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Emily West. *Family or Freedom: People of Color in the Antebellum South.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 233 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3692-9.

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Ties of Affection: Relationships across Race and Status in the Antebellum South

In *Freedom or Family*, Emily West explores approximately 140 cases where black men and women, born free or formerly enslaved, entered into voluntary enslavement, relinquishing whatever liberties they had in order to maintain their family, community, and property. In this paradoxical system, "free people of color possessed an ability to request the removal of their wider liberties and move yet further away from idealized notions of 'freedom' and citizenship" (p. 156). While documents detailing voluntary enslavement are scarce, West argues that examining cases of voluntary enslavement, residency requests, and other similar petitions presents a larger, more nuanced picture of the free black and enslaved communities in the rural antebellum South. Indeed, she asserts that "kinship and broader affective communities among free people of color and the enslaved ensured ties of affection … and for enslavement petitioners families come first, above their desire for freedom" (p. 6). The "choice" to enter or sometimes reenter into bondage was not easy or simple. As southern legislation, which aimed at maintaining a biracial system by removing free blacks from the South or enslaving them, became increasingly oppressive, free blacks had limited options for remaining in the same place with their family.

White southerners wanted a social hierarchy based on the distinction and separation of black and white. Still, relationships formed between antebellum southerners that transgressed those boundaries. West utilizes residency requests and voluntary enslavement petitions to reveal both the strong "ties of affection" that "crossed the blurry divide between slavery and freedom," and the very real desires of free people to stay in one place (p. 74). Free blacks gave various reasons for their petitions of voluntary enslavement and residency, but all included their desire to maintain their relationships. Some were motivated by the fear that expulsion legislation passed in the 1850s and 1860s would force their removal from their still-enslaved families. Some wanted to hold on to the land they and their kin worked on. Others were driven by the prospect of not being able to provide for their children. Gender further complicated these decisions. For example, West argues that some of these documents reveal the existence of intimate relationships between free black women and white men. These women may have chosen to become enslaved rather than have to move away from their men and their kin, or they may have been "exploited into enslavement" by white men who convinced them that slavery offered them more than freedom could (p. 151).

Historians have been hesitant to make use of enslavement petitions because they are scant in number and the authors and their intentions are difficult to identify. West also posits that it may be too difficult to contemplate the idea that free black people would choose slavery. These concerns make the petitions improbable sources. West acknowledges these concerns and has attempted to address them, examining the petitions in conjunction with census records, legal codes and policies, plantation records, registers, narratives, and secondary sources. She uses these sources effectively and uncovers some of the previously unknown lives and stories of free blacks. Her findings challenge the existing historiography, particularly the work of historians Ira Berlin and John Hope Franklin, who have depicted enslavement petitioners as old poor free blacks who desired the "security" of bondage for their remaining years.[1] West argues that the most commonly cited reason for voluntary enslavement was made by young healthy individuals who wanted to remain with family. Her study demonstrates how extensive and powerful kin networks were for both free and enslaved blacks, and complicates the narrative of the antebellum South which had been previously characterized as having clear and rigid distinctions.

West's desire to critique the narrative and use sources that might make history "messy" is both advantageous and disadvantageous (p. 12). In relying on a limited number of sources, which are also limited in what they reveal, West is able to shed light on a part of southern black history previously unrecognized, but a close reading of these sources often leaves the author and the reader having to speculate about the reasons behind the choices made by free blacks. There are various instances throughout the book that rely heavily on speculation and there are many phrases like "may have" and "could have." Some readers may take issue with the numerous assumptions that West makes in establishing the relationships and reasons for voluntary enslavement. Connections and conclusions are sometimes constraining as they serve to maintain assumptions about the past. For example, it is problematic that West writes about relationships in primarily heteronormative ways. A story about Elizabeth Jane Bug is illustrative of this point. Bug had petitioned that she and her infant child become the slaves of Reverend William P. Hill. West then provides a few aspects of the narrative along with census material that lists Hill's four slaves by age and gender: "a thirty-eight-year-old woman; a twenty-five-year-old man; and two boys, aged sixteen and nine." From this West concludes that, "although Bug's motives are elusive, it is perfectly plausible to speculate that she was married to the twenty-five-year-old slave man" (p. 118). This assumption is restrictive and limiting. It is equally as possible that this young woman requested voluntary enslavement to remain with one of the other *female* slaves. Perhaps she wanted to become enslaved in order to be with a female relation, friend, or lover.[2] Or maybe Elizabeth wanted to maintain a relationship with the slave owner. We cannot know. The nature of these petitions means that the voices of free blacks often remain unclear, and although West acknowledges this, she sometimes makes great assumptions in reconstructing their lives and motivations that ultimately restrict how we can understand the past and the people in it.

Despite these considerations, *Freedom or Family* offers insight into a very complicated world, not only of race relations in the South, but also of class, gender, agency, identity, and family, and suggests that free blacks sometimes made choices to sacrifice what freedom they did have to be with family. Even though there are instances where West must fill in the gaps with speculation and assumption, she highlights the possibilities concerning the choices that free blacks made, providing them with a voice. Ultimately, even though the petitions for residency and enslavement can often not do more than make suggestions about the relationships that existed between slave and free and white and black, there is enough tantalizing pieces to imply that these connections existed.

Note

[1]. John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860,* 3rd ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), and Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

[2]. Recent trends in queer history have called into question the ways heteronormativity is unquestioned in modern history. For example, see Judith M. Bennet, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (January-April 2000): 1-24.

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