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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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HIDDEN RESISTANCE IN STEVEN HAHN'S A NATION UNDER OUR FEET

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet* (2004) using the theory of hidden resistance. From the slavery era to the Great Migration, African Americans worked out covert strategies to circumvent the economic and socio-political hardships of life in Southern society. Hahn's work highlights communication networks and rumors as important mechanisms that allowed Black people to resist race-based oppression. This perspective redefines the meanings of politics and the political, thus highlighting African Americans as early-politicized subjects in US history.

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INTRODUCTION

Steven Hahn is a social and political historian of the American South, a comparative historian of slavery and Emancipation. Hahn's bibliography comprises articles and several books, including *A Nation Under Our Feet*. The book addresses several topics in Black history, such as early political activities, communication, land, and kinship networks. Above all, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (2004) is a pioneering work in the analysis of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the twentieth-century Freedom Struggles because Hahn considers those topics as parts of a dynamic and uninterrupted experience for African Americans. The author creates "one coherent period in Black political history" by aggregating all these major stages of Black life (Hahn, 2004, p. 4). Hahn recognizes that to reach his goal, he had to find a linking element and he identified the quest for self-governance as central to Black politics. *A Nation Under Our Feet* received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2004.

Theoretical framework: From a theoretical standpoint, Hahn's work aligns with James C. Scott's concept of hidden resistance, which posits that subaltern people always design covert strategies to undermine the power structure oppressing them. Scott explores political conduct among subordinate groups in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). He studies the articulations of power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic attitude in the presence of the powerful. He says, "slaves and serfs dare not contest the terms of their subordination openly.

Behind the scenes, though, they are likely to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relation may be voiced" (Scott, 1990, p. xi). Scott's theory provides the avenues for uncovering the bargaining power and political agency of social groups within an overarching domination system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From the perspective of hidden transcripts, Hahn's work sheds light on African Americans' covert strategies against enslavement as valid instruments of resistance to the slavery institution in the South. Among the pioneering works that explored this perspective before *A Nation Under Our Feet*, we can mention *American Negro Slave Revolts* by Herbert Haptheker (1930). The book challenged the belief that the enslaved Africans were docile and accepting of their lot. More recently, Stephanie M. H. Camp in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004) argues that despite slaveholders' attempts to restrict their movements, African Americans usually succeeded in removing themselves from such control through covert ways (Camp, 2004).

DISCUSSION

A Nation Under Our Feet examines hidden resistance among enslaved African Americans and argues that communication networks and rumors in slave life represented the signs of very early political

activity in a supposedly powerless community. The author explains, "[This book] is about how African Americans in the rural South conducted politics and engaged in political struggle as slaves and as freed people, about how they constituted themselves as political actors in a society that tried to refuse them that part, and thus about how they gave powerful direction to America's revolutionary experience of disunion, emancipation, and nation-building" (Hahn, 2004, p. 1). Through a bottom-up analysis of the files of the Freedmen's Bureau and archives in eleven Southern states and the massive amount of letters of complaints the Bureau received from the formerly enslaved people, the book demonstrates that Black people's interest in politics was genuine, and that it was permanent from the slavery era on. According to Hahn, Black people became active stakeholders in Southern politics by using methods out of White people's control. Here, Hahn looks at the power of communication networks and rumors among enslaved and freed Blacks in the rural South. Building on an earlier article, "Extravagant Expectations of Freedom: Rumor, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South," the author shows how rumors turned all the social sub-groups (men, women, and children) into political actors. Indeed, rumors connected all those Blacks, leading them to act or react according to the nature of the information circulated (Hahn, 1997). These efficient communication networks increased the slaves' power by informing their actions with the opinions and trends among their masters. For example, Black political life became more active as electoral politics restricted to whites neared. The circles involved in the circulation of information among Black people grew larger and more dynamic and climaxed during and after the electoral processes.

A Nation Under Our Feet also emphasizes African Americans' agency by stressing the power of African Americans' early and unsuspected political experience and how it impacted community members and the nation overall. To do so, Hahn questions the "assumptions and expectations about the goals and aspirations of rural African Americans and looks much more closely at [...] what African Americans took out of slavery rather than how they responded to political defeat after slavery" (Book TV Program 1). Because previous scholarly literature considered Blacks until the end of the Civil War as "nonpolitical, prepolitical, [or] protopolitical," it failed to explore the degree of political penetration of politics in the African American community (Hahn, 2004, p. 3). Hahn challenges "the liberal integrationist framework" that guided the historiography of the Civil War, Reconstruction and overall African Americans because it denied Black people any political consciousness before Reconstruction (Hahn, 2004, p. 6). That liberal framework posited that all of Black people initially sought integration into mainstream America. Yet, Hahn shows, a more comprehensive definition of the politics is necessary to identify "the constituent elements of slave politics" and highlight Black political awareness decades prior to the Civil War itself, mostly in the rural South (Hahn, 2004, p. 3). Hahn's perspective of African Americans as politicized agents builds on the understanding of the sense of community belonging and kinship among enslaved and freed Blacks. For the author, the community's anthropological understanding of kinship goes beyond the Western biological conception to include all community members. The quest for individual rights, inclusion, and assimilation was concomitant with desires for collective rights, self-determination, and separatism. Yet, it might be tempting to argue that the development of separatist ideologies resulted from Black people's failure to integrate society. Therefore, *A Nation Under Our Feet* is a tribute to enslaved Black people and their descendants the uninterrupted efforts to realize their aspirations as human beings.

