O'Brien on Bell, 'Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and Their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America'

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Throughout *Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and Their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America*, Karen Cook Bell highlights “the varied strategies and conditions of escape that freedom-seeking women encountered during the Revolutionary Era” to center women in the study of flight and fugitivity and to refute “the misconception that women did not flee or attempt to flee slavery” (p. 165). Although historians have largely seen “Black women’s various efforts to escape bondage … as ancillary in the studies of slavery,” Bell demonstrates that far from existing on the “margins of the American Revolution … Black women [were] visible participants and self-determined figures who put their lives on the line for freedom” (p. 160). In her study, Bell not only documents freedom-seeking women’s personal and collective motivations but also demonstrates how enslaved women’s flight fits within the framework of the Revolutionary Era. As she explains, “by excavating the story of fugitive enslaved women, Black women’s integral role in the eighteenth-century abolitionist movement is manifest” (p. 3). By focusing on women’s fugitivity, Bell demonstrates that “the wars that enslaved women waged during the American Revolution grounded the Black radical politics that informed their postwar struggles” (p. 4). Bell’s greatest accomplishment is her ability to flesh out the lives of women who challenged slavery by inverting a system of surveillance to their benefit from a source base specifically designed to silence subversive individuals. In doing so, she inserts the stories of runaway women into a synthesis of slavery and fugitivity studies while also reorienting the study of the Revolution and its aftermath around these freedom-seeking women. Thus, historians of slavery and freedom in both the Revolutionary and antebellum eras will find Bell’s focused study illuminating, while future scholars will no doubt use Bell’s work as a platform for more detailed study.

Bell organizes her first four chapters chronologically and uses a fifth chapter to explore and compare the experience of fugitive women within maroon communities across the southeastern United States. Throughout these chapters, she reorients the scholarship of slavery and resistance in the Revolutionary Era around the stories of fugitive women. The first chapter highlights enslaved women’s particular experience as slaves within the British colonies of North America to emphasize how slave owners and slave traders created a gendered system specifically designed to exploit women. As Bell explains, “the intersection of women’s productive and reproductive capabilities, and
the exploitation of both, shaped their experience of slavery and informed their resistance” (p. 43). Although slave owners valued both enslaved men and women for their labor, Bell shows that women “experienced labor differently than did men because of their sex” (p. 24). Tying together the scholarship of both Northern and Southern slavery, she demonstrates that owners relied heavily on the labor of enslaved women. Whether forced to work as field hands on Carolina rice plantations or as domestics in New England households, enslaved women’s labor was critical to the maintenance of both slave societies and societies with slaves.

Furthermore, enslaved women in the North and South, with some variations, were also valued for their reproductive capabilities. Because women’s labor—both physical and reproductive—was necessary for the day-to-day operations of plantations and households, slave owners saw women’s resistance as more subversive than men’s and “often punished enslaved women even more severely than they did men” (p. 32). Slave owners crafted punishments specifically designed to humiliate women and break down enslaved families’ power. “By beating enslaved women in front of their male relatives or forcing men to beat women, slaveholders undermined both women’s roles as wives and mothers worthy of patriarchal protection and men’s roles as husbands and fathers who have the right to defend their women” (p. 32). Slave owners also used “moral anguish, which included separation from their families or surroundings when sold away” to punish rebellious women (p. 25). This system influenced how women resisted, especially the ways they attempted to flee from it. Perhaps because of the threat they faced as mothers, women were more likely than men to flee “with family members, including mothers, children, and husbands” (p. 31). Runaway advertisements suggest that fewer women fled slavery during the colonial period than did men. Three-quarters of South Carolina runaways during the 1730s were men, and of the more than eight hundred runaway slave advertisements printed in New England newspapers between 1700 and 1789, only 7 percent were for women and girls. Despite these statistics, Bell aptly shows that women took a particular risk by running away while also demonstrating the specific measures owners took to reduce women’s fugitivity.

Chapter 2 introduces and explores one of the two central themes of Bell’s study, the idea of “rival geographies,” which Bell explores through the story of Margaret, a twenty-year-old woman who absconded from her master in Baltimore in 1770, and other enslaved women who sought freedom on the eve of the Revolution. Bell borrows the concept of rival geographies from Stephanie Camp and defines it as “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern [and northern] space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands” (p. 45).[1] When Margaret fled, she pursued a rival geography of freedom and relied on her knowledge of the system that kept her enslaved to resist capture. Having experienced the culture of surveillance that maintained slavery and recognizing that “enslavers had a powerful need to know the bodies of those they owned,” Margaret disguised herself in men’s clothing and played the part of a waiting boy to a fellow escapee, an English convict servant named John Chambers (p. 50).

