A Canada in the South: Marronage in Antebellum American Literature

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A CANADA IN THE SOUTH: MARRONAGE IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

SEAN GERRITY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

A Canada in the South: Marronage in Antebellum American Literature

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This dissertation considers maroons—enslaved people who fled from slavery and self-exiled to places like swamps and forests—in the textual and historical worlds of the pre-Civil War United States. I examine a counter-archive of US literature that imagines marronage as offering alternate spaces of freedom, refuge, and autonomy outside the unidirectional South-to-North geographical trajectory of the Underground Railroad, which has often framed the story of freedom and unfreedom for African Americans in pre-1865 US literary and cultural studies. Broadly, I argue that through maroons we can locate alternate spaces of fugitive freedom within slaveholding territory, thereby complicating fixed notions of the sectional geography of freedom and mobility as they were tied to conceptions of liberalism in the antebellum United States.

Whereas previous scholars, especially those whose work focuses on Latin America and the Caribbean, have tended to regard forms of marronage in relation to their potential for large-scale emancipatory schemes like those made famous by the maroons of Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil (among others), I am less interested in the concrete or imagined connections between marronage and enslaved revolt and more interested in those between marronage and freedom-seeking practices via flight in their many possible forms and manifestations. In this sense, marronage becomes an optic through which I investigate the production of alternate formations
of community, sociality, belonging, space, and ultimately geography and freedom that primarily
African American writers in the 1850s were exploring through literary discourse.

The texts I examine ultimately form a constellation which articulates a black-centered
politics of resistance based on a freedom of movement disarticulated from liberal conceptions of
citizenship and the nation state. The emphasis on the 1850s reflects a rise in attention to
marronage after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, which effectively nationalized
the institution of slavery in the eyes of the law. The mobility exhibited by runaway enslaved
people who sought freedom by heading north, sometimes via the Underground Railroad, has
been made to comport with the teleological narrative of the liberal subject in US history so as to
appear as an example of those wrongfully denied liberal subjecthood valiantly striking out in
search of it. The mobility exhibited by maroons, on the other hand, has been largely ignored in
the US context because it does not comport with racial ideologies of assimilation and integration.
This dissertation aims to demonstrate the extent to which marronage engages with contested,
complicated, often nonliberal meanings of freedom for enslaved and fugitive African Americans
in the antebellum United States as they were explored and articulated through representations of
maroons in literary texts.
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| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | Fugitive Geography and the Production of Maroon Spaces in Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* | 16 |
| Chapter 2 | Space, Race, and the Provisionality of Freedom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* | 53 |
| Chapter 3 | A Maroon in the Garret: Rethinking the Politics of Fugitvity in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* | 87 |
| Chapter 4 | Marronage Disavowed: Martin Delany’s *Blake* and the Specter of Insurrection in the 1850s | 157 |
| Works Cited | 194 |
Introduction

Marronage arose concomitantly as a form of flight and resistance with the processes of captivity, forced migration, and enslavement that began in the African interior, moved to the barracoons on the continent’s western coast, proceeded across the middle passage, and ended at auction blocks and on plantations throughout the Caribbean and in European colonies scattered all over the Americas. It is not only a diasporic formation of freedom-seeking through flight, but one with its roots on the African continent itself, making it a circum-Atlantic practice employed continually by Africans and people of African descent over the course of over four hundred years of European colonization and enslavement.

A long tradition of scholarship exists examining maroons, maroon communities, and various practices of marronage throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and western Africa, but the same cannot be said of the British colonies in North America and the United States. The reasons for this have to do with both historical differences and longstanding biases in the scholarship on the subject. Nation-based historical and anthropological studies of marronage in the Caribbean and Central and South America are numerous. Scholarship exists on marronage in nearly every modern-day nation in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, some of which still exists in languages other than English (primarily Spanish, French, and Dutch).¹ Descendants of the longest lasting maroon communities continue to maintain a connection to their maroon heritage and traditions. In Jamaica, Queen Nanny of the Maroons is featured on the five hundred dollar Jamaican note; in Haiti a statue, “Le Negre Marron,” sits across from the

presidential palace in Port-au-Prince; an imposing statue of Gaspar Yanga, leader of a maroon colony that repeatedly repelled Spanish colonial attacks in the late sixteenth century, exists in Veracruz, Mexico; and celebrations of maroons as heroic forebears often tied to postcolonial nationalist ideologies occur throughout the Americas and Caribbean each year. In the United States, however, with the exception of the Gullah community, which presents a case related to marronage but not explicitly within the scope of this project, no such historical tradition with organized, contemporary populations is extant.

The word “maroon” derives from the Spanish cimarrón, meaning “runaway,” but translating literally as “living on mountaintops.” The term was originally used in New World Spanish colonies to describe cattle that had escaped their pastures and found themselves in the mountains neighboring plantations in places like present-day Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Over time it was adopted and shortened to refer to runaway slaves who similarly escaped and found refuge in the dense and inhospitable mountain terrain outside the circumscription of the plantation system. In several places—namely Jamaica, Haiti, Suriname and Brazil—colonial authorities fought extended wars against maroon communities that had become established and deeply entrenched in the mountains and jungles. Some of these campaigns were quite successful for the maroons; in eighteenth-century Jamaica certain particularly resistant maroon communities became recognized as autonomous polities that were left alone in exchange for helping the Spanish hunt down other runaway bondspeople. Still,

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2 I refer here to the Windward Maroons and Leeward Maroons of Jamaica and what historians have termed the First and Second Maroon Wars. The first was ongoing from 1655 (when the British took control of the island from the Spanish) until 1739, when a treaty was signed between the maroons and colonial authorities. The Second Maroon War occurred in 1795-96 and resulted in defeat for the maroons, most of whom were forcibly relocated to Nova Scotia and then to Sierra Leone. For more on the Jamaican maroons and Maroon Wars, see Mavis C. Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).
many of these communities assisted and assimilated runaways rather than turning them over to the authorities. Similar situations also arose in Brazil and Suriname, where powerful and highly organized maroon communities fought for and negotiated forms of sovereignty that enabled them to live in relative peace and solitude. Many of these countries possess contemporary populations that trace a direct descendancy to maroons, and vibrant celebrations of that maroon culture and history remain prevalent.

The island geography of the places with which maroons are most commonly associated in the US imaginary lends itself well to marronage, since unlike in the United States, enslaved people in these places could not hope to flee north to non-slaveholding states or to Canada, and escape aboard a ship was extremely difficult. While historical sources suggest that marronage was a much more popular means of escape from slavery in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas than it ever was in the continental United States, by no means was it inexistent there. The lack of organized and identifiable cultural descendants and archaeological sites has made the study of marronage in the United States difficult, but a recent proliferation of scholarship on it is beginning to fruitfully suggest the ways in which studying US marronage is necessary to our understanding of slavery and the multifaceted means of resistance against it. Herbert Aptheker’s “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” published in *The Journal of Negro History* in 1939, marks the first scholarly attempt to limn the presence, habits, and extent of US maroons from a historical and anthropological standpoint, though many of its statistical

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3 Aptheker’s work on maroons would ultimately be incorporated into his doctoral dissertation-turned book *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia UP, 1943). It remains a classic account of resistance to slavery and turned the tide against previous historical accounts of US slavery, which had often painted enslaved Africans as docile and content with their lot.
conclusions regarding maroons are difficult to corroborate.\(^4\) That Richard Price’s now classic (and thrice reprinted) *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1973) reprints Apthecker’s essay from thirty-four years earlier as its only entry in the section on US maroons suggests the paucity of a tradition of scholarly inquiry on marronage in the US context.

The recent increase in scholarship on US maroons can be traced in part back to Daniel Sayers’s initiation of the Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study in 2001.\(^5\) Sayers, a historical archaeologist, has identified the Great Dismal Swamp of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina as one of the most promising sites for investigating the presence of maroons and maroon societies in the US from the time of early colonization through the antebellum period. His book *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (2014) is to date the most comprehensive study of the phenomenon in this location, and it and his extended fieldwork in the swamps have yielded new insight into the lives of US maroons and the complexity of their social organization and means of resistance. Several other contributions to the field from historical and anthropological perspectives have appeared over the last two decades, namely Hugo Prosper Leaming’s *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas* (1995), John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger’s *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (2000), William Tynes Cowan’s *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (2005), Timothy James Lockley’s *Maroon Communities in South Carolina: A Documentary Record* (2008), and Sylviane A. Diouf’s *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (2014).

