

*A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* edited by Karolyn Swardz Frost, and Veta Smith Tucker

Funké Aladejebi

Volume 110, Number 1, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044330ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044330ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Aladejebi, F. (2018). Review of [*A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* edited by Karolyn Swardz Frost, and Veta Smith Tucker]. *Ontario History*, 110(1), 113–115.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1044330ar>

of sexual activities and spiritualist interests, transform, perhaps permanently, the public image of King from dull political leader to “Weird Willy.”

Meanwhile, King’s executors and archivists also faced national security problems; copies of the unreleased diary pages were turning up in the black market, some of them possibly revealing wartime (and cold-war) cabinet decisions. Indeed, one whole volume of the diary—covering the latter half of 1945—disappeared and has yet to be recovered.

All in all, *Unbuttoned* reveals a fascinating world of bureaucracy, of feuds and rivalries, of public accountability and personal privacy. Much more than a book about the exposing of King, it is also an ad-

mirable study of evolving Canadian social and political values.

A final comment: King may well have inhabited both a public world and a private world, but who among us does not? For Mackenzie King to become “Weird Willie” had less to do with his behaviors than with our learning about them. If comparable detailed evidence of the private lives and inner thoughts of, say, Macdonald or Laurier or Trudeau were suddenly to be discovered, would not our evaluation of them also change? King is unique, not for his living “a double life,” but for his leaving so much documentation for both his lives.

Chris Raible  
Creemore, Ontario

*A Fluid Frontier*  
*Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the*  
*Detroit River Borderland*

Edited by Karolyn Smardz Frost, and Veta Smith Tucker

Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. 360 pages. \$34.99 softcover. ISBN 9780814339596. Ebook available. ISBN 9780814339602 ([www.wsupress.wayne.edu](http://www.wsupress.wayne.edu))

*A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* offers an engaging and insightful approach to understanding the importance of American and Canadian relations along the Detroit River Borderland. Speaking to an absence in historical scholarship discussing the interconnected nature of antebellum African American and African Canadians, editors and contributors of this volume are concerned with the ways national boundaries and borders restructured the parameters of ‘freedom’ in North America. Arguing that the Detroit River region was part of a large and com-

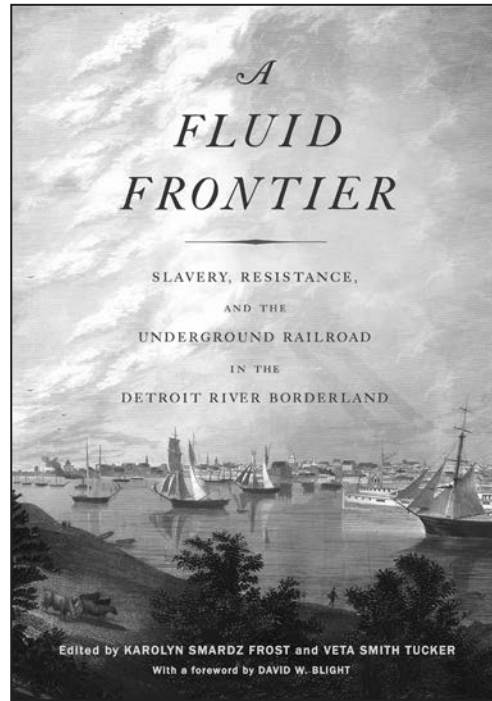
plex transnational project, which included black and whites in Canada and the United States, *A Fluid Frontier* expands the frameworks of abolitionist thought and activism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (5).

Offering a richness of archival and community sources that lend to an expanded view of Underground Railroad scholarship, contributors urge readers to consider the role that black abolitionist leaders, community members and individuals had in ensuring the successful movement of free and enslaved persons through the Detroit borderland. Repositioning

the importance of black agency and activism in the United States and Canada, this volume emphasizes “the dynamics of black transnationalism in the Underground Railroad era” (9). Highlighting the ambiguous nature of national boundaries during this period, this work facilitates a rethinking of homeland and freedom within the context of jurisdictional irregularities over territory, property and persons.