Margaret’s escape also demonstrates the ways slavery and resistance united the Atlantic world. Margaret had previously been enslaved in the Caribbean, in Charleston, and in Philadelphia before being brought to Baltimore. Although the story is fragmented, Bell fairly speculates that “the fact that Margaret had been enslaved on three islands may be an indication that she was viewed by her enslavers as recalcitrant and troublesome” (p. 55). Margaret’s experience in these places, especially her time in urban areas, would have aided her in her flight as she could have used friendship and
kinship networks to evade capture. Bell also uses the relationship between Margaret and John Chambers to better understand “how discourses of ‘resistance,’ ‘sexual power,’ and ‘will’ shape our understanding.” Margaret’s enslaver sexualized her body when he described her in a runaway advertisement as “an artful hussy [who] can read and write,” which Bell uses to demonstrate that Margaret “was a shrewd and cunning woman who knew the power of being literate, but who may have also used John Chambers to escape bondage” (pp. 59-60). While Margaret may have been able to use her sexuality to escape in 1770, her sex complicated her next attempt at flight. After being captured and sold, Margaret fled again in 1773, this time pregnant. Bell uses both these examples to demonstrate that enslaved women’s lives “were shaped by sexual violence and impossible choices, which are not fully elucidated by progressive notions of agency” (p. 61).

The third chapter explores women’s flight during the American Revolution, a period when women “ran away more frequently ... than at any time before or after the war due to the breakdown of oversight and state authority” (p. 61). While wartime disorder created opportunities for escape, Bell also documents how women’s flight fits within the rhetoric of liberty and freedom that defined, at least in theory, the Revolutionary Era. “The Revolutionary War,” Bell explains, “bolstered the independence of Black women, gave them access to their families with whom they fled, and greater autonomy in their daily lives once they reached safe havens” (p. 68). Bell introduces these concepts through the flight of Jenny, a twenty-five-year-old woman who fled a farm outside Petersburg, Virginia, in 1776 while eight months pregnant. Jenny understood the ways her owner would attempt to capture her, and carefully planned an escape that would use the disorder of wartime to evade detection. Here Bell expands on the second central theme of her study, “fugitivity as a revolutionary act of resistance” (p. 14). One of the wartime realities that encouraged women to flee slavery was the presence of the British army. In 1764, Essex County, Massachusetts, was home to the largest enslaved population in the state, with a recorded 1,351 enslaved persons. In 1776, the population had dwindled to 682 because of flight to British-occupied Boston. When the British army occupied New York, “a greater number of women fled their enslavers in New York and New Jersey ... than in the previous six decades.” When the British evacuated the city in 1783, more than 3,000 enslaved people went with them, “making it the largest single flight by chattel slaves in U.S. history” (p. 75). One-third of the people who responded in the weeks following Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation in November 1775 were women and girls. Following Henry Clinton’s capture of Charleston in 1780 and his ensuing proclamation, about two-fifths of those who escaped were women. But Bell also shows that escaping women did not naively believe reaching British lines meant a guarantee of freedom. Instead, she explains that the war created a paradox where “enslaved women were faced with a fatal dilemma: to remain on the plantations and suffer the physical deprivations that it imposed during the war, or to risk death in a military camp or betrayal by British forces and still be a slave” (p. 98). Thus, enslaved women’s flight during the war was a revolutionary act of resistance against slavery, not simply an act of self-preservation. “Inspired by natural rights ideology,” Bell summarizes, “Black women seized upon every opportunity to undermine the system of slavery through flight” (p. 104).

A fourth chapter connects Bell’s study of wartime fugitivity with postwar Black resistance to the growth of slavery to demonstrate how women’s wartime fugitivity informed and shaped Black communities’ fight against slavery. In Massachusetts, enslaved women like Elizabeth Freeman led the way in challenging slavery in the courts. Throughout the Mid-Atlantic states, women pressured owners for manumission as free Black populations grew and communities developed in major urban areas. By bringing freedom suits and purchasing their freedom, enslaved Virginian women were
perhaps the most important drivers of the expansion of freedom. Across the South, women continued to run away with family members, which increased pressure on the system of slavery throughout the region. Bell uses these examples to show how “the expansion of freedom after the Revolutionary War was caused by an expansion of the legal landscape and was driven by both ideological change and greater pressure from African Americans,” including women (p. 124). Bell also demonstrates that fleeing women were not always attempting to reach the North. Many fugitive women remained in the South, especially urban areas, where they “sought to remain invisible before the eyes of authorities” while aiding other fugitives and working to tear down slavery from within (p. 130). During a period when enslavers “took nearly a quarter million enslaved people from their families and friends to cultivate tobacco or cotton on frontier plantations,” Bell demonstrates the critical role women played in the continued resistance to slavery through both legal avenues and fugitivity (p. 135).