\(^4\) Such remains the case, one must add, with more recent attempts to put quantitative analysis to work in the study of historical maroon populations.

\(^5\) See <https://www.facebook.com/GDSLS/>
Diouf’s book is the first comprehensive attempt at telling the story of marronage in the United States since Apthecker’s essay in 1939, and it reveals a robust historical archive of US marronage previously thought not to exist. Through careful analysis of archival sources, Diouf uncovers the existence, activities, and survival methods of US maroons on a scale previously unacknowledged and sometimes outright denied by scholars of African American history and literature. She explains where this elision or denial began: “Southerners…reserved the terminology maroons for the people of Jamaica and Suriname. They called the people in their midst outliers…or runaways and banditti; and…never called maroon settlements by their name, thus negating their very existence” (3). Equipped with these terms of negation, among many others, I have been able to effectively identify in archives many more literary and historical sources that feature marronage in some capacity.

**Marronage and/as Method**

Researching, documenting, and representing maroons presents a set of interrelated challenges from the standpoints of archival practice, recovery, ethics, and politics. The object of the maroon was to hide, for in sustained hiding could be found the senses of autonomy, self-determination, agency—of “freedom”—that were systematically and categorically denied through the practice of race-based chattel slavery not only in the United States, but throughout the western hemisphere. The notorious difficulties involved with recuperating the voices of the enslaved from history are compounded immensely in the case of the maroon. In the archive, one finds the historical situation of maroons replicated in the realm of the textual. Their stories are largely hidden, obscured by their own highly deliberate strategies of concealment and, as Diouf has argued, by the obfuscatory language used by US southerners to describe them in the written records that do survive.
Maroons and instances of marronage can, however, be recovered from the historical archive, brought to light by US scholars who have discerned the vocabulary through which marronage was discussed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century US contexts and who have then in turn understood it through a more capacious interpretation of what types of flight behaviors constituted practices of marronage in the first place. This kind of historical recovery is, of course, a necessary precursor to any further work that might be done on marronage in the United States, where the work is especially lacking. These historical sources, however—court documents, trial records, fugitive slave ads, letters, notices of outlawing, and so on—speak of marronage from the standpoint of the state, of the slavocracy, of the dominant white supremacist sociopolitical order. Their bias is clearly evident and can rather easily be imagined. Attempting to recover the stories and experiences of maroons in their own words, from their own perspectives, is another matter entirely. It is one that, from the standpoint of historical records and documents, is very nearly impossible.

What we do have in the United States is a rich body of literature, broadly defined, written by African Americans who either, like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, experienced slavery and escaped, or, like Martin Delany and David Walker, were born free but lived as black Americans in a society structured at its social, political, economic, and cultural core by the system of chattel slavery and the pernicious effects of anti-black racism. In other words, this is to say that there is an archive—an ever-expanding archive thanks to ongoing and recovery work and robust digitization efforts—of African American literature that engages with and represents maroons and myriad practices of marronage, if only we attune ourselves as critics to look for these moments which have very often been, like maroons themselves, hiding in plain sight.
We move toward a theory of marronage in the United States context, I argue, most forcefully and effectively through the African American literary texts which represent it, through the voices of black writers who experienced, witnessed, or heard tell of it. To the extent that it is possible, my theorizations regarding the spatial organization, mobility, and freedom-seeking practices of maroons arise from the literary texts themselves. Rather than defining from outside and above or through contemporary theorists the parameters for what constituted or should constitute marronage in the antebellum United States, I allow Harriet Jacobs (as Linda Brent), just as one example, to demonstrate the variety of resistant flight practices that were understood by enslaved and free African Americans during her lifetime to function as strategic or tactical means for concealing oneself in order to achieve everything from temporary succor to full-on self-liberation in the geographical realm of the slaveholding states. In practice, this means understanding her example of black women, enslaved and free, fleeing temporarily to the swamps while inebriated mobs of white men ransacked their homes in search of anything constitutive of a weapon after Nat Turner’s revolt, as a form of marronage. It means understanding this practice in proximity and relation to the more conventional forms of marronage she hints at throughout the narrative, wherein maroons consistently inhabit the swamps abutting Chowan County.

In pursuing this mode of inquiry into literary representations of marronage and the potential theoretical implications arising from them, I take a cue from David Kazanjian’s method of reading the archive in *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (2016), which he describes thusly:

> By reading apparently descriptive texts as theoretical texts that speculate upon their own conjunctures, in addition to describing or witnessing them, I have been able to discern
some profound challenges to classically liberal conceptions of freedom, conceptions that often go unquestioned and are thus perpetuated in work that attends principally to the question of who did what, where, and when. (79)\(^6\)

Kazanjian’s method, particularly applicable to the reading and interpreting of slave narratives because they were for a long time traditionally understood as texts which bear witness to conditions of enslavement without providing extrapolated theoretical assessments of those conditions in relation to adjacent political philosophies, speaks also to one of the core conceptual concerns of this dissertation, namely the contested, complicated, often nonliberal meanings of freedom for enslaved and fugitive African Americans in the antebellum United States as they were explored and articulated through representations of maroons in literary texts.

This is not to say, however, that my operational understanding of marronage is not informed by more recent interdisciplinary scholarship on the subject. Crucial to this project is identifying definitions and categories of marronage that have been articulated in the past in particular contexts and in regard to particular peoples, places, and times so that I might assess their adaptability to the specific contingencies of the United States context. Binaries like that between \textit{petit marronage} and \textit{grand marronage} in the Caribbean and Latin American contexts, or Diouf’s revision of these categories to borderland maroons and hinterland maroons in her historical account of marronage in the thirteen colonies and the United States, continue to serve an important analytical purpose for scholars engaged in historical, anthropological, sociological, and archaeological research that is both localized and comparative. Their importance is less apparent in the work I have undertaken here. What I have discerned from studying representations of maroons and marronage in antebellum literary texts, most by African

American writers, is a variegated and multifaceted array of flight-as-resistance practices that constitute forms of marronage better imagined along a non-hierarchical continuum.

Whereas previous scholars, especially those whose work focuses on Latin America and the Caribbean, have tended to regard forms of marronage in relation to their potential for large-scale emancipatory schemes like those made famous by the maroons of Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil (among others), I am ultimately less interested in the concrete or imagined connections between marronage and slave revolt and more interested in those between marronage and freedom-seeking practices via flight in their many possible forms and manifestations. In this sense, marronage becomes an optic through which I investigate the production of alternate, material formations of community, sociality, belonging, space, and ultimately geography and freedom that primarily African American writers in the 1850s were exploring through literary discourse.

**Literary Maroon Spaces and the Geography of Freedom**

The passage of the Compromise of 1850’s Fugitive Slave Act marked a significant transformation in the geography of freedom and unfreedom for enslaved, fugitive, and “free” African Americans in the United States. Frederick Douglass said in 1852 that “Mason and Dixon’s line has been obliterated” as a result of the new Fugitive Slave Law, which legislatively nationalized the institution on a federal level, requiring citizens in non-slaveholding states to assist in the capture of suspected fugitives and law enforcement officials to act on all claimants’ sworn testimonies of ownership and affidavits. Cooperation with the law was incentivized and refusal was heavily penalized. While the status of fugitive was of course always a perilous one,

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even before 1850, afterwards it became extraordinarily so, as once-imagined havens from slave catchers in the northern states became instead compulsory hunting grounds for citizens, authorities, and slave hunters alike.

The focus of this dissertation is literary texts produced between the years 1850 and 1862 in the United States, though texts and historical episodes from previous decades frequently inform the analysis, as do considerations of events outside the ever-growing boundaries of the United States. I operate from the premise that the rise in texts depicting marronage makes sense in the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, and that evocations of such a form of resistance to slavery respond to the shifting and unstable nature of freedom in a time and place where support for slavery had been enshrined as a legal obligation on a national scale. Close examination of major literary texts representing marronage reveals African American writers grappling with, contesting, complicating, and offering alternatives to liberal conceptions of freedom and mobility tied distinctly to the shifting geography of US slavery after 1850. In many of these texts, instances of marronage initiate disruptions or interruptions in the narrative that in turn unsettle a longstanding tendency to read and overdetermine geography as plot in early African American literature, by which I mean to interpret flight from slavery along a South-North geographical axis, whereby the South is imagined as a place of enslavement and unfreedom and the North as a place of freedom and opportunity.

