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Solidarity and Control

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Solidarity and Control*

At least 200 000 people were considered »liberated Africans« after slaving ship captures and anti-slave trade proceedings in the 19th-century Atlantic World (6). *Bonds of Freedom: Liberated Africans and the End of the Slave Trade*, by Jake Subryan Richards, follows historical stories across the African diaspora to show that opposing, co-existing, and co-constitutive meanings of »bond« emerged from the same anti-slave trade regimes that created this status. Richards argues that the »bonds of freedom« came to be, on the one hand, instruments of lasting authoritarian control after »liberation« and, on the other, solidarity bonds that gave rise to diasporic visions of freedom.

The book follows the routes of anti-slave trade patrols and both forced and self-directed migration throughout the 19th century. It opens with seminal cases of slaving ship captures by the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, which forged the first authoritarian legal meaning of »liberated Africans« as a category built on the notion of debt to the liberator. The first chapter underlines how the 1807 Abolition Act incentivized such captures with prize money, and how Vice-Admiralty Courts processed shipboard captives into bonds of apprenticeships and military enlistment in the British Caribbean and Sierra Leone. When these courts did not hear them, liberated Africans resorted to British imperial bureaucratic offices and investigative procedures to seek formal recognition of non-enslavement, as well as to advocate for their ability to manage their own independent livelihoods.

Richards then analyses the meanings of »liberation« under the treaties Great Britain established with other parties over the course of that century. These treaties authorized the capture of foreign slaving ships on the high seas during peacetime and established mixed commissions to liberate shipboard captives. This was but a »narrow window« for freedom, Richards argues, since »the treaties continued the trend of positioning rescued captives as people who must repay the debt of liberation through labor.« (63). The second chapter focuses on Brazil and Cuba – the primary destinations of transatlantic slave trade voyages – comparing how the 1817 Cédula and the 1818 Alvará regulated liberation and apprenticeship differently, yet ultimately curtailed the personhood of liberated Africans. Under those legal regimes and contemporary diplomatic arrangements, liberated Africans petitioned to local judges, mixed commissions, and British diplomats, resorting to strategic forum shopping to have their formal status recognized. Other strategies bypassed formal »liberation«, such as the establishment of fugitive communities.

The Palmerston Act changed the geography of anti-slave trade enforcement once more in 1835. British naval patrols began to bypass treaty co-signatories and expand into the South Atlantic and African territorial waters. Liberated Africans who had been freed in Sierra Leone, but had been detained or re-enslaved in neighboring jurisdictions, demanded protection based on their status. Some claimed to be »Her Majesty's subjects« to trigger British interventions for their release within Indigenous African dominions. In those cases, dispute resolution was not just limited to gunboat diplomacy, the book highlights. British representatives largely engaged in the practice of gift-exchange with Indigenous African political rulers, opted for reciprocal exchange of value rather than force, and worked with local legal and political institutions to negotiate.

Looking at the 1840s, the book compares the practices of compulsory labor in systems of apprenticeship and enlistment that bound liberated Africans. Magistrates and ordinances disciplined labor and mobility of liberated Africans as a central workforce in the colonial economy in Sierra Leone and the Cape. Across the Atlantic, forced labor built modern state infrastructures – such as Brazil's

* Jake Subryan Richards, The Bonds of Freedom: Liberated Africans and the End of the Slave Trade, New Haven (CT): Yale University Press 2025, 336 p., ISBN 978-0-300-26320-6

first public prison and major railways in Cuba. Liberated Africans protested abuse, requested transfers, demanded wages, sought the free status of their children by collectively petitioning political leaders and magistrates. They also formed urban communities in places like Rio de Janeiro and Havana. In sugar- and coffee-producing regions in Cuba and Brazil, insurgent ideologies grew stronger as British diplomatic pressures continued and fueled rumors that British ships might supply them with arms. Fear of insurrections – including those aimed at Cuban independence – grew stronger among authorities and elites, prompting the use of military force and criminal law as tools of repression. Slaveholding states deployed torture and deportation of liberated Africans in the name of the plantation economy.

