

“Invisible Disabilities”: Black Women in War and in Freedom¹

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“We, the colored women of Newbern, North Carolina, desire to give to the world our object, plans, constitution, and our officers, for the purpose of ameliorating the miseries of our colored soldiers in their struggle for freedom, whatever may be the occasion against oppression.”

—Colored Women’s Union Relief Association of Newbern,
North Carolina

On a Baltimore street corner in February 1861, two women were overheard discussing the state of the Union. “Wait till the fourth of March,” one of them reportedly announced, “and then won’t I slap my missus’ face!”¹ March 4, 1861, of course, was no date snatched out of thin air. It was the date Lincoln was to be inaugurated, and in that event, the “two negresses” saw the opening of new political ground in the war against slavery. In contrast to the war President Lincoln prepared to fight—to reunite the nation as a slave country—they could be counted among the slaves in Maryland who “made no detour through the middle ground” and had no “doubt, from the beginning of hostilities, where the central issue lay.”² Even as that confidence was repeatedly tested over the course of the war, the basic premise that guided it, that a war over slavery must be a war for slave emancipation, remained the bedrock of slaves’ wartime politics. From the vantage point of the enslaved and their white and black allies, the slaveholders’ rebellion presented new and unparalleled opportunities in the slaves’ ongoing war for freedom.

The work of slaves in support of emancipation and the Union played a large role in redirecting the course of the war and helped to redraw the political map of the United States. Lincoln admitted as

1 Read 12 November 2015.

much in his famous letter to the citizens of Springfield, Illinois, who opposed his issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. They could fight on “exclusively to save the Union,” he admonished them, but he also reminded them he had issued the proclamation to aid “in saving the Union.” Black soldiers were essential to that objective, he emphasized, and in return they expected no less than their freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation inextricably linked their service and their freedom, and he would not take it back. “The party who could elect a President on a War & Slavery Restoration platform,” he wrote, “would, of necessity, lose the colored force; and that force being lost, would be as powerless to save the Union as to do any other impossible thing.”³

Lincoln’s administration and Congress increasingly understood that the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of black soldiers and military laborers would have to be offered the same deal.⁴ Black soldiers urged their commanders to use the army to rescue wives and children left behind and to protect those who had come within Union lines. They protested when Union officers ordered their wives and children out of Union lines and built shanty towns for their families just outside those lines. General William T. Sherman learned that to get black men for his labor battalions, he would have to take care of their wives and children. A requisition for 200 black laborers in November of 1862 was accompanied by a request that the families of the men be provided transportation to Cairo, Illinois. “When negro women and children are left behind,” Sherman wrote, “they become a fruitful source of trouble.”⁵

As Ira Berlin reminds us, “[t]he demise of slavery was not so much a proclamation as a movement; not so much an occasion as a complex history with multiple players and narratives.”⁶ Over the past several decades, by centering previously neglected voices and complex narratives, scholars have demolished the long-standing historiography that portrayed slavery as a benevolent institution and obscured the contributions African Americans made to Union victory, the destruction of slavery, and the expansion of democracy during Reconstruction.⁷ The slave’s “working hours were long but not strenuous” and “from the psychological side, since he had never known freedom, he looked upon slavery not as a degradation but as a routine,” wrote historian Robert S. Cotterill, a founding member of the Southern Historical Association.⁸ Like historians of the Dunning School who argued that Reconstruction was an unmitigated disaster, Cotterill adhered to proslavery ideology that held, as John C. Calhoun put it, that slavery was “a mercy.”⁹