In this common scenario, the story of flight-as-resistance is understood as the movement from South to North, the beginning of a trajectory toward nominal freedom which in the realm of literature is also a trajectory from enforced silence to an emergent literary voice. The story of early African American literature is often thought of as the story of the escape from slavery to
freedom, from South to North, from chattel to liberal subject of American democracy. It is a story in which slavery and the conditions of enslavement are the defining feature of the early African American literary experience. This project looks to unsettle the canonical status of both this story and this defining focus by paying close attention to how antislavery writers in the 1850s deployed marronage in ways that generate alternative formations of freedom, mobility, and resistance within the slaveholding states of the US South.

To these ends, the project is informed by recent scholarly work at the intersections of African American and abolitionist literary studies, slavery studies, and critical geography. My analysis builds on interventions by Katherine McKittrick, Eric Gardner, Martha Schoolman, and Judith Madera, whose work has together invited us to look for an African American presence in “unexpected places,” with attention to the contingencies of the geographical imagination, the ways “nineteenth-century African American literature produces subject mappings” through geographical reordering, how fugitive black spaces arise in “opposition to geographic domination,” and the dissonance between contemporary hermeneutics (still so often bound to a sectionalist-based interpretation of 1850s geographies of freedom) and the lived experiences of African Americans during the antebellum era. In this last sense, I am taking a cue from the work of historians of US slavery such as Walter Johnson, Edward E. Baptist, Sven Beckert, and

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especially Steven Hahn\textsuperscript{12}, whose research has asked us to consider the extent to which slavery was really a national rather than a southern institution in the 1850s, and that slave narratives go beyond suggesting that racism featured prominently on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, making the more radical point that the border between slavery and freedom “itself was illusory and indistinct.”\textsuperscript{13}

The dissertation is organized into chapters that center around a major set-piece literary text, each of which is in and of itself an object of analysis but also becomes an anchor point for forays into adjacent texts, histories, and politics. There is much to be added to the canon of early African American literature and much to say about the problematics surrounding processes of canonization and anthologization that have historically elevated texts—or more precisely, \textit{readings} of texts—which privilege the conventionalized racial and spatial logics under interrogation in this work. However, my primary aim here is to demonstrate how marronage as an insurgent, resistant, disruptive, alternative formation is operant \textit{within} the very texts upon which the canon has been built and has been expanding over the past couple decades, just as marronage was operant \textit{within} the very states where slavery was the law of the land.

The first chapter argues that Douglass produces, via Madison Washington in \textit{The Heroic Slave} (1853), radical black spaces—or what I will be suggesting can be generatively understood as maroon spaces: in his woodland retreat at the edge of the pine forest, in the cave where he lives for five years as a maroon, aboard the slave ship \textit{Creole} where he leads a successful revolt,

and at the port of Nassau where the self- liberated slaves ultimately sail and land the ship. From an analysis of these spaces, we might arrive at a sense of a fugitive or more precisely maroon aesthetic that is at work in *The Heroic Slave*. I demonstrate that, perhaps at times in spite of itself, Douglass’s fictionalization of Madison Washington’s life and his rebellion aboard the *Creole* breaks from the symbolic, allegorical, and ideological unity that he so carefully constructs through direct, associative engagements with the mythology of the American Revolution and Founding Fathers, Enlightenment-based natural rights philosophy and theories of liberal personhood, and the Byronic heroic tradition. What results are inevitable ruptures in a story that attempts to link—narratively and ideologically—the unmitigated (if certainly romanticized) violent imperatives of individual sovereignty within a collective, pre-nationalistic framework underwriting the American Revolution with those underwriting slave insurrection.

The second chapter argues that Stowe’s depictions of maroons, a maroon community, and marronage in her second anti-slavery novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856) work to elucidate the multifaceted self- and community-affirming potential of these peoples and practices as they relate to the causes of abolition, liberation, and black self-determination. By not pigeonholing or reducing marronage to its possibilities for actuating large-scale revolt and potential political autonomy (like in the Caribbean model most exemplified by the maroons of Jamaica, Suriname, Brazil, and ultimately Haiti), Stowe allows for a surprisingly nuanced exploration of the radical, subversive and at times interracial and inter-class potentialities, socialities, and collectivities manifested through these self-exiled people and their alternate community formations in the swamp and at the margins of the plantation zone. This depiction provides us with a continued sense of the ways in which freedom was understood as an unstable and provisional concept in the United States during the 1850s. By demonstrating, as well, how
freedom could be provisional for poorer white characters and southerners with antislavery leanings thanks to the system of chattel slavery, Stowe evokes the possibility of an interracial, inter-class, and inter-sectional coalition-based politics of sentiment and action as a weapon against nationalized, elite slaveholder interests.

The third chapter reads Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) as a maroon figure and the garret she inhabits for seven years as—both literally and metaphorically—a maroon space. By first analyzing under-acknowledged episodes of marronage in the text and providing historical context for practices of marronage in Harriet Jacobs’s Edenton, then arguing for a material and conceptual homology between Brent’s experience in the garret and maroons’ experiences in nearby swamps and forests, I argue that Jacobs reveals a fluid, protean, and provisional sense of freedom for fugitive slaves in the 1850s. By locating sites of freedom within the slaveholding South after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Jacobs challenges abolitionist geographies that depend upon the unidirectional, South-to-North trajectory of the Underground Railroad for narrative and conceptual coherence. Lastly, I suggest a similarity in subject position between Brent in the garret and a manumitted Jacobs composing *Incidents* in Cornwall, NY, further affirming the constructedness of sectionalist-based understandings of freedom in the 1850s and instead revealing an instability and provisionality that is often unremarked by contemporary readers.

The final chapter reads Henry Blake, protagonist of Martin Delany's *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859-62), as a maroon figure, analogous in thought and action to maroons throughout the hemisphere who self-exiled from slavery to find spaces of autonomy and self-determination within slaveholding territory but outside the purview of the plantation zone. It argues that Delany uses the character Blake to thematize the link between marronage and slave
revolt, thereby recuperating the maroon figure in the landscape of US slave resistance and
turning US slaveholders’ disavowal of the maroons in their midst against them. Through Blake,
Delany illustrates the existence of alternate spaces of provisional freedom outside the
unidirectional South-to-North geographical axis of the Underground Railroad—spaces within
slaveholding states—and suggests their insurrectionary potential. I show how Delany amplifies
this potential through references to a historical tradition of radical black militancy—both
hemispheric and national—including the Haitian Revolution, Gabriel’s Rebellion, the German
Coast Uprising, Denmark Vesey’s plot, Nat Turner’s revolt, and Lew Cheney’s conspiracy, in
many of which maroons were implicated. Ultimately, I contend that Blake demonstrates the
extreme provisionality of “freedom” for African Americans in the post-Fugitive Slave Law
United States, wherein the political geography of freedom and unfreedom had been redrawn and
spaces of freedom and mobility reconstituted outside the moral, abolitionist geography upon
which the South-North trajectory of the Underground Railroad paradigm depended (and still
depends) for coherence. Marronage, as Blake shows, deserves a place in considerations of
fugitivity and freedom for African Americans in the 1850s.
Fugitive Geography and the Production of Maroon Spaces
in Frederick Douglass’s The Heroic Slave

“To look at the map, and observe the proximity of Eastern Shore, Maryland, to Delaware and Pennsylvania, it may seem to the reader quite absurd, to regard the proposed escape as a formidable undertaking. But to understand, some one has said a man must stand under. The real distance was great enough, but the imagined distance was, to our ignorance, even greater. Every slaveholder seeks to impress his slave with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of his own almost illimitable power. We all had vague and indistinct notions of the geography of the country.”
-- Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)\textsuperscript{14}

“I knew something of theology, but nothing of geography. I really did not, at that time, know that there was a state of New York, or a state of Massachusetts. I had heard of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey, and all the southern states, but was ignorant of the free states, generally.”
-- Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)\textsuperscript{15}

“If kindness were the rule, we should not see advertisements filling the columns of almost every southern newspaper, offering large rewards for fugitive slaves, and describing them as being branded with irons, loaded with chains, and scarred by the whip. One of the most telling testimonies against the pretended kindness of slaveholders, is the fact that uncounted numbers of fugitives are now inhabiting the Dismal Swamp, preferring the untamed wilderness to their cultivated homes—choosing rather to encounter hunger and thirst, and to roam with the wild beasts of the forest, running the hazard of being hunted and shot down, than to submit to the authority of kind masters.”
-- Frederick Douglass, “Inhumanity of Slavery” (1850)\textsuperscript{16}

The underlying aim of this first chapter is to illustrate how representations of marronage—and a critical reading practice attuned to those representations—work to unsettle conceptions of antebellum African American literature that privilege the symbolic and allegorical over the physical and the material. The abstraction of enslaved experience into the realm of the symbolic perpetuates the erasure of the materiality of the black body from antebellum history and reproduces, at the level of the discursive, the violence of chattel

\textsuperscript{14} Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855): 282.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 283.
enslavement itself, wherein human beings are constituted as property via their abstraction into notations in ledger books and the imagined, intangible domain of monetary credit values. Even in literary texts, which traffic in symbolism, analogy, metaphor, and allegory by nature, attention to marronage forces a return to or at the very least a renewed emphasis on the materiality of enslaved life and the physicality of the landscapes of enslavement.

