

BOOK REVIEW

Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America, by Damian Alan Pargas.
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Pages 1 – 324.

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Damian Alan Pargas, the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Professor of History and Culture of the United States and the Americas at Leiden University, has written two well-received books on slavery in the U.S. South: *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (University of Florida Press, 2010) and *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). Thus, Pargas is a recognized expert on slavery in the antebellum South and a natural candidate to compile a book of essays about fugitive slaves and spaces of freedom in North America. In the introduction, he discusses runaway slave advertisements to demonstrate the diverse nature of the presumed destinations. The essays in this volume build on this observation by considering the diverse experiences of permanent runaway slaves throughout North America. Scholars such as Larry Gara, Keith P. Griffler, and Eric Foner, not to mention many others, have written excellent accounts of the Underground Railroad and have analyzed the passage of slaves out of the South and into the North and Canada. The essays in the current volume, however, do not just explore movement from the South to the North, but within the South, and from the South to Mexico. The vision of this volume is indeed continental. Furthermore, the essayists investigate three different spaces of freedom. First, spaces of formal freedom where slavery was abolished. Second, spaces of informal freedom, specifically regions within slaveholding territories to which slaves attempted to escape. Three, spaces of semiformal freedom on free soil where claims to freedom remained precarious. The scope and breadth of the volume is impressive and a testament to the creative work currently being undertaken by scholars of slavery in the Americas.

The organization of the volume is generally chronological. Graham Russell Gao Hodges begins by considering the Black Loyalists during the Revolutionary Era “who fled to and fought for the British during the war itself, and later both openly campaigned to end slavery in the northern United States and protected fugitive slaves in their midst” (21). Hodges argues that the Black Loyalists should compel scholars to rethink the chronology of the Underground Railroad. Furthermore, they not only affected the end of slavery in the Northern states, but were “among the first and largest recorded examples of a freedom-seeking black migration” (27).

Gordon Barker, Roy Finkenbine, and Matthew Pinsker follow Hodges in focusing on the northern U.S. and Canada. Barker’s excellent essay notes how some black people celebrated Canada as a Canaan. However, although places like Ontario sounded lovely in theory, black people experienced virulent Canadian racism and this “shattered Canada’s image as an ideal safe haven” (48). In other words, Canada beckoned and raised expectations, but yielded largely empty promises. Finkenbine examines Indian Country in northwestern Ohio and finds numerous examples of “biracial cooperation between African American freedom seekers and Native Americans in their own version of what would come to called the Underground Railroad” (73).

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Finkenbine asserts that Indian Country demonstrates that the Underground Railroad was a triracial enterprise. Pinsker analyzes resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and argues that “the coalition mobilized over the 1850s to frustrate all types of fugitive recaptures was broad-based, multiracial, and—to a surprising degree—successful” (95). Furthermore, in contrast to accounts that emphasize northern compliance with the law, Pinsker contends, “it seems quite certain that runaways were at least ten times likelier to succeed than fail if they just made it across the Mason-Dixon line or the Ohio River” (109). In sum, Canadian colonial officials helped slaves, but the people of Ontario did not react well to freedom claimants. In Ohio, Native Americans helped fugitive escape. Resistance across the North to one of the most notorious pieces of legislation was far more widespread than scholars have heretofore understood.

Damian Pargas, Viola Müller, and Sylviane Diouf study the South and spaces of informal freedom. Many permanent freedom seekers, Pargas notes, preferred to rebuild their lives in spaces of informal freedom rather than escape to spaces of formal freedom. He offers a broad survey of slaves who escaped to urban areas and helps reinterpret fugitive slaves who remained in the South as permanent refugees from slavery. Müller demonstrates the richness of this topic by analyzing slave flight to antebellum Richmond. Richmond municipal authorities begrudgingly tolerated fugitives, likely because of the importance of fugitive slaves to Richmond’s economy. Thus, Müller wryly notes, when white southerners grew enraged about fugitive slaves, they directed their anger at the North and overlooked the fugitives in their own backyards. Diouf examines, in great depth, borderland maroons, who settled near plantations. “To be a borderland maroon,” she perceptively comments, “could appear to be a half failure, a consolation prize for someone too scared to join a community in the hinterland or to cross the Mason-Dixon line” (190). However, it took a great deal of courage to carve out a life so close to plantations. Müller, Pargas, and Diouf contend that “illegal freedom in the middle of slavery was possible” (161), albeit exceptionally difficult.

Kyle Ainsworth, Mekala Audain, and James David Nichols investigate Texas slaves who sought informal freedom in Texas or formal freedom in Mexico. Ainsworth draws material from the Texas Runaway Slave Project dataset, which documents 2,052 runaway slaves, and proves that fugitive slaves were ubiquitous in antebellum Texas. Audain explores slave flight to Mexico, a phenomenon that remains understudied, particularly the environmental challenges of the journey to a space of formal freedom. Nichols, however, challenges the idea that slaves could be free by crossing the border into Mexico because “Texan pirates could easily cross the border to recapture their so-called property” (252). Although Mexico was a space of formal freedom, the U.S./Mexico borderlands proved too lawless to grant fugitives security. Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie closes the volume by discussing the maritime aspects of the domestic slave trade, particularly slave revolts, which occurred with as much frequency as revolts had during the Middle Passage. However, “the key difference, of course, was that their actions were encouraged by the proximity of Caribbean spaces of freedom” (302). Like many of the authors in the volume, Kerr-Ritchie reveals another promising area for scholars to study.

The contributors to this volume deserve much credit for pushing scholars to think about spaces of freedom in North America and complicating our vision of who fugitive slaves were, what they did, and where they went. In discussing the volume's contributions, Pargas asserts, "this volume is the first of its kind to provide a truly continental perspective of fugitive slave migration in the antebellum period" (12). The volume is indeed continental in scope, but there are many places in the continent – the west, for example, not to mention the Caribbean, where scholars could also think about fugitive slaves. In addition, the ideas about fugitive slaves and spaces of freedom outlined in this book should be applied to South America and the Atlantic World more broadly. Pargas has, in other words, compiled a stellar volume that contains several important historiographic interventions and will spur additional research. It will appeal to anyone interested in the topic and will work excellently in graduate seminars.