

The Freedom Voyage Paradigm

O paradigma das travessias de liberdade

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MARCUS REDIKER'S *Freedom Ship* offers a bottom-up abolitionist history of Atlantic ship-based escapes from slavery in the nineteenth century United States. These "freedom voyages" emerged through the self-activity of enslaved people in pursuit of freedom while depending upon an anti-slavery network connecting port cities across the United States. Through the freedom ship, Rediker demonstrates that the tall ship, which was central to the rise of commercial capitalism, slavery expansion, and the transatlantic slave trade, could also be temporarily repurposed as a vessel for the emancipation of the once enslaved. From this perspective, *Freedom Ship* charts a counter-history to the Atlantic slave trade voyages central to Rediker's foundational *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007). While the transatlantic slave ship powered racial capitalism, the freedom ship enabled no such profits. Instead, the freedom ship is a name that charts the passage from slavery to freedom made possible through the subversive actions of the once enslaved.

The freedom ship, according to Rediker, remains overlooked in abolitionist study despite an abundance of scholarship on the Underground Railroad. The metaphor of the Underground Railroad first produced by the anti-slavery movement directed attention toward the land-based routes of freedom seekers. Slaveholders' representations of freedom seekers in so-called runaway advertisements depended upon crude images of running "fugitives" on land. As Rediker further notes, "terracentrism" - the dominant tendency to believe that human history happens primarily on land - has narrowed historical imaginations. Maritime sources

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remain understudied. However, if this convergence has resulted in underrepresentation of freedom voyages, this does not mean such voyages were historically insignificant. Instead, Rediker estimates that as many as fifteen to twenty thousand freedom seekers escaped slavery by sea in the years between 1830 and 1860. The scale of maritime self-emancipation was vast enough that the book only focuses on one of five systems of U.S. maritime escape—the Atlantic system. In addition to the Atlantic, a second system connected New Orleans, Mobile, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea; a third moved up and down the Mississippi River and its tributaries; a fourth spanned the Ohio River; and a fifth was based in the Great Lakes.

While North American ship-based escapes from slavery existed since at least the seventeenth century, Rediker focuses on four central phases of freedom voyages during the nineteenth century. The first phase in the nineteenth century development of freedom voyages occurred during the 1820s through a historical conjuncture that included U.S. trade expansion and the emergence of a new anti-slavery radicalism. The period between 1836 and 1843 was characterized by an escalation in battles between freedom seekers and enslavers. Subsequently, a new anti-slavery militancy emerged between 1844 and 1850 that was inspired in part by the direct action of sailors including centrally Jonathan Walker. The final phase followed the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The Fugitive Slave Act was met by a decade of militant direct action with ship captains embracing the cause of freedom while at the same time also commercializing escape through charging fees for escape from slavery.

Freedom Ship represents these four phases through chapters focused on the strategies of enslaved people, the infrastructure of commercial capitalism, individual biographies, and port cities connected to the freedom ship. The first chapter, “The Art of Escape,” presents techniques used by enslaved people to subvert the social order of slavery. This art of escape included disguise and deception, hiding aboard a ship, shipping oneself aboard a vessel, purchasing passage from a sailor or captain, and sailing one’s own small vessel away from slavery. The art of escape further depended upon a series of skills including the ability to quickly assess situations and individuals and to construct alternative personalities to aid in escape. For the once enslaved Edward Hicks, learning the art of escape entailed a process of what he described as “studying” the conditions to gain freedom.

The art of escape was embedded within a wider social world built upon networks within and between enslaved populations, free Black communities, and free Black sailors who along with a “motley crew” of waterfront workers supported escapes. David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) reveals what Rediker describes as the reverse circulation of this social world. Walker’s militant anti-slavery *Appeal* moved from North to South through the networks of sailors smuggled and sometimes sewn into sailors’ clothing by Walker himself. Freedom seekers relied upon similar networks that enabled the circulation of Walker’s *Appeal* in the slaveholding South but moved in the opposite direction, from South to North.

The art of escape freedom seekers developed operated through and against the infrastructure of global capitalism. The ports, networks, and workers essential to the smooth flow of commercial capital created conditions for the disruption of this logic. As Rediker writes, “every commodity chain was necessarily a chain of human labor” and “every trade route was a potential route” for escape. The circulation of commodities also reflected the routes seized by freedom seekers escaping slavery by sea. From this standpoint, *Freedom Ship* reveals another dimension of the instability of a capitalist system that enslaved people and workers together exploited in agitation against slavery.

