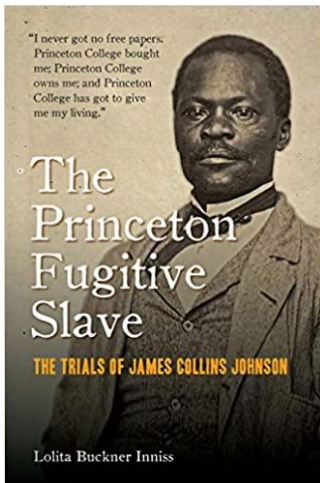


***The Princeton Fugitive Slave:
The Trials of James Collins Johnson***

Lolita Buckner Inniss. Fordham Press, 2019
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Reviewed by

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This remarkable book traces the history of James Collins Johnson (1816-1902) who, in 1839, escaped from slavery in Maryland to Princeton, New Jersey, where he lived for the remainder of his life. He became a well-known figure in the Princeton University campus area. In 132 succinct pages, Lolita Buckner Inniss, a legal scholar at Southern Methodist University, situates Johnson's life within its geographical-historical-social context, explores his arrest and trial as a fugitive, describes the benefactor who enabled his freedom, and highlights pathways Johnson pursued to find dignity as an African-American man living during the oppressive context of slavery. Inniss extends that dignity

through writing Johnson's story "on his own terms" (p. 129). Her interdisciplinary approach relies on legal analysis, an innovative methodology, and biographical elements to animate this unique historical figure. Notably, the text also contributes to a growing trajectory of scholarship on the role of universities in "slavery and the memory of slavery" (p. x). As

one of country's oldest universities, Princeton (founded as The College of New Jersey) is implicated in the system of slavery that profoundly shaped Johnson's life.

The Princeton Fugitive Slave consists of a preface, an introduction, a timeline, seven chapters, 14 photographs and visuals, and 67 rich pages of notes, which offer a treasure trove of historical detail, sources, and interpretation. Inniss first introduces Johnson and situates his life within the long history of Princeton's racist practices. She describes her goals and methods, as well as relevant scholarship for understanding the style of the book. The next four pages provide a useful timeline of events salient to Johnson's historical context, including the settling of the town of Princeton (1696), changes in The College of New Jersey/Princeton, court rulings, and notable markers.

Chapter 1 provides information on Johnson's early life in Maryland, the state in which he was enslaved, and the forces likely shaping his decision to flee. In Chapter 2, Inniss focuses on Johnson's initial years in Princeton and the social conditions in which Black people lived. In Chapter 3, Inniss describes the circumstances in which Johnson's fugitive status was betrayed, and Chapter 4 details the trial itself. The mystery of Johnson's benefactor, the person who advanced funds to enable his freedom after the trial, is the focus of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 provides information about Johnson's personal life: his marriages, children, where he lived, and his life after the trial. The last chapter summarizes the book. Inniss concludes by underscoring her effort to flesh out the contours of Johnson's life while also conceptualizing him as a "site of memory." In this framing, Johnson "symbolizes the past of a community" and carries "memories" of Princeton and the institution of slavery into the present (p. 130).

Inniss' extensive research and methodological approach are effective in wresting and sculpting a humane and compelling portrait of Johnson from diverse archival materials. Her innovative methodology emerges from both necessity and creativity. Although Inniss learned of Johnson through colorful stories she heard when she attended Princeton, historical research on the man himself proved challenging. The inequities of the archival record result, she recognizes, in an array of "difficulties to find our subjects in the archives" (p. 3) in contrast to more robust resources on institutional founders or the families of enslavers (e.g. see Ball, 1998). Accordingly, she relies on Princeton histories, a sole interview with Johnson from 1895, census records, court cases, and records of the Wallis family who had enslaved Collins (later, Johnson). She details her intricate process of searching for and interpreting materials, and accordingly uses qualifiers such as "maybe" and "likely" to convey the uncertainties in making claims about Johnson.

One compelling technique Inniss uses is tracing the “genealogy” of families connected to Princeton or the Wallis family who had enslaved Johnson in his early life. She notes, “many of the figures in this book are connected to each other through biological kinship or close social ties” (p.8). This approach allows her to circle around and illuminate Johnson through community ties. In the process, she discovers contemporary descendants of the Wallis family, one of whom acknowledged they were “not on the right side of history” with Johnson (p.vii). Inniss’ genealogical approach is instrumental for her biographical portrait. It also conveys the web of intimate relationships that sustained slavery in the United States. These connections reverberate into the present, as descendants of those White families still benefit from the labor men like Johnson provided in a brutal, oppressive system—at the cost of their freedom and self-actualization.

SLAVERY AND UNIVERSITIES

The biography reveals intersections between slavery and education with contemporary relevance. Inniss notes that “slavery and universities, though seemingly disparate topics, have long been intertwined” (p. x). These complexities include its economic engine that produced White landowners’ resources that enabled their families to pursue higher education. As a fugitive, then freed man, Johnson had to negotiate economic choices situated within the structural racism of legal restrictions, a vulnerable status, and limited work opportunities for Black men available locally. His livelihood, in fact, depended on serving students—including those from plantation families—who attended Princeton. The institution, in turn, relied on Black workers to fuel its educational mission for White male students, including laundering their clothes, emptying their chamber pots, chopping their wood, and cooking and cleaning for them.

Moreover, a Princeton student was the likely culprit alerting authorities to Johnson’s status as a fugitive which led to his trial, while another community member, Ms. Prevort, was the likely benefactor who paid for Johnson’s freedom after his trial. Like recent scholarship that details Land Grant universities’ role in dispossessing American Indians of their land that enables the institutions’ existence today (e.g. Nash, 2019), Inniss’ work similarly suggests the sobering human costs integral to and constitutive of Princeton’s origins, structure, and development as an institution. It is an ‘absent presence’ in higher education history that Inniss renders visible. This backdrop underscores the cruel injustice that Princeton excluded Black students through 1947.

Inniss’ legal expertise animates her research as well. As the title suggests, the text highlights the varied “trials” Johnson faced in carving out a life for himself, including his court trial. Her legal analysis traces how the

intricacies of fugitive laws played out in tension with local politics to shape Johnson's case, the figures and arguments involved in the trial, and its outcome. Case laws, differing opinions on slavery, and newspaper accounts also inform her analysis of the trial. Although Johnson was found guilty, a benefactor emerged to pay for his freedom, a mystery explored in Chapter 5 that animates an additional intersection among the law, the oppression of slavery, and universities.

This text presents a compelling biography of a man who escaped from slavery to craft a life over the next sixty years (1839-1902) near one of the nation's premier universities. It will interest readers of American history, biography, educational history, legal history and methodology. Inniss unpacks the nostalgic portrait of Johnson sustained in Princeton lore to emphasize the "model of success" and resilience (p. xvii-xviii) he provides in circumstances in which many Black community members suffered deeply (p. xix). In underscoring the intersecting histories of slavery and universities, Inniss' text demonstrates the unfinished work remaining in analyzing such intersections and their present day implications.

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