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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

On Agency, Freedom, and the Boundaries of Slavery Studies

Jessica Millward

Audra A. Diptee, *From Africa to Jamaica: The Making of an Atlantic Slave Society, 1775–1807* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2010)

Max Grivno, *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor Along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790–1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press 2011)

Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011)

Damian Alan Pargas, *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2010)

Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press 2010)

Discussing chattel slavery necessitates interrogating freedom. Freedom by definition is "the condition of being free or unrestricted; personal or civil liberty; absence of slave status; power of self-determination; quality of not being controlled by fate or necessity."[1] The scholars reviewed in this essay ask questions about freedom from the perspective of the enslaved. How did enslaved people define freedom? Was freedom achieved only through legal mechanisms such as manumission? Was freedom experienced in spaces such as the cabins or in places such as the border states? To what extent were larger political movements shaped by the enslaved pursuit of freedom? Conversely, to what extent did larger political movements shape not only the definition

1. *Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus* (New York 2001), 321.

Jessica Millward, "On Agency, Freedom, and the Boundaries of Slavery Studies," *Labour/Le Travail*, 71 (Spring 2013), 193–201.

of freedom but the possibility, as well? Freedom can be found in nearly every aspect of chattel bondage examined in these works – being truant from the plantation for a period of time, resisting sexual exploitation by choosing who to love, and challenging one's status by bringing a freedom suit to court, to name but a few. As the five works reviewed here suggest, slavery and freedom were inextricably linked, and enslaved agency (or lack thereof) often determined divergent experiences of autonomy and liberation from bondage. This article discusses enslaved agency, manifestations of freedom in slavery, and the limits of both as categories of analysis. I argue that a singular definition of freedom and its manifestations does not exist, because the conditions and experiences of enslavement were not monolithic.

In his remarkable essay "On Agency," historian Walter Johnson argues that the historian's overemphasis on agency threatens to minimize the brutality that inscribed the lives of the enslaved.[2] Johnson is especially critical of the notion that scholars can "give" a subject agency rather than understanding subjects as architects of their own actions. Johnson argues that overemphasizing the historian's "discovery" of black humanity inadvertently supports the hegemonic assumptions about black inferiority that scholars precisely want to negate.[3]

Each of the authors reviewed here address agency in their formulation of freedom. Damian Alan Pargas, for example, tackles the agency debate in his introduction by viewing agency through the lens of the enslaved family. Pargas suggests that diverse labour forces impacted how enslaved people exercised agency and more importantly, how this agency shaped slave families. (202) Pargas notes that the very existence of enslaved families "worked against agency as (they) kept people in place." (7) Enslaved families were flexible, but this flexibility was dependent upon choices and opportunities determined by respective labour regimes. Ultimately, Pargas aims "to avoid an overemphasis on agency." (9) Pargas' ability to present members of enslaved families as individuals who realized their familial ideals amidst the horrors of slavery allows the author to strike a middle ground in the debate. (9)

Rather than strike a balance, Max Grivno and Amrita Chakravarti Myers point out the limits of agency. Grivno notes that enslaved men and women in Maryland achieved freedom largely because slave owners found a way to meld slavery with the most attractive aspects of free labour. (151) By allowing enslaved people to delay their freedom or that of their children, owners inevitably tied future generations to slavery. Once freed, it was assumed, then African Americans would have greater opportunities. Yet as Amrita Chakrabarti Myers argues, for free black women agency fell somewhere between life choices and the legal apparatus. (18) Therefore, when faced with real-life situations, Myers suggests that historian's "agency had its limits." (11) Indeed,

2. Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *The Journal of Social History*, 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–123.

3. Johnson, "On Agency," 114.

Damion Alan Pargas agrees in that "agency should not be confused with success." (8)

In perhaps a more daring intervention in the agency debate, scholar Audra Diptee explores agency within the often-taboo space of African participation in the Atlantic slave trade. Though Diptee discusses African participation in the trade, she is even handed. She also explores enslavement from the standpoint of captives. By providing evidence of acts of resistance by New World Africans, Diptee argues that the enslaved "showed that they were more than the ultimate human tool of the plantation labor system." (6)

All scholars agree that enslaved agency was undercut by the slaveholder's power. Diptee argues that race, power, and perception influenced encounters between enslavers and the enslaved during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. For recently manumitted and freeborn black women, Myers argues, "the reality of their lives indicates that absolute power is as much a myth as absolute freedom." (18) Indeed, if not careful, the coupling of agency and autonomy may produce a version of "freedom" that runs the risk of constructing an experience largely unrecognizable to the enslaved themselves. In particular, Myers rejects historians' tendency to describe free blacks as "nominally free" and "quasi free." Doing so, argues Myers, perpetuates a type of "historical violence," as manumitted blacks understood themselves to be, in fact, free. (12)

One would think then that the artistic imagination allows for an interpretation of agency which is ultimately freer and less constrained than that produced by the historical imagination. Christina Sharpe refutes this notion, however. Sharpe explores the post-slavery subject and the confluence of power, race and memory. The work opens by discussing violence inflicted upon the enslaved. Specifically, Sharpe centres the discussion of agency against the "everyday violences that black(ened) bodies are made to bear." (4) Viewed together then, all five works offer a challenge to delve further into how power shaped agency, and vice versa, how agency informed, among other things, perceptions of power and powerlessness. In doing so each author also balances agency with manifestations of freedom.

