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Michaël ROY, Marie-Jeanne ROSSIGNOL & Claire PARFAIT (eds.), *Undoing Slavery. American Abolitionism in Transnational Perspective (1776-1865)*

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REFERENCES

Michaël ROY, Marie-Jeanne ROSSIGNOL & Claire PARFAIT (eds.), *Undoing Slavery. American Abolitionism in Transnational Perspective (1776-1865)*, Paris, Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2018, 163 p., ISBN: 978-2-7288-2782-4, 12 €

- 1 It suited European colonial powers to benefit economically from slavery while keeping it largely at arm's length. Colonial policing and plantation management were outsourced where possible, and many colonists aspired to make a fortune and return to the imperial centre to enjoy it. As Ashli White writes, 'the fiction of European freedom was built on the foil of American slavery'.¹ A key part of that freedom was the ability to step away from and disclaim responsibility for violence taking place in the Americas. Europe was eventually forced to cut its colonial losses during the period of unprecedented global upheaval, 1776-1865, which is covered by this volume. Following the war of independence, in 1783 Britain recognized its former North American colonies as the United States. Four decades later, France finally recognized the independence that the Republic of Haiti had claimed for its own in 1804. Latin American independences followed. Yet despite largely achieving freedom from colonial rule, the problem of slavery and its pervasive impact across the Americas was not solved quickly or easily. The title of this volume, *Undoing Slavery*, is thus a well-chosen one, recognising abolition not as a moment of triumph, but as a contested, multi-stage process in which a diverse range of actors intervened over more than a century.

- 2 *Undoing Slavery* follows the transnational turn in the history of American abolitionism over the past two decades, that has firmly challenged national historiographies and Anglocentric visions of how slavery was ended. A new generation of scholars in the US including Manisha Sinha, whose work prefaces this volume, have refined the case for abolition not as a solely national campaign or bilateral collaboration between British and US actors, but as a transnational movement that involved complex, extended multilingual and multiracial networks of people, ideas and texts circulating in the Atlantic world. Roy, Rossignol and Parfait rightly put the case in their introduction for recognition of a longer timeframe, more diverse cast and wider global reach of abolitionist practices. Their parting call for a more in-depth and integrated approach to understanding the role of the Haitian revolution in ending transatlantic slavery is also highly relevant both to the subject at hand and to studies of global abolition; as Robin Blackburn put it, it was not finally ‘English or American abolitionists’, but the half a million enslaved Africans of Haiti who opened ‘the first major breach in the hugely important systems of slavery in the Americas’.²
- 3 The chapters of this volume, however, focus predominantly on efforts to combat US slavery. They share a focus on transnational connections, foregrounding the circulation of people (the underground railroad to Canada; African American emigration to Haiti) and the international circulation of texts in anti-slavery print culture. The importance of the *longue durée* approach to understanding American abolitionism is particularly evident in the opening contribution of Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, which focuses on the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in early US print culture. She examines the role of the abolitionist Anthony Benezet in particular, situating his arguments within contemporary debates on the slave trade. She shows how French-born Benezet was influenced by European travel writings on Africa in circulation at the time, which in turn enduringly shaped the image of Africa put forward by subsequent anti-slavery writings.
- 4 Emigration is considered in the second chapter by Claire Bourhis-Mariotti, who evaluates the decision taken by some African Americans to leave the United States in the light of controversial organizations of the time like the American Colonization Society, and subsequent pan-Africanist ideas. Bourhis-Mariotti’s chapter clearly shows the range of opinion and debate on emigration in the African American community and explains how and why Haiti gained favour as a destination, prompting two nineteenth-century waves of departures. The forging of networks to facilitate transnational African mobility at a time when it was being heavily restricted by legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is explored in the third chapter by Sandrine Ferré-Rode, on Canada and the Underground Railroad. Ferré-Rode considers this history through the lens of Canadian state TV, revealing the reach but also the limitations of national broadcast media in ‘doing’ public history. The effect of the media focus on the story of the railroad, which has tended to reinforce a positive national narrative of freedom, home, a warm welcome and family has resulted, according to the author, in other stories of Black lives in North America not being told.
- 5 The two central chapters by Claire Parfait and Michaël Roy consider the role played by literature in changing hearts and minds on slavery among the American public. The huge international success of the most famous American antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is rightly considered by Parfait for its significance for the US antislavery movement and its international impact. The importance of the campaigning literature

