

Where is the Border?

Chasing John Brown from New York to Arizona

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JENNA M. LOYD

This essay could also be subtitled “or, how a girl raised in Colorado, now grown and living in Brooklyn, ended up driving around Civil War battle-grounds in the Southwest.” Finding the Civil War in places close to home is only one part of the story. Finding how and where the past weighs down on the present is about those curious juxtapositions of received regional and national histories that are animated by an urgent political question and restless intellect. What would the great abolitionist John Brown, who led armed resistance to slavery and helped catalyze the Civil War, have to say about the violence of mass criminalization?¹

I like to think that the understandings sparked by these experiences result from following a Benjaminian method of bringing the past into constellation with the present.² Which is another way of saying that I wanted to explore overlapping and discontinuous circuits of slavery and colony.

Learning that boundaries can also mean freedom is not exactly what I expected when I set out mid-July 2010 to find out what solidarity from one border state to another looked like. When I think of borders, I most often think of migrants trying to navigate the Sonoran Desert into the United States or the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. I think of how the natural is made national through militarization: Fortress NAFTA and Fortress Europe.

I learned that boundaries don’t always have this meaning while tracing the arcs of the Ohio River. There was a time when it marked the great divide between North and South, when flights across a river were to something more like freedom, and expressly not slavery, where looking across this divide from Kentucky to Cincinnati meant looking at a city filled with abolitionists.



Rankin House overlooking
Ohio River, Ripley OH

Photo by Lorem Ipsum



How I got to this juxtaposition of the border as freedom and death begins aptly enough in Detroit, another abolitionist border city. While at the 2010 US Social Forum, which was held there, I spoke with a friend from Arizona who organizes against border militarization and migration policing about whether invitations to travel to the state to help fight against SB 1070, a law which promises “attrition through enforcement,” would be useful to resisting the criminalization of life for undocumented migrants. Would pressure from the outside be a more effective use of our collective capacities? Would it be better to build power throughout the country in order to get rid of 287(g), which Sheriff Joe Arpaio made infamous, and Secure Communities, federal programs that are by no means isolated to Arizona?³

These are still pertinent questions, but it turns out that they did actually want people to come to Arizona. So, I put together a road trip on the fly. The route there and back would give me time to piece together answers to some other pressing questions:

How is the struggle over slavery tied up with the history of the U.S. border with Mexico, and in turn, contemporary struggles over migration and nation?

Or, how can it be forgotten that the struggle over slavery and U.S. territorial conquest were part and parcel of one another?

What might an abolitionist history look like, and how might this past animate this world of borders?

Or, if John Brown had a posse, what would that mean to us in the 21st century?

The reasons for these questions go something like this—before Brooklyn, I lived in Syracuse, NY, the first place east of the Mississippi I’ve lived. Syracuse, too, is part of a borderland with a rich set of histories of inter-imperial rivalry, indigenous governance and anti-colonial efforts, abolition and women’s suffrage. As a new resident, whose own received history of the nation and territory were all about bloody settler colonialism, the telling of New York’s histories often rubbed me the wrong way because too often they are tethered to a liberal American exceptionalist project.

Such national histories forget, for example, how the prison and abolition, twin trajectories of freedom and democracy, sit cheek by jowl. Harriet Tubman would have lived down the road from Auburn Prison in Auburn, NY. Or how Tocqueville took great interest in the modern prison as a democratic institution. As Eric Foner, in his lovely *Nothing But Freedom*, reminds us, Tocqueville in 1843 wrote: “If the Negroes have the right to become free, the colonists have the incontestable right not to be ruined by the Negroes’ freedom.”

How can these stories of prisons, slavery, and democracy be told together in their messy, disjointed, contradictory realities? A not unimportant question, but I keep getting sidetracked, which is part of the beauty of road trips. They have a kind of linearity, but there are still many circuitous routes to track, especially with a Blackberry and selective library in tow:

Raider Nation, volume 1 | *on Oscar Grant's murder by the BART transit police, and organizing for justice in Oakland*

Terry Bisson's novel Fire on the Mountain | *which asks what happens if John Brown wins*

W. E. B. Du Bois, John Brown | *a history written by the great author of Black Reconstruction*

Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience | *the classic essay, which I'd never read, and my copy is a gift from a fellow advocate of citizenship abolition*

Angela Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? | *a replacement for the copy I lost in Lordsburg, NM on a different road trip*

Timothy Dunn, The Militarization of the US-Mexico Border 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home | *dry, but a classic in recent border history*

Juan Gonzalez, Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America | *found used in a Brooklyn bookstore at 10pm the night before departure*

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass | *another classic I'd never read*

Haruki Murakami, Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World | *cuz I need to read more novels*

Fergus Bordewich, Bound for Canaan | *NYT bestseller about the Underground Railroad*

Leonard Richards, The California Gold Rush and Coming Civil War | *in audio form for the drive, and to understand the geopolitics of migration and free labor in what would become California*

James F. Simon, Lincoln and Chief Justice Taney: Slavery, Secession, and the President's War Powers | *in audio form, and to understand Dred Scott and the geopolitics of free soil & sectionalism*

Some other articles and podcasts on stuff like the post-Mexican War Gadsden Purchase, which established the existing boundary between Arizona and Chihuahua so there could be a transcontinental railroad.

