Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: James Downs
Title: “Sick From Freedom”
Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2012
Reviewed by Devon Elovitz

Associate Professor of History at Connecticut College Jim Downs’s publication of his book, “Sick From Freedom,” is the result of over a decade of his research. Downs is concerned with telling the true narrative of the years immediately following the emancipation in America. The narrative consciously begins not with the beginning of the Civil War but with Southern emancipation. What did freedom look like to newly freed people and what were their first experiences with freedom? Unlike many idealized accounts of slaves reaching freedom, Downs successfully portrays this era as one of the darkest moments in America’s history filled with uncontrollable disease, starvation, and unavoidable death.

The book successfully reveals the inability of the federal government to anticipate the social and political consequences of emancipation such as unemployment, homelessness, lack of medical care, and widespread need for basic necessities such as food, water, and shelter. Without resources to help freed people begin their new lives, the American South faced one of the largest biological outbreaks of small pox and cholera. When the federal government finally did come to the aid of freed people, in the form of a temporary Freedman’s Bureau, the medical care was extremely poor and did little to help slaves with basic survival. Downs constructs his argument through a medical lens that reveals how identity was created as a result of medical diagnoses and theories that labeled freed people as either dependent or able-bodied.
The book’s extensive and diverse amount of research reveals the significant impact this moment in history had not only on slaves but on the newly expanding role of the federal government. A considerable amount of archival research appears in the book as disease and death rate statistics, medical records, and descriptive, heartfelt narratives from ex-slaves who never saw the promises of slavery to doctors who begged for medical equipment to keep their patients alive. Downs uses these sources to construct a narrative that explores the interconnectedness of slavery, emancipation, racism, labor, disease, and citizenship. Nosological reports, demographic data of migrations, and at times an overwhelming amount of statistical data offer the reader a readable narrative that offers a glimpse into an otherwise forgotten history.

Whether interested in healthcare, epidemiology, race relations, governmental intervention, or history in general, students of all backgrounds can gain a better understanding of how authors like Downs use archives to construct history using multiple perspectives. Students at Connecticut College are encouraged to take Downs’s courses, especially AMS 248, Narratives of Illness, AMS 330, Meditations on the American South, and AMS 309, History of Slavery and Emancipation in America.