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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sydney Nathans. *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 360 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06212-2.

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Published on H-SAWH (December, 2012)
Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm

Rarely does a historical study pack the suspense and emotional intensity of Sydney Nathans's *To Free A Family: The Journey of Mary Walker. To Free A Family* reads more like a novel, offering an intimate, multidimensional portrait of the life of its central protagonist, the fugitive slave Mary Walker, with "cameo appearances" by a celebrity cast of characters including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lydia Maria Child, and Frederick Douglass (p. 5). Chronicling Walker's exodus from slavery in North Carolina in 1848 to her life as a Northern free woman of color until her death in 1872, Nathans examines how Walker's individual attainment of freedom was incomplete in the context of her family's enslavement: Walker dedicated her life to campaigning for her family's freedom. Bringing to light the story of this previously unknown enslaved woman helps rectify the dearth of fugitive slave women's life stories from the antebellum era and offers a companion to the often-cited narratives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs. Nathans inserts a fruitful biography into the historical record, centralizing the experience of women of color, both free and enslaved, within a comprehensive understanding of the politics of abolitionism and emancipation.

Nathans uses an innovative methodology to examine Walker's life. Most studies of fugitive slaves are dependent upon slave narratives, but Walker did not leave behind a narrative, and only three of her written letters have survived. Instead, Nathans meticulously reconstructs the social and political networks Walker encountered on her migration from slaveholding Raleigh to abolitionist Philadelphia and Cambridge. Consulting the correspondence of Walker's former slave owners (the Cameron family), her adopted abolitionist family (Peter and Susan Lesley), and several Northern abolitionist societies involved in her struggle, Nathans tells the story of one woman's quest for freedom through a multiplicity of vantage points. Methodologically, this is complementary to the slave narrative genre as it incorporates a myriad of understandings and responses to a slave's flight external to the slave's individual experience. Thematically, Walker's story is complementary to the canonical women's slave narratives because her life as a slave and her decision to run away were similarly oriented around the systemic gendered dangers of motherhood and the threat of sexual abuse.

Nathans's analysis of Walker's pursuit of her family's freedom is situated within the greater abolitionist campaign and national conflict over the issue of slavery. A particular strength of this historical lexicon is its personalization of the impact of the Fugitive Slave Act on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. After 1850, the Lesleys as abolitionists and the Camerons as slave owners became fortified in their respective ideologies, even to the point of fanaticism. Walker, too, became radicalized and willing to resort to violence if necessary. Nathans shows that the micro-level ideological entrenchment of these two families is symptomatic of the systemic polarization of the nation stemming from the Compromise of 1850. This family-centered approach provides a more intimate and accessible way in which to evaluate the consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act. As such, this approach would be especially useful for undergraduate students.

Nathans extends his story of Mary Walker beyond her death in 1872 to follow the lives of her descendants and their climb up the occupational ladder: "Edward Walker moved from painter to artist, John Walker from laborer to coachman, Frederick Walker from plumber to gas inspector, William Walker from laborer to clerk and finally to the proprietor of a lunch counter in Cambridge" (p. 256). Nathans emphasizes the generational struggle for economic freedom after slavery and encourages readers to consider the acquisition of freedom not as an individual's geographic pursuit to cross the Mason-Dixon Line, but as a collective temporal journey to ensure stability and opportunity for future generations. Additionally, Nathans introduces an analytical counterpart to the struggle for freedom beyond 1865: materiality. In chron-

icling Mary Walker's 1870 purchase of a house in Cambridge, her family's subsequent occupation of the house until 1912, and its conversion as the "Window Shop" in 1946 (a haven for World War II European refugees), Nathans explores the physicality of the enduring battle to overcome past and present forms of oppression. This notion of materiality is an effective and underused framework, especially considering the contemporary sesquicentennial of the Civil War and its accompanying material commemorations.

The investigation of Mary Walker's life, first as a Southern slave and then as a Northern free woman of color, illuminates intimacies of slave life notoriously lacking in documentation: namely, the danger of letter writing and sexual abuse. However, while Nathans broaches these facets of slave life, he does not develop them beyond the experience of the Walker family to the broader context of slavery as an institution. Future scholarship on enslaved women and their culture of dissemblance would do well to explore these issues further while adopting Nathans's methodology of piecing together the correspondence of abolitionists and slave owners.

Overall, *To Free A Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* is an exceptionally strong contribution to not only nineteenth-century American history, but African American history and gender studies as well. The book's captivating prose and skillful historical contextualization of Walker's life make it accessible to a wide audience, including undergraduate students. Simply put, this is essential reading for scholars of American slavery at every level.

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Citation: Kristen Brill. Review of Nathans, Sydney, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36614

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