The book argues that state counterinsurgency also forced elites to reconsider the feasibility of the illegal slave trade. Increased pressure from British diplomacy and naval captures brought the slave trade even closer to a breaking point. During the 1850s and 1860s, domestic regulation extended the reach of anti-slave trade measures – the jurisdiction of Auditoria Geral da Marinha in Brazil went beyond the high seas into coastal and private estates. And the courts of slaveholding states became central arenas of contestation. Richards presents a series of oral testimonies of liberated Africans in domestic courts to show how they ruptured dominant social assumptions about property rights – further enriching our understanding of the end of the slave trade in Cuba, usually attributed to external geopolitical factors or »market death«.

The book's final chapter examines what happened after compulsory labor in the 1860s and beyond. On both sides of the Atlantic, Richards argues, liberated Africans devised visions of freedom based on connections forged within freedmen communities and through solidarity with shipmates. Some liberated Africans became key buyers in prize actions, where they accumulated capital to engage in maritime commerce – in Freetown, their interests as traders converged with British imperial commercial policies. The book draws on court documents to show how capital and shipmate bonds were jointly enforced in shipmate societies that funded financial credit and business ventures among liberated Africans.

Sometimes the pursuit of economic and political opportunity prompted liberated Africans to relocate, as in the case of those who left Sierra Leone, Brazil and Cuba to join a new diaspora in Lagos. Other times, liberated Africans devised strategies to stay in places where they built their families and social life. In Brazil, holding private property with official recognition helped to avoid displacement, since national laws allowed the state to condition the granting of freedom on a change of residency. In Cape Colony, where assimilationist ideologies were evident in court cases favoring white employers, liberated Africans from Mozambique relied on mosques as a communal institution and stretched the bonding qualities of shipmate solidarity across the Indian Ocean World. In Cuba, they collectively demanded fair wages as masters pushed for labor contracts in exchange for freedom papers, and also became key actors for anticolonial insurgency.

By the end of the book, readers come away with an elaborate, dynamic sense of the gradual illegalization of the slave trade as it moved through international, national, and local spaces. Yet neither systematic analysis of case law nor the local (non-)implementation of anti-slavery laws are the main focus of the book's route. Richards begins each chapter with a brilliant opening that unfolds through layered narratives about individuals and polities before the next chapter introduces a new narrative combination. In between, the book zooms in and out of the dense entanglement of meanings, which becomes increasingly more intricate with each new treaty, colonial code, courtroom and public square. Broad territories, maritime domains, as well as specific points on the maps of Havana, Rio de Janeiro and Freetown become spaces for contrasting versions of freedom informed by British imperialism, polities' slaveholding interests, and liberated Africans' pursuit of justice.

By following the anti-slave trade regulations across international, national, and local spaces, the book sheds light on the *making* of freedom on a large scale. Richards combines original primary research with a vast body of scholarship spanning imperial, international, social and legal history, guiding the reader through different paths of slave trade illegalization without losing sight of its commonalities. Significantly, at every major turn, the book foregrounds how shipmate bonds consistently devised diasporic visions of freedom, through mutual aid societies, financial credit pools, rights-claiming mobilization, and social innovation.

Yet the book takes care to frame these visions of freedom alongside authoritarian control (the two senses of »bonds« of freedom), showing that they disputed the same social terrain and fed on, among other normative constructs, the same »layered and compromised« (228) legal norms. Richards convincingly argues that these stories have much to reveal both about world history and lasting racialized constraints to this day: »After the state denied liberated Africans formal free status, property rights, and citizenship, it became possible to imagine the same measures applying to all subsequent generations […]« (236). Ultimately, this is also a book about how laws grounded in liberal discourse paved the way for authoritarian control. The publication of *Bonds of Freedom* is no doubt a landmark work in the legal history of antislavery and, hopefully, a timely contribution to ongoing reflections about authoritarianism.

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