such as testimonies, mailshots and pamphlets is demonstrated by Roy, who also highlights lack of access to print, and the alternative ways and networks that African American abolitionists used to get their voices heard. North American abolitionism undoubtedly gained a significant international audience via lecture tours and slave narratives, as in the case of Frederick Douglass. It seems clear though, as in the earlier case of Benezet highlighted by Rossignol, that abolitionists in the United States were also influenced by the international context. European and Haitian anti-slavery writings found an audience in the US, albeit on a much smaller scale than bestselling authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.³ Translation also played a role in this transatlantic circulation of texts, with for example Joseph Lavallée's abolitionist novel *Le Nègre comme il y a peu de blancs* serialized in a prominent US periodical in 1791 and Abbé Gregoire's *De la littérature des nègres* translated into English and published in Brooklyn in 1810.⁴

- 6 The fifth chapter, by Yohanna Alimi-Levy, 'The spirit of the age is on our side', is key in making some of these connections clear. A new generation of transatlantic antislavery relationships forged in the 1840s is explored, from the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London to Europe's revolutionary moment of 1848. By the end of the decade, abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic were hopeful that following France's abolition of slavery, pressure would increasingly be exerted on the Southern states to end slavery in the US. The final chapter by Hélène Quanquin focuses on the relationship between women's rights and abolitionist movements in the wake of the American civil war. Her approach in 'looking backward' from the vantage point of 1865, where accounts of the struggle for abolition often end, enables the reader to revisit American abolitionism through the contribution of women. From African American activists such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, to the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and numerous women in the transatlantic sphere like Maria Weston Chapman and the British abolitionist Harriet Martineau, the diversity and importance of roles played by women in abolishing slavery are threaded through the preceding chapters of the book.
- 7 This volume takes on something of a challenge to extend the transnational reach of US abolitionism in just 163 pages. Its concise chapters and useful bibliography make it very accessible to advanced level students among other potential readers. The editors and contributors offer targeted insights into recent historiographical trends, highlighting the diversity at the heart of the movement that worked to put an end to American slavery. The project highlights the contribution of sometimes-overlooked African American individuals operating in the transnational abolitionist sphere, such as Prince Saunders, who worked to bridge Anglophone and Francophone worlds via a deep interest and investment in the 19th-century Haitian anti-slavery project. The volume is also an example in practice of transnational scholarship on abolition, prefaced by an American scholar, Manisha Sinha, and written and edited by a group of Americanists working in French universities. Together their work brings a different perspective to some of these intellectual traditions beyond the Anglophone scholarly sphere. Elements such as 1848, the European 'year of revolutions', as turning point, and the incorporation of a French-language historiography into a book on US abolitionism are examples of this transnational project in action.

NOTES

1. Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution. Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*, Baltimore / London, John Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 17.
 2. Robin Blackburn, "Haiti, Slavery, and the Age of the Democratic Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, No. 63/4, 2006, p. 643.
 3. On the reception of Haitian texts in the early United States, see Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative. Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011, and Marlene Daut, *Baron de Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
 4. Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution...*, op. cit., p. 127; Henri Grégoire, trans. David Bailie Warden, *An enquiry concerning the intellectual and moral faculties, and literature of Negroes*, Brooklyn, Thomas Kirk, 1810), discussed in Bernard Gainot, "L'abbé Grégoire et la place des Noirs dans l'histoire universelle," *Gradhiva*, No. 10, 2009, pp. 22-39.
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