More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889

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Review

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Kantrowitz, Stephen *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*. Penguin Press, \$36.00 ISBN 978-1-59420-342-8

How Citizenship was Defined and Defended by African American Boston

In *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, Stephen Kantrowitz examines the political and social activism of free, ex-slave, and fugitive slave African Americans living and working in Boston during the six decades surrounding the Civil War. The story is bracketed by the publication of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829 and the post-Reconstruction death of black activist Lewis Hayden in 1889. Kantrowitz argues that the term "black abolitionists" does not adequately or accurately describe the work or goals of African Americans who participated in the antislavery movement. These "black activists" continued their struggle for citizenship and national belonging long after slavery was abolished and its abolition was never the sum of their goals. Part of this book's work is to remind us that both before and after the war, there was a legal, political, and social battle to be fought for African American rights in the North as much as in the South. Kantrowitz broadens our understanding of that struggle by arguing that African Americans ultimately wanted *more than freedom* – they wanted acceptance, fellowship, respect, and belonging. The citizenship these African Americans sought – what Kantrowitz calls their "*entire* enfranchisement" (author emphasis) – "would mean being able to move through the world without constantly being reminded that they belonged to a suspect class; sharing the experience of daily life without wondering when they would next be rebuked, mocked, or excluded; joining in the rituals and customs of public life without apology or apprehension. These final steps would require a change in white people's hearts." (32)

The book is divided into three chronologically organized parts. In the first section, "Confronting Slavery and Freedom," Kantrowitz puts free blacks'

antislavery work in the broader context of their search for belonging and full participation in a society that often viewed them as anti-citizens. He looks at the challenges and limitations of interracialism within the abolition movement; African Americans' distinct approach and sometimes separate actions with respect to fighting slavery, including their engagement with politics and violent confrontation; and their simultaneous fight for integration and inclusion in Northern arenas such as schools, churches, public accommodations, the state militia, and Freemasonry. The career of Lewis Hayden, a central actor throughout this book, reveals something about the breadth of Northern African Americans' activism and engagement. Beginning in the 1840s, Hayden was a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society, but he also spoke at Liberty Party meetings, was a full member of the Prince Hall Free Masons, was involved in efforts to build an interracial church, gave shelter and protection to fugitives within his own home, and served as a subscription agent for Frederick Douglass's newspaper. Hayden's career demonstrates that black activists' participation in the struggle for abolition, legal and political rights, and full membership in the nation was not defined or circumscribed by the white-led antislavery movement.

In the second section, "Fighting Like Men," Kantrowitz explores how black activism was shaped by a revolutionary tradition which argued that freedom and rights must be won through struggle. With a limited and largely abstract understanding of slavery, some whites wondered why so many millions of slaves did not rise up in rebellion to overthrow the system and claim freedom for themselves. Images of a passive and child-like slave population lent weight to arguments regarding racial inferiority and African Americans' innate suitability for slavery. Black activists in the North understood that they needed to prove themselves true inheritors of the revolutionary spirit by physically and publicly resisting slavery. These efforts included militant mobilization in response to the Fugitive Slave Law, efforts to get recognition for a black militia company, strategically using their influence at the polls, and serving in the Union military during the Civil War. Kantrowitz reveals the complexity and contested nature of these battles, as African Americans struggled to demonstrate that they possessed the order, discipline, and bravery of citizen-soldiers even as they continued to face formal exclusion and white opposition. Historians are in agreement regarding the significance of African American men's military service in their claim for the rights and privileges of citizenship, but Kantrowitz shows that the rhetorical connection between martialism and citizenship was part of a longer

tradition in black activism. African Americans staked a claim to freedom on that basis whenever they publicly performed their revolutionary heritage – whether that meant physically resisting slave catchers, speaking publicly about African Americans’ historic role in defending the nation during times of war, or insisting on equal pay for black troops who made an equal sacrifice.

The book’s final section, “The Disappointments of Citizenship,” challenges traditional narratives which understand Reconstruction as a peculiarly *Southern* event. At the same time, the evidence suggests that Northern Reconstruction followed a similar trajectory in terms of early gains followed by the gradual retrenchment of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. During Radical Reconstruction, Northern black activists fought for state civil rights laws, gained patronage positions in the government, and helped shape Republican politics as officeholders and voters. While African Americans were newly armed with legal and political rights, the “citizenship of the heart” which they sought remained elusive. (426) Over time, Northern blacks found that their Republican allies were fair-weather friends who only cared about black voters when they were critical to an election. Freemasonry, which leaders like Lewis Hayden saw as an ideal sight for creating true bonds of brotherhood between white and black men, also proved a disappointment, as the Grand Masonic Lodge rejected petitions for the recognition of African American lodges. By the time of Hayden’s death in 1889, Boston’s black activists faced alienation from the Republican party, increasing segregation, and diminishing opportunities for social advancement.

Kantrowitz accomplishes much in this work, but there is no denying that the “African American citizenship” he examines is always implicitly understood to be male. He makes what seems a concerted effort to mention women’s participation in some of the events and efforts he describes, but ultimately these examples feel more additive than substantive. The leading activists he examines are male and the black activist venues he examines are overwhelmingly exclusive to or dominated by men: the state militia, voting, Freemasonry, aggressive rescues of fugitive slaves, war-time military service, and political office. For a work that wants to challenge and expand our understanding of what citizenship really meant, *More Than Freedom* does little to critically consider African American women’s particular relationship to the “entire enfranchisement” Kantrowitz describes. It seems faulty to assume that a citizenship so defined by militarism and physical displays of resistance would have had the same implications for, or been performed in the same way, by both sexes. But this is a narrative in which African American men are presumed to

speak for the race.

This criticism aside, *More Than Freedom* is an important contribution to the field and complicates our understanding of multiple narratives and traditional periodization. Kantrowitz challenges histories of the antislavery movement and of free black activism that see abolition as the most significant and sometimes only major reform which concerned Northern free blacks in the antebellum. He explores individual activists and venues of activism that have received less scholarly attention. He demonstrates that African American men's military service in the Civil War and post-emancipation battles for civil rights were a continuance of a much longer fight that began in the North. And in important ways he moves beyond the traditional discussion of what African Americans were fighting for – of their legal and political battles and gains – to look at what African Americans ultimately hoped to achieve – not a legal protection or political power grudgingly acceded by whites, but true acceptance and fellowship in the republic.

Heather Cooper is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at University of Iowa, where she studies issues of race, slavery, and representation in the nineteenth century U.S.

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