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Timothy D. Walker ed., *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. 248 pp.
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While scholars of slavery studies face many difficult obstacles in research, studies of the Underground Railroad (and other pathways and processes of freedom-seekers) face the additional challenge of researching those who deliberately tried to leave no traces. Enslaved people who resisted through flight tried to do so as inconspicuously as possible. Yet, because we typically think of running through forests and fields, the maritime pathways to freedom have been underappreciated by scholars as the centrality of the seas and rivers to economies and livelihoods has waned. The enslaved who fled overland made more contact with Underground Railroad agents and abolitionists thereby leaving more traces than those who stowed away in secret on board ships. (32) Yet, while an escapee on foot had to exert maximum effort under duress to cover miles in variable conditions, Cheryl Janifer Laroche stated simply that naval travel was consistent and rapid. (105) The focus of editor Timothy D. Walker's book on maritime marronage is overdue given that of 103 slave

narratives published before 1865, 70 of them detail the enslaved person's use of maritime travel. Presented by Megan Jeffreys, there are also 617 known fugitive slave advertisements between 1716 and 1860 on the "Freedom on the Move" database which document or suspect maritime escape throughout America.

Sailing to Freedom, analyzes the maritime Underground Railroad spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the coastal Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, New York, Connecticut, eastern Massachusetts, and the community of New Bedford. Despite omissions of southern Florida, the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans from the scope of analysis, the contributors thoughtfully recreate and explore occupations, routes, and strategies of escape for enslaved people in many interconnected east coast spaces. Overall, it is a compelling resource for histories of slavery and abolition in the eastern Atlantic seaboard for considering maritime travel, sea faring labour, and their roles in resistance.

The contributors' foci vary within each chapter from the Atlantic ports to the interior waterways depending on the geographic site and available data. While Walker foregrounds his focus on the American Underground Railroad and the pre-Civil War pathways of escapees to freedom in the north, the relationship between black communities and labour (bound or free) is present in various chapters. The collection, however, lacks a framing that maritime travel and escape for enslaved workers and freedom seekers was a widespread practice, a missed contextual framing due to such a strict adherence to the eastern United States. Exemplary, the fugitive slave advertisement genre from numerous

sites is peppered with threats to ship captains who were known to replace deserting crew members with enslaved stowaways or those passing as free sailors. Maritime marronage is evident in published advertisements from Quebec like Cloe's escape from Berthier by canoe in 1791.[1] In the same province, the enslaved African-born man called Joe was apprehended onboard a ship in the port of Quebec City in 1779 by a bailiff who had been paid by his enslaver William Brown.[2] In Halifax, Nova Scotia, an enslaved black runaway from South Carolina named Bill fled from his enslaver Michael Wallace who described him as "frustrated" in his attempt to board a ship for Newfoundland.[3] Attempted escapes and successes such as these, outside of the United States, are an important missing context which would have emphasized the prevalence and ambition of maritime escapes as a transatlantic phenomenon.

The ways escapees utilized naval travel was widespread and varied because costal shipping dominated the eastern seaboard. A compelling example considered by Walker is Frederick Douglass who used a steam ship in his 1836 escape to travel between Delaware and Philadelphia. (18) As both passengers and labourers, freedom-seekers capitalized on maritime infrastructure. Black boatmen or sailors on vessels big and small were ubiquitous and their presence allowed them to imagine their own escapes or to assist others. Some stowed away on ships, worked as dock hands to secret themselves on board, or outright bribed or pleaded with captains for passage as argued by David S. Cecelski. (63) While some captains in harbours like Maryland might

have been abolitionists, Cassandra Newby-Alexander considered that others weighed rewards for handing in "fugitives" against the monetary or labour incentives of allowing stowaways. (91-92) Mirelle Luecke argued that ports like New York from 1790 to 1820 were a target for its deep-sea international docks where escapees could work, seek further passage, or blend in with the growing free(d) black community. (124) Gradual emancipation laws in northern states meant that some freedom-seekers in New York came north from the Deep South, but also south from upstate or New Jersey.

