Cities of refuge : slave flight and illegal freedom in the American urban South, 1800-1860
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Summary in English

In the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of enslaved people escaped slavery in the US South. The bulk of historiography has hitherto focused on those who left the slaveholding states in their endeavors to reach freedom. In reality, however, the majority of slave refugees stayed within the South. *Cities of Refuge: Slave Flight and Illegal Freedom in the American Urban South, 1800-1860* is the first study to put permanent southern-internal slave flight center stage. Internal refugees tried to camouflage themselves among the (free) African American population. This population had been growing since the Revolutionary era, especially in urban areas, which made it possible for refugees to find shelter and to live permanently in the midst of slaveholding territory. **This dissertation investigates how and why urban spaces of freedom arose, and how refugees from slavery navigated them.**

The freedom these people found was of an illegal nature because it had no basis in law. This focus on illegality significantly contributes to the historiography on runaway slaves, which has been very much concentrated on legal forms of freedom. Refugees who fled across international borders or to the US northern states—finding legal freedom on so-called "free soil"—were often the subject of heated political discussions. This produced reams of written sources for historians to poor through. The success of illegal freedom seekers, by contrast, depended to large extent on their capability to stay invisible before the authorities, and they are, as a consequence, largely absent from the historical records.

A variety of "explicit" and "implicit" sources nevertheless illuminates the urban dynamics of illegal freedom between 1800 and 1860, the so-called antebellum era. Slaveholders placed runaway slave advertisements in newspapers, wrote about absconded slaves in plantation managements books, and discussed their lost "property" in private correspondence, petitions, and court documents. Another bulk of evidence stems from people who were neither slaveowners nor slaves, for example, jail and police records. Legal testimonies, autobiographies, and interviews are sources that represent the voices of enslaved people. "Implicit" sources include newspaper articles, legal petitions, legislative ordinances, political speeches, travel accounts, population censuses, church registers, municipal reports, and city directories. By consulting and combining diverse evidence, this study attempts to counterbalance the silence about southern slave refugees in the historical archives and in historiography.

Based on four major cities as case studies, this dissertation analyzes social, cultural, political, and economic processes that made illegal freedom possible. Drawing from material from Baltimore (Maryland), Richmond (Virginia), Charleston (South Carolina), and New Orleans (Louisiana), the size of the urban free black populations, degrees of urbanization, and work opportunities receive particular attention. *Cities of Refuge* is one of few studies that put

the focus on the experiences of runaways *after* they ran away. It detects and discusses factors that helped enslaved people integrate into urban communities. Precisely because of this, it is of foremost importance to scrutinize the black communities as well.

The emphasis on the refugees' experiences and the dynamics of the free black population as receiving societies is also reflected in the chapter synapsis. **Chapter One**, "The Changing Landscape of Freedom," identifies and discusses the four factors that precipitated slave flight in the antebellum period: (1) diminishing opportunities to legally exit bondage; (2) the expansion of slavery; (3) the intensification of the domestic slave trade; and (4) the rapid growth of the free black population. The analysis of the last point reveals that free African Americans increasingly faced tight legal restrictions and that many possessed an illegal status, too. The concept of illegality is therefore crucial to understanding the conditions of large parts of the free black population—and, by extension, of the runaway slaves who joined them. This finding will run through the rest of the dissertation. This chapter, hence, complicates the conventional historical view that sees the free black population as a legally homogeneous mass.

While slavery was expanding, it became more feasible for a small group of enslaved people to make a successful flight attempt. And although escaping remained extremely risky, the geography of freedom in the South was growing. **Chapter Two**, "A Mobile Elite: Profiling Southern Refugees," introduces the concept of the "mobile slave elite" and presents a profile of urban freedom seekers. Answering the question who these refugees were and why and how they could escape, this chapter highlights mobility, gender, age, and professional skills as factors that were relevant to southern slave flight. It includes, among others, sections that scrutinize the slave-hiring system as a facilitator of flight, the bolsters and obstacles refugees encountered during their escapes, and the practicalities of passing as free. Furthermore, this chapter links the decisions of runaways to stay in the midst of a region of legalized slavery to family ties, support networks, and their sense of a regional belonging. Another finding is that women, although numerically still less represented than men, played a much more significant part in this type of slave flight compared to flights out of the slaveholding South.

