

Adam Rothman. *Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-36812-5.

Reviewed by James Illingworth

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Commissioned by Caitlin Verboon (Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, Virginia Tech)

An extraordinary drama played out in the courtrooms of New Orleans in early 1865. Rose Herera, a Louisiana freedwoman, brought suit against her former mistress, Mary De Hart, for kidnapping. Two years earlier, De Hart had taken Herera's three oldest children on a steamer from Union-occupied New Orleans to Havana, Cuba. There, they rejoined their master, one of many Confederate sympathizers who had fled the Crescent City for a port more hospitable to slavery. By the time Mary De Hart returned to New Orleans in January of 1865, however, a new state constitution had abolished slavery in Louisiana, and Rose Herera was a free woman with powerful new allies. First, Herera pursued her claims in the civilian courts, and, when that failed, in the provost courts of the occupying army. Finally, after three years apart, and thanks to the intervention of figures at the highest level of the federal government, Rose Herera was reunited with her children.

Rose Herera's struggle to rescue her children is the subject of Adam Rothman's *Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery*. This compact, lively book manages to be both an intimate microhistory of one black family and a sweeping transnational account of war, emancipation, and Reconstruction in the Deep South's largest city and beyond. In it, Rothman

uses Rose Herera's life and times to illuminate crucial changes in the southern legal system during Reconstruction, and, more importantly, to illustrate the challenges and triumphs of African American family life in the age of emancipation.

Born a slave in rural Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana, in 1835, Rose Herera grew up in the distinctive plantation regime of the lower Mississippi Valley. By the 1830s, planters in Pointe Coupée had made the transition from tobacco and indigo to cotton and sugar, and the booming parish had a significant black majority. In the early 1850s, Herera's owner sold his plantation and brought her and several other slaves to New Orleans, a bustling metropolis of well over a hundred thousand people. In the Crescent City, Herera was bought and sold several times, eventually ending up in the possession of one James De Hart, a dentist. In New Orleans she met and married George Herera, a free man of color, and the couple had four children before the outbreak of the Civil War.

When the Civil War came and Union forces occupied New Orleans, James De Hart fled to Cuba. The dentist's family tried to take Rose to join him there, but she resisted, and ended up confined to the city jail. Sick and imprisoned with her youngest child, an infant, Rose was powerless to prevent the De Harts from sailing to Havana

with her three oldest children. She did not remain helpless for long, however. The abolition of slavery, the presence of Union troops, and the beginning of the political reconstruction of Louisiana created a terrain on which Herera was able to press her claims as a free woman and a mother. Although she was ultimately unsuccessful in both civilian and provost courts, Herera's persistence caught the attention of the military authorities who, in turn, alerted the federal government. Through the intervention of Secretary of State William Seward, the De Harts were eventually forced to send the children home.

In *Beyond Freedom's Reach*, Rothman faces the challenge of using Rose Herera's life to illuminate major historical processes without letting the drama of war and emancipation drown out the human elements of her story. This challenge is particularly acute given that Herera left very few written records for long stretches of her life. It would have been all too easy for her story to become submerged in the social history of Civil War-era Louisiana. In general, however, Rothman succeeds admirably in striking the right balance between narrating Herera's life and describing her times, and there are only one or two moments where these elements seem unbalanced. One wonders, for example, whether a multipage history of dentistry in the antebellum United States was really necessary for readers to understand Rose Herera's "lifeworld." Later in the book, on the other hand, Rothman provides relatively little social historical context for the time Herera's children spent in Cuba. Further insight into the society the children encountered on their Caribbean sojourn would have deepened the already impressive transnational character of this story.

Beyond Freedom's Reach treads familiar ground in its account of war, occupation, and emancipation in southern Louisiana, and specialists in this region and period will find little to surprise them here. Rothman's major contribution to this literature is to demonstrate that narrating the

lives of people like Rose Herera "humanizes the history of slavery and emancipation in the United States" (p. 5). Much like Michael Ross's *The Great New Orleans Kidnapping Case* (2014), Rothman's book shows how the drama of a single legal case can provide an exciting new way to tell the story of the Civil War era in the Crescent City. Indeed, *Beyond Freedom's Reach* tells us something important about the legal history of this period. Rose Herera's experiences show that the law was not simply an instrument of the oppression of the freedpeople in the years following emancipation. While Herera was forced to navigate confused and overlapping legal jurisdictions as well as the hostility of local authorities, she was nevertheless able to use the courts to bring her family back together.

Most importantly, perhaps, *Beyond Freedom's Reach* is a valuable addition to the literature on black kinship in the Civil War era. Rothman successfully captures the complex ways in which these tumultuous years impacted the families of freedpeople. Rose Herera's experiences show that the chaos of war and emancipation had the potential to tear black families apart: she lost her husband to disease during the war, and very nearly lost custody of her children. As a number of scholars have recently argued, such tragedies often marred the end of slavery. But it would be a mistake to see *Beyond Freedom's Reach* as contributing to a one-sided image of a "darker" Civil War. Ultimately, Herera's success in recruiting powerful allies, navigating an unfamiliar legal system, and reuniting her family suggest that this was a period alive with emancipatory possibilities.

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