In the summer of 1822, an influential Black community leader in Charleston, South Carolina, planned a major slave revolt. Denmark Vesey, a freed Black man, and his followers allegedly sought to liberate thousands of enslaved workers in Charleston and sail to the Black republic of Haiti. The rebellion was stymied before it could even begin, and Vesey, along with five enslaved men, was tried and executed on July 2, 1822. The edited work reviewed here, *Fugitive Movements: Commemorating the Denmark Vesey Affair and Black Radical Antislavery in the Atlantic World*, demonstrates that systemic racism is part of the story of slavery and antislavery and that “reckoning with racism must include an understanding of how entwined racism and slavery were.” Furthermore, relying on Tina M. Campt’s definition of “fugitive,” in her *Listening to Images* (2004), as the refusal to stay in one’s “proper” place, the book’s essays ultimately argue that “all Black freedom movements are fugitive” (p. 2). Using this definition, then, all movements are also social in that movements emerge from specific communities, not just the mind of a single individual.

Editor James O’Neil Spady and the contributors within this edited volume are conscious of the language they use as well. For instance, despite debate surrounding whether the Denmark Vesey affair was a true insurrection or a result of over-stimulated white planter anxieties surrounding possible uprisings, Spady actively avoids using terms like “conspiracy” because of connotations with criminality and approaches the affair from the viewpoint of the Black men and women who participated. Spady furthermore articulates how slavery was the anchoring institution of American anti-Blackness, as “Black” came to connotate property as “white” eventually came to connotate citizen. Each scholar within this work grapples with the notion of “fugitive” movements, and each piece adds to the idea that Black freedom movements are a result of enslaved and free people of color refusing to accept their “place” in white America.

The essays in this volume are divided cohesively into two sections. The first, “Fugitive Direct Action,” tells the stories of direct resistance to enslavement. This section expertly draws in essays from Bernard Powers Jr., Spady, Anita Rupprecht
and Cathy Bergin, Lucien Holness, and Wendy Gonaver. Powers uses Julius S. Scott’s idea of the “common wind” (The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution [2018]) to explain how the Haitian Revolution influenced those like Vesey as narratives of resistance stoked white fears and Black hopes for freedom. Spady, meanwhile, argues that the 1822 Vesey conspiracy was a result of social networks, not just the act of Vesey. Spady illustrates this point by pushing the affair forward and analyzing the trials, using discursive analysis to show resistance and connections. Furthermore, Spady seeks to decolonize anti-racist and slavery movements to show that slavery attacked the sense of belonging for Black individuals and therefore “created fugitivity” (p. 60).

Rupprecht and Bergin focus on the 1831 Tortola slave conspiracy to demonstrate this moment’s connection to the wide context of Black antislavery resistance during the nineteenth century, arguing that “the plot illuminates the ways in which the circulation of alternative and overlapping forms of knowledge shaped the possibility of collective organization” (p. 73). They also argue that the Tortola slave conspiracy speaks to how the legacies of slave ownership in Britain are currently being understood, linking the past to the present. Holness reveals in his essay an “oppositional culture, shaped by place, that sought to protect and promote a broader notion of free soil” (p. 95). Examining numerous case studies, Holness highlights how Black Pennsylvanians understood and used Pennsylvania’s Free Soil law for their own purposes, challenging the claims enslavers made on their lives and using the legal system to fight for their freedom and shape it to fit their own ideologies about Black justice and freedom. [1] Finally, Gonaver concludes this section by juxtaposing two narratives about an 1862 slave rebellion on St. Simon’s Island in Georgia. While one narrative paints a story with characters and Black archetypes, Susie King Taylor countered this flatness and pushed for postwar accountability, “re-framing the past as a protest to the present” (p. 119).