Post-Civil Rights era studies of slavery suggest that manifestations of freedom were both temporally and ideologically wedded to the Age of Revolution (1775–1832). Audra A. Diptee's gripping socio-economic study, *From Africa to Jamaica,* traces the embarkation of captives at Jamaica Point, Sierre Leone to their disembarkment in Jamaica, one of the toughest labour regimes in the Americas. The demographic evidence Diptee employs offers three compelling contributions to the scholarship on the Age of Revolution. The first is that Diptee argues that the preference for prime male captives has been overstated. To bolster this point, the author juxtaposes findings from the 2009-revised version of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (http://www.slavevoyages.org) with analyses of the enslaved experiences from the perspective of men, women, and children. This multilayered approach allows the author to present

a human history of lives lived and lives lost. (3) By pairing Clio-metrics with social history, Diptee's first chapter in particular allows the reader to grasp the multiplicity of viewpoints developing in the "Atlantic crucible." The assertion that trans-Atlantic interactions were fortified in a crucible that was fluid and mutually constructed offsets the notion that culture emanated solely from Europe. By showing how people, goods, and cultural traits flowed back and forth in the Atlantic world, Diptee demonstrates that "trans-Atlantic influences ran not only east to west but also from west to east." (1)

It is Diptee's subtle sub-argument about how slavery shaped the Age of Revolution that proves to be one of the most innovative aspects of the work. Rather than the American Revolution shaping notions of liberty, Diptee suggests that the American Revolution shifted shipping patterns. The shift in trading routes created food shortages in the New World and the enslaved populations were those most adversely affected. This lens allows Diptee to focus solidly on health among Africans during various stages of the Middle Passage. This contribution expands a growing literature on health and disease during slavery.

Because Diptee's study centres on the experience of captives, one would think this work lacks a cohesive discussion of "freedom." To the contrary, when Diptee does discuss freedom, it is quite instructive. Diptee denies the notion of slavery as social death: "Regardless of the nature of their response to slavery in Jamaica, enslaved Africans clearly arrived at the island with their own ideas and beliefs." (7) She focuses on the attempts at self-liberation such as those employed by persistent runaways like Coobah, an Igbo woman. (103) Diptee also provides a lengthy discussion of the marroons of Jamaica, calling them "freedom fighters," whose presence could not be ignored by slave catchers, slave owners, and the enslaved themselves. (113) Perhaps the most sobering discussion of freedom is Diptee's concluding remarks that the Age of Revolution was fundamentally linked to human bondage. Indeed, Diptee leaves the reader with the haunting fact that the British slave trade was but one of many trans-Atlantic trades. (118) Rather than living in the ideological or teleological sphere of slavery and freedom, Diptee reminds readers that enslavement in Africa remained well after it was abolished in the Americas. Diptee's final analysis is open-ended not only because it addresses the persistence of slavery in Africa, but also because this line of argument requires a further interrogation of African customs, colonialism, and capitalism. This, of course, would be another book entirely.

Diptee suggests that place – whether it was Jamaica Point, Sierre Leone, or the island of Jamaica – significantly shaped one's experience in slavery. Author Max Grivno pushes the argument of place further. In *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line 1790–1860,* Grivno argues that place influenced one's relationship to freedom. To Grivno, the location of Maryland as a border state, its economic market privileging enslaved and free labour, and its occupation by federal troops during the Civil War all made understanding black/white relations much more complicated. Grivno's

research on enslaved and free labour in six Maryland counties (Baltimore, Carroll, Cecil, Harford, Frederick, and Washington) places him in a developing cohort of scholars of Maryland who argue against the exceptional nature of Baltimore City as the only place where slavery and freedom coexisted. The entire state of Maryland, "the tangled intersection where labour systems collided and where local and national forces converged[,] was the setting where the slavery-free labour boundary emerged." (22) Grivno draws from a range of local county court records such as land records, judgment records, planter correspondence, and legal tracts, ultimately placing Maryland's history of slavery and freedom in dialogue with scholars interested in capitalist labour systems.