With these guides in hand, I tacked a route that would get me to Arizona before the July 29 implementation date of SB 1070,⁴ while also touching on a number of important sites in abolitionist and civil rights history, like:

- **Harpers Ferry, West Virginia** where John Brown and his crew raided a federal arms cache and where I found a used copy of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*;
- **Nashville, Tennessee** as a circuit on the Underground Railroad and birthplace of the filibuster, William Walker, who named himself president of Nicaragua and was killed by Hondurans when later he tried to set himself up there;
- **Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee** where Dr. King was assassinated while in town supporting a sanitation worker strike, and where Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken is just around the corner;
- **Little Rock Central High School**, where Arkansas Governor Faubus deployed the state's National Guard troops to prevent 9 Black students from enrolling in an all white school, and where President Eisenhower deployed federal troops to force the integration of education;
- **Piedras Negras, Coahuila**, a maroon community across the Rio from Eagle Pass, Texas.

Arrive six days later in Tucson, a place with a long history of fighting against border militarization and providing sanctuary for migrants and refugees. Spend a couple of weeks learning from and supporting organizing efforts against militarization and criminalization.⁵

Get back to New York for the fall, following Manifest Destiny "backwards" through a sometimes abandoned (Fort Craig, NM), sometimes thriving (Fort Bliss, TX), infrastructure of military outposts marking efforts to suppress independent nations and territorialize United States hegemony.

Blaze through Bleeding Kansas, where pro- and anti-slavery forces took up arms to decide the future of the territory at places such as Pottawattamie Creek and



Fort Craig Guard House and Sally Port, post-Treaty of Guadalupe territorial fort, prison and Civil War battle site, Fort Craig, NM

Marais des Cygnes. This is where John Brown made a name for himself before Harpers Ferry.

Less than 24 hours here is perfunctory. Have a look at the map: a straight line running North-South dividing Kansas from that other border state, Missouri, was a military road, and Fort Scott was one of the staging grounds for the Mexican War and later Indian Wars. Here a historical articulation of our current borders of domestic and international geopolitics as they're being built into the ground.

Pull into St. Louis, MO, the Gateway to Manifest Destiny and city where the Dred Scott case was heard. Thanks to the National Park Service, the courtroom and Jefferson Arch are next to each other, but, perhaps not surprisingly, nowhere do I find NPS explicitly discuss how the politics of westward expansion were the politics of slavery. The received history of opposition to slavery conflates anti-slavery with abolition. But much of the debate over slavery and expansionism supported "free labor," meaning opposition to the competition posed by slave labor and the people who would be emancipated. Some anti-slavery folks, like Supreme Court Justice Taney, who wrote the infamous Dred Scott case that ruled that enslaved Black people were not U.S. citizens, and Abraham Lincoln, were not abolitionists, and supported emigration, another round of forced relocation to far-away places.

What is so rich about making these connections between slavery and citizenship now is how disconnected they have become. For the past couple of decades, for example, nativists have been pushing to get rid of birthright citizenship. The citizenship clause of the 14th Amendment was passed during Reconstruction in order to grant



St. Louis Old Courthouse, Dred Scott hearings, St. Louis, MO

citizenship to formerly enslaved people, effectively nullifying Dred Scott. Even archconservative Alan Keyes thinks it's crazy to mess with birthright citizenship.

Freedom's boundary also extends to the current territorial divisions of the U.S. and Mexico and the states of Arizona and New Mexico. When U.S. citizens traveled to Mexico's Alta California on word of gold, they were entering a nation that had abolished slavery. The potential extension of slavery into conquered territories was part of the controversy over the Mexican War, and a series of compromises between the North and South concluded that the now state of Texas would remain a slave state, but that it could not retain its claims to the New Mexico Territory, where "popular sovereignty" would determine its future with regard to slavery. During the Civil War, a North-South line was drawn to divide the pro-slavery powers living in the southern portion of this territory from their Confederate neighbors in Texas, establishing the Arizona Territory as free.

