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Gabor Boritt, Scott Hancock, eds. *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xix + 165 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510222-2.

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Probing the Limits of African American Agency

Gabor Boritt and Scott Hancock, editors of *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom*, have combined under one cover six fine essays that illustrate ways in which African Americans shaped the course of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The slim volume is a fine capstone to a generation of scholarship in which historians have come to understand black Americans as central actors in the sectional conflict. Indeed, the contributors so effectively elaborate the extent of African American agency on the plantation, at war, and in politics that they highlight the interpretive limits of the current scholarly consensus. As Hancock writes in the introduction, the collection highlights "the rich diversity of African Americans' experiences with and responses to freedom and slavery in the Civil War era." He also makes clear, however, that the collection attends primarily to those "black people, both slave and free," who "resisted all kinds of exploitation and degradation" (p. xviii). There is no room within the rich diversity of experience, in other words, for black Americans who decided against active resistance.

Ira Berlin, in a previously published essay entitled "American Slavery in History and Memory," lays out in the initial chapter why historians' discussions about slavery carry such an enormous emotional charge. In the process, he may well also have explained why it is so difficult to move beyond the heroic examples of black resistance to slavery and oppression chronicled in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom.* Berlin explains that historians of slavery face two related challenges. First, he observes "that slavery has become a language–a way to talk about race–in a society in which black people and white people hardly talk at all" (p. 8). Second, he notes that Americans often fail to distinguish between the memory of slavery (which "gives voice to the men and women who experienced slavery") and the history of slavery, which is much more complex (p. 16). It is no coincidence, if Berlin is right, that historians tend to concentrate on narratives which not only fulfill the demands of both history and memory but also deliver a politically acceptable message: well-documented accounts of black actors self-consciously and courageously demanding full rights as American citizens. In general, the subsequent chapters in *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* fit this mold.

The second and third chapters cover the antebellum period and show how enslaved Southern blacks and free black Northerners worked to put freedom for all African Americans on the national agenda even before secession. In chapter 2, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger recapitulate many of the most important arguments from their excellent book, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999) and document the various forms of flight through which many black Americans protested their enslavement. Not only do they suggest that the number of total fugitives (including unsuccessful ones) was higher than historians have previously imagined (at least fifty thousand per year), but they also stress that virtually every white slave owner would have been aware of this "epidemic of runaways" (p. 38). In other words, enough men and women fled that they effectively "challenged the system" and, by their actions, rebuked Southern whites' assertions of slavery's benevolence (p. 23). Franklin and Schweninger do not press the point about the relationship between flight and the sectional conflict here, but other authors, such as Keith P. Griffler (*Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* [2004]) and Fergus M. Bordewich (*Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* [2005]), have made the connection more forcefully in their books.

In the North, as recounted by Hancock, some free blacks were at work in the late antebellum period crafting "a memory that protested their exclusion from the dominant narrative while simultaneously critiquing that narrative" (p. 42). While some leaders, such as Frederick

Douglass, were despairing over the possibility of federal action against slavery by the 1850s (and others, like Martin Delaney, were even proposing emigration), Hancock focuses on the contingent that pressed most forcefully for integration into American national life. He suggests that William C. Nell, author in 1851 of *Services of Colored Americans, in the Wars of 1776 and 1812*, cultivated a communal memory of black military service that "helped African Americans define who they were and why they could demand a place in the American polity" (p. 55). Ironically, however, Nell provided an anachronistic example of Berlin's warning that the conflation between history and memory can lead to distortions of the historical record. Nell left out any record of black military service for the British during either the Revolution or War of 1812, evincing "a purposeful forgetfulness, a desire to erase anything that might damage their case for citizenship or cause division within the race" (p. 63).

The two wartime chapters focus on the experience of black soldiers. Edward L. Ayers, William G. Thomas III, and Anne Sarah Rubin draw from their prize-winning Valley of the Shadow project (http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/) to tell the story of black Americans in Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, with a heavy emphasis on the Northern county. The essay is an elegant example of how careful research can knit together the home front and battlefield, which these authors tie together most effectively through the correspondence of five Franklin County volunteers in the 54th Massachusetts. The service of over two hundred thousand black Americans in the Union army (more than enough to make up for every battlefield casualty) is the ultimate example of African American agency in the Civil War. Using the fine-grained tools of local history, Ayers, Thomas, and Rubin emphasize the political awareness and self-sacrifice of the men of the 54th. By 1864, they observe, the "war was becoming" for its black participants, "if it had not always been, a war of rights and power, a war of demonstrated black claims to them." One of the essay's protagonists, Jacob Christy, wrote to his sister in May 1864 about the depth of his commitment: "'I shall die a trying for our rights so that other that are born hereafter may live and enjoy a happy life"' (p. 84).

Only a small proportion of black soldiers served in the famed Army of the Potomac, and Noah Andre Trudeau tells their story in the penultimate essay. His account of the Ninth Corps centers on the Battle of the Crater, the most significant and controversial of the unit's engagements–and the most costly. Based on Trudeau's research, "of the 4,500 blacks who battled at the Crater, 1,327 were hit or injured in some way" (p. 112). Trudeau is as careful as Ayers, Thomas, and Rubin to link black military service to a broader search for freedom. He concludes that "the experience of fighting with the Army of the Potomac was central to what the black community hoped would be a transformation of American society" (p. 117).

In the concluding essay, Eric Foner summarizes findings from his magisterial *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), using research he painstakingly assembled for *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (1993). Foner gives a collective portrait of 1,465 black officeholders and defends their record against its Dunning school critics. He reiterates powerfully the main theme of the edited collection (and of his entire corpus of work) when he argues that "blacks were major actors of the Reconstruction drama, and their ascent to even limited positions of political power represented a revolution in American government and race relations" (p. 133).

This is a successful collection, and it includes in one place pathbreaking arguments from several of the most thoughtful historians of our time. The almost exclusive emphasis on the self-conscious and politically aware actions of black men (and a very few black women) in the introduction and in most of the essays, however, threatens to create a distorted picture of African American actions during the Civil War era. What should scholars do with statements from men like James K. Green, who underscored the lack of political initiative that he felt before emancipation? "'I for one was entirely ignorant,"' Green said, "'I knew nothing more than to obey my master; and there were thousands of us in the same attitude"' (p. 131). Moreover, as Steven Hahn argues, might scholars have erred by projecting on politically engaged blacks a "liberal integrationist framework," when those individuals wanted primarily the freedom to govern their own affairs? What of the approximately three million black Southerners who did not find Union lines by the end of the war?[1]

The central argument from *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* that "the impact of African Americans' struggle with slavery and their efforts to make a place for themselves in the post-Civil War United States shaped the nation then, and persists in doing so today" remains compelling despite these lingering questions (p. xiv). But readers seeking to explore the *full* "diversity of African Americans' experiences with and responses to freedom and slavery in the Civil War era" will want to supplement their reading of this volume with other sources.

Note

[1]. Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 499n6.

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