Marronage also poses a challenge to modes of critique in which “pro-slavery” and “anti-slavery” operate as dialectical opposites, and wherein “enslavement” and “freedom” are understood as the aspirational ontologies (for black people, by white people) associated with those ideologies, particularly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Marronage as a resistant discursive and material practice is actually folded up within slavery (as a set of systems, laws, and ideologies) itself, rather than being something external to or opposite of it. Marronage reveals that the opposite of slavery is not necessarily freedom in the way we have imagined it prior to 1865 in the United States: as manumission. Post-Fugitive Slave Law literary texts that depict maroons, marronage, and maroon spaces in fact illuminate in one way the extreme provisionality of the lived experience of freedom for African Americans prior to Emancipation. Thus, a critical reading practice attuned to marronage unsettles convenient, homogenizing ideological, regional, geographical, and political hermeneutics that obscure provisional formations of freedom in the interstices.

In Frederick Douglass’s 1853 novella *The Heroic Slave*, Madison Washington’s marronage poses a distinct, if brief and underappreciated, challenge to symbolic interpretations of wilderness spaces and, by extension, representations of marronage pose a challenge to such ways of reading space in general in antebellum African American literature. Washington’s marronage imposes on the symbolic unity Douglass works to construct in *The Heroic Slave*. It
does not contradict, per se, the symbolic association of nature with freedom and of the natural world with “natural” rights, but marronage is an interposition of the material and strategic into the realm of the otherwise symbolic and allegorical landscape of the text. Washington’s marronage interrupts the forward march of a story otherwise seemingly embedded in a familiar teleology, one in which the enslaved African, after a series of trials and obstacles, sheds his (in this case) chains and achieves a state of “freedom” by escaping slavery in the South and striking out for the northern states or Canada. Even if that freedom is nominal, and marked still by racial prejudice and discrimination, and often, especially after 1850, a pervasive insecurity, it is still, the logic goes, obviously preferable to chattel slavery and legible as slavery’s dialectical opposite. The geography associated with this teleology is also a familiar one—a simultaneously moral, political, abolitionist, and sectionalist geography defined by what is imagined to be a strict boundary between slavery and freedom at the Mason-Dixon line. Within this teleology and attendant geography, directionality of movement is also normativized such that we expect the enslaved turned fugitive to follow a linear trajectory from south to north, most commonly along the coordinates of the Underground Railroad, which is too often imagined as a set of known, fixed, stable locations—ahistorical, abstracted, and somehow at once real and mythological.17

In these senses the long tradition of the racial uplift story, initiated by the slave narrative genre, is frequently thought of on the most literal level as a movement “up,” as in northward. “Up from slavery” represents an elevation in one’s condition from chattel to freeman that

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17 In Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad (2015), Eric Foner offers these thoughts on the Underground Railroad in the popular and scholarly imaginations: “The picture that emerges from recent studies is not of the highly organized system with tunnels, codes, and clearly defined stations and routes of popular lore, but of an interlocking series of local networks, each of whose fortunes rose and fell over time…” (15). “The ‘underground railroad,’” he concludes, “should be understood not as a single entity but as an umbrella term for local groups that employed numerous methods to assist fugitives, some public and entirely legal, some flagrant violations of the law” (15).
necessitates most often first a movement upward from a southern location to a northern one, whether it be the northern United States, Canada, or even England. Even in the case of Booker T. Washington’s autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), so strong is the association of freedom with the North and slavery with the South (perhaps even especially in the postbellum era) that the metaphor holds even if Booker T. Washington’s post-emancipation work occurs in the geographical realm of the southern states. In a profoundly radical and subversive gesture, maroons stake a claim to land, to physical space that, despite its marginality outside the plantation zone and domain of market value, is nevertheless denied them in both theory and practice by virtue of their status as chattel, as fugitive, as runaway, as maroon, as black. Maroons represent an encroachment, both literal and metaphorical, on the foundational pillars of white liberal democratic citizenship and on the complex set of social, political, and economic relations that constitute the system of chattel slavery in the antebellum United States. In *The Heroic Slave*, Madison Washington will ultimately find his freedom not in the North or the South, but way south, way outside the conventional geography of US freedom, in the British Bahamas.

In this chapter I argue that Douglass produces, via Madison Washington, radical black spaces—or what I will be suggesting can be generatively understood as maroon spaces: in his woodland retreat at the edge of the pine forest, in the cave where he lives for five years as a maroon, aboard the slave ship *Creole* where he leads a successful revolt, and at the port of Nassau where the self-liberated slaves ultimately sail and land the ship. From an analysis of these spaces, we might arrive at a sense of a fugitive or more precisely maroon aesthetic that is at work in *The Heroic Slave*. I intend to demonstrate that, perhaps at times in spite of itself, Douglass’s fictionalization of Madison Washington’s life and his rebellion aboard the *Creole* breaks from the symbolic, allegorical, and ideological unity that he so carefully constructs through direct,
associative engagements with the mythology of the American Revolution and Founding Fathers, Enlightenment-based natural rights philosophy and theories of liberal personhood, and the Byronic heroic tradition. What results are inevitable ruptures in a story that attempts to link—narratively and ideologically—the unmitigated (if certainly romanticized) violent imperatives of individual sovereignty within a collective, pre-nationalistic framework underwriting the American Revolution with those underwriting slave insurrection.

Douglass knew his audience: whether subscribers to the *North Star for The Heroic Slave*’s first serialized run in 1852 or recipients of Julia Griffiths’s antislavery gift book *Autographs for Freedom* (where the story appeared in novella form in 1853), he knew that a certain predisposition toward abolitionist feeling would incline them toward the message of his story and the ideological link it attempted to make, its suggestion that the impulses behind slave insurrection were as fundamentally “American” as those behind the Revolution. He also knew abolitionist support for the real-life Creole rebels led by Madison Washington in 1841 had been widespread and almost universal in the US presses. It is these rupture points, however, that I wish to consider because of the ways they reveal an irreconcilable, incommensurable racial politics of identification/disidentification and displacement/deferral inherent in the comparative work to which Douglass puts the story. This is a text, I will show, very much of the political moment of the early 1850s when it was written, not the early 1840s when the event upon which it was based took place.

**Toward the Production of Maroon Spaces**

“Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”
The real historical figure Madison Washington, like so many of the enslaved people in the United States, named and anonymous, is a kind of maroon in the historical archive itself, presenting mere “glimpses” and “snapshots,” a figure whose illegibility for most of his life (until the Creole incident and the massive textual production it occasioned in the courts afterward) is re-enacted in his illegibility in the archive. What little is known about him, historically, comes from the actual trial records of the Creole affair. Others who wrote about Washington after Douglass—including William Wells Brown, Lydia Maria Child, and Pauline Hopkins, among others—borrowed liberally from Douglass’s fictionalization of Washington’s life in their own accounts.

