



## Stories of Freedom in Black New York

*Shane White*

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*Stories of Freedom in Black New York* recreates the experience of black New Yorkers as they moved from slavery to freedom. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, New York City's black community strove to realize what freedom meant, to find a new sense of itself, and, in the process, created a vibrant urban culture. Through exhaustive research, Shane White imaginatively recovers the raucous world of the street, the elegance of the city's African American balls, and the grubbiness of the Police Office. It allows us to observe the style of black men and women, to watch their public behavior, and to hear the cries of black hawkers, the strident music of black parades, and the sly stories of black conmen.

Taking center stage in this story is the African Company, a black theater troupe that exemplified the new spirit of experimentation that accompanied slavery's demise. For a few short years in the 1820s, a group of black New Yorkers, many of them ex-slaves, challenged pervasive prejudice and performed plays, including Shakespearean productions, before mixed race audiences. Their audacity provoked feelings of excitement and hope among blacks, but often of disgust by many whites for whom the theater's existence epitomized the horrors of emancipation.

*Stories of Freedom in Black New York* brilliantly intertwines black theater and urban life into a powerful interpretation of what the end of slavery meant for blacks, whites, and New York City itself. White's story of the emergence of free black culture offers a unique understanding of emancipation's impact on everyday life, and on the many forms freedom can take.



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