



## LJMU Research Online

Gillespie, L

**Review: Baumgartner, South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War**

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/25706/>

### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Gillespie, L (2022) Review: Baumgartner, South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War. Irish Journal of American Studies (11). pp. 75-76.**

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

**Baumgartner, Alice L. *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*. New York: Basic Books, 2020. ISBN 9781541617773. \$32. 365pp.**

In *South to Freedom*, Alice Baumgartner explores the experiences of fugitives from U.S. slavery who escaped to Mexico during the nineteenth century. Tension in the book increases in tandem with both the national crises that developed in the United States and Mexico and in the conflict between the two countries. Baumgartner considers the experiences of runaways in a way that has not been fully explored before, weaving together stories from across space and time to demonstrate developing attitudes towards slavery among enslavers, enslaved people, and regular citizens who lived on either side of the Rio Grande. Baumgartner argues that those who fled from the slave states of the Deep South were seeking equality and human rights, regardless of their circumstance of birth or skin color, and Mexico was one of the only nearby regions that would have provided even a semblance of that for Black people at the time (211). In her comparison of the two countries, Baumgartner's argument centers on the concept of freedom of choice: although life in Mexico was often dangerous and incredibly tough for formerly enslaved people, they did ultimately have some agency regarding where they would live and whom their labor would benefit. Although she demonstrates that formerly enslaved people shared different visions of what freedom meant, it was always "the right to define freedom for themselves" that mattered most (250).

Baumgartner acknowledges the challenges posed by the "scattered and incomplete" source material available on this topic, and so her work therefore focuses for the most part on constructing a detailed analysis of the pro-slavery and anti-slavery policies and politics of Mexico and the United States, which results in a generally top-down analysis (4). The political turmoil surrounding Mexico's precarious hold over Coahuila and T exas features prominently in the first half of the book, as does the near-constant changing of leadership and systems of government within the country. Laws on slavery were constantly being made and re-made in Mexico from 1800 to the mid-1830s, and these policies were full of complexities and contradictions. This caused much friction with the *norteamericanos* in the areas surrounding the border. Baumgartner's analysis suggests that this legislative inconsistency south of the border provided both opportunities for enslaved people and challenges for those who held people in bondage, although the reader is left with questions regarding the ways in which enslaved people in the American South learned of Mexico's laws regarding slavery and how this information was transmitted among enslaved communities there, if at all.

While Baumgartner offers mostly a top-down history, her work highlights the experiences of African Americans in Mexico with the inclusion of some grassroots stories. These add a personal, and at times tragic, element to this history: stories such as that of Honorine, who absconded from Louisiana to Mexico in 1831 with the help of a white man (78); Jean Antoine, who escaped from Louisiana to Mexico in 1835 and died of self-inflicted knife wounds when he was returned to New Orleans (95); and Joe, William Barret Travis's slave who fought—or was forced to fight—at the Alamo and fled to Mexico one year after the battle (121). The author acknowledges that there was often no paper trail when fugitives from slavery reached the southern border. Nevertheless, a deep dive into Mexican archives and multiple research centers in the United States enables Baumgartner to piece together a remarkable history illuminated by such cases. The individual experiences of the Black people who chose to flee to Mexico represent the collective struggle for freedom and choice that appears in much of Baumgartner's work, even if the book does focus largely on high politics.

One of the strengths of this work is the equal weight given to the exploration of societal, political, and economical developments in both the United States and Mexico up to the mid-1800s, especially abolitionism, annexation, and industrialization. Baumgartner analyzes their impact on both the national and international levels, contending that “‘American’ histories of slavery and sectional controversy are, in fact, Mexican histories, too” (8). The growth of anti-slavery activism in Mexico and the northern United States sharply contrasted with the South’s increasingly hostile defence of the peculiar institution. The annexation of Texas, in particular, led to increasingly strained relations between the two countries and war by 1846, which in turn heightened the sectional tension between the North and South. Baumgartner argues that when the Mexican Congress decreed “slaves of other countries” would be “free by the act of stepping on the national territory” in 1849, this “freedom principle” made territory into a mechanism of emancipation that transformed the landscape of freedom across North America (166). This was particularly true of the Deep South, where Baumgartner found that over three-quarters of fugitives from slavery caught in Texas before 1861 were headed to Mexico (165). Data from Louisiana, for instance, shows that a large proportion of runaways there escaped to Mexico (168), and certain parts of Texas were even deemed “non-slaveholding” because of their proximity to the border (181).

Baumgartner does not shy away from the exploitation that many enslaved people faced upon arriving in Mexico. However, contrasting the institution of slavery in the United States with forced servitude in Mexico, Baumgartner refutes arguments that laboring conditions in Mexico were equal to those of slavery. Freedom was incomplete for those who attempted to forge new lives in Mexico, as they were at risk of military service, coercive labor practices (including violence and debt), and kidnapping, but Baumgartner uses this evidence to maintain that the biggest threat to runaways in Mexico remained their former enslavers. While conditions were tough and far from ideal, her work emphasizes that the risk was worth it for fugitives in pursuit of freedom from bondage.

Baumgartner thus emphasizes the key differences between the experiences of Black people in Mexico and the United States. She contends that the opportunity to make their own choices was a key victory for those who found sanctuary south of the U.S. border; the prospect of attaining citizenship, in particular, was not even a possibility for free Black people to the north due to their skin color. Mexico continued to ratify anti-slavery legislation, enshrining the “freedom principle” in the country’s constitution in 1857 by extending freedom to those born in Mexico, outlawing the extradition of fugitive slaves and forced labor, and broadening the eligibility for citizenship, among other provisions (216). Baumgartner demonstrates that this was in direct contrast to the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision, which denied Black people citizenship or freedom on American soil that same year (216). In her analysis of these developments, Baumgartner encourages a wider approach to the way we think about the experiences of African Americans in North America in the nineteenth century.

In the final chapters, Baumgartner demonstrates how quickly things changed with the coming of the American Civil War. With the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the United States and Mexico found themselves suddenly “united in the cause of freedom” (240). Yet when Maximilian took over as Emperor in 1864, his government was quickly accused of encouraging slavery under another name via provisions to enforce labor contracts, and many Confederates subsequently fled to Mexico during and after the war (244). Baumgartner’s examination of these contrasting events shows that the will of the people of Mexico, and the will of those who were held in bondage, ultimately overthrew this system through protest and resistance, restoring Mexico’s reputation as a haven for people of color.

*South to Freedom* is undoubtedly an essential addition to the history of nineteenth-century slavery in North America. Baumgartner's work complicates the conventional narrative surrounding fugitives from slavery, particularly in the Deep South. While it is presumed that the Underground Railroad went north, Baumgartner's research raises the question of whether there were agents at work in sending people south of the U.S. border, as well. Baumgartner's research complicates traditional geographical and political boundaries that were transcended by the Black men and women who fled from slavery in the Deep South and sought sanctuary in Mexico. This invaluable study shows that "American" history is not confined by national borders, and neither was slavery.

**Laura Gillespie**

**Biographical note:**