’s vigorous opposition to the spread of slavery in the 1850s and his steadfast resistance to the idea of the Confederacy in the 1860s therefore represent, in Striner’s interpretation, antiracist acts. As president-elect and later as president, Lincoln declined every opportunity to appease the South. For Striner, that refusal constitutes evidence not only of Lincoln’s hostility to slavery but also of his opposition to the racism that undergirded the institution.

The third strain of Striner’s argument consists of his comparison of Lincoln’s statements on race to those of his political opponents. Some ethnologists in the mid-nineteenth century argued that “negroes” were a “different species” than the rest of humanity. Lincoln’s political foes, such as Stephen Douglas and the leaders of the Confederacy, often echoed those arguments. Abraham Lincoln, Striner notes, asserted repeatedly that “the negro is a man.” While he occasionally made statements that at the very least sounded racist, he consistently maintained the humanity of black people throughout his political life. For Striner, this demonstrates that Lincoln, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not possess a “gut-level bias” against people of color.

On the whole, the central argument of Lincoln and Race is unconvincing. Striner strains credibility in his attempts to disprove accusations that Lincoln possessed any racial bias whatsoever in his adult life. When analyzing any of Lincoln’s many speeches that seem to hint at “racial bias,” Striner emphasizes the caveats that Lincoln typically attached to those statements, but he never fully explains away the frequently straightforward statements Lincoln made regarding his view that the white race was “superior” to the black race. His contention that Lincoln was a consistent antislavery man is certainly correct, but Striner too often conflates antislavery and antiracism. Just as Bennett erroneously concluded that Lincoln did not truly oppose slavery
because he believed in white supremacy, Striner errs in concluding that Lincoln was not a white supremacist because he opposed slavery. Millions of Americans joined Lincoln in opposing the spread of slavery in the 1850s and the Confederacy in the 1860s; many of them, like Lincoln, continued to believe in the existence of natural racial hierarchies. There is certainly no doubt that Lincoln fundamentally believed in the humanity of people of color. It was that belief that most directly led him to oppose the institution of slavery. Striner’s contention that Lincoln’s belief in a common humanity meant that he remained free from racial bias, however, is not supported by the existing evidence.

Perhaps the largest problem with *Lincoln and Race* is its premise. The entire book is constructed around answering the question that acts as the title of the book’s final chapter: Was Abraham Lincoln a “Racist or Not?” The simplicity of this question leads Striner down a path where he must determine whether an individual living in the mid-nineteenth century deserves to be described with the twenty-first-century adjective racist. This is an impossible and unnecessary task. The question also conjures a nineteenth-century world where a person’s views on race could comfortably fit into only one of two categories: racist or not racist. That approach ignores the scholarship on race produced in the last two decades by whiteness scholars and others. As a result, *Lincoln and Race* leaves an incomplete picture of Lincoln’s views on race and, perhaps more importantly, neglects the role that ideas of race played in shaping Abraham Lincoln.

In *Abraham Lincoln and White America* Brian Dirck also examines the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and the idea of race. Like Striner, Dirck at the outset of his study takes issue with the scholarship of Lerone Bennett. Unlike Striner, however, Dirck criticizes the questions Bennett asks far more than he attempts to refute the answers Bennett provided. By focusing so determinedly on simply proving that Abraham Lincoln was a white supremacist, Dirck argues, Bennett missed an opportunity to “try to figure out exactly what *white* meant in Lincoln’s time or what it may have meant to Lincoln himself”—questions that are Dirck’s central focus.

On the issue of whether or not Abraham Lincoln was or was not a “racist,” Dirck sides more with Bennett than with Striner. Lincoln, Dirck writes in the introduction, “very definitely functioned under a set of limitations where race was concerned.” He also “carried within himself the multiple assumptions, prejudice, and limitations of white racial identity that pervaded the culture of his times.” Dirck is far more interested, however, in exploring the nature of those assumptions and
Dirck rightly takes the scholarship of David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and others seriously, and he largely looks at Lincoln’s life through the lens of whiteness studies. As a lawyer and a politician Lincoln was “deeply enmeshed in the web of whiteness that surrounded him,” argues Dirck. Other studies of Lincoln and race have focused, despite their many differences, primarily on Lincoln’s thoughts and attitudes toward black people. Dirck looks at Lincoln’s pursuit and protection of whiteness. The sources available for this approach, Dirck admits, are limited because much of the power of whiteness derived from its invisibility. Nineteenth-century Americans, including Lincoln, rarely wrote or talked about being white. Despite this limitation in sources, Dirck provides several compelling arguments.

Dirck is at his best in explaining the relationship between Lincoln’s white supremacist tendencies and his opposition to slavery. Unlike Bennett, Striner, and others, he never conflates the two ideas. “Race is not slavery,” Dirck rightly states, “and it is naïve to think that opposition to the latter necessarily involved a more tolerant perspective on the former.” This is an essential point. Dirck goes further, however, and briefly explores the possibility that Lincoln’s version of antislavery principle was actually part of changing and supporting—rather than challenging—the importance of whiteness in American society. Lincoln consistently insisted that white Americans did not have to give up anything to embrace antislavery principles. “I do not perceive,” Lincoln said in 1858, “that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything.” Emancipation, Lincoln reminded his white audience, would not be a threat to whiteness. In fact, Dirck argues, the antislavery principles embraced by Lincoln often had far more to do with saving white society than they did with saving black people. It was the “injustice and inherent unfairness of the slave system” that drew Lincoln’s attention rather than “any particular empathy for the slaves as people.” Unlike many of his political opponents, Dirk implies, Lincoln believed that Jefferson’s promise in the Declaration of Independence was meant for all men, regardless of race. Yet Lincoln saw the nation’s failure to live up to this promise as a failure of a fundamentally white society. Lincoln believed in the essential humanity of black people, but his embrace of antislavery measures and emancipation had far more to do with his desire to save white people from the curse of slaveholding than with a desire to free black people from the chains of slavery.

*Abraham Lincoln and White America* is not without a few shortcomings. In analyzing Lincoln’s early years Dirck occasionally relates
stories of Lincoln’s youth without clearly explaining their relevance to his larger thesis. He also misses an opportunity to explore the importance of place in constructing race. His claim that the border states were not just “the geographic boundary between North and South” but also “the borders of white racial tolerance,” is at odds with much of his other analysis regarding race in Lincoln’s Illinois. One of his most important contributions—the idea that Lincoln’s antislavery principles and his white supremacy reinforced each other more than they worked against each other—is given far less space than it deserves. These minor weaknesses, however, do little to detract from this important study. *Abraham Lincoln and White America* sheds light on both of the subjects in its title. In an era when cultural historians are asking and answering fundamentally different questions than historians writing “old-fashioned” political biographies, Brian Dirck illustrates an effective way to link the two.