Revisionist scholarship has established why attention to the questions of the nature and process of emancipation matters.¹⁰ The

question of what former slaves actually got once the long battle for freedom was won—what freedom meant—is again being vigorously debated. It has led some to conclude that the historiographical turn in the scholarship beginning largely in the 1970s that emphasized black agency and cultural resistance went too far and others to suggest (again) that, in effect, black culture in slavery abetted the rise and growth of the institution of slavery. Scholars have also focused increasingly on the damage inflicted by slavery and racism. They ask whether black people emerged from the Civil War and Reconstruction so damaged that they could hardly stand on the ground of freedom (if they lived to see it).¹¹ The question at the forefront of many discussions is no longer “Who Freed the Slaves?” but whether what slaves got was freedom at all. In truth, we are only beginning to understand in all its complexities the in-between space of slavery and freedom.¹²

Certainly, the slow and often tepid response of the federal government to the humanitarian crisis surrounding black refugees and its wary embrace of wartime slave resistance and black freedom presented huge obstacles to the making of freedom and contributed, wittingly and unwittingly, to the violent and protracted nature of emancipation.¹³ But, consequentially, the transformation of the war to include emancipation as a war aim marked a major breach in the nation’s commitment to the institution of slavery and the political arrangements that empowered it. And no less important, the battles African Americans waged before and during the Civil War lent themselves to a radical politics that informed the postwar struggles.¹⁴ These struggles, as Thomas Holt writes, cannot “be understood apart from the communities from which they came, communities forged in slavery, tested by war, and now reconstructed in a chaotic peace.” Through the experience of war, black people gained “new incentives, a sense of self, and new tools to act collectively and individually in the own political interests.”¹⁵ Although often overlooked in studies of the history of black radical thought, the Civil War experience was critical to the evolution of black politics and postwar mobilization.

We can understand this best, perhaps, by beginning with the recognition that enslaved people expected that they would have to fight for their freedom and understood that the brutality that had accompanied the making of slavery would also accompany its undoing. They knew many would suffer and die before any of them experienced freedom and that their families, despite their best efforts, would again be torn apart. As they gathered up their families to flee the plantations or fled alone to Union lines, they knew they were in “for harder times” one Union officer wrote.¹⁶

The transformation of the Union’s war aims spoke to the pressure “ordinary folk” who “believed that their historical experience mattered,

that it made them who they were” kept up on Lincoln and his initial platform of Union with or without slavery.¹⁷ They were men like the writer Richard Wright’s grandfather, who fled slavery and “groped his way through the Confederate lines” to become a soldier in the Union Army.¹⁸ They were women like Louisa Alexander, enslaved in Missouri only 60 miles from the Union stronghold at St. Louis but who remained out of reach of the Emancipation Proclamation, which did not touch slavery in the Union’s border slave states. Alexander remained in the clutches of her master who watched her every move and promised that she would only see freedom “at the point of the Bayonet.” Alexander welcomed just such a resolution, pleading with her husband of 30 years who had already escaped to “send soldiers.”¹⁹

Although the 150th anniversary of the Civil War has now passed and scholarly and public attention have turned—though seemingly with much less fervor and interest—to the postwar amendments to the Constitution and Reconstruction, the work of figuring out what it meant to live in the in-between space of slavery and freedom, to daily contend with the making of freedom, remains unfinished. Civil War refugee camps are sites where we might take the temperature of this question. The flight of an estimated 500,000 enslaved people over the course of four years had no parallel in the history of slave resistance in United States history nor the establishment of refugee camps on such a large scale.²⁰ Among the refugees were people with living memories of the domestic slave trade and its shattering of kin and community.

During the Civil War, black refugees once again experienced the trauma of families separated and were further traumatized by old and new forms of violence, including re-enslavement at the hands of Union and Confederate soldiers. New disease environments and labor regimes on federally leased abandoned plantations added to the disruption, as did the gendered impact of federal policies that fueled the disproportionate representation of black women, children, and the elderly in refugee and labor camps. In many places, particularly in the Mississippi Valley, black women, children, and the elderly made up the majority of these populations. The wartime fugitive history of enslaved women, their lives in wartime refugee camps and re-enslavement, and the punitive federal state policies they faced are foundational to understanding their wartime and postwar struggles and activism.