Access to maritime infrastructure coincided profoundly with work and labour. In Norfolk and Hampton, Virginia, the centrality of north-south naval trade provided enslaved men working on steamships, schooners, or docks easy access to passage, news, and goods from northern ports. One escapee named Jackson from South Carolina slipped away from a Christmas celebration in 1846 and found work illegally as a wharf-hand knowing some enslavers hired out gangs on the docks. (37) Frederick Bailey (later Douglass) fled 1838 Maryland with his free wife, dressed as a mariner and carried seaman's documentation borrowed from a free black sailor. (27) In northern regions like Massachusetts analyzed by Kathryn Grover, some Quacker whaling companies welcomed runaways as good, hard-working men eager to be absent for many years to avoid slave catchers and retaliation. As haulers of goods or passengers, ferrymen who were usually enslaved navigated rivers and islands while enslaved artisans maintained ships with skills like caulking, refitting, rigging, and

construction. Cecelski considered that the harsh policing of plantation gangs could not translate to maritime work, where mobility and independence were more important than surveillance. (67) Thus, black dock and maritime workers moved freely, were knowledgeable of waterways, and had connections to domestic and international trade and communication networks.

Since resistance as flight and naval work were highly gendered domains, runaway enslaved females were disadvantaged through a lack of access to related labour skills and are underrepresented in the archive and subsequent literature of maritime marronnage. Despite this, some enslaved women were known to pursue maritime travel as stowaways, while others disguised themselves as male sailors and labourers and worked on docks to access ships. (30) Others found adjacent work in harbours and ports as hucksters, launderesses, street vendors of fish, oysters, or corn, tavern maids, or associated industries like prostitution. Luecke hypothesized that other enslaved women in maritime cities were domestics in households, isolated from community and collaborators, but may have made connections with dock workers in their errands like hauling water. (129) Thus, enslaved black women could disguise themselves amongst free(d) working women in proximity to the docks. While an overt gendered analysis is largely absent, some contributors do highlight various women while men and masculine trades feature heavily throughout.

Between 1820-1845, the recruitment of the naval industry began to change. Previously ship captains selected their crews from connections or

boarding houses, but Len Travers followed the impact of a transition to use "crimps" addressing the high turnover of ships. (189) As captains sacrificed control over their crews, "crimps" who were mostly white men, dominated the service to fill ship's rosters and discriminated against black sailors. By mid-century, black mariners had lost important gains and employment security to racist practices. At the same time, Grover argues that northern states grew increasingly dependent on southern plantation crops like cotton, which by 1830 fed northern textile mills as cotton plantations expanded to the southern interior and gulf states. (164) With a domestic trade to fuel the westward growth of plantation slavery, many took it upon themselves to escape north.

The ubiquity of free(d) or enslaved black sailors and dock hands meant several states required identity papers or badges, as in Wilmington, North Carolina discussed by Cecelski which issued a curfew to avoid opportunities for enslaved escape. (64) Several Negro Seamen Acts were passed between 1822 and 1856 to prevent connections or abolitionist communications between the enslaved in the south and northern sailors or free(d) blacks. Michael D. Thompson followed the passage of a South Carolina inspection law for New York ships in 1841, suspecting many enslaved to have left ports like Charleston on an established north-south trade route. In the Carolinas, Cecelski argued that Great Dismal Swap logging companies dodged scrutiny and policing of their employment rosters even though they knowingly hired and harboured runaways.

For many enslaved or free(d) men, women, and families, life along maritime trade and infrastructure was an invaluable point of access to stable employment and fast transport. Newby-Alexander argued that it provided special labour passes, training in skilled artisanal trades in shipbuilding, and ways to travel out of state if needed. (85) The networks of docks and waterways importantly blurred lines between freedom and bondage. These environments provided cover and the means to support oneself. In Baltimore, Laroche found that between 1747-1790, 80 percent of escapees were males aged between 15 and 34. (103) Runaways were able to hide amongst working black populations as a "subterfuge" because black mariners, workers, and women were commonplace in coastal cities north and south. Luecke argued that the ubiquity of black maritime labourers and communities meant disguising oneself as a sailor or borrowing or forging seamen's protection papers allowed runaways unfettered access to urban-maritime spaces. (133) In fugitive advertisements analyzed by Laroche, some sailors fled distinguished not just by their dress but by "holes in his ears," a bodily modification associated with devoted seamen. (112)