When Mr. Listwell, an Ohioan traveling in Virginia, happens upon Madison Washington soliloquizing on his plight in the clearing of the dense pine forest which, we will learn, is his habitual retreat, the narrator describes Washington in the vein of a protean fugitive or maroon figure, one hovering along the marginal landscapes that intersect with but are not fully enclosed by the plantation zone’s regulatory mechanisms of control, surveillance, and domination. The narrator, inviting readers to glimpse Washington as Mr. Listwell soon will, concealed “by the side of a huge fallen tree” “near the edge of a dark pine forest” (176), explains:

Glimpses of this great character are all that can now be presented. He is brought to view only by a few transient incidents, and these afford but partial satisfaction. Like a guiding star on a stormy night, he is seen through the parted clouds and the howling tempests; or, like the gray peak of a menacing rock on a perilous coast, he is seen by the quivering flash of angry lightning, and he again disappears covered with mystery. (175)

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Along with cultivating a sense of mystique and foreboding around Washington with this series of comparisons involving a “menacing rock,” “perilous coast,” and “flash of angry lightning,” there is an element of voyeurism in the dynamic of the scene. The narrator continues:

Curiously, earnestly, anxiously we peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of northern skies to reveal him. But alas! he is still enveloped in darkness, and we return from the pursuit like a wearied and disheartened mother, (after a tedious and unsuccessful search for a lost child,) who returns weighed down with disappointment and sorrow. Speaking of marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities, we come before our readers. (175-76)

The fantasy being activated here is one in which readers may imagine for themselves an encounter with a truant bondsman, a one-on-one intellectual and embodied reckoning with the institution of slavery, though one in which that reader is a passive observer, not asked to interact with the enslaved man, but simply to listen. The northern, white character Mr. Listwell serves as a mediator and buffer for Douglass’s imagined (largely white, northern) readers, a safe and convenient means by which they who may never have travelled through the South might encounter a fugitive slave in the comfort of their own homes. Douglass appeals here to white curiosity about the enslaved experience but also to an underlying curiosity—one marked by a combination of fear and a complex set of desires (which are reflected in Listwell’s descriptions of Washington)—regarding the simultaneously threatening and desirable black male body.

Through a disembodied narrative voice—though one that readers have come to understand since the story’s opening paragraph as an agent of progressive historical revisionism, one dedicated to elevating Madison Washington from “the chattel records of his native State [Virginia]” to his proper place alongside the likes of Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and “he
who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence” (176)—we are introduced to Washington for the first time in his forest retreat. He is described as being “black, but comely,” “of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong,” with the apparent “strength of a lion,” and “arms like polished iron,” a man whose “whole appearance betokened Herculean strength” (180). But the narrator quickly qualifies these traits, telling us “yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulders. A giant’s strength, but not a giant’s heart was in him. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness” (180). Washington is, in the narrator’s final estimation, “just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,—intelligent and brave. He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute. In a word, he was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy” (180). So begins a careful balancing act that Douglass will employ throughout the text, simultaneously humanizing and romanticizing Washington as part of the extraordinary task of, as a black writer, making a slave ship revolt leader palatable and sympathetic to a mostly white reading public.

Listwell overhears Washington first decry his mean position in life as a bondsman and then declare his determination to be free, whatever the cost. Washington bemoans the freedom he lacks compared to that even of simple creatures like birds, which “fly where they list by day, and retire to freedom at night” (178). He goes on to compare himself to a snake, a comparison that resonates with his later marronage episode and also with Douglass’s thoughts on swamp-dwelling fugitives in the chapter epigraph from “Inhumanity of Slavery”: “How mean a thing am I. That accursed and crawling snake, that miserable reptile, that has just glided into its slimy home, is freer and better off than I” (178). But as Washington thinks aloud, free temporarily in this forest space to consider his circumstances without the immediate threat of violence, he
begins to convince himself that he is not a coward for submitting to enslavement for as long as he has:

Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it. This working that others may live in idleness! This cringing submission to insolence and curses! This living under the constant dread and apprehension of being sold and transferred, like a mere brute, is too much for me. I will stand it no longer. What others have done, I will do. These trusty legs, or these sinewy arms shall place me among the free. Tom escaped; so can I. The North Star will not be less kind to me than to him. I will follow it. I will at least make the trial. I have nothing to lose. If I am caught, I shall only be a slave. If I am shot, I shall only lose a life which is a burden and a curse. If I get clear, (as something tells me I shall,) liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man, precious and priceless, will be mine. My resolution is fixed. I shall be free. (179; emphasis in original)

The narrator explains that after Washington utters these words, “a smile of satisfaction rippled upon his expressive countenance, like that which plays upon the face of one who has but just solved a difficult problem, or vanquished a malignant foe; for at that moment he was free, at least in spirit. The future gleamed brightly before him, and his fetters lay broken at his feet” (179).

Washington’s words in this space are performative: he speaks the space and his intentions and their end result into being, and they will be so, engaging with the oral tradition so often associated with African American culture. But on the page itself, Douglass as the black, formerly enslaved author also writes this space and these intentions, pre-ordained and inevitable as they come to seem, into being, much like—and we might imagine Douglass had such a comparison in mind—the Declaration of Independence virtually wrote into being the existence of a United
States of America, and the Constitution further codified the existence of that entity from thought, to word, to material reality. In this sense, Douglass via Washington and Washington via Douglass are speaking and writing into reality radical black spaces—what I am arguing are in fact maroon spaces—within both the physical landscape of US slavery and the discursive landscape of the northeast, white-dominated abolitionist print public sphere that by the early 1850s Douglass knew so well. These are maroon spaces precisely because of their positionality and relationality vis-à-vis dominant, hegemonic white spaces. They are apart but within; they do not seek to be without. The nature of their radicalness lies in their apart within-ness. They are spaces of autonomy, self-determination, and provisional freedom physically located within slaveholding territory but outside the purview of the plantocracy.

Washington’s forest retreat comes to serve as an antecedent or precursor to the maroon spaces that he will speak and act (and Douglass will write) into existence over the course of the rest of the story. While the forest setting is certainly significant to my overall argument regarding marronage, which is most often associated with forest and swamp landscapes, perhaps even more important are the cognitive-psychological and metaphysical dimensions of the production of a maroon space in this particular situation. Through processes of embodied cognition, Washington thinks, believes, speaks, and realizes into existence the autonomous space of refuge in the woodland clearing. Such an act is a crucial component of the formation of maroon spaces and of the acting out of marronage, both of which rely upon both physical, material places as well as cognitive projections of provisional freedom and self-determination.¹⁹ The precedent established

¹⁹ Here I am thinking alongside Carolyn Cooper, who argues that maroonage is the “tradition of resistance science that establishes an alternative psychic space both within and beyond the evolving boundaries of the plantation,” (4) and Greg Thomas, who suggests that “maroonage can be mobile or urban; hydro or maritime; folkloric, cosmological, metaphysical, or supernatural; spiritual or religious as well as territorial and psychological” (71). See Carolyn Cooper, Noises in
here is that maroon spaces are embodied and have the potential to be mobile; they are not pre-existing in the world, but are rather enacted via processes of human agency, an agency that is often downplayed or denied to the enslaved as historical actors.

Washington’s final ruminations in this space regard his wife, who he does not want to leave behind in slavery, but fears he cannot do anything for if he himself remains enslaved. He determines, therefore, to make a break for the North, hoping to achieve freedom for himself, whereafter, “[his] arms [his] own,” he “might devise the means to rescue her” (182). In Part II of the story, Washington coincidentally seeks refuge at the Listwells’ home in Ohio on his way north to Canada, at which time Mr. Listwell recognizes him, and prompts Washington to tell him all that has happened since their last “meeting” in the Virginia forest. Washington explains in detail the circumstances that had led to his appearance in the pine forest and the occasion of Listwell overhearing his ruminations:

I had, on the previous Saturday, suffered a cruel lashing; had been tied up to the limb of a tree, with my feet chained together, and a heavy iron bar placed between my ankles. Thus suspended, I received on my naked back forty stripes, and was kept in this distressing position three or four hours, and was then let down, only to have my torture increased; for my bleeding back, gashed by the cow-skin, was washed by the overseer with old brine, partly to augment my suffering, and partly, as he said, to prevent inflammation. My crime was that I had stayed longer at the mill, the day previous, than it was thought I ought to have done, which, I assured my master and the overseer, was no fault of mine; but no excuses were allowed. […] I could do nothing but submit to the agonizing infliction.