Steven Hahn has called our attention to the “substantial role of the trans-Mississippi West as a proving ground” for understanding how “languages of ‘civilizationism’ and of race and racial prospect resonated with one another and then contributed to the logic and choreography of both reservations and segregation.”²¹ We might extend this critical intervention to Civil War refugee camps. In their role as

spaces of trauma, containment, discipline, and surveillance grounded in racialized notions of purity, pollution, and “otherness,” they represent an important antecedent for the racist discourse that framed the trans-Mississippi West project, Jim Crow, and American intervention in other parts of the world in the late nineteenth century. Some of the army men who would play leading roles in subjugating Native Americans in the West and oversee their encampment on reservations received their basic training during the Civil War. It was in Civil War refugee camps that they gained valuable experience in developing, overseeing, and managing populations deemed different and inferior. The Civil War correspondence of Union commanders and agents of freedmen’s aid societies brims with the language of racial containment and contamination. They echo Lincoln’s long-held belief that colonization represented the best solution to the problem of free black people in a white republic. General William T. Sherman was one of many who saw colonization as a solution to the problem of black freedom and the “hordes” of refugees in his lines.²² Indeed, many refugee camps were called colonies.²³

Black women in refugee camps fought mightily against ideas that rendered them undeserving claimants to the nation’s attention or freedom and citizenship. Despite the obstacles, they refused to turn back from the path of freedom and marked in concrete ways the moments that signaled that they were no longer slaves. For Emeline Anderson, this meant using the mobility her position as a cook and laundress for a Union regiment gave her to serve as a conduit between a black woman refugee she met on the road to freedom and that woman’s soldier husband. It was one of the ways in which black women refugees worked to help each other reconstitute kin and community networks and survive the war.

To be sure, black women refugees suffered tragic losses that would have long-term economic, political, social, and psychological consequences. But it is only because they refused to adhere to the notion that the war was not about them and risked all for freedom in flights to Union lines that we can track the making of freedom in refugee camps. The official records of the War Department, newspaper articles, the letters of privates and officers, the records of agents of freedmen’s aid societies, and pension files constitute an archive of camp management and black women’s resistance. It is an archive of fragments that individually and collectively chronicle the stories of loss and survival, the concrete moments of the making of freedom.

There is, for instance, Cilinda Johnson, whose name appears on wartime federal rolls in 1864 along with the description, “Citizen, Colored.” Johnson would have to wait another four years to be officially declared a citizen of the United States by the Fourteenth

Amendment, but the fact that in 1864 an agent of the federal government listed her as a citizen signaled just how far the war to put down the slaveholders' rebellion had come and the war for Union had been transformed. Cilinda Johnson enters the historical record as one of hundreds of thousands of enslaved women who fled to Union lines and placed themselves on the Union's wartime agenda, uniting in uneasy embrace the Union war and the slaves' war.²⁴

It is also an archive of sorrow that documents the plight of women like Margaret Ferguson. A refugee, Ferguson arrived at a freedmen's hospital emaciated, with an exposed and partially destroyed tibia and a gangrened leg and foot. A Union surgeon amputated her leg in an effort to save her life, but the infection returned and she died two weeks later. There is sorrow too in the archival fragments that reveal only a glimpse of women like Missouri Lewis who aborted the fetuses—the future free born—they carried. Hard decisions of this sort are not the kind revisionist scholarship typically celebrates or even discusses. Some historians would see them as proof of the need to temper our judgment of the extent to which emancipation was a boon for former slaves; some as evidence of apolitical consciousness. Missouri Lewis does not fit the model of the heroic black women who fought slavery and its sexual abuses. She is not Harriet Tubman, Celia, Harriet Jacobs, or Susie King Taylor. Caution in our assessments of women who opted to have an abortion is nonetheless required. The record does not reveal what led Lewis to take this step. Perhaps she had been raped as so many women were during the war. Perhaps, she could see no way in which they could care for a child on the meager rations allotted in refugee camps. A myriad of reasons might explain such decisions, but at bottom, they can be understood only in the context of refugee camp life and, more broadly, the long and hard road to freedom and the lingering sense of its precariousness.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the decisions African Americans made about how to live a free life continued to reflect their personal and cumulative experience of loss and violence and a centuries-long business model in the United States that had fostered and celebrated their “unfathering, unmothering, misnaming.”²⁵ The empire of slavery with its extended tentacles North and West had brutally torn their families apart and killed them. Emancipation did not end this kind of destruction but it mandated that the nation would have to define freedom anew. The making of free lives that extended into the postwar years was undeniably painful, but we risk doing a fundamental disservice to the difference freedom made if we conclude that it accomplished too little to much matter. Like all wars, the Civil War generated misery and death, but for former slaves the fact that they were no longer slaves made a

