

[Author Interview--Viola Müller \(Escape to the City\) Part 2](#)

Discussion published by Niels Eichhorn on Wednesday, February 8, 2023

Hello H-CivWar Readers:

Today we continue our conversation with Viola Müller to talk about her new book, [Escape to the City: Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum Urban South](#), published by the University of North Carolina Press in October 2022.

[Part 1](#)

How do we have to envision these southern urban spaces?

VM: Urban spaces in the antebellum era were contested and shifting, and they were structured along markers such as gender, race, work, and, increasingly, class. Runaways had to read these “codes” so that they could move unmolested and so that urban spaces could be turned into spaces of refuge.

In terms of fragility and stability of urban spaces of refuge, for most of the antebellum era, it is striking how low the numbers of arrested runaways and their helpers were. But things were far from static, and my book shows how the picture changed in the 1850s. Especially in the last few years before the Civil War, a number of measures that had been sporadic and loose became more systemic. Suddenly, many more free people of color were arrested for being illegal residents or persecuted for not paying taxes (which were extremely high for Black people) than in earlier times. Enslaved people were taken up for not having passes or badges. This happened in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, but only New Orleans intensified the targeting of runaways, it seems. Baltimore was the exception, where Black people were spared from systematic roundups.

I cannot elaborate on the reasons for this in depth. Most important is that White Americans and European immigrants had been pushing against Black southerners for a long time. Primarily driven by resistance to economic competition, they demanded what White supremacy had been promising them. In the last years of the 1850s, “democracy” had provided lower-class Whites with enough power and legislators began to go after free people of African descent. This also increased the discovery of fugitive slaves. In addition to my answer to your previous question, this also means that becoming a part of the free Black population held a dimension of risk for runaways.

Acting against the Black part of the working class contradicted the economic interests of the upcoming industrialist employers, large merchants, and even slaveholders. It seems that the elite needed to reassure and empower White residents at a time when increasing numbers of them populated southern cities who were not slaveholders or had a stake in slavery. In the eyes of the southern elite, they presented a threat to White unity that was so desperately needed to maintain slavery and, shortly after, to wage a war for secession.

Southern cities seemed to have a major need for skilled and unskilled labor offering runaways many opportunities. However, is not this a paradox too? These businesses and employers want and need cheap labor, runaways provide that labor but it is illegal. So would not businesses have something of

an interest in lax enforcement of the laws? Was there any activities by business to "assist" runaways who have been on their payroll for a while?

VM: Your questions hit the mark. I hope I do a good enough job in the book of explaining the diverging—and partly clashing—economic interests that came together in southern cities. Industrialists, planters, merchants, they all had different visions of the labor force, which also fluctuated throughout the South and over time. While the planter elite maintained a firm hold on state politics, a few places developed a business elite with decreasing stakes in slavery. We can observe this with the declining numbers of enslaved people in southern cities, both in relative and absolute terms. Throughout the antebellum period, those players grew stronger and more important to urban economies. Although never as dominant as in the North, the new southern middle and upper classes shaped economic change and the transformation of society. They also came to fill local political positions, through which they could get a foothold in the police force, contributing to the enforcement or ignorance of laws.

Imagine a place like Baltimore, where slavery had never really been important to the local economy. Why should Baltimore's leadership be concerned with spending resources on catching other people's runaway slaves? This is partly true for all places, and while all four cities that I studied were unique, it is Richmond that continuously emerges as the great exception in this story. It was the only city where urban slavery kept on growing in the antebellum period because it strategically used enslaved labor in industry and production. I take from this that Richmond is the most obvious example of a strong planter class that was flexible enough to accommodate its own interests of slaveholding alongside the progressive economic promises of capitalist production.

To answer your last question, I think that a pro-active support of runaways by their employers goes too far. Let's rather say that it was effective for employers to create a workforce as diverse as possible to keep workers replaceable. Runaways and illegal workers were among many other exploited. Yet, it speaks volumes that aiding and harboring runaways was a severe offense but there were never any discussions in southern cities about potentially forbidding the employment of fugitive slaves.

I wondered if you could speak a little more to the modern connections and influences. You classify the runaways as refugees and compare them to migrants who cross into the United States outside legal channels. What lessons can we draw from the antebellum runaways?

VM: These are big questions, and I'm not sure I can answer them to your satisfaction. Let me first say that rather than comparing fugitive slaves to present-day refugees, I take methodological inspiration from the field of migration studies. This new perspective allows me to pause for a moment the discussions on "degrees of freedom", that are so dominant in American History. Instead, I turn the attention to the every-day struggles of runaways and their relation to the broader economic and political framework. In this sense, I do think that we can connect the experiences of antebellum fugitives to those of other precarious social groups in history that have lived in conditions of vulnerability, undocumentedness, and legal and economic insecurity. And the picture that emerges is that, then and now, these people are part and parcel of our society and economy. Illegality is constructed. Someone gains from it.

Last summer I was at a conference at the European University Institute in Florence, and one of the attendees of my panel flipped the perspective around. He asked what would happen if we applied the concept of freedom to present-day migrants. I find it intriguing to start thinking about what it is about our current understanding of “freedom” that is important to us. Do we consider freedom as a universal right or is it just meant for a selected group of privileged people? This is something that we all might reflect on sometimes.

As we draw to a close, I like to ask about future projects--any plans?

VM: For my current project, I somewhat move away from the history of slavery and into labor history more broadly. I’m comparing urban workers (men, women, and children) in Baltimore, Havana and Rio de Janeiro in the transition time from slavery to wage labor. The project is pretty much in its infant shoes, so it might take some time before you hear from me again.