



Summer 2018

[Review of] Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker, eds., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. Pp. 286. \$34.99 (paper).

Vanessa Holden
University of Kentucky, vanessaholden@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/history_facpub



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

Repository Citation

Holden, Vanessa, "[Review of] Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker, eds., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. Pp. 286. \$34.99 (paper)." (2018). *History Faculty Publications*. 12.
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/history_facpub/12

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

[Review of] Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker, eds., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. Pp. 286. \$34.99 (paper).

Digital Object Identifier (DOI)

<https://doi.org/10.1086/698555>

Notes/Citation Information

Published in *The Journal of African American History*, v. 103, no. 3.

© 2018 Association for the Study of African American Life and History

The copyright holder has granted the permission for posting the article here.

KAROLYN SMARDZ FROST and VETA SMITH TUCKER, eds. *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*

Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. Pp. 286. \$34.99 (paper)

The Underground Railroad lives in the American popular imagination through tales of courage, narrow escapes, and bravery on the part of ordinary citizens. Hidden passageways on remote farms, clever hiding spots disguised as everyday objects, coded language in quilts, and the nineteenth century's technological marvel, the railroad, all meet, creating a lush mental landscape for many Americans. Recently, runaways and the network of African Americans, along with their white allies, who helped fugitives on their journey to freedom have been the subject of a hit television program on WGN Chicago titled *Underground*. With it, public interest in the topic of US slavery, antebellum antislavery activism, and the history of the Underground Railroad has peaked. In the spring of 2017 a new national park, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Park, opened on Maryland's eastern shore. Tubman was also recently announced as the new face of twenty-dollar bank notes in the United States, again contributing to the popular attention paid to the importance of the fugitives and the communities that helped them to escape enslavement. But even as this history is being dramatized and institutionalized, historians have so much more to uncover about the Underground Railroad.

In recent years, works such as Eric Foner's *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (2016) and Cheryl Janifer LaRoche's *The Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* (2014) have persisted in separating truth from myth by highlighting the communities and individuals who aided fugitives as they traversed hostile environments on their way to freedom in the free states and Canada before 1865. The work of countless local historians at sites across both the United States and Can-

ada has also been invaluable in preserving the memory of ordinary individuals who took extraordinary risks to seek freedom, help others along the way, and sustain communities despite the constant threat of violence, displacement, and kidnapping and sale to the South. Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker, editors of *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*, have compiled a collection of essays that demonstrate the significance of the Detroit River region in the history of the Underground Railroad, black transnational activism, and borderlands histories that are exciting, useful, and generative.

As the editors make clear in their introduction, the volume engages the history of the Underground Railroad broadly by acknowledging extensive “out migration of African Americans in search of freedom from slavery and racial oppression, whether they were assisted or not” (5-6). They focus on the experiences, histories, and lives of African Americans and Afro-Canadians both in the Detroit River region and around Lake Erie. While they initially entered into the project as one way to demonstrate the region’s worthiness of UNESCO recognition, the volume moves beyond making a clear case for the importance of the Detroit River region to the history of the Underground Railroad. The editors and their contributors propose a new way to think about the region by engaging other fields. The authors included in the volume employ the approaches of borderlands scholars to explicate a new history of black transnationalism. The title of the volume comes from the work of Afua Cooper, a contributor to the volume, who uses the term “fluid frontier” to “denote the highly transnational nature of black life along the Detroit River border” (6). Along with the volume’s focus on African American life and history, it is this exploration of the back-and-forth between both banks of the Detroit River, the vibrant free black communities on both sides, and the activism of former fugitives that makes for an exciting intervention in the field of Underground Railroad history.

The editors divide the volume into five sections to highlight the work of contributors who take up related themes. They provide brief introductions at the start of each that help guide the reader. Part I, “Crossing Boundaries,” includes chapters by both editors that take readers from the early colonial period through the 1833 Blackburn Riots in Detroit sparked by attempts to return fugitives to slavery and reshaping the legal and social history of the region in the 1830s. Veta Smith Tucker’s “Uncertain Freedom in Frontier Detroit” recounts the story of the Denison family as they sought to legally establish their freedom in Detroit and Upper Canada at the turn of the nineteenth century. Their story spans national borders and territorial governments, making the case that much earlier studies of fugitives and the Underground Railroad are both possible and necessary.

Karolyn Smardz Frost takes up this transnational history at the start of the War of 1812 that saw both the US Northwest Territory and Upper Canada play important roles in the global imperial conflict involving their parent empires. Amidst war and a redefinition of legal structures and borders, African-descended people made bids for freedom all over the Detroit River region. The dramatic story of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn's truly transnational fight to remain free after their escape from slavery in Louisville, Kentucky, illustrates the complex interplay between two jurisdictions and the important role of African Americans in defining it. The section concludes with Bryan Prince's legal and diplomatic history of extradition from Upper Canada to the United States titled "The Illusion of Safety: Attempts to Extradite Fugitive Slaves from Canada." Instead of out-migration, the chapter focuses on legal and diplomatic attempts to pull African Americans back across the border between the United States and Canada. Along with the stories of individuals, the legal history of the region makes a nice bookend to the section and reinforces the arguments of Tucker and Frost.