Smarting still from the wounds, as well as from the consciousness of being whipt for no cause, I took advantage of the absence of my master, who had gone to church, to spend the time in the woods, and brood over my wretched lot. (189-90)

As many scholars have argued, this kind of marronage, whether referred to as *petit marronage* or “lying out” (the more common phrase used in the United States), was quite common throughout slaveholding societies all over the hemisphere.20 Enslaved men and women might frequently abscond as a form of protest after a vicious beating or whipping, particularly one perceived to have been without provocation or to have exceeded in severity the act of wrongdoing. Taking advantage of a master’s absence, too, as Washington does, was a common strategy for those bondspeople wishing to abscond temporarily—usually, but not always, with the intent to return on their own. Such practices were sometimes tolerated by slaveowners because they imagined that allowing for periodic acts of protest in the form of temporary truancy might act as a kind of safety valve and stave off actual flight with the intent not to return at all.21

Next, Washington explains that before making the decision to live as a maroon, he had made a prior aborted attempt to flee north:

I will try to tell you, said Madison. Just four weeks after that Sabbath morning, I gathered up the few rags of clothing I had, and started, as I supposed, for the North and for freedom. I must not stop to describe my feelings on taking this step. It seemed like taking a leap into the dark. The thought of leaving my poor wife and two little children caused me indescribable anguish; but consoling myself with the reflection that once free, I could,

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21 See Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, Jamaica: U of the West Indies P, 2006): Chapter 2. In this chapter, “Forms of Marronage,” Thompson offers a valuable historiography of the terms *petit* and *grand marronage* and the various meanings attached to them in different places and times.
possibly, devise ways and means to gain their freedom also, I nerved myself up to make the attempt. I started, but ill-luck attended me; for after being out a whole week, strange to say, I still found myself on my master's grounds; the third night after being out, a season of clouds and rain set in, wholly preventing me from seeing the North Star, which I had trusted as my guide, not dreaming that clouds might intervene between us. […] This circumstance was fatal to my project, for in losing my star, I lost my way; so when I supposed I was far towards the North, and had almost gained my freedom, I discovered myself at the very point from which I had started. It was a severe trial, for I arrived at home in great destitution; my feet were sore, and in travelling in the dark, I had dashed my foot against a stump, and started a nail, and lamed myself. I was wet and cold; one week had exhausted all my stores; and when I landed on my master's plantation, with all my work to do over again,—hungry, tired, lame, and bewildered,—I almost cursed the day that I was born. (190-191)

This failed attempt at navigating north is worth further examination. The extraordinary hold that the Underground Railroad has for understanding and interpreting enslaved escape has over the popular and still, to a large extent, scholarly imaginations of literary critics in particular has led us to often reflexively think that the majority of enslaved blacks who fled from bondage in the South set out knowingly and deliberately for the North—to the free states or Canada. But this is simply not so. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger write in the preface to their documentary historical study Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation (1999), “Indeed, most runaways remained in the South, few were aided by abolitionists or anyone else, and many fled with a sense of terrible urgency” (xiv). Included amongst “aspects of the history of slavery” that “even today…remain shrouded in myth and legend,” they include the ideas that “slaves were
generally content, that racial violence on the plantation was an aberration, and that *the few who ran away struck out for the Promised Land in the North or Canada*” (xv; emphasis mine).

This is not the occasion for a full-blown historiographical genealogy tracing the means by which the Underground Railroad paradigm—and its attendant South-to-North geographical trajectory and overtones of white abolitionist paternalism and benevolence—came to prevail with such ubiquity, but a few suggestive angles are worth pointing out. For one thing, the abolitionist presses were located almost exclusively in the Northeast, and those comparatively few fugitives who made it successfully to the North, were or became literate (or in some cases, like Harriet Tubman’s, dictated their stories), and entered abolitionist circles through which narratives of their lives—hinging, of course, on the daring escape from slavery in the South to “freedom” in the North—were ultimately published, promoted, and distributed by people with a vested interest in painting themselves and by extension their section of the nation as morally superior to the degraded condition of the slaveholding South.

Moreover, Sylviane Diouf has argued that abolitionist ideological aims had little use for maroons, who, rather than integrating or assimilating into “white” society, sought refuge in a “clandestine life outside white-controlled spaces” (12). “Abolitionists had no use for them [maroons],” she writes, “except to paint them as lost souls living among and like wild beasts, so as to underscore the cruelty of slavery” (12). I would further expand on her claim to suggest that abolitionists also had little use for maroons because maroons contested the idea of freedom as manumission, therefore complicating the paternalistic, state-sanctioned mode of freedom upon which the pro-slavery/anti-slavery dialectic depended for ideological coherence in ways that undermined the position of northern abolitionists invested in a moral-political geography defined against the backwardness of the slaveholding south. Maroons constitute themselves as free rather
than be endowed with freedom by others. Moreover, marronage as freedom shifts agency from white abolitionists to black slaves and former slaves, thus shifting moral currency away from northern abolitionists who relied upon that currency as political-ideological fuel as sectional tensions in the 1850s increased. Ultimately, that the North American fugitive slave narratives, the experiences and escapes they relate, and the former bondspeople who wrote them have largely been taken to be representative—to exist, as Carla Peterson has noted of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), as “the metonym for nineteenth-century African-American literary production” (5)—has contributed to the longevity of an interpretive paradigm that forecloses, for example, the experiences of maroons, free blacks in the South and North, those who fled west or to Indian nations, and those who left the United States altogether. Such a fact also obscures the true provisionality, instability, and complexity of meanings of freedom for African Americans in the antebellum period.

After explaining to Mr. Listwell his aborted attempt to flee north, Washington tells of the alternative he devised—marronage—which has never been adequately addressed by scholarship on *The Heroic Slave*. Washington describes returning, weary and exasperated, to the plantation from which he had fled, where his wife remained as a house-servant working in the kitchen. They meet briefly in secret, and she agrees to join him at the clearing in the pine forest where Mr. Listwell had first encountered Washington, a place she “knew…well, as one of [his] melancholy resorts, and could easily find…though the night was dark” (193). This description reinforces the idea that Washington has absconded to this place with some frequency in the past, made a habit out of engaging in acts of *petit marronage* as a form of personal resistance against his unjust condition as chattel, and that the landscape of slavery includes liminal spaces—what I
will soon argue come to constitute maroon spaces—which are known to and employed by the enslaved but are illegible as such through the planter gaze. The spaces themselves might be perceptible, but it is their potentiality, the alternate purposes to which they might be put, which remains obscured in the planter imaginary.²²

Washington’s description of this midnight meeting with his wife and the subsequent decision to engage in prolonged marronage are worth quoting here at length:

I hastened away, therefore, and concealed myself, to await the arrival of my good angel. As I lay there among the leaves, I was strongly tempted to return again to the house of my master and give myself up; but remembering my solemn pledge on that memorable Sunday morning, I was able to linger out the two long hours between ten and midnight. I may well call them long hours. I have endured much hardship; I have encountered many perils; but the anxiety of those two hours, was the bitterest I ever experienced. True to her word, my wife came laden with provisions, and we sat down on the side of a log, at that dark and lonesome hour of the night. I cannot say we talked; our feelings were too great for that; yet we came to an understanding that I should make the woods my home, for if I gave myself up, I should be whipped and sold away; and if I started for the North, I should leave a wife doubly dear to me. We mutually determined, therefore, that I should remain in the vicinity. In the dismal swamps I lived, sir, five long years,—a cave for my home during the day. I wandered about at night with the wolf and the bear,—sustained by the promise that my good Susan would meet me in the pine woods at least once a week.

This promise was redeemed, I assure you, to the letter, greatly to my relief. I had partly become contented with my mode of life, and had made up my mind to spend my days there; but the wilderness that sheltered me thus long took fire, and refused longer to be my hiding-place. (193-94)

At the most fundamental level, and as it relates to the progression of the narrative and the exposition of its main character, Washington’s marronage functions as a means by which he might remain in the vicinity of his beloved wife, able to see her “at least once a week,” while exercising some degree of autonomy and self-determination over his own life and circumstances. As Douglass well knew, punishments for running away, repeated truancy, and “lying out” often included being sold south or to a slave trader. In other cases, the returned runaways might be subjected to some of the most brutal, sadistic punishments meted out by slave owners, sometimes resulting in death. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes the fate of a runaway named James, who fled the plantation, evaded capture for some weeks, but was eventually caught and fastened between the screws of the cotton gin for the same number of days he had been lying out. He was eaten alive by rats and vermin, his corpse picked at by insects.23 Others might have been fastened with heavy metal collars affixed with bells, keeping them from being able to flee without being heard. Alternately, a heavy log or piece of metal might be affixed by shackle to the truant’s leg, preventing future escapes, or at least making them significantly more challenging. At the very least, Washington could expect a whipping of the severest order, a branding of ‘R’ for runaway on his face, or some such act of vengeful barbarism.