Part 2, “Fugitive Memory,” explores memory and commemoration. This section shows, most importantly, that “historians have too often subsumed antislavery and antiracism within a narrative of the US state as the progenitor of putatively Western principles of freedom, equality, and opportunity.” Dismantling the idea that “Euro-American discourses inspired Africans to desire freedom,” these scholars point instead to how “narrating radical Black antislavery as part of the history of the unfinished struggle for Black lives” shows an acceptance for how radicals “were willing to attempt war with their captors if it became necessary for their escape” (p. 13). By publicly acknowledging slavery and antislavery movements, these essays convey the importance of public memory and the need to dismantle harmful narratives of a peaceful version of slavery that permeates into American history. William D. Jones looks at the dirge of Jean St. Malo to uncover the counter-histories told by Black men and women and the impact these counter-histories had on the lives of those who told them. Furthermore, Jones highlights silences in the archives as a Black space, shaped by enslaved men and women who resisted “despite and often because of the ever-present violence and coercion that upheld racial slavery in the Americas” (p. 134).[2]

Shawn Halifax and Terri Snyder look toward the memorialization of the Stono Rebellion of 1739 to show that memory of slave resistance is an ongoing part of the struggle against slavery. They also expertly dismantle America’s “false picture” of slavery and contend that resistance is ignored in the historical public memory because it overturns the idea of a harmonious relationship between enslaved people and their enslavers (p. 146). Samuel Ntwusu furthers the investigation into slavery and popular memory by examining the Builsa Feok Festival, arguing that Builsa warriors fought against enslavement from their own
critical perspective, rather than from colonial ideologies of liberty. Countering the popular narrative that enslaved people fought for freedom in America based on ideas of liberty stemming from the American Revolution, Ntewsu argues that “slave raiding hurt Buisla society, compelling it to resist or fight slave raiders,” as well as dismantling the idea that “until the intervention of Europeans ... communities did nothing to stop slavery and the slave trade” (p. 182).

Turning back to the Vesey affair, Robert Paquette focuses on Vesey's church. He describes the origin of the church, the extent of Vesey’s affiliation with the church, and the church's role in helping Vesey organize the rebellion. Harkening back to one of the main aspects of this collection, that fugitive movements are social movements, Paquette shows the deep connection between resistance and religion, as well as the historical memory beholden to Vesey's church. Douglas Egerton explores the silences in the archive as he recovers details of the lives of women, families, and survivors of slave conspiracies. He argues that while there is little direct evidence of women's involvement in rebellions, this might be because “powerful white men assumed that enslaved women were as socially and economically powerless as were their own wives and daughters” (p. 197). The reality was far from this “truth,” however, as Egerton shows that women’s absence from slave rebellions was a conscious result of African military antecedents. This compelling collection of essays ends with Blain Roberts and Ethan Kytle’s essay about how Vesey is remembered in Charleston by both Black and white members of the community. They show that, most importantly, it was the family of the deceased that was the first to preserve the memory of the rebels and that the Denmark Vesey Monument embodies change in Charleston, and America, as citizens slowly come to reckon with the memory and violence of slavery and antislavery movements.

Overall, this collection contains essays that are important for not only understanding past fugitive movements but also connecting the past to current cultural movements sweeping the world. By showing that “all Black freedom movements are fugitive” and reformulating Black antislavery as a fugitive social movement, Spady is able to “preserve a history of the Black radical tradition and link our contested present to the past,” as Manisha Sinha states in the foreword to the collection (pp. xii, xiii). This book would be a great addition for a graduate-level class focusing on antislavery or Black freedom movements in the Atlantic world. It would also be of interest to any scholar who has interest in the Atlantic world, especially those who focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, the connection the essays make between past anti-racist events and present-day Black freedom movements makes this a must read for anyone interested in today’s racial political climate. The only drawback to this book is that some essays have difficulty linking Vesey to their larger arguments. Still, the essays are easy to understand and digest and provide invaluable insight on how the past shapes our present. They provide the reader with an excellent source of information so that scholars and general readers alike can familiarize themselves with the historiography surrounding slavery and anti-racism throughout America’s history and the way these events shape our current Black freedom movements.

Notes


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