

Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, and Memory

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This rich book on Roots captures the complexity of its reception and its enduring place in popular culture.

In ten chapters, the essayists in *Reconsidering Roots* posit that, although *Roots* has been a topic of debate since its release, few would argue against its impact on readers and viewers around the world, and how they think about slavery, reconstruction, African civilization, and the modern civil rights movement. Editors Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson have compiled an honest and intriguing look at *Roots* and its creator, Alex Haley.

The three sections of the book—"Rethinking the Context," "Rereading *Roots*," and "Rerouting *Roots*"—are complementary, first establishing the tone in America when *Roots* was released, and then offering four tightly woven analyses of images of black people and white people—or, how black masculinity and whiteness were handled in an effort to make Haley's story about black experiences palatable for white audiences.

The last section illustrates the extent of *Roots*'s reach, with fascinating chapters about how South Africans plagued by apartheid were prevented from seeing the miniseries, but looked for ways to break the ban. The final chapter tells how *Roots* helped spark a young man's fight in Taiwan against the Chinese Nationalist Army for the right to return to China. Each chapter is centered on an argument followed by a discussion of specific passages and scenes that support the author's reading.

While there are no section prefaces, research and analytical skills are apparent across chapters. The strength of this collection rests in how scholars from varied fields, from black studies and education to history and media studies, have come together to problematize the extent of *Roots*'s influence in illuminating ways.

Though one chapter acknowledges that Alex Haley's best-selling novel led many to explore their ancestry, his integrity is called into question in another, leading to at least two accusations of plagiarism. The first plagiarism charge is well-known. Careful research unveiled Margaret Walker's failed court case due, she believed, to racism, regionalism, and sexism.

The 1977 miniseries *Roots* was adapted for a contemporary audience in 2016, suggesting that the narrative continues to be cherished. This collection—which is a thorough examination of *Roots*—helps to explain why.

KAUVONIA HINTON (May/June 2017)

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