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The inhabitants of Mexico are used to the caravans of migrants that cross the country in search of a better future in the United States. The border between the United States and Mexico has always been a contested and porous space, where identities are constantly recreated. The book *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*, by Alice L. Baumgartner, tells the history of hundreds of African Americans who found freedom not north but south of the border, and the crisis that this freedom caused in the political institutions of the United States in the years before the Civil War.

The journey commences in the early nineteenth century. The book takes us along the border between New Spain and the United States, which later becomes the border between the independent territory of Texas and Mexico, and then the border between Mexico and the United States—a border that resulted from an expansionist war motivated by the defense of slavery, establishing relations between slavers from Louisiana and Texas, enslaved African Americans, US congressmen, and Mexican politicians. Baumgartner tells us about the development of abolitionist policies in Mexico and the ways these were taken advantage of by the enslaved in the United States and exploited by the Mexican government to declare itself morally superior to the powerful neighbor to the north, who became a defender of slavery. In Baumgartner’s words: “Antislavery was a powerful weapon in the hands of a weak government” (p. 74).

The author uses an impressive referential apparatus. She collects advertisements offering rewards for escaped slaves, American and Mexican newspaper material, diplomatic correspondence, and personal diaries. During her research she visited more than forty national and municipal archives. Some of her sources forced her to track and triangulate information that originated on one side of the US-Mexico border and was completed on the other side.

Baumgartner's style is elegant and fluid. Her pen connects the lives of the enslaved and their at-
tempts to achieve freedom with the political transformations that took place on both banks of the Rio Grande. Individual lives, processes, and systems appear in the narrative as meant to transform each other. It is an academic book with high informative value, written in an engaging manner that makes this work the kind of history book that laypeople buy in bookstores. The author generally begins and ends the twelve chapters of the book with anecdotes or exemplary stories that summarize or exemplify the central ideas of the chapter. The first chapter, for example, begins with a phrase typical of an adventure novel, “No one knew how the two sailors escaped,” creating a dramatic effect that motivates us to continue reading (p. 1).

The author overestimates—perhaps following the ideas of the historian Frank Tannenbaum—the real possibilities of slaves achieving freedom within the Spanish Empire and exposes an overly optimistic view of Spanish legislation, which was always extremely difficult to enforce in overseas territories. Tannenbaum defended the idea that Iberian slavery was more moderate than that of other colonial empires; this thesis, however, has been disproved by historians of plantation slavery. When comparing the situation of the enslaved populations of New Spain and the United States, Baumgartner appears to stand by Tannenbaum’s ideas.

In some passages and chapters, the author offers too many details about the formation of the North American states or about some individual trajectory of a politician or slave owner, causing the reader to lose the central thread of the narrative. Likewise, readers might appreciate a chapter that contained the experiences of African Americans who found freedom—no matter how contingent—in Mexico. These stories are scattered throughout the book in such a way that it is difficult to draw patterns, similarities, or comparisons between the various experiences of the escaped slaves.

Baumgartner uses twelve chapters to discuss the experiences of African American slaves fleeing first to New Spain, and then to Mexico, in search of freedom. The author chronologically unfolds the conflicts around slavery and the escape to freedom, the formation of Texas as a slave society and the defense of slave property, the war between the United States and Mexico, and the Civil War.

Closing the book, one realizes that they did not read a story about escaped slaves, at least not primarily about escaped slaves. Baumgartner has written—from the perspective of the development of the southern slave system, its quarrels with the abolitionist North, and the diplomatic conflicts with Mexico—a story about the contradictions that led to the American Civil War, rescuing in the process fragments of the life stories of some enslaved who fled to the South. The author also rescues the importance of abolitionism and the defense of antislavery principles in the foreign policy of the Republic of Mexico, a subject on which Mexican historiography has not abounded.

*South to Freedom* tells a binational history that captures the contradictions that arose around slavery in Mexico and the United States, leading to the Texas Revolution (1835-36), the US invasion of Mexico (1846-48), and the Civil War (1861-65). Due to its vast scope and the masterful way the author interweaves both national histories, this book should be on the shelf of any historian interested in the early history of the Mexican republic, American slavery, or the American Civil War. Furthermore, Baumgartner has changed decisively the one-sided vision that portrays the US-Mexico border, offering hope only to those crossing to the North. Freedom was also found South.
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