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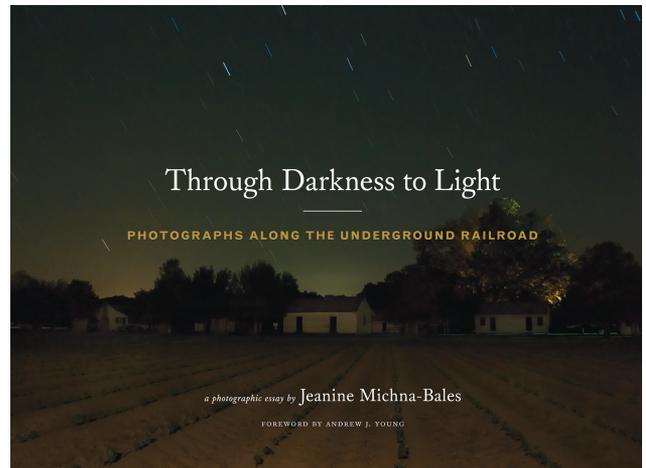
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# Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad

Jeanine Michna-Bales. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017. 191 pp., maps, photos, notes, bibliography. \$40.00 cloth (ISBN 978-1-61689-565-5).

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This is a beautiful, powerful, and deeply original book that brings together photography, history, geography, white supremacy, and antiracist struggle. The book is divided into two parts. Part I, “The Underground Railway,” features three short essays. Historian Fergus Bordewich recounts the history of the Underground Railroad in “Bound for Freedom.” In “Let Freedom Ring,” historian Eric Jackson brings the railroad alive with vignettes of the “passengers” journeys, including that of Frederick Douglass. In “The Spirituals,” media scholar Robert Darden invokes the role of music in “powering” the railroad. In his foreword, Ambassador Andrew J. Young points to the legacy of the Underground Railroad and ongoing struggles for freedom and justice. Part II of *Through Darkness to Light* is an extended photo essay documenting a 1,400-mile journey of one strand of the Underground Railroad, from Louisiana to Ontario, Canada. The author, photographer Jeanine Michna-Bales, learned about the Underground Railroad as a child and realized that it crossed very close to her home in the Midwest. Eventually, she began piecing together the actual path that slaves crossed in their journey to freedom. She explains that although she undertook exhaustive research, not all sites or segments of the journey could be fully verified. Such a precise lack of knowledge, she notes, parallels the actual experience of the runaways—their path was far from certain. After assembling the route, she then went and photographed points along the way. The photos are arranged spatially, from the south to the north in the order in which a runaway would have encountered the landscape. The author



is very clear in her intent: “The goal of this photographic series is to evoke a sense of one journey out of bondage; to capture what it may have felt like to run in fear for roughly three months in pursuit of freedom” (p. 38). She has succeeded in her goal. The result is a haunting and visceral take on slavery, landscape, and place.

Each photo contains a brief caption and location, which serves to narrate the journey. This narration documents numerous aspects of the journey, including directions, landscape, survival, and emotions. Examples of captions that describe the physical landscape include, “Dirt Road, outside Coldwater Michigan,” (p. 161); “Downed Tree, Wayne County, Tennessee” (p. 89); and “The River Jordan, first view of a free state, crossing the Ohio River to Indiana” (p. 117). Other captions convey the physical experience and logistics of running away, such as, “Catching a Breath, LaSalle Parish, Louisiana” (p. 49), or “Gathering Provisions, Outskirts of the Myrtle Grove Plantation” (p. 57). Still others explicitly convey the geography and directions of the railroad: “On the way to the Harkin House Station, San Jacinto, Indiana” (p. 126); and “Follow the Tracks to the First Creek, Just Outside Richland, a Free Black Community . . . Indiana” (p. 127). The final category of captions hints at the emotions and

terror that runaways must have experienced: “Fleeing the Torches, Warren County Kentucky” (p. 103); and “A Safe Place to Regroup, House of Levi Coffin . . . Fountain City Indiana” (p. 144). Finally, the caption on the last image reads, “Freedom, Canadian soil, Sarnia Ontario” (p. 180).

The photographs are placed on the right side of each page spread, with many of the facing pages featuring a quote on the underground road, slavery, and abolition. For instance, the page facing the image of Levi Coffin’s house (“A Safe Place to Regroup”) has the following quote from Coffin, considered the unofficial president of the Underground Railroad: “The dictates of humanity came in opposition to the law of the land, and we ignored the law” (p. 144). Other quotes are rooted in vernacular culture, such as lyrics from the spiritual, “Following the Drinking Gourd,” which is about the Big Dipper and escaping to freedom: “For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom/If you follow the drinking gourd” (p. 128). Others are relatively unknown, such as this account of Reverend Jacob Cummings, an escaped slave: “A local grocer heard that the Smiths were mistreating their slaves. He showed Cummings a map of Lake Erie, spoke with him about Ohio and Indiana, taught him to find the North Star and determine direction by moss on the tree, and encouraged him to make a run for it. In July 1839, Cummings fled” (p. 66). The collective power of the quotes is their ability to illuminate the multiple texts, traditions, individuals, and organizations who actively opposed slavery.