23 I discuss this incident at more length in my consideration of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in Chapter 3.
Engaging in the kind of marronage Washington does was very often done for the purpose of being able to retain contact with a loved one or group of family members or friends. While Washington’s wife is the reason he becomes a maroon, she is also the reason he is able to become a maroon at all. At their first meeting at the agreed upon secret location in the woods, she arrives “laden with provisions,” knowing that it will be nearly impossible for him to survive solely by hunting and gathering and without adequate protection from the elements. Borderland maroons—those who stayed close to the plantation zone so as to retain contact with brethren still in bondage—almost always depended upon such a relationship in order to survive. The enslaved people to whom their secret was entrusted often put themselves at great risk to aid the maroon in their vicinity, becoming complicit, as it were, in both the crime and the conspiracy to cover it up.

Challenging the assertions of previous scholars who privilege grand marronage because of the potential it held for enslaved populations to wield considerable political influence over or against colonial regimes (such as was the case in Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil), Alvin Thompson has argued, “Like short-term marronage, individual marronage has historically been treated as a peripheral issue within the wider context of desertion, but perhaps this activity had much more significance than scholars have attributed in terms of the ideology of freedom” (58-59). Washington’s “solo” marronage, like Douglass’s own solo escape from slavery, plays into the masculinized, Romantic heroic tradition of the Byronic order, aligning Washington with Douglass and downplaying the role of others—especially, in this case, women, both

24 See Price, Maroon Societies, 3.
25 “Borderland maroons” is Diouf’s term from Slavery’s Exiles. See her elaboration on it in the book’s Introduction.
26 I discuss at greater length in Chapter 4 the ways in which scholars of marronage in the United States have historically downplayed the role of the practice there.
Washington’s and Douglass’s wives, without whom their marronage and freedom, respectively, would not have been possible—so as to highlight individual self-reliance, fortitude, and strength of character. Perhaps this is another reason for including the marronage episode in the first place. To survive for five years in a cave in a swamp is an extraordinary feat, even with occasional assistance. It certainly serves to increase our estimation of Washington’s physical prowess, determination, persistence, and psychological fortitude. Just as in the mythologized imagination a younger George Washington had cut his proverbial military teeth in the French and Indian Wars in the 1750s and 60s before going on to assume the storied role of Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolution, Madison Washington fights his own five-year personal war against nature and the elements (and against his own enslavement) as a maroon in the swamp, after which trials he then goes on to fulfill what, from the beginning of the story (and from history itself), we are led to understand is his destiny as leader of the revolt for black liberation aboard the Creole.27

Douglass does, however, hint at the existence of other maroons in the vicinity of his own abode when he is describing to Mr. Listwell the great fire that ultimately forced him from his place of refuge: “Many a poor wandering fugitive, who, like myself, had sought among wild beasts the mercy denied by our fellow men, saw, in helpless consternation, his dwelling-place and city of refuge reduced to ashes forever” (195). Douglass does not romanticize the life of the maroon, but he does hint here at the existence of an unelaborated web or assemblage of fugitive swamp inhabitants, a subaltern social formation quietly contesting white supremacist domination by its mere existence, a community—as above—apart but within, provisionally free within

27 Any biography of George Washington will discuss this formative time period in his military career. For particular emphasis on it, however, see, for example, Thomas A. Lewis, For King and Country: The Maturing of George Washington, 1748-1760 (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
slaveholding territory itself. We do not learn anything of these other maroons in the swamps, but as the epigraph to this chapter from Douglass’s 1850 speech “Inhumanity of Slavery” suggests, their existence itself is a powerful testament to the cruelties of slavery, a living retort to those who would defend slavery as a paternalistic, benevolent institution.

The cave that Washington makes his home in the “dismal swamp” is typical of maroon habitations in the United States South.²⁸ It serves both materially and symbolically in the story as a place of shelter and refuge, allowing him effective concealment during the daylight hours so that he may move about more freely under the cover of darkness at night. Here he “wanders about at night with the wolf and the bear,” (193) hearkening back to the opening soliloquy in which he spoke of the freedom that wild animals like birds and snakes enjoy but he, as a man who is enslaved, cannot. We might imagine that his marronage becomes a kind of intermediate state between enslavement and freedom, wherein he inhabits a liminal, interstitial space and also occupies an interstitial subject position somewhere between the codified, reified poles of freedom and bondage. Here he is not entirely free but not entirely a slave, either. Writing in the context of Haitian marronage, Jean Fouchard has called maroons “de facto free persons,” (339) and Orlando Patterson has flatly called maroons “not slaves” (10). Of course maroons were criminalized, often outlawed, and still considered fugitive/lost/stolen property by the state, but this does not negate the agency, autonomy, and degree of self-determination they demonstrated by virtue of engaging in acts of marronage, especially long-term ones like Washington’s. He may remain a de jure bondsman or officially designated fugitive, but as Fouchard suggests, in practice he is operating according to his own volition, not under direct, immediate control by outside forces.

In this way, we may consider Washington’s marronage as a staging ground for his later act of overt rebellion against his own condition as chattel and against the larger system of slavery—captivity, imprisonment, forced migration, trade and selling, physical and psychological violence—through which he and his fellow bondspeople aboard the Creole are held and maintained in racialized subjugation. As a maroon, he experiences a taste of freedom—a freedom that he comes to appreciate so much that he only leaves his place of seclusion, as we are told, because of a great forest fire that forces him out. Having experienced the kind of freedom (quite literally) that wild animals enjoy, and which he previously coveted, Washington becomes even further unable to bear the cruelties, violences, and degradations of enslavement once he is recaptured in the attempt to free his wife and sold to a slave trader to be brought to the New Orleans market. Thus, the seeds of his revolutionary consciousness have been sown as a result of his time as a maroon and his violent, abrupt return to slavery after five years as a kind of de facto free person.

The Literary-Historical Madison Washington

In The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (1863), William Wells Brown included a chapter devoted to Madison Washington, and he drew much of his inspiration for it from The Heroic Slave’s fictionalized biographical details along with what had become known of the man through the court proceedings following the Creole affair, which dragged on for over a dozen years after the incident itself occurred in 1841. It still had not been resolved when The Heroic Slave went to press in 1853, and was only just finally wrapping up when Douglass published the second version of his autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, in 1855. Brown’s book, which also notably includes chapters on Nat Turner, the Afro-Cuban poet Placido (featured as part of Henry Blake’s insurrectionary plot in Martin Delany’s
Blake), Joseph Cinque, Denmark Vesey, Martin Delany, and Frederick Douglass, reproduces but recasts Douglass’s fictionalization of Washington’s marronage in its chapter devoted to him. Brown describes Washington’s failed attempt to go north, the clandestine meeting with his wife, and decision to become a maroon thus:

I took her to my bosom as my wife, and then resolved to make the attempt. But unfortunately my plans were discovered, and to save myself from being caught and sold off to the far south I escaped to the woods, where I remained during many weary months. As I could not bring my wife away, I would not come without her. Another reason for remaining was, that I hoped to got up an insurrection of the slaves, and thereby be the means of their liberation. In this, too, I failed. At last it was agreed between my wife and me that I should escape to Canada, get employment, save my money, and with it purchase her freedom. With the hope of attaining this end I came into your service. I am now satisfied that, with the wages I can command here, it will take me not less than five years to obtain by my labor the amount sufficient to purchase the liberty of my dear Susan. Five years will be too long for me to wait, for she may die or be sold away ere I can raise the money. This, sir, makes me feel low-spirited, and I have come to the rash determination to return to Virginia for my wife. (78)

Most notably in Brown’s version, Washington had planned to incite an insurrection while engaged in his life of marronage, in hopes of being the “means of the liberation” of his people. Writing a decade after The Heroic Slave was published, and in the midst of civil war, Brown draws upon long-held associations between marronage and revolt in the plantocratic imagination (these will be detailed at length beginning in chapter two). Even if Washington was unable to get up the insurrection he hoped to while living as a maroon, we might imagine that any such
planning and preparation could have become useful in the event of the insurrection at sea on the Creole. Brown’s version of events is further suggestive of my point that Washington’s marronage serves as a kind of staging ground, a material and psychic incubator of revolutionary fervor and potential, which necessarily precedes his rebellion aboard the Creole. By locating Washington’s militancy in this earlier moment, Brown contributes to the same kind of teleological drive as Douglass, suggesting a kind of inevitability in Washington’s ultimate act of rebellion. Both writers use this technique of “great men” history writing that already permeated the literature on the founding fathers, so often imagined after the fact as always having been destined for the great deeds they carried out as members of the revolutionary generation, the Revolution itself also being a historical event frequently narrated retroactively as inevitable in the development of the American democratic national project.

