Alice Baumgartner. *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*. New York: Basic Books, 2020. Hardcover $21.49.

In *South to Freedom*, Alice Baumgartner, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Southern California, where she teaches courses on nineteenth-century North America, brings attention to an often-ignored aspect of the history of slavery in the United States by exploring the narratives of enslaved people in America and their quest to finding freedom in Mexico during the nineteenth century. Baumgartner argues that despite their many obstacles, by fleeing the Antebellum South for Mexico, enslaved people played an essential role in the sectional crisis of nineteenth-century America, ultimately leading the nation to the American Civil War, a necessary step to ending slavery across the country. To support her argument, Baumgartner explains the way her book focuses on three threads of narratives that examines why the United States allowed the spread of slavery across the South, the reasons why Mexico abolished slavery, and the consequences both sets of policies had on the United States. Thus, the book is organized thematically into twelve chapters to capture the different experiences during this period.

In an attempt to highlight the experiences of enslaved people during this era, Baumgartner's book delves into a wide array of disciplines and fields, such as transnational, borderlands, social, political, racial, and legal histories, to name a few. Furthermore, while her main focus is to highlight how enslaved people became crucial actors in leading the United States towards the Civil War by fleeing to Mexico and making a stand for their freedom, it must be acknowledged that Baumgartner's book inevitably moves beyond focusing solely on the impacts and repercussions of the United States. By juxtaposing the sets of policies regarding slavery between the U.S. and Mexico, Baumgartner examines the conflicts that consequently arose between the two states as fears that Mexico threatened the system of slavery in Antebellum America intensified amongst many white/slave-owning Americans. Slavery versus freedom became

essential in various conflicts between Mexico and the U.S. The drastic difference in policies catalyzed events such as the First Seminole War in 1818, the Texas Revolution, and the Mexican-American War, which all impacted Mexico as well.

Baumgartner's powerful arguments and informational examination of this overlooked part of history are strengthened by a profusion of primary sources. By drawing on military records, diaries, letters, interviews, government documents, newspapers, and more, Baumgartner did an exceptional job providing evidence to demonstrate various opinions and thoughts during this period. More important, however, is how the archives were used to reveal a valuable and detailed description of the experiences of formerly enslaved people during their fight for their independence. Furthermore, many primary sources displayed how formerly enslaved people used existing laws and political systems to fight for and secure their rights.

South to Freedom is an essential and well-written book that contributes much by sharing a vast knowledge of history. While her writing is engaging and focuses on historical context, Baumgartner's writing style is not typical of other historical works, so it is not read like one, which is not a critique but an observation. Thus, while still an essential tool for historians, the book is captivating enough to attract a general audience. However, locating arguments and main ideas throughout the book could be difficult. Furthermore, because the book attempts to cover so much material, it skims over many topics and events throughout its text that deserves more attention and focus. Nonetheless, Baumgartner's *South to Freedom* is a groundbreaking text that is unafraid to acknowledge historically overlooked groups and discuss topics that may paint the United States negatively, especially in comparison to Mexico. Baumgartner brought attention to parts of history that had been ignored and overshadowed by dominant narratives for generations. Baumgartner demonstrates how enslaved people in the U.S. and Mexican policies became arbiters for freedom and helped spearhead the United States in the direction of being a genuinely free republic that establishes liberty and justice for all.

Matthew Dominguez