California was admitted to the union as a free state, but when writing California's constitution following U.S. conquest, freedom came to mean "free labor," which did not mean freedom for people who were enslaved. Rather, it meant freedom from Negroes, whether enslaved or freedmen. As Jean Pfaelzer's Driven Out details, portions of this white republic also took vigilante action against Chinese settlers, organizing violent pogroms to run them out of California. In both cases, free labor was an exclusivity backed by legislation that ratified exclusion and rightlessness, rather than solidarity.

These legal bars set the stage for the federal Chinese Exclusion Act signed into law in 1882. It built permanent alienage on top of an 1875 naturalization statute,

which itself had doubly built Jim Crow on top of the 14th Amendment by declaring that citizenship could be extended to white people and to persons of African descent alone.

Undoing birthright citizenship now would mean undoing the Black citizenship legacy of Reconstruction, and simultaneously rebuilding Jim Crow alienage found in Chinese Exclusion.

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This sidetrack is a radical root that branches to the crux of the story where I rethought some connections between boundaries and freedom. Because after St. Louis, a place whose Museum of Westward Expansion, which, mind you, is dedicated to the 19th century, managed to juxtapose dioramas of stuffed beavers and a buffalo posed in their natural environs with an atomic cloud, making nuclear colonialism oh so natural, I was really looking forward to visiting the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Happily, this museum did manage to tell the histories of US colonization, native dispossession, and slavery as intertwined stories. It's about how these histories live in the present in the form of conflicts over race and citizenship, but it's also about how anti-slavery is remembered to constitute the essential terms of American democracy and freedom.

As the name suggests, the Freedom Center, which opened in 2004, is not just a museum to the past, but devotes some of its programming to connecting the historical anti-slavery moment to more recent freedom struggles and international figures such as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. This is a challenging mission, as is trying to speak to what appeared to be an ethnically and geographically broad audience, and hence to people with complex relationships to slavery and colonialism.

The symbolism of the Freedom Center is its most significant feature. A bank of windows looks out over the Ohio River, a visceral reminder of the ways in which freedom's struggle can be territorialized, not only marked by a wide river, whose stillness the day I visited belies its stark historical meaning, but also in the urban form. Cincinnati and other towns dotting the north bank of the river were abolitionist cities, like Detroit or Syracuse, whose border to freedom was Canada.

The Center's placement between two under-construction stadiums is also symbolic. I spent a good deal of time wandering around outside, thinking about what it would mean for a visitor to stumble across a piece of the Berlin Wall permanently installed outside the Center after having just enjoyed a sporting event. This production is not all there is, but it is a twist, perhaps, on the heritage tourism/waterfront redevelopment schemes: Freedom Redeveloped.



Berlin Wall Monument,
National Underground
Railroad Freedom Center,
Cincinnati, OH

Photo by Lorem Ipsum

All men are created equal,
and therefore, are free

Spectacles are always fragile or contradictory, but a lot of money gets poured into making the appearance of freedom, and one can rent the symbolism of the building for a host of social and corporate functions. According to the center's website, the Lighting Freedom's Flame capital campaign raised 60% of the center's cost of \$110,000,000. The campaign was co-chaired by John Pepper, former Chairman & CEO of the Procter & Gamble Co., and by former Atlanta Mayor and UN Ambassador, Andrew Young.

It was not for these reasons alone that I became fixated on the ways in which freedom was being commodified. There are other obvious things like corporate sponsorship of different exhibits, and how photo, video, or sound recordings were not allowed inside (nor was there a comprehensive guide for purchase). The museum contains a complex set of perspectives and juxtapositions whose documentation would afford time for the analysis they deserve. But the history was made to feel proprietary, and ultimately "knowledge" felt beside the point because one was really paying \$12 for the "experience."

The Center creates experiences and emotions of freedom, which to my mind, assimilate radical histories to hegemonic U.S. nationalism. For example, "Escape for Freedom," the exhibit geared to young people and their parents, which enrolls the child viewer to select what they would do if they were a slave, offers a lot to think through, particularly given the diversity of the visitors. I think the exhibit is dangerous because of the way it fails to register visitors' different historical and contemporary relations to slavery.⁶ To be clear, buying a child a ticket to the Center to learn about slavery is not a "bad" thing, nor is this necessarily ideologically "dangerous," but as a complex, the Freedom Center began to feel more like innocuous heritage tourism than a place for thoughtfulness that the haunting installation of a slave house provoked for me, your road weary skeptic of an essayist. The exhibit effectively builds a public that uniformly reads itself as always ever having opposed slavery and championing freedom, a dodgy project when 'freedom' insistently is tethered to 'America,' and to capitalism. It does not challenge people to sort through their specific entanglements with power and disempowerment, nor the specific capacities they might cultivate to oppose contemporary state violence and systemic power relations.