The next two chapters address the integration experiences of slave refugees in the cities that help explain why it was possible for them to stay free. **Chapter Three**, "Finding Refuge," deals with the social and spatial integration. Important is the observation from chapter one that slave refugees joined urban black communities that were in large parts of an undocumented status. With emphasis on these receiving societies, this chapter scrutinizes the interplay of spatial segregation, societal exclusion, and criminalization of African Americans in rapidly urbanizing contexts. It shows that these different elements were both supportive and limiting for the creation of spaces of freedom. Higher segregation led thousands of illegal city dwellers be able to remain in their own circles. At the same time, the legislative framework as well as the supervision in all cities grew tighter. Ironically, more control from above translated into less social control from within as white people increasingly retrenched from black people. This shows that it was not only people of African descent who consciously constructed spaces of freedom, but that also white people inadvertently contributed to this. The limitations that the free black communities and everybody who joined them faced, however, were a severe setback concerning the freedom runaway slaves were looking for, as the degree of freedom refugees and other undocumented received depended to large parts on the freedom of their receiving societies. This gave cities of refuge a bitter by-taste and diluted the quality of freedom.

Chapter Four, "From Slavery to Poverty," sets out an array of opportunities and difficulties that illegal freedom seekers encountered in their integration in the urban labor markets. Refugees from slavery became part of the working classes in southern cities by either passing as free black people or self-hired slaves. The best-case scenario for men and women would have been to capitalize on the skills and expertise they acquired under slavery. Yet, antebellum urban labor markets were coded along race and legal status. This had consequences for slave refugees, who felt the effects of both codes. In order to navigate the spaces that the labor markets offered, they had to be able to decipher the coded working areas and worksites. Especially male runaways who, according to their profile, were often trained in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, integrated into the economy below their capacities. In order not to raise attention, they depended on a low profile and a ready payment.

The mentioned codes were dynamic and developed over time, generally to the disadvantage of people of African descent. In this light, the chapter also discusses the repercussions that the integration of refugees had on the societies that received them. The latter forfeited even more of their already severely restricted leeway by counting among their group large parts of illegal and, hence, powerless workers. It was a combination of economic and extra-economic (formal and customary law) forces that drove black people to the bottom of the economic system. Strikingly, capitalist development, by relying on flexibility and low labor costs, created conditions that were beneficial for the undocumented.

Building upon these insights, **Chapter Five**, "Illegal but Tolerated," shifts the focus, which has been on the refugees themselves, to include different interest groups. Slave refugees had a truly paradoxical position in the political economy of the four cities. Although they could not count on much sympathy on the part of the white population, their presence was largely condoned. This chapter shows that economic developments, democratization, and foreign immigration brought about a restructuring of civic power and visions around black labor. Slaveholders were traditionally responsible for legislation regarding racial control in the cities. Over time, however, financiers, merchants, and industrialists grew stronger and came to fill in important political positions on local level. The more powerful this capitalist middle class became, the more absorptive the respective city grew vis-à-vis slave refugees as easily exploitable wage workers. This was, however, not a linear development. Towards the end of the antebellum era, the lower and the lower-middle classes achieved a stronger political voice. Because they were confronted with black labor as a direct competition, their political emancipation had negative impact on illegal spaces of freedom, which increased the discovery of slave refugees.

Social experiences varied from place to place depending on legal frameworks, economic factors, and social developments. Economically thriving and demographically growing urban centers formed the most promising cities of refuge. In the period under analysis, New Orleans was at the beginning the place that received most slave refugees. The restructuring of the administrative apparatus after the inclusion of Louisiana into the American republic, the division of the city into Franco- and Anglophone office holders, and the cultural variety of the population created a constellation in which refugees did not attract much attention. Baltimore, the city with the highest growth rates and governed by industrialists, surpassed New Orleans and became in the second half of the antebellum era the dominant city of refuge. Charleston must have received more freedom seekers than Richmond in the first decades, of which most

refugees tried to pass as self-hired slaves. Yet, the high presence of slaveholders produced the tightest geography of control of all four cities. Due to Richmond's development into an industrial center, it became over time a more attractive city of refuge than Charleston. As a place in which slaveholders and industrialists were most symbiotic, Richmond came to absorb slave refugees who both passed as free and as self-hired slaves.

The chapters illustrate that the similarities between the case studies are more striking than the differences. Large in number, slave refugees influenced local communities, the labor markets, and municipal politics, but political discussions about their presence were extremely limited. All these findings demonstrate that spaces of freedom in southern cities arose through an interplay of different actors: Freedom seekers and their helpers constructed them deliberately. State authorities produced a large population of illegal people that camouflaged refugees. Local authorities did not attribute sufficient importance to the topic because it did not hold high priority, a fact from which urban employers benefitted. The growing white middle classes, driven by the desire to distinguish themselves from poor people, constructed physical places that supported the invisibility of illegals. Slaveholders could not prevent flight under these circumstances. The paradox of the time was that many of the developments that benefitted refugees and created spaces of freedom were not nearly as beneficial for legally free black Americans.

In a nutshell, *Cities of Refuge* paints a nuanced picture of slavery, slave control, and freedom within the changing social geography of the American South. Furthermore, this dissertation shows that the process of illegalization has a longer history than migration studies argue. It therefore sheds new light on freedom, inequality, race, resistance, citizenship, democracy, and capitalism as large themes that continue to engage American society until this day.