tremendously important difference. For Anna Ashby, born a slave in Kentucky, it meant leaving the place where she had been enslaved and starting anew somewhere else. By 1870, she, her husband, and their children had left Louisiana and resettled in Leavenworth, Kansas.

There had been other wars over slavery, other places where slavery's destruction was achieved through force of arms, other places where the process of emancipation was prolonged and bitterly contested, other places where war generated refugees and atrocities and where slaveholders were forced to their knees. The American Civil War was not exceptional in these respects, but the history of the battle for freedom in the United States remains to be fully integrated into that broader historiography. When we place the Civil War within a global, comparative, and transnational context and within the long history of refugees and refugee camps, the history of the making of freedom in the United States becomes more legible.

To be sure, the effort to remake democracy in America during Reconstruction did not end with the kind of thoroughgoing transformation former slaves had hoped and fought for. And the defeats they suffered would have long-lasting consequences. As a child, Richard Wright learned how after mustering out his grandfather returned home and “during elections, guarded ballot boxes with his army rifle so that Negroes could vote. But when the Negro had been driven from political power, his spirit had been crushed. He was convinced that the war had not really ended, that it would start again.”²⁶ Nonetheless, the world the slaveholders made did cease to be in large measure because “ordinary people . . . did extraordinary things under the most difficult circumstances and, in the process, transformed themselves and the world in which they lived.”²⁷ The “hungry and disfranchised Confederates” who went “down into the land [of Egypt] for corn for their wives and little ones” during Reconstruction were but one reminder of this transformation.

In the end, slavery died a slow, cruel death in America. Even as the Civil War accelerated its destruction immeasurably, it fell piecemeal and unevenly. Its fate finally was beholden to the movement of armies and the outcome of battles, presidential decrees, and acts of Congress, and not insignificantly, to the determination of enslaved and free black people to turn the Northern war for the Union's salvation into a war for the slave's emancipation and the rights of citizenship for all Americans. In the years and decades to come, African Americans would be forced to continue to fight for basic human rights and rights guaranteed under the Constitution: the right to an education, to own land and freely contract their labor power on an open market, to vote and move about without undue constraint, to make basic decisions concerning the welfare of their families, and to be secure in their persons. Klan and

other forms of state-sanctioned violence coupled with economic and political reprisals represented what scholar Rob Nixon in another context calls “the persistence of unofficial hostilities.”²⁸ Reconstruction was a moment of political, social, and economic rights grudgingly won and stunningly lost.

Today, we know more about the casualty lists of the Civil War and more about the survivors. In the end, recounting the violence black people suffered in slavery and during the Civil War and Reconstruction is one, and perhaps the easiest, task. Reckoning with the disremembering and the invisible disabilities and their legacies is the far more difficult task as the struggle to “fulfill these rights” continues.²⁹ “I had never heard, until 1962, that black people could register and vote,” we recall, Fannie Lou Hamer stated. Freedom remains not enough.