Perhaps I'm disappointed because I wanted something so much more oppositional. I was confronted with the cooptation of a history that I was thinking through for such different purposes, as no doubt others were, too. At the same time, I don't quite trust this feeling because I feel like I'm bowling over the complex experiences people have at the museum with a well trod story of bloody empire robed in neoliberal freedom. And I honestly am uncertain about what the popularization of radical history could look like for an expressly national-corporate venue.

With those doubts and caveats exposed, I hope that someone who has more time and inclination can write a richer narrative of the center complete

with the juicy back stories on programming debates over the exhibit, jointly sponsored by the International Spy Museum, that opened 9/11/10, “Enemy Within: Terror in America – 1776 to Today.”⁷ This piece might situate back-room discussions over Andrew Young as a representative for Freedom (something that would involve a measured discussion of his place in and use of his place in Black History for other purposes) within a narrative about how Cincinnati residents think the Freedom Center speaks to their daily lives and struggles. It would investigate the extent to which the center provokes an oppositional urge to freedom, or how it inoculates visitors to feeling like they’ve already inherited freedom, treating slavery as a thing of the past or something that other people somewhere else do to some other people, and is atavistic and anachronistic rather than the (capitalist) condition of a few people’s freedom in which we are implicated in divergent ways.

These questions need provoking in more urgent ways than this center does. Especially so at a time in which the discourse of slavery and human trafficking is tied to a state project that creates the conditions for trafficking, and is responsible for deaths in the deserts and oceans. I expect these to be part of an intense discussion of the contemporary iterations of slavery that asks uncomfortable questions much closer to home.

Take Thoreau again, who in his, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” decried his Northern neighbors’ hypocrisy for paying taxes that would go to support the Mexican War, slavery, and violence closer to home: “We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman’s billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail! Look at the gallows! Look at the chaplain of the regiment! We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of this provisional army. So we defend ourselves and our hen-roosts, and maintain slavery.” Or take the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude “except as a punishment of a crime.” The prison is an institution that in the U.S. alone shapes millions of people’s lives directly and indirectly. Can this museum grapple with the ways in which slavery lives as legalized punishment and massive disenfranchisement? “Can it ask, in echo of Thoreau, if the prison now is “our provisional army”?

I arrived late that night at a campsite near Oberlin College, a storied abolitionist institution. A trio of camo-wearing bow hunters walked by (of course!) as I drank some whiskey and considered a concrete arena for solidarity between border states. Days before I left Arizona, Chuck Schumer, the senator who represents me as a bonafide New York resident, pushed through Congress a \$600 million border militarization bill, which President Obama immediately signed into law. The ease with which money could be thrown into more guns while the future of even a timid DREAM Act—which traded

on tropes of innocence, sympathy, and military service in exchange for citizenship—seemed uncertain, gives me pause. What could be done to challenge Schumer’s claim to be the champion for immigrant rights?

Tomorrow would be a symbolic full circle, better, a topological node in freedom’s cross-border politics. I would drive through Buffalo, a city across the border from Fort Erie, Ontario, where the first meeting was held of the Niagara Movement, an anti-accommodationist civil rights group founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (among others). The group’s second meeting was in Harpers Ferry, where they held a ceremony honoring John Brown’s actions, and a subsequent meeting was held at Oberlin. Their statement of principles touched on a range of issues, including health, economic opportunity, organized labor and strike breaking, political rights, and the inequities of the courts. Implicitly referencing the relation between lynching and demagogic politicians, they expressed alarm at the “evident retrogression ... of sound public opinion on the subject of manhood rights, republican government and human brotherhood.” To that end, they demanded suffrage, “the abolition of the dehumanizing convict-lease system,” and federal enforcement of the War Amendments. Making these changes would take persistent demands, agitation, and protest.

The challenge of history is the challenge of Progress. Where dominant portrayals of John Brown, such as at the National Park Service installations at Harpers Ferry, respect him as a man of his convictions, following these convictions is depicted as foolhardy, naïve, or extreme. Using a man to stand in for an entire social movement subtly exchanges politics for emotion, simultaneously obscuring the politics of abolitionism. The paternalistic call for reason and common sense subtly undermines politics as conflictual and replaces it with the accommodation that the Niagara Movement rejected, or with eventuality. Slavery was always ever going to end because this is America. This is what I fear about the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Hitching freedom to the nation—the U.S. is forever becoming freedom—appropriates the work for freedom dreams to the state and to capital. Freedom Redeveloped is the tourism and real estate sectors of the broader stories of Neoliberal Freedom that are being told as American national identity. But freedom’s project would involve questioning the provisional armies closer to home.