Hahn's efforts to highlight hidden resistance among Black people also mean redefining the political. To explore "black politics at the grassroots and its collective and institutional forms," the book goes into the underground world of black people's political activities before Emancipation (Book TV Program 2). That African Americans mobilized massively for political power after the Civil War suggests that they had been active in some way before and that the "privileges [they had] won into rights [were] to be defended" (Hahn, 2004, p.

33). The pillars of black political activities included the slave quarters, the Black church, the Black school, Black fraternities, and Black secret societies. From there, Hahn argues, all sorts of political ideologies influenced the community, and rumors played a key role in the whole system. While this mode of information circulation kept white people out of Black information network during slavery, it also complicated other institutions or political partners' endeavors after Emancipation to grasp the agency of the community fully and control its members. Further delineating the features of hidden resistance in his work, Hahn portrays Black political thought as uninterrupted from the slavery era on. Indeed, the book highlights the continuity between slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the modern civil rights/black power movements. In that approach, Hahn's scholarship is close to Nikil Pal Singh, Jeanne Theoharis, and Jackelyn D. Hall's theory of the Long Civil Rights Movement. Hahn's aggregating procedure uses Black people's search for control over their own lives as a linking element. *A Nation Under Our Feet* stresses the power of hidden resistance as Hahn locates the origins of the black freedom struggle not in the urban areas but rather in the rural settings of the South. That highlights the politicization of rural African Americans, which reveals an unsuspected narrative of slave labor. That enslaved people were free labor is well known, but not their capacity to reach a bargaining power with their own masters and all other white people thanks to their growing political agency. According to Hahn, enslaved African Americans succeeded in imposing limits on the amount of coercion they would endure, so they started to question a long-established social order. They did so by slowly pushing back against the limits of the space provided by White society. The centrality of Black agency in *A Nation Under Our Feet* is compelling and this approach should even inspire similar analyses of the African American experience.

The study of hidden resistance among Black people in the rural South, also reveals the multidisciplinary approach in Hahn's work. As the author says, he knew he was not writing about only one thing. As a specialist of comparative history, he covered several aspects of black life, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, geography, economy, and politics. In that regard, Hahn did archival research in eleven states, dug into the papers of the Freedmen's Bureau, and designed a Black Leaders Data Set based on archival sources about thousands of prominent black people. Despite the amount of archival research and the scope in *A Nation Under Our Feet*, some scholars believe that more evidence is needed to support Hahn's claims about the beginnings of political agency among enslaved Blacks. In "The Roots of Black Nationalism?" Alexander C. Lichtenstein finds it not convincing when Hahn "projects the black political culture forged in the waning days of slavery and the first days of freedom across the boundary of the twentieth century, and to locate origins of popular Black Nationalism and the Civil Rights Movement in the earlier period" (Lichtenstein 2005). According to Lichtenstein, the book has more assumptions than proofs to support this central point. Brian Kelly is also critical of Hahn's work in that the emphasis on kinship makes the African American community appear as monolithic rather than diverse as Hahn himself admitted (Hahn, 2004, p.5). Kelly goes further to argue that focusing too much on rural settings as the birthplace of Black Nationalism downplays the political role of the urban Black elites and neglects the stratification of the African American community in the early days of slavery (Book TV Program 2). Indeed, enslaved Blacks experienced bondage differently according to multiple factors such as economic activity (sugar versus tobacco farms), origin (creole or Africa), and function (domestic versus farm workers).

CONCLUSION

Upon publication in 2004, *A Nation Under Our Feet* received acclaim as a significant contribution to Black historiography and the book received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. The prize itself does not Symbolize Unanimity among scholars, but it is a recognition of the higher professional qualities of Hahn's work over other contestants. The committee chose *A Nation Under Our Feet* over the books by

David Maraniss and Daniel Okrent, which were also compelling contributions in their area. Overall, Hahn received praise for not clustering the African American experience and for complicating people's understanding of politics and the political for Black people. As Steven Hahn said to his audience at the Margaret Mitchell House and Museum on May 25, 2004, academic historians permanently argue with each other to interpret the meaning of events and documents. The study of hidden resistance in *A Nation Under Our Feet* reveals another understanding of the roots of black politics through a re-interpretation of the political. Indeed, enslaved and freed African Americans built independent communication networks. They chose rumors as an information circulation medium, which situates their politicization in an earlier period and a different setting than most Black history scholars believe. This trailblazing perspective of *A Nation Under Our Feet* book should foster similarly daring and undertaking interpretations in the historiography of the Black experience in North America.

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