Freedom Ship documents maritime escapes from the first published narrative to the largest in 1855 when twenty-one enslaved people escaped from Norfolk. Four central chapters provide biographical accounts of individual lives involved in and impacted by the freedom ship and the waterfront. In chapters on the authors of the most significant slave narratives in United States history— Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs—Rediker reminds readers of the importance of escaping slavery by sea in their lives. Douglass’s life was shaped by the waterfront, particularly in the port city of Baltimore where he was enslaved and labored. Knowledge of the waterfront informed his escape and Douglass dressed as a sailor to avoid detection. As recounted in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs and daughter Fanny engage in a waterfront escape and are taken aboard and put in a small cabin on a vessel that travelled from Edenton, North Carolina through the Albemarle Sound and Great Dismal Swamp Canal before arriving in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Together, these chapters serve as a reminder of the importance of the sea in facilitating emancipation.

Two subsequent chapters examine the white sailor-abolitionist Jonathan Walker and the Black abolitionist William Powell. These chapters provide deeper perspective on the abolitionist networks that made freedom voyages possible. Walker was at the forefront of a new abolitionist militancy in the 1840s and notoriously in 1844 his palm was branded “s.s.” for “slave stealer” after he sought to facilitate the escape of seven Black men from slavery in Pensacola, Florida. According to Rediker, Walker was a proletarian who was radicalized at sea and his actions brought militant direct action for escaping slavery by sea to the forefront. Rediker describes the New York-based Black abolitionist William P. Powell as a “waterfront intellectual and activist” who was involved in mutual aid projects to support Black sailors through the Colored Sailors’ Home which he operated. The Colored Sailors’ Home would support Black sailors in a range of ways beyond offering a place to stay including finding ships and also abolitionist literature. Powell further facilitated the freedom efforts of individuals including Mahommah G. Baquaqua who was taken aboard a transatlantic slave ship from Dahomey to Pernambuco before being shipped to Rio De Janeiro and ultimately to New York City. Powell was also involved in agitating against anti-Black sailor legislation including the Negro Seaman’s Act which targeted Black sailors in the South. For Powell, this agitation was based in part on a conviction, Rediker contends, that Black sailors in the South were most likely to support Black freedom voyages.

Freedom Ship's final chapters examine the northern port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York in the decades leading up to the Civil War. These port cities were nodes in the infrastructure of escape and also served as centers for militant anti-slavery organizing, particularly following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850). Freedom seeker Anthony Burns found a vessel that would carry him out of the South and would travel to Boston. However, in Boston, Burns was apprehended by the slave catcher Asa O. Butman and returned to Virginia despite the protests of Boston abolitionists. This encroachment of slavery's power in the anti-slavery port city would further inspire northern resistance and Burns himself would ultimately gain his freedom and return to Boston. At the same time, slave states would pass laws to limit the possibility of escaping to northern port cities including Virginia's "An Act Providing Additional Protection for the Slave Property of this Commonwealth" (1856). The act empowered the police to search maritime vessels for enslaved people seeking to escape from slavery to northern port cities. Together, these were part of the lines drawn between slavery and anti-slavery that passed through port cities on the eve of Civil War and emancipation in the United States.

Freedom Ship demands readers view freedom beyond the land-based routes of the Underground Railroad and through the sea and waterfront. The book provides a unique historical reconstruction of emancipation from the bottom-up. Chapters further historicize limits to the freedom made possible by the freedom ship for those who escaped from slavery and lived in the northern United States. This history emerges at the intersection of the subversion of slavery's power led by enslaved people while also confronting the national character of anti-Black racism in the U.S. empire-state. This convergence also reveals limits to the freedom made possible by escaping slavery by sea in the United States. In Justin Leroy's *The Lowest Freedom*, a range of thinkers in the nineteenth century Black radical tradition reflect on the limits of United States freedom as the "lowest freedom" providing additional perspective on the constrained form of U.S. emancipation. As history from below, *Freedom Ship* provides an indispensable account of resistance to slavery through the paradigm of the freedom ship which the enslaved salvaged out of the ruins of racial capitalism.

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