Free(d) black men sought out naval environments for careers at sea, with its freedoms and opportunities that outpaced those on land. Luecke found an 1806 Rhode Island ship that offered wages by skill, not colour, so experienced sailors received eighteen dollars a month while a white cook or novice seaman received fourteen dollars a month. (132) While there were some positive aspects

to maritime life, analysis of New Bedford, Massachusetts by Travers revealed that by 1838, most of the black population did not own property, instead living as borders or renters. The housing status for mariners was precarious. While onshore black workers were more likely to live in a home, even if it was rented. (191) Of about 1400 black people in the city, only fifty owned real estate. For runaway enslaved people starting new lives as sailors, the specialized fisheries or whaling of harbours like New Bedford or "fugitives Gibraltar" offered employment, housing, and security from slave catchers. (181) These promises attracted freedom-seekers for new lives at sea with the background of a supportive yet still unequal community on terra firma.

Notably, the book overall and its contributors lack a foregrounding of environmental factors, limitations, and opportunities. Here I mean how did the environment impact access to ports? How would storms or hurricanes in the south and freezing waters in the north impact ports, trade, and access to maritime infrastructure for escapees and labourers? How would these factors have inhibited travel and access to maritime spaces, particularly for historic north Atlantic ports likely not in continuous operation in winter? These are important considerations that were not discussed or examined. An attention to the specificity of climate and the environment would have meant discussing the possibilities for escape along frozen interior waterways rather than traversing land. While contributors unearthed personal stories, an analysis of the climatic conditions of these spaces is important for narratives of resistance and access

beyond the Underground Railroad. As well such attention foregrounds the lived day to day experiences of these spaces and people.

Overall, the contributors of *Sailing to Freedom* have unearthed personal histories of individual runaways and communities, as well as labourers and trades not often associated with slavery or black labour-history. Chapters are tightly focused geographically, well researched, and convincingly argued. Walker does not provide insights into future directions of research, but American tropical sites that were omitted may be one future pathway of research in the maritime Underground Railroad. Branching out more broadly, there are maritime connections to explore both northward and throughout the Caribbean, and South America where enslaved and free(d) black sailors, fishermen, harbour hands, and boat navigators contributed to the economies, colonial trade, and life on the water.[4] While slavery played out all over the Americas, these case studies from various states and sites remind us of the ubiquity of black labour, the skilled trades that were learned, and the tenacity of those that forged new lives for themselves. What is most commendable about the collection is that it often centres black protagonists without being overly fixated on white abolitionists. Thus, it explores black labourers and communities and their major role in assisting their freedom-seeking brethren explained by Elysa Engelman. (154) What is illuminated most in these chapters, are stories of black communities helping one another in the rivers, docks, and ships of the Atlantic as they lived and worked, or bravely endeavoured to start new lives elsewhere.

[1] For more on Cloe's escape see: Charmaine A. Nelson, "He 'is supposed to have with him forged Certificates of his Freedom, and Passes': Slavery, (Im)mobility, and the Creolized Counter-Knowledge of Resistance," special issue: *Humanity on the Move in the Era of Enlightenment and Colonisation*, Global Intellectual History, eds. Bruce Buchan, Linda Andersson Burnett, and Ingeborg Hovik, vol. 7, no. 2, 14 June 2022.

[2] Thérèse P. Lemay, "Joe," Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 15 December 2024) https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/joe_4E.html

[3] Michael Wallace, "Twenty Dollars Reward," The Weekly Chronicle, 8 February 1794, vol. vii, no. 402, p. 1; MFM 8165, Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, Canada.

[4] For instance, see: Linda M. Rupert, "Navigating Between Enslavement and Freedom: Runaway Curaçaoan Slaves and their Descendants in the Spanish Colonial Legal System," The Precariousness of Freedom: Slave Resistance as Experience, Process, and Representation, ed. Charmaine A. Nelson (Concord, Ontario: Captus Press, 2024)