The first thing that struck me as I opened the book was how dark it was. The cover is black, the images are very dark, with the exception of the final two—which depict Canada—and most of the pages are black. I found this frustrating at first. Having vision problems, I need lots of light when reading. Then it dawned on me, though, that she was photographing the landscape as runaways would have experienced it, at night. Moreover, the photo essay is arranged diurnally, beginning in the evening and ending in the morning. Accordingly, the photographs at the point of departure—the plantation—are quite dark, but they become lighter as the trail shifts to Canada, symbolizing both the dawn as well as freedom. The centrality of darkness is also marked by its opposite, the many references to light. Numerous images and captions refer to the night sky, the north star, the moon, lanterns, and the like. This is a subtle but powerful move that foregrounds the difficulties, knowledge, and skills required to traverse 1,400 miles at night in a preindustrial age.

Although many scholarly works have been written on the Underground Railroad and it has been depicted in story,

song, and film, no one that I know of has attempted to portray its extensive landscape. Several things immediately stand out about the depicted landscapes. First, they are overwhelmingly nonurban landscapes. Indeed, the author writes, “Shooting at night, listening to all the natural sounds, I was overwhelmed with a sense of how vast, strange, and forbidding these remote places must have felt to those making the journey to freedom: the cicadas, the wind rustling through the trees, water trickling in a stream, coyotes howling in the distance, bullfrogs singing” (p. 12). Images range from open, “natural” landscapes, such as bogs and forests, to abandoned buildings, farms, creeks, and rivers. This is not an urbanized journey—either then or now. This, in turn, brings up a whole series of questions regarding the evolution of place: How similar is the contemporary landscape to what the fugitives encountered? To what extent, if any, can the landscape bring us closer to understanding the experience of both captivity and flight? As I was studying the photographs, I wondered how the slaves must have perceived the landscape. Some scholarship suggests that African Americans have a limited engagement with wilderness and the “great outdoors” precisely because of the plantation, bondage, and the dehumanization associated with it. Although there is certainly a compelling case to be made for this position, there is also evidence to the contrary, as seen in a rich history of gardening and hunting, the reverse migration to the South, and deep place attachments. Was it possible for slaves to see beauty in the southern landscape given the fact that it was saturated with their blood? How might their perception of the landscape have changed as they journeyed north? Certainly, there are many accounts that convey slaves’ joy on reaching and crossing the Ohio River. This, of course, brings up fundamental questions of positionality and how power relations shape our relationship to nature and place.

We are living at a moment when numerous individuals and organizations are attempting to reckon with the deep history of racial violence and white supremacy in the United States. This can be seen in widespread activism over Confederate monuments, in the Equal Justice Initiative’s effort to memorialize lynching sites in the southeastern United States (they have counted 4,000 to date) and its newly opened Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Earlier projects included *Without Sanctuary*, originally published in 2000, which consists of postcards and photographs of lynchings. Although all of these projects are enormously important and help a nation unable to acknowledge and process the centrality of racial violence to its very existence, few have systematically considered landscape and place. Of course, as geographers,

we know how central place and landscape were to slavery, abolition efforts, and its demise. Although *Through Darkness to Light* contains maps and is based on careful archival research to piece the trail together, Michna-Bales gives us much more than a spatial representation of the Underground Railroad. By using her photographs of landscapes, she strikes a deep emotional chord, as she forces us to contend with these spectral places of racial brutality. *Through Darkness to Light* is a wonderful example of what the geohumanities might aspire to.

Focusing on the railroad also portrays a distinct spatiality of slavery. Certainly, within geography as well as cognate fields, the most frequently studied slavery sites are plantations in the South. Geographers have conducted extensive field work on former plantations as sites of cultural memory, analyzing specifically how they represent slavery. One of the limitations of plantation studies, though, is that they contribute to a spatially limited understanding

of slavery: Slavery was not a southern institution—it was a U.S. one—although we find great comfort in locating it in the South. Not only did it exist throughout much of the United States for over two centuries, but even when it was confined to the South, it still functioned as a national institution, as seen in trade, laws (e.g., the Fugitive Slave Act), culture, and the national racial formation. By depicting the path from Louisiana to Canada, not does Michna-Bales provide a much fuller and accurate geography of slavery, but she also shows the mobility of slaves, the fluidity of radical consciousness, and the degree to which abolitionists operated in broad daylight, so to speak. By focusing on the landscape of the Underground Railroad, and specifically the fact that it existed above ground, one can begin to appreciate not only the tremendous courage and conviction of all those who participated in it, but also the extent to which such consciousness and action contributed to dismantling an entrenched system of human bondage.