Grivno divides the work into five chapters, each discussing a form of labour found in Maryland where whites and blacks often intersected such as during the harvest season, when whites and free blacks hired out to area farmers. To Grivno, the market determined chances for freedom. Grivno pays particular attention to how cycles of debt hastened owners' decisions to either hire out their enslaved labour or liquidate their human capital through sales. Speaking particularly of the Panic of 1817, Grivno writes that during times of economic crisis landowners in Northern Maryland "haltingly and sometimes grudgingly embraced free labor." (70) Grivno does a balanced job of showing how the cycles of debt shaped free and enslaved labour alike and redrew the landscape of slavery and freedom. (70) He argues that "slavery and the various manifestations of free labor may have remained distant components of the work force but employers found innumerable ways of slicing them together" (199) Yet Grivno's use of freedom via the traditional employers versus employee framing renders a narrative that often runs the risk of overstating the ways in which skilled labour equated a degree of egalitarianism among enslaved, free black labourers, and white labourers.

In essence Grivno is confined by his own paradigm. He argues that from a labour management perspective, "labor not status united and divided" black and white life. (21) This rationale may be accurate from the employers' perspective but for the enslaved person, it was race and status which shaped one's life. Grivno's positioning of access to freedom as an end result versus a proactive force engineered by the enslaved, is also problematic. Grivno misses subtle opportunities to make the enslaved voice more vocal in this narrative. Concentrating on slavery and free labour strictly from a labour management perspective means that Grivno sometimes misses compelling stories of enslaved people who won their freedom through a variety of channels such as buying their freedom outright, or negotiating for their freedom in the future. Combined, this approach contradicts Grivno's argument that "slavery could be hammered into something resembling free labor." (198)

Whereas Grivno centres on manifestations of freedom in one state, Damian Alan Pargas interrogates slavery and freedom across three regions: the tobacco-producing centres of Fairfax County, Virginia, the mixed-grain producing plantations of South Carolina, and the sugar plantations of St. James Parish,

Louisiana. In *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South*, Pargas argues that place by itself did not determine the formation and manifestations of freedom. It was the social space of the enslaved family which determined how enslaved freedom was imagined and how it was achieved. For Pargas, the family served as "dynamic social units that were formed and existed under different circumstances across time and space." (204) Pargas isolates five methods for determining how crop cultivation affected family life. These are familial contact, childcare, family-based internal production, marriage strategies, and long-term stability. (4) It is significant that Pargas centres his study on the enslaved family. As the first formal institution developed by Africans in America, the family served as the cornerstone to forming a collective identity.

To Pargas, manifestations of freedom were regional and defined by access to family. For example, on the tobacco-producing farms of northern Virginia, enslaved family life was plagued by long periods of separation due the cross-plantation structure of marital unions. (205) Marriages in the mixed-grain economy of South Carolina's Georgetown District, in contrast, tended to be more co-residential in structure. In the sugar-cane plantations of Louisiana's St. James's parish, there were both co-residential families and single-parent families. (205) Thus for Pargas the public and private function of the enslaved family was also determined by social processes such as migration, crop cultivation, and proximity to family members.

For Pargas, the lens of family as a form of autonomy and freedom also means addressing the delicate nature of the economy of the enslaved. Pargas (similar to Diptee and Grivno) attaches significant importance to the cultivation of farming plots among the enslaved. Farming private plots allowed the enslaved to grow more food for their families and to possibly barter or sell their goods. The proceeds from these sales often translated into small material goods on one end or the purchasing of freedom on another. In Chapter Four, "Family-Based Internal Economies," Pargas reveals that just as region determined the opportunities for familial contact and stability, so too did it influence the opportunities of enslaved families to participate in the informal economy. Pargas provides evidence that enslaved families in Fairfax County, Virginia were denied the time and the means to participate in the internal economy. (112) Bondpeople in South Carolina achieved a greater degree of autonomy as they were allowed to work for themselves and thus partially provide from themselves. (112) Likewise, in the grueling sugar-producing environment of St. James's parish, the enslaved lacked large amounts of freedom. Nonetheless, they "took advantage of various labor incentives to work for their own gain on Sundays and other holidays." (113) Pargas presents enslaved families as diverse in composition yet remarkably similar in their goals of freedom and if not freedom, some autonomy.

One of the most important contributions found in these volumes is the idea that freedom was not an abstraction; freedom was experienced. In *Forging*

Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston, Amrita Chakrabarti Myers analyzes the tenuous legal and financial position of African American women. Her analysis is based on 86 petitions for freedom filed by women of colour in Charleston, South Carolina. Myers traces the manifestations of freedom in three sections: glimpsing freedom, building freedom, and experiencing freedom. Myers is among a number of scholars in the last three decades to focus on the importance of women and the manumission process. To this end, Myers dialogues with scholars of manumitted women in cities such as Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans throughout the study.

