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BOOK REVIEW

MÜLLER, VIOLA FRANZISKA. Escape to the City. Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum Urban South. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (NC) 2022. xii, 248 pp. Ill. Maps. $99.00. (Paper: $32.95; E-book: $22.99.)

The journeys of men and women like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, who fled slavery in the American South towards the North, have become symbols of the resistance of African Americans in the antebellum United States. During and after the constitutional debates of 1787, slavery and slave flight were sensitive topics that threatened the preservation of the Union. While slavery spread across southern states, the free-soil principle prevailed in most northern states. The national territory became a terrain of struggle not only for slaveholders and abolitionists, but also for enslaved people who escaped from their masters in the South to become free in the North. Therefore, fugitive enslaved people were at the center of national debates. Consequently, this topic has long attracted the attention of historians who focused on secession crises or the agency of men and women like Douglass and Tubman. Yet, little is known about the thousands of runaways who remained in the American South. Viola Müller's book *Escape to the City* sheds light on the journey of enslaved African Americans who broke their chains to become permanent refugees in cities like Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans.

Inspired not only by the historiography of slavery, but also by the methods of migration studies, Müller compares the clandestine lives of fugitive enslaved people to contemporary migrants. In doing so, she examines their experiences based on concepts like illegality and "undocumentedness". Müller also compares this phenomenon to marronage and rebellions by claiming it was a form of collective resistance. Although running away was often an individual action, successful urban refugees usually benefited from a network of allies and found shelter among Black communities. Thus, *Escape to the City* reveals the alternative Black geographies that permanently contested slave power and white supremacy at the heart of the nineteenth-century American South.

In the first few chapters of the book, Müller addresses an American paradox. The aftermath of independence inaugurated an age of freedom in the United States. Slavery was abolished in northern states, and manumission rates increased all over the country. However, by the time the constitution had been ratified, the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the American South had sewn the nation's future to human bondage. In the following decades, slavery not only survived – it expanded. Although Britain inaugurated the age of international abolitionism, the economic development of Manchester's textile factories benefited cotton production in the American South. At the same time, the rise of abolitionism in the North encouraged statesmen in the South to defend slavery as a legitimate institution in the public sphere of their nation. This was the beginning of the Cotton Kingdom in

the American South. Slavery grew stronger, manumission rates decreased, and white supremacy prevailed.

Yet, this was also the beginning of a new age of Black resistance. The politics of slavery established slave codes and black codes that restricted manumission and the rights of free people of color. At the same time, the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade after 1807 benefited the interstate trade in the Unites States. Enslaved people were often separated from their families, while free people of color faced the risk of illegal enslavement. Still, the population of free African Americans increased between 1800 and 1860, especially in urban areas of the American South. As Müller argues, these conditions contributed to transform slave flight into one of the main forms of resistance. Many found their way to freedom by running away to northern states, while others found refuge in the Black communities and neighborhoods of the urban South.

As Müller's extensive research reveals, the prototypical fugitive was a fit young man in his twenties. However, her study also demonstrates that women escaped to southern cities more often than to the North and represented a substantial group among urban refugees. Furthermore, while most studies have described successful runaways as skilled enslaved workers, Müller argues that mobility and autonomy were more relevant. Those who worked in a profession that provided them with enough autonomy and mobility to expand their cultural horizons and build social networks had a greater chance of a successful escape. Runaways who navigated southern cities benefited from Black spaces and alternative geographies – the unintended consequences of urban racial segregation. The final challenge to becoming a permanent refugee was integration in the Black communities. Racial solidarity was crucial.

One of the main contributions of *Escape to the City* is to illuminate the dialectics between white supremacy and Black resistance in the nineteenth-century United States. The politics of race intended to preserve the privileges of white southerners. However, by restricting the rights of free people of color and pushing them to live under precarious conditions and illegal status, racialized laws encouraged them to ally with enslaved people – including runaways. Thus, Black communities and their neighborhoods offered fugitive enslaved people alternative geographies and social networks to camouflage their legal status and establish a new life beyond captivity. It is worth noting that historians of slavery and race in the Americas have demonstrated that enslaved and free people of color belonged to different social strata and were often suspicious of one another. Thus, the making of racial solidarity between free Blacks and runaways in southern cities must be understood as a dialectical consequence of white supremacy and racialized democracy in the United States.

In the final chapters of her book, Müller focuses on the intersection between capitalism, democracy, and race. By analyzing economic variables, Müller concludes that planters were the hegemonic elite in the South, but urban development benefited new elites, such as industrialists, merchants, and bankers. Although runaways caused economic loss to planters, they offered cheap labor to urban employers. The development of the urban economy expanded formal and informal job markets, and contributed simultaneously to the making of a white working class and a subclass of colored illegal workers. In sum, Müller argues that economic

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development and diversification contributed to the transformation of southern cities into places of refuge. It is worth mentioning that Müller was inspired by Dale Tomich's concept of Second Slavery,[1] which connects the expansion of the American cotton frontier to industrial development in Britain as parts of the nineteenth-century capitalist world economy. However, Müller often defines urban economic development as "capitalism" and contrasts planters to urban "capitalists", contradicting Tomich's perspective that integrates industrial capitalism and slavery. Nonetheless, this is essentially a terminological issue that does not compromise Müller's theoretical premises or her hypothesis.

Democracy also played an important role. Since the early nineteenth century, planters established their political hegemony in southern states, but urban businessmen become progressively powerful in municipal politics during the following decades. This urban elite benefited from the illegal job market and persuaded municipal representatives and police institutions to tolerate undocumented Black residents and runaways. In contrast, lower-class whites resented competing for jobs with Black workers. When poor whites became politically influential in the 1850s, their representatives established law enforcement against illegal Blacks. Thus, citizenship was a privilege of class and race in American democracy, and each political turn affected the lives of Black runaways and refugees in the antebellum American South.

In conclusion, *Escape to the City* reveals the hidden history of thousands of African-Americans who resisted slavery by becoming refugees in the state capitals of the South. This remarkable experience of collective resistance was only possible due to the dialectical consequence of white supremacy: racial solidarity among people of African descent. Müller's scholarship should encourage historians to investigate slave flight and urban refugees and test her methodology and hypothesis in their studies about other slave racialized societies in the Americas. Brazil and Cuba have had large communities of people of color since the eighteenth century, and although many runaways became marrons, others found shelter in cities like Rio de Janeiro and Havana. Yet, racism and racial identities were not the same across the continent. During the nineteenth century, Cuban society moved closer to the American biracial paradigm and dialectally contributed to bringing free and enslaved people of African descent together as members of the "*raza de color*". The same did not happen in Brazil before the rise of the Black movement in the twentieth century. Therefore, each slave society and racial regime established different conditions for Black resistance, including urban refugees. Hopefully, scholars of Latin America and the Caribbean will follow Müller's steps to reveal other hidden stories of Black resistance across the continent.

Finally, a methodological note. The comparison between enslaved fugitives and today's migrants may miss the specificities of resistance in slave societies and lead to anachronistic conclusions. This is not the case in *Escape to the City*. Müller moves beyond this formal comparison to suggest historical connections between the antebellum and post-emancipation United States. She argues that the phenomenon of enslaved runaways and fugitives disappeared after slavery had been abolished, but other related phenomena such as social exclusion, racial segregation, and illegal

[1]Dale Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD, 2004).

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labor exploitation did not. In doing so, Müller convincingly claims that the illegal status of enslaved fugitives anticipated dilemmas of migrants in the twentieth- and twentieth-first-century world.

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