



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 38  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 13

---

2011

**Review of *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. Daniel Rasmussen. Reviewed by Phillip Seitz.**

Phillip Seitz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Seitz, Phillip (2011) "Review of *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. Daniel Rasmussen. Reviewed by Phillip Seitz.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol38/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

population, Coll's work reminds us that among those undocumented immigrants are leaders and contributors to a new American reality who have gained a right to be called citizens.

Lirio K. Negroni, *School of Social Work,*  
*University of Connecticut*

Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt.* Harper Collins, 2011. \$26.99, hardcover.

*American Uprising* tells the story of the massive 1811 New Orleans slave rebellion, and is one of several highly readable, well-researched new books that chronicle events and lives in African-American history—American history, really—from the perspective of participants themselves. Emphasizing agency, books like Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010) (reviewed separately in this issue) and Dan Biddle and Murry Rubin's *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (2010) provide inspiration and substance from the lives of Africans and African descendents who courageously challenged the limits imposed upon them by white America. Like the others, *American Uprising* is written in narrative form and is directed to the popular market, and it is enjoying substantial sales—an indicator that black and white audiences are eager to learn about flesh and blood people who made choices, took risks, accepted rewards with joy, and consequences with dignity.

Adapted from Rasmussen's Harvard senior thesis, the book charts New Orleans' commercial growth as center for slavery and details the violence of the sugar plantation owners determined to control their chattel. This back-breaking work resulted in high mortality among the enslaved, and new workers were purchased rather than born because parents didn't live long enough to reproduce and raise children. In this violent context, Rasmussen traces the development of a conspiratorial ideology among the enslaved that drew on the American, French and Haitian revolutions, and the gathering of a small

tribal army that included warriors with previous combat and firearms experience in Africa. The situation came to a head in January 1811 when a large party of rebelling slaves marched from the German Coast area to New Orleans, gathering volunteers, killing plantation owners and burning plantations as they advanced. The city's few troops had been sent to Florida, and essentially it was the plantation owners who were sent to put down the revolt, which they did with incredible ferocity. By week's end New Orleans was filled with the severed heads of Negro (sic.) rebels, a "lesson" to those who might come after. Yet for decades the plantation quarters reverberated with the tales of heroes who chose to die rather than be enslaved.

This story is set against the backdrop of the Louisiana Purchase and the country's growing ambitions to annex Florida and areas to the west. One result of the rebellion was the choice to militarize New Orleans with the formation of a trained militia and installation of Federal troops (steps Rasmussen credits for the victory at the Battle of New Orleans), therefore making further westward expansion possible. This is the first of many conclusions, and one of the book's faults is an inability to bring the story to a close—most likely a sign of this promising author's youth. The book is documented, but in a manner that will be troublesome to those wanting to use the original materials. However, it was not written for academics, but for the people who have long been starved of the actors'—and their own—perspective on African American history. It succeeds in feeding this long-felt hunger admirably.

*Phillip Seitz, Independent Scholar, Winner, 2011 Brooking Award for Creativity, American Association of Museums*

Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Random House, 2010. \$30.00, hardcover.

African-American history has most often focused on two epochs, the Civil War and its immediate aftermath and the Civil Rights years, often seen as commencing with the Birmingham bus boycott of 1955 through the Civil Rights bills of 1964-65. Accordingly, literature of the period of 1876-1955 was