In chapter 5, Bell explores the place of runaway women in the maroon communities of the American southeast to further emphasize fugitive women’s “tenacity and staunch pursuit of freedom” (p. 139). Although women’s invisibility in the sources makes it difficult to estimate the number of women who lived and contributed to large maroon communities, which Bell rightly notes “reflects the violence of archival silence, a problem of historical methodology that has limited comprehensive narration of the histories of enslaved women,” she is nonetheless able to show that the growth of maroon communities in the years following the Revolution prompted “a declaration of independence in the swamps and woods of Virginia, North Carolina, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida” (pp. 140, 159). Although colonial slave owners had tolerated petit marronage, or brief periods of fugitivity that enslaved people used to achieve temporary goals like resisting sale, post-Revolutionary fugitives built larger, more permanent settlements as acts of grand marronage, which “penetrated the foundations of the plantation system” (p. 139).

To understand the place of women in maroon communities, Bell compares the settlements that developed at the Great Dismal Swamp on Virginia’s border with North Carolina, at Belleisle and Bear Creek along the Georgia border with South Carolina, in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and at Prospect Bluff in western Florida. Ultimately, Bell shows that although regional and geographic differences meant each maroon community developed differently, these fugitive societies were more than safe havens for runaways. “Maroons conspired,” Bell explains, “with participants and leaders of the planned revolts to subvert the slave system” (p. 146). While Bell mostly synthesizes existing scholarship on maroon communities, she also adds to this research by placing fugitive women at the heart of maroon resistance. Maroon women were not simply secondary figures in maroon communities; to the contrary, within these settlements, women fostered the growth of “non-kin groups that coalesced around shared experiences of oppression and flight,” thus continuing to play a vital role in the Revolutionary fight against slavery (p. 153).

One of Bell’s greatest strengths is her methodological approach to the source base. While studies of antebellum fugitivity can draw from the many published narratives of runaways who escaped to the North or Canada, the only published accounts of an eighteenth-century fugitive woman were two interviews of Ona Judge, the woman who both escaped bondage in George Washington’s household and resisted the Washington family’s attempts to re-enslave her, printed in abolitionist newspapers in 1845 and 1847.[2] To address “the fragmented archive,” Bell adopts a creative approach to reading eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements for runaways. Although these advertisements provide only a glimpse into the lives of enslaved women, these sources “still offer a remarkable amount of
information about individual human beings caught in a horrific system of bondage.” Augmenting these advertisements with close study of “petitions, letters, county books, parish records, official correspondence, diaries, and plantation records” allows Bell to “imagine the varied meanings and possibilities that are inherent in [the archival] silences” (p. 15). Contrary to slave owners’ original designs, Bell uses advertisements meant to result in capture to reconstruct fugitive women’s resistance and to restore women’s place in the history of the Revolution. The result is an easily digestible narrative where Bell inserts fugitive women into a synthesis of scholarship to thoroughly explore the motivations that drove enslaved women to flee slavery, the methods these women employed to invert the surveillance designed to restrict their freedoms, and the ways these tactics continued to inform Black resistance in the postwar United States.

Collectively, *Running from Bondage* artfully situates fugitive women in the history of the American Revolution and Black resistance. Bell highlights the motivations that drove enslaved women of the Revolutionary Era to flee bondage in greater numbers than they had before while also exploring the strategies these women employed and the ways this resistance influenced the post-Revolutionary generation. Bell makes good on her promise to read the archive against the grain by digging into newspaper advertisements to excavate the lives of the women being pursued. This reading of the sources brings women’s flight into new light and allows Bell to vividly capture how women navigated “the tensions inherent in fugitivity between the rejection of the notion of being owned as property and the tenuous position of moving through public spaces” (p. 83). If fugitive women fall out of focus at all in Bell’s analysis, she is careful to note the violence of the archive that accounts for these silences. Future scholars of Black women’s experience in the Revolution and beyond would be wise to consult Bell’s findings and to mirror her approach.

Notes


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