

Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation

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Review

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Beyond Freedom grew out of a conference organized by David Blight, Gregory Downs, and Jim Downs at the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. Each chapter in this short volume aims to raise new questions and provoke new discussions about the field of emancipation. Emancipation studies for the past few decades has been dominated by what the editors call the freedom paradigm, the story of a deeply contested but “ever-expansive concept of freedom” (3). Although stories of black political mobilization fit neatly into this narrative, the editors question whether it still makes sense to use such a framework. Instead, a defining feature of the new emancipation scholarship showcased here is the very “distance between legal rights and the capacity to enforce those rights” (4). In other words, not the meaning of freedom but the ability to make freedom meaningful. To make the rights of freedpeople felt took far more than the scratch of a pen in distant Washington, and indeed presented—and continues to present—a historical problem of the first order. A defensible freedom, the editors and contributors argue, depended upon inclusion in a protected group. Thus, in moments of suffering, historians should see not simply an absence of freedom but a “lack of power and belonging” (4).

Leading historians of emancipation variously explore the compelling framework set up in the introduction. Early chapters by Richard Newman and Susan O’Donovan offer strong chronological challenges to the freedom paradigm. Newman’s chapter suggests that longstanding ideological struggles over the meaning of emancipation in the Atlantic world since the late eighteenth century laid the intellectual groundwork for the “creatively destructive acts that updated the grammar of emancipation” during the Civil War (19). Likewise urging a long view of emancipation, Susan O’Donovan contends that, by keeping the years of slavery and the years of freedom analytically separate, historians do profound injustice to the lives and aspirations of

African Americans. Abiding the wartime divide jeopardizes our understanding of the “recently freed as fully realized political people,” with the “chilling” implication that “what women and men managed to make of and for themselves in bondage has no bearing on what they aspired to and accomplished as freedpeople” (27). These critiques echo earlier calls by Ira Berlin and Steven Hahn, among others, to widen the lens of emancipation in America before and after the war years.

Nevertheless, the Civil War opened opportunities and dangers for enslaved peoples in the South and precipitated new meanings of rights, equality, and inclusion in postbellum America. Chandra Manning’s chapter, “Emancipation as State Building from the Inside Out,” for example, explores how “the wartime circumstances under which African Americans exited slavery placed black women as well as men in newfound positions to call on the federal government to protect and defend individual rights,” therefore transforming old presumptions about what the nation-state could and should do for its citizens (61). Kate Masur’s chapter on “the problem of equality” likewise grapples with the issue of rights in the new nation-state, though in ways that differ from the old tenets of the freedom paradigm that unduly sidelined political battles over equality. Demands for racial equality, she argues, easily folded into accusations of “social equality”—seen by most Americans as antithetical to the “very foundations of collective life” (85). Defining insiders and outsiders frequently summoned violence in the turbulent years of Reconstruction. For Justin Behrend, the “irregular warfare” that characterized postbellum (as well as antebellum) violence was less about diminishing freedoms than it was “to literally expel that group from the body politic or at least to drive them to the margins of society” (93). Evoking as it does issues of continuity, community, and the intervention or non-intervention of the state, violence against freedpeople is rightly central to many of these essays.

So, too, is what historians make of that violence. Meditations on historical writing by Thavolia Glymph and Hannah Rosen compel historians towards close, sensitive readings of human suffering, taking care to foreground and analyze the political expression of violence while avoiding tendencies to normalize it. The sheer ubiquity of suffering freedpeople in the Civil War era is itself the greatest challenge to the freedom paradigm and its “compelling stories of agency, determination, and hope.” As Carole Emberton pointedly argues in her chapter, “the narrative of freedom that historians collectively have written in the last thirty years or so is the ultimate cleaning project, sweeping away the vestiges of slavery and mopping up the blood, sweat, and

tears of bondage” (137). Contrasting the sanctioned outpouring of grief over the white Civil War suffering and dead—an outpouring very much alive today—with the still-ongoing silencing of African Americans’ misery over their own suffering and dead, Emberton suggests that grief itself was politicized in the age of emancipation. And, in turn, historians ought to pay attention to the politics of grief so as not to “perpetuate the same aversions or denials when it comes to tidying up our narratives” (143).

The final chapter, Jim Downs’s “Emancipating the Evidence,” interrogates historians’ use of the Freedmen’s Bureau records. As essential as they have been to our understanding of emancipation, Downs rightly argues that an uncritical reliance on Freedmen’s Bureau records has led historians to emphasize the “novelty of emancipation” to the detriment of seeing how “it evoked familiar themes or drew on past experiences” of enslavement (166). Moreover, because “the bureau records have produced very specific knowledge about the South,” historians using them have unwittingly reified the categories of labor, education, and medicine the bureau created to bring order to a fundamentally chaotic situation (175). We do so at the risk of losing not merely the “voices” of freedpeople, but their perhaps nonconforming worldviews and experiences as well.

Each contribution to *Beyond Freedom* recognizes emancipation not as a single moment of liberation sharply and easily contrasted with what came before, but rather a halting, incomplete process. And, as these essays make clear, that process was also gendered, violent, grief-ridden, and inseparable from issues of power and inclusion. Presented as humble provocations to further discussion, the essays collected in this invaluable volume will surely be considered much more by historians of emancipation in the future.

Dale Kretz is an assistant professor of African American history at Texas Tech University. He is currently working on a book manuscript on freedpeople and pensions in the age of emancipation.