

### D.A. Dunkley

*Agency of the Enslaved: Jamaica and the Culture of Freedom in the Atlantic World.*

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D.A. Dunkley's *Agency of the Enslaved* examines the concept of "slave freedom." Slave freedom was "the knowledge and conviction of enslaved people that they were free. They held this belief in spite of enslavement, and demonstrated it through their agency and/or acts of resistance" (p. 1). Dunkley argues that freedom is "indestructible," a natural right that cannot be made, taken away, or given; therefore, enslaved people could never lose their freedom. His interpretation redefines slavery as "the attempt to destroy freedom" (p. 3) and resistance as "assertions of the freedom that enslaved people knew that they still had" (p. 8). These new definitions are not mere semantic adjustments, but the basis for a new vision of the Atlantic World that places the enslaved at its heart (pp. 1–2, 96).

Using Jamaica as the site of analysis, the book examines interactions between slaves on the one hand and slaveowners, clergymen, and government officials on the other. Dunkley shows how Jamaican slaves responded to attempts to ameliorate slavery, including planter Matthew Lewis's paternalistic slave codes, baptisms and marriages ordained by the Anglican Church, and apprenticeship, the four-year transitional labor system imposed after slavery. Slaves used instrumentally the church membership and schooling opportunities offered by the Church of England, and their actions forced white elites to adapt. Furthermore, Dunkley argues, the very structure of Jamaican slave society reflected the power of slave freedom. Both the legal strictures imposed on the enslaved and later attempts to mitigate brutality were acknowledgments that enslaved Jamaicans could potentially upend slavery at any moment.

The most innovative element of the book is its extended analysis of the changing role of the Anglican Church in Jamaica. In the late eighteenth century, the Church of England shifted its focus away from slaveowners and toward the enslaved. As a result, enslaved Jamaicans flocked to Anglican churches to be baptized and to get an education. Although evangelical missionaries were allies of British abolitionists, the marginalized position of nonconformist churches made them less ideal for baptisms and marriages. In the case of slave marriages, the state only recognized those conducted in the Anglican Church. Similarly, baptism in the state church conferred a measure of status that, given the Church's elevated position in the colony, the nonconformist denominations could not.

As a philosophical rumination, Dunkley's concept of slave freedom has a lot to offer toward a powerful corrective to narratives that presume to know how

slaves viewed their enslavement or what they hoped to achieve by engaging in acts of resistance. It also raises a critical question: is enslavement (and by extension freedom) a legal designation, a social status, or a metaphysical state? Ultimately, however, *Agency of the Enslaved* is less successful when it shifts from a philosophical register to historical analysis. The available sources make it hard to prove conclusively that enslaved people saw themselves as free—and indeed, the operational definition of “slave freedom” shifts from “freedom known” (p. 97) and “freedom maintained” (p. 98) to slaves’ assertion of “the natural right to freedom that enslaved people knew that they had” (p. 149).

Slavery scholars rely on sources produced by slaveholders and other elites, documents that are shot through with racist assumptions. Dunkley reads these sources against the grain, a method that requires close textual analysis and clear explanations of how these problematic texts reveal new insights. However, he does not provide enough quotations from these sources, and it is never clear how explicitly various clergymen and planters articulated the opinions ascribed to them. In a similar vein, there is not enough context for an 1823 roster of 140 complainants who insisted they were free. Had the majority of these people run away from plantations? What series of events brought them in contact with local magistrates? There is an implication that some of them may have been illegally transported to Jamaica after the abolition of the slave trade. Four men on the list claimed Amerindian descent, a reference to a law in British Honduras—a colony that the Jamaica Assembly oversaw—that prohibited the enslavement of Amerindians. This fascinating list is the closest Dunkley comes to proving that slaves saw themselves as free. Nonetheless, more details are necessary to extrapolate beyond the 140 petitioners, who may not be representative of the larger slave population, especially if captured after 1807.

Furthermore, Dunkley contends that the scholarship on slavery has not sufficiently considered slave freedom. Concepts like Orlando Patterson’s “social death,” he insists, cannot account for the creative ways slaves used the tools of domination to achieve their own goals. However, the book’s summation of the literature is incomplete and at times misleading. Recent scholarship has reconsidered agency and resistance. Articles by Walter Johnson and Vincent Brown demonstrate that, while social death has long been a possible framework for understanding slavery, it has never been the only one nor is it currently the most dominant framework. Other relevant works are missing as well: Thomas Holt receives an all too brief mention, and David Brion Davis’s work is never referenced. Had Dunkley used a more comparative approach to the literature, these books and others might have helped to add needed complexity to the concept of slave freedom.

While the extant archival materials may never make broad generalizations possible, *Agency of the Enslaved* prompts readers to avoid pat assumptions about the mindsets of the enslaved and demonstrates the sophisticated legal and religious strategies enslaved Afro-Jamaicans used to challenge the island's slave regime.

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