

Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance

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Review

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LaRoche, Cheryl Janifer *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance*. University of Illinois Press, \$25.00
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Free Black Communities and Resistance

In *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad*, American Studies scholar Cheryl Janifer LaRoche “weave[s] together history, archaeology, and landscape studies” (15) to examine the role of black communities, churches, and fraternal organizations in building and operating the Underground Railroad in the Old Northwest states of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Lamenting that much of the existing scholarship focuses on the efforts of white abolitionists, she aims to put black activists and resistance at the center of the story. “With and without the assistance and cooperation of White America,” she notes, “Blacks came together collectively and individually seeking freedom from servitude and an end to slavery. In the face of devastating racial oppression, people of color had been escaping bondage since the advent of New World slavery centuries before the rise of the Underground Railroad” (3).

LaRoche organizes her study into three sections. In the first, she explores four specific black settlements that played a significant role in the Underground Railroad – Rocky Fork and Miller Grove, Illinois, Lick Creek, Indiana, and Poke Patch, Ohio. In the second, she examines what she calls the geography of resistance, assessing how those fleeing slavery made use of the landscape in their pursuit of freedom. In the final section, she investigates the role of black families, churches, and communities in establishing and perpetuating the Underground Railroad over several generations.

LaRoche deserves praise for her effort to situate free blacks firmly at the center of the scholarship on the Underground Railroad. She also makes contributions to that body of literature. Notwithstanding the traditional focus on the homes of white abolitionists as the primary stations along the route, for

example, LaRoche marshals evidence to suggest that the iron furnaces that dotted the southern regions of the Old Northwest were likewise central places of refuge for the fugitives. "Identifying iron furnaces as critical to the success of Underground Railroad operations sets this region apart and adds another pathway to the geography of resistance," she writes on page 82. "Parallel accounts can be found in other iron-producing parts of the country....[I]ron ore-containing regions in Pennsylvania and Maryland, for example, have similar stories to tell."

Unfortunately, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* suffers from weaknesses which significantly undermine its utility. First and foremost, LaRoche is an imprecise writer who never really succeeds in clearly articulating her argument. Nor does she provide a serviceable definition of the central concept of the book, the geography of resistance, seeming to imply that any natural or cultural landscape feature over which fugitive slaves passed in their quest for freedom was, *ipso facto*, an ally in that quest without ever really explaining how or why this was so. Finally, by choosing to address the four case studies before sufficiently introducing the overarching conceptual framework and the various historical actors, she creates confusion and redundancy. Had she reversed the order of the book, she might have been able to use the case studies to flesh out the issues and themes developed at a higher level earlier in the book. Without a clear argument, a serviceable definition, and a reaffirming organizational structure, LaRoche is ultimately unable to articulate the substantive, methodological, and theoretical implications of her findings.

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