The collection is divided into five parts, within which there are a total of thirteen chapters. The volume broadens the approach to historical writing through its integration of both academic and community historians to reveal the complexity of black life in the borderland region. Part I, “Crossing Boundaries” argues that the prospect of freedom inspired resistance and activism from black communities along both sides of the Detroit River (15). Veta Smith Tucker, Karolyn Smardz Frost, and Bryan Prince analyze extradition cases that revealed the tenuous nature of freedom and enslavement in borderland regions. Tucker, Smardz Frost, and Prince all demonstrate the intricate ways black populations in Canada and the United States used legal and jurisdictional shifts to enact and/or ensure their freedom. As part of this analysis, the inclusion of intersecting relationships between Indigenous and black peoples in the Great Lakes region strongly demonstrates that the Underground Railroad was one of many elements used in establishing freedom in Canada and the United States (32).

Part II reviews the significance of community cohesion and black settlement in both Canada and the United States. Religious, educational and political institutions reflected a transnational network of communication and leadership that allowed for the sustainability and preservation of black



communities. Here, Irene Moore Davis, Barbara Hughes Smith, and Adrienne Shadd document the lives of community and religious leaders that helped to facilitate the settlement of black families in the region. These authors also demonstrate the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination in border towns that made (re)settlement difficult for many black families (89). The uniqueness of this section is in the ways each author uses church papers, letters and community reports to determine how religious and community institutions not only reflected transnational cooperation and institution building, but also offered spaces for antislavery activism and vigilance committees to develop (103).

Afua Cooper, Roy Finkenbine, and Margaret Washington discuss the importance of gender, transnational activism and abolition in their examination of “Inspired Transnationalists.” Offering three unique

chapters that cover a breadth of sources including newspapers, magazines, and abolitionist papers, contributors reveal an intricate system of community activists and leaders who advocated on behalf of free and enslaved black populations across geographical boundaries. They argue that this activism facilitated a brand of antislavery awareness and culture specific to the region (140). In many ways, these scholars demonstrate not only the physical movement of black leadership throughout the region, but also provide a detailed picture of the ways the Detroit River borderland offered a place for black abolitionists to meet, exchange views and debate issues concerning the fight for racial equality. Connecting intersectionality with the movement for freedom in the region, the role of women's grassroots activism is also highlighted in this section and situates women as important transnational antislavery actors who challenged traditional gender roles and expectations of the time (170).

In Part IV of this edited collection, Kimberly Simmons, Larry McClellan, Debian Marty, and Carol E. Mull challenge readers to consider how families were (re)structured through movement and migration in the borderland region. They argue that a transnational network of people of colour on both sides of the Detroit River allowed for the preservation of family and kinship bonds before and after the American Civil War. Writing against the tradition of Underground Railroad scholarship, this section offers a compelling argument about black families and individuals who left Canada and returned to the United States as a form of "reverse migration" (217).

Finally, Louis A. DeCaro Jr. closes the volume with his analysis of abolitionist John Brown. Brown's meetings and desire to enlist black leadership in the Detroit

River borderland emphasizes the significance and importance of the region in the fight for black liberation in the nineteenth century (17). Although this is the shortest section of the edited collection, DeCaro Jr. makes a clear argument about the strategic placement of African Canadians and African Americans in providing support and assistance to antislavery campaigns.

While the volume is successful in connecting historical actors together through each chapter, the collection could additionally explore interconnected arguments about how processes of racialization, antislavery and activism shaped the region. For example, the strong emphasis on black leadership in the area leaves readers wondering about the parameters of class, education and access and how this may have framed activism in the Detroit borderland. In other instances, the strong presentation of historical and archival data could be strengthened by nuanced arguments around their significance to Underground Railroad scholarship.

Nonetheless, *A Fluid Frontier's* strongest contribution is in its disruption of broader historical narratives that constructed the Underground Railroad as a series of clandestine routes, often organized by white abolitionists, who assisted fugitive slaves in escaping the Southern United States. Its insistence on a transnational system of collaboration and support trace black activism and resistance as happening before a formal Underground Railroad system developed. The volume's convincing presentation of evidence, and integration of community and academic scholarship strongly situates the Detroit River borderland as an important part of North American history.

Funké Aladejebi  
Trent University