ENDNOTES

1. F. S. W. [Jane Stuart Woolsey] to Cousin Margaret Hodge, Feb. 7, 1861, in Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey Bacon and Eliza Woolsey Howland, eds. *Letters of a Family during the War for the Union, 1861-1865*, 2 vols. (Printed for Private Distribution, New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1899), 34.
2. Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 92.
3. A. Lincoln to Hon. Charles D. Robinson, August 17, 1864, in Roy P. Basler, et al., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 501.
4. It would not be until 1865 that Congress approved a joint resolution that explicitly liberated the wives and children of black soldiers. “A Resolution to encourage Enlistments and to promote the Efficiency of the military Forces of the United States,” U.S., *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 13 (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1866), 571.
5. U.S. Government, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, vol. 1, ser. 23 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 473. Hereafter cited as ORN.
6. Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 8–9.
7. See, for example, U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (orig. pub. 1918; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966); R. S. Cotterill, *The Old South: The Geographic, Economic, Social, Political, and Cultural Expansion, Institutions, and Nationalism in the Ante-Bellum South* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark, Pub., 1937); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1905); Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1929); E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947); James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: D. C. Heath

- & Co., 1937); H. E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickerson University Press, 1970).
8. Cotterill, *The Old South*, 269.
 9. Calhoun was encouraged in this view by the 1840 census survey of the state of the nation’s mental health that found a higher rate of mental illness among free blacks. It argues from this that they were without the capacity for “self-care” and without “the guardianship and protection from mental death slavery provided,” would sink into “lunacy.” As quoted in Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3.
 10. On the process of slavery’s destruction, see Ira Berlin et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-67* Ser. 1, Vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and the other volumes in Series I and Series II. The Freeman and Southern Society Project based at the University of Maryland has played an important generative role in this discussion.
 11. See, for example, Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xviii. The historiographical turn is associated, for example, with the work of John Blassingame, Sterling Stuckey, George Rawick, and Lawrence Levine. W. E. B. Du Bois, of course, had decades before established the centrality of black resistance in the Civil War. (W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* [orig. pub. 1935; New York: Athenum Press, 1973]). For the revisionist scholarship that emphasizes the obstacles former slaves faced, see, for example, Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Susan Eva O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). The part played by Union armies and President Lincoln are the focus of Gary W. Gallagher’s *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011) and James M. McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves?” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1. (March 1995), 1–10.
 12. Historians remain indebted to Willie Lee Rose’s classic *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) but have been slow to take up many of the questions it poses for other sites of wartime reconstruction.
 13. See, for example, James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013), 393–429.
 14. See, for example, Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7 (Fall 1994): 107–46; Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
 15. Thomas C. Holt, *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 173–6, quotes at 173.
 16. ORN 1, ser. 24, 478.

17. Holt, *Children of Fire*, xiv.
18. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (orig. pub. 1937; New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 155.
19. Louisa Alexander to Archer Alexander, November 16, 1863, William Greenleaf Papers, Missouri History Museum, St. Louis; William Greenleaf Eliot, *The Story of Archer Alexander from Slavery to Freedom* (Boston: Cupples, Upham and Company, 1885), 80–3. Through her husband's efforts, Louisa Alexander was rescued from the man she called "the greatest rebel under heaven." On slavery's destruction in Missouri, see Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 268–307.
20. Thousands of slaves fled during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, but their numbers did not reach this scale. Also, although more than twice this number were forcibly relocated in the domestic slave trade, that dislocation was spread out over the space of 70 years.
21. Steven Hahn, "Slave Emancipation, Indian People, and the Projects of a New American Nation-State," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (September 2013): 324.
22. See, for example, Sherman to Thomas Ewing, Memphis, Aug. 10, 1862 in Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds. *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 263–4; quote at 264.
23. The Rost Home Colony was one such camp.
24. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), see especially 1–11; Fields, *Slavery on the Middle Ground*; Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).
25. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 194.
26. Wright, *Black Boy*, 155.
27. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1. See also pp. 13–215. See also Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Foner, *Reconstruction*, 602–12.
28. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 200.
29. President Lyndon B. Johnson, "To Fulfill These Rights," Commencement Address at Howard University, June 4, 1965.