Part II, "Communal Voices," has chapters that highlight the vibrant community life of African Americans and African Canadians in the region. Irene Moore Davis chronicles significant African Canadian settlements, their institutions, and communities in her essay "Canadian Black Settlement in the Detroit River Region." The section also includes two perspectives on African American religious life in the area. Barbara Hughes Smith details the significant role that African American churches played in Detroit's resistance campaigns in "Worship Way Stations in Detroit." Adrienne Shadd focuses on the transnational character of black Baptist congregations and their international efforts for "Black Freedom" in "Extending the Right Hand of Fellowship: Sandwich Baptist Church, Amherstburg First Baptist, and the Amherstburg Baptist Association." Both studies take into account the significant role of faith communities in the history of resistance in the region. Savvy community leaders intentionally built transnational strategies with their respective communities to battle racist discrimination on both sides of the Detroit River while working toward "black liberation" in the form of equal rights. Moving beyond being houses of worship and meeting places for community events, churches in the region were politically active.

"Inspired Transnationalists," Part III, includes Afua Cooper's "*The Voice of the Fugitive: A Transnational Absolutist Organ*," Roy Finkenbine's "A Community Militant and Organized: The Colored Vigilant Committee of Detroit," and Margaret Washington's "'I Am Going Straight to Canada': Women Underground Railroad Activists in the Detroit River Border Zone." Afua Cooper's offering chronicles the careers of Henry and Mary Bibb, with a particular focus on Mrs. Bibb's editorial prowess, as they established the *Voice of the Fugitive*

and sought to foster community development in Canada. While Henry Bibb is the more famous of the two, Mary Bibb, née Miles, contributed to the vibrant and important abolitionist paper *Voice of the Fugitive* in many significant ways. Finkenbine and Washington's contributions focus on important actors across the Detroit River in Michigan, from the Colored Vigilant Committee's efforts to protect African American life in Detroit to figures familiar to Americanists—Sojourner Truth and Mary Ann Shadd Cary. Both essays focus on the contributions of African American abolitionists to community building within a transnational context. As with the other sections, the lives and work of African Americans and African Canadians, and not the stories of benevolent whites, are at the center of Michigan and Canada's Underground Railroad history. This section also presents juxtaposed gender histories of abolition, with Cooper and Washington highlighting the work of female abolitionists and Finkenbine's history of the Colored Vigilant Committee as a study of black men's organizations, especially given the group's ties to black Freemasonry.

"Resilient Families" are examined in Part IV, where the focus shifts from institution and movement building to the personal stories of families of fugitives and individual freedom seekers. Kimberly Simmons and Larry McClellan's "Bridging Rivers: Caroline Quarlls's Remarkable Journey" and Debian Marty's "One More River to Cross: The Crosswhites' Escapes from Slavery" each trace the journey of fugitives from the US South through the networks and communities first introduced in Parts I and II. In both studies the reader encounters churches, individuals, and institutions that other contributors to the volume placed in historical context. Carol E. Mull's "The McCoys: Charting Freedom from Both Sides of the River" tells the story of a family that moved from Western Canada to Ypsilanti, Michigan, in the opposite direction of most fugitives and migrants in the region. The McCoys' story includes fugitivism, freedom in Canada, and a move west to the United States in hopes of finding economic opportunity in eastern Michigan. Along with contradicting the tale of migration and fugitivism with which most readers are familiar, the story of the McCoy family includes their negotiations for freedom in Canada, despite its hostile racial climate. Throughout the volume, African Canadian history remains important, and Mull's account of the McCoys contributes much needed insight into the life of fugitives after achieving freedom on the other side of the Detroit River.

The final section, "The Trumpet Sounds," has only one chapter, Louis A. Decardo Jr.'s "The Useful Frontier: John Brown's Detroit River Preface to the Harper's Ferry Raid." This is also the only contribution to center on the activities of a white abolitionist. Decardo characterizes John Brown's vision for freedom and abolition as transnational by charting Brown's efforts to drum up support and recruits in the Detroit River region during a tour of Canada West. As a bookend to the volume, the chapter demonstrates the place that the region

held in the minds of the broader abolitionist community and its significance to perhaps the nation's most famous abolitionist of all. This account of Brown's time in the region highlights a meeting between Brown and Frederick Douglass in Detroit in 1859, one much earlier than Douglass's autobiography attests to, during which Douglass learned of Brown's plans for his Harper's Ferry raid. Decardo's account of this meeting brings together prominent Detroiters discussed in earlier chapters, the nation's most famous former fugitive, and the most recognizable abolitionist. Douglass and his Detroit colleagues declined to join Brown then and there. Their independence, resolve, and savvy when denying Brown support demonstrates the claims at the heart of the volume's argument—African Americans and African Canadians built communities and institutions transnationally to sustain themselves with and without help from whites and their ideas of African American advancement.

At the end of the collection, Frost and Tucker provide a thorough bibliographical essay that includes extensive notes for both secondary scholarship in the fields in which the volume intervenes and primary source materials. This allows the editors to expand the volume's reach to the history of fugitivism, from the broader Great Lakes region down into the Ohio River Valley and throughout Canada. They cite Underground Railroad history on both sides of the border and challenge scholars to consider the Detroit River region and the Niagara River region, another watery boundary, as a way of expanding the field. The collection shifts the regional focus from Ohio or New York to the Northwest Territory/Michigan and Upper Canada/Canada West, demonstrating that African American fugitives and their allies fostered the communities that supported runaways well past their initial arrival. The volume's contributors document community connections, institutions, and kinship networks that reached back and forth across national borders by design, revealing groups and institutions that played a significant role in shaping the region's political, legal, diplomatic, and social history.

Employing the term "borderland" helps the editors and contributors to discuss the Detroit River region as a permeable zone between two colonial territories, and later established states and provinces, through which African Americans and African Canadians moved frequently along with their ideas, writing, and support for black freedom and advancement across generations. The fugitives' journeys from the US South were not one-way ventures, but paths that took whole lifetimes to traverse and negotiate, maintained by deep connections across national boundaries, guided by a persistent resolve to realize their freedom.

Vanessa Holden, University of Kentucky