Myers is consistently attuned to the tenuous position occupied by black women in slavery and after they are freed. She argues that freedom by itself was not enough to determine success in antebellum Charleston. She writes, "Manumission without the ability to improve one's social standing, acquire financial resources and consolidate familial security was a poor imitation of liberty." (3) Freedom meant more than legal manumission alone. It included earning a fair wage and the "performance of respectability." (14) "Black women used all the resources at their disposal to craft a freedom of their own imagining as opposed to accepting the limited confines of a freedom shaped for them by white southerners." (2) As Myers' research shows, free black households (similar to the enslaved households in Pargas's study) reflected the thin line between enslavement and freedom.

Myers' concept of earned citizenship presents an interesting debate on the history of free black women. Free black women were not allowed to vote and as Myers writes, "the reality of antebellum black women's lives thus did not allow them to engage in activism the same way their descendants would." (11) Nonetheless, Myers presents micro histories of such women as Cecille Cogdell, Sarah Sanders, and Margaret Bettingall – women who against all odds faced the challenges of being free women in the slave South. As interesting as these caveats are, Myers leaves the readers wanting to know more about their lives. How did each understand the guiding themes of liberty? Success? Were some women more exceptional than others? Finally, Myers' focus on Black women in South Carolina is often muted by her tendency to draw comparisons with Black women in places like Baltimore and Philadelphia. That leads to the question of whether or not freedom and manumission were part of a Southern process, an urban process, or both? These are minor quibbles. Yet, more of these types of questions provide even more depth to this important study – a study that, may I add, has already won a number of book awards.

As each author demonstrates, freedom was made and remade from the Age of Revolution to the Age of Emancipation. Myers demonstrates that freedom is an experience; Pargas and Sharpe that freedom is "imagined"; Grivno that it is "gleaned"; and Diptee that freedom in Africa was eclipsed by slavery in the Americas. Despite these nuances, each suggests that freedom lived in the hearts of enslaved Africans.

What, then, are the boundaries of slavery studies? Are the boundaries of studies on slavery and freedom temporal as suggested by Myers and Diptee? Are they geographical as suggested by Grivno and Pargas? Or do the boundaries of slavery extend beyond the plantation? Or even beyond the historical and into post-colonial terrain? In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making the Post-Slavery Subjects,* Christina Sharpe demonstrates that rigid boundaries do little to explain enslavement and the post-slave experience. In four concise chapters Sharpe surveys an assortment of visual and written texts of the 19th and 20th centuries. Sharpe argues that the possibilities of black freedom are enmeshed in the violence of the past. These violences "are markers for an exorbitant freedom, to be free of it marks of a subjection in which we are all forced to participate." (4) To illustrate this point Sharpe's introduction focuses on one of the most famous scenes of violence in slavery texts, the abuse of Frederick Douglass' Aunt Hester. Sharpe could have easily chosen Douglass's altercation with the overseer Covey. By choosing Douglass' ability to witness violence, indeed to gaze upon it, Sharpe is pointing to how post-colonial subjects not only understood violence but inserted themselves into the story as well.

Sharpe is particularly focused on the ghosts of slavery. When dealing with the ethereal aspects of violence the author asks, "What is the nature of the haunting and what are some of our "inheritances"? (13) In some ways, Sharpe is suggesting that the presence of the ghosts of slavery, be they actual or imagined, speaks to Diptee's argument that the slave trade is just as much as the lives lived as it is about those lost.

Would any of the enslaved recognize themselves in Sharpe's works? I believe so. But we can push it even further. For example, in rescuing Sara Baartman from her icon status and writing the story from her eyes, Sharpe shows "the myriad of ways that her redemption as incorporation has allowed continued injustice to be rewritten as freedom." (109) Therefore, Sharpe presents a "problem of liberation," which is different than the one articulated differently from Myers who isolated the problem of freedom as something which can be glimpsed, achieved, and experienced. Though the demonstration of freedom is different, both the violence and the threat of violence underlay both works.

For example, implicit in both Myers' and Sharpe's arguments is the view that violence extends past slavery. Sharpe argues that acts of horror, particularly those enacted on the black body extended past slavery. In fact, violence is visible, as Sharpe writes, "through further colonialism, imperialism and the relative freedoms of segregation, desegregation and independence, whether that body is in the Caribbean, the Americas, England or post-independence Africa." (3)

In sum, the works presented here challenge us all to rethink how we understand enslaved agency and freedom. The work of Diptee, Pargas, and Grivno approach traditional debates of enslavement such as the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, the enslaved family, and the simultaneous existence of slavery and freedom. It is the work of Myers and Sharpe that incorporates

the most nuanced innovations of gender history. Nonetheless, it is difficult to recommend one work over the other, as all five are strong in their respective sub-fields of history. The task then is for the reader to decide for him or her which book expands and limits the boundaries of slavery and freedom.