In 1865, Lydia Maria Child edited and published The Freedmen’s Book, an anthology containing writing by, among others, Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Jacobs (whose Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl she had edited for publication in 1861), and Frederick Douglass himself. Child contributed a biographical portrait of Madison Washington to the book, which, like William Wells Brown’s, borrows heavily from The Heroic Slave in order to flesh out Washington’s life story prior to the Creole affair. Child relies heavily on the sentimentalism afforded by Washington’s relationship with his wife, and she uses it to simultaneously evoke Washington’s capacity for tender affection and also his unwavering commitment to freedom: “Perhaps he [Washington] would have attempted to escape sooner than he did, had he not become in love with a beautiful octoroon slave named Susan” (161). In Child’s version, however, unlike Douglass’s, Washington’s term of marronage lasts only several months:
If he had hated Slavery before, he naturally hated it worse after he had married Susan; for a handsome woman, who is a slave, is constantly liable to insult and wrong, from which an enslaved husband has no power to protect her. They laid plans to escape; but unfortunately their intention was discovered before they could carry it into effect. To avoid being sold to the far South, where he could have no hopes of ever rejoining his beloved Susan, he ran to the woods, where he remained concealed several months, suffering much from privation and anxiety. His wife knew where he was, and succeeded in conveying some messages to him, without being detected. She persuaded him not to wait for a chance to take her with him, but to go to Canada and earn money enough to buy her freedom, and then she would go to him. (162)

Both Brown’s and Child’s accounts differ from Douglass’s in their description of the duration of Washington’s marronage: in Douglass’s, it lasts “five long years,” whereas in both of theirs, it lasts instead “many weary months” and “several months,” respectively. Part of the reason for Douglass’s singular choice could be the timeline in his story: Mr. Listwell first encounters Washington in “the spring of 1835, on a Sabbath morning” (177), so in order for the Creole revolt to take place in November of 1841 (as it did according to the historical record), five years of marronage were necessary to fill in the bulk of the intervening years. But there is potentially more at work here. Why such a long period of time? And why gloss over five years in one paragraph? It is a discursive gesture that acknowledges, by not acknowledging any specifics, the fact that secrecy and concealment are crucial to real-life maroons’ survival. And a preponderance of historical and archaeological evidence exists indicating maroons inhabited the swamps and forests of Virginia (among many other places) up through the culmination of the
Civil War. It is possible to understand the purposeful omission of any details regarding how Washington actually survived as a maroon in the same way we understand Douglass’s omission of the details surrounding his escape from slavery in the 1845 Narrative. But Douglass also has Washington suggest, “I had partly become contented with my mode of life, and had made up my mind to spend my days there; but the wilderness that sheltered me thus long took fire, and refused longer to be my hiding-place” (194).

Writing in a post-1850 Fugitive Slave Law context, even though the story’s events take place prior to the law’s passage, Douglass felt viscerally the increased paranoia and danger occasioned by the law’s federal redistricting of the political geography of freedom for African Americans in the United States. To suggest, therefore, that Washington “had partly become contended with [his] mode of life” as a maroon in a Virginia swamp is a radical move, and one that can be understood as amplified in its urgency at the particular political moment of The Heroic Slave’s publication. Having been unable to make it north, Washington’s experience resonates with Douglass’s own thoughts from My Bondage and My Freedom, wherein he writes: “We [slaves] all had vague and indistinct notions of the geography of the country” (282), and “I knew something of theology, but nothing of geography” (283), as noted in the first two epigraphs to this chapter. In the case of Washington’s first attempt to escape north, the Underground Railroad never factored into the equation because he found himself unable to navigate the labyrinthine geography of Virginia’s undeveloped swamps and forests. More to the point, however, is the fact that this moment deeply unsettles the familiar association of freedom with the North and enslavement/unfreedom with the South.

In the chapters that follow, literary figures will consciously choose, for a variety of

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29 See Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States;” Diouf, Slavery’s Exiles; and Sayers, A Desolate Place for a Defiant People.
different and complex reasons, situations of marronage in the slaveholding South over the nominal freedom that could be afforded them in the North. While Washington does not remain as a maroon, for he must go on to, as the story constantly suggests, greater purposes, the marronage episode forces us to reckon with a marked disruption to totalizing and homogenizing formulations of enslaved life and geographies of freedom and resistance in the antebellum US South along with the corollary conception of the North as the location of freedom for fugitive slaves. Washington had found a provisional freedom in the slaveholding South, disrupting both normative abolitionist geographies of freedom and the idea of “freedom” itself. While he must move on as part of the story’s action, this moment marks a major rupture in the standard narrative of escape from slavery propagated by the abolitionist establishment and the slave narrative genre.

Writing Rebellion: Marronage at Sea

“You may bind chains upon the limbs of your people if you will; you may place the yoke upon them if you will; you may brand them with irons, you may write out your statutes and preserve them in the archives of your nation if you will; but the moment they mount the surface of our unsteady waves, those statutes are obliterated, and the slave stands redeemed, disenthralled.”

-- Frederick Douglass, “Slavery, The Slumbering Volcano” (1849)³⁰

Part IV of The Heroic Slave, wherein the actual story of Washington’s revolt on board the Creole is related, begins with the narrator’s scathing condemnation of the hypocrisy evidenced by the continued legality of an internal American slave trade even after the United States had officially outlawed the international slave trade via federal legislation that became effective on January 1, 1808:

What a world of inconsistency, as well as of wickedness, is suggested by the smooth and

gliding phrase, AMERICAN SLAVE TRADE; and how strange and perverse is that moral sentiment which loathes, execrates, and brands as piracy and as deserving of death the carrying away into captivity men, women, and children from the African coast; but which is neither shocked nor disturbed by a similar traffic, carried on with the same motives and purposes, and characterized by even more odious peculiarities on the coast of our MODEL REPUBLIC. We execrate and hang the wretch guilty of this crime on the coast of Guinea, while we respect and applaud the guilty participators in this murderous business on the enlightened shores of the Chesapeake. (226; emphasis in original)

Such hypocrisy frames the spatial and geographical terms through which we are to understand Madison Washington’s revolt in The Heroic Slave. By asserting the unjustness of the internal American slave trade, Douglass sets the stage for an understanding of Washington’s revolt as just in the face of hypocritical and unjust conditions of continued systematic oppression and subjugation.

The story of the revolt aboard the Creole is highly mediated. We are invited as readers to overhear the story as told as a recollection by the ship’s first mate, one Tom Grant, to a group of sailors at the Marine Coffee House in Richmond, Virginia. Grant is taunted by another sailor, Jack Williams, who knowingly goads him with the question: “I say, shipmate, you had rather rough weather on your late passage to Orleans?” (227). In what follows, Williams suggests that had he been on board the Creole when its human cargo rose up in revolt under Madison Washington’s leadership, the whole thing would have ended very differently. Grant sets the record straight by explaining in great detail the events that occurred onboard that night. As with Listwell, Grant serves as a vehicle through which Douglass presents the interpretation of the events and their participants that he wants readers to ultimately embrace. Just as Listwell earlier
had an epiphany regarding slavery after seeing and hearing Washington in the pine forest, Grant explains that “I have resolved never to set my foot on the deck of a slave ship, either as officer, or common sailor, again” (230). He continues: “I'm resolved never to endanger my life again in a cause which my conscience does not approve. I dare say here what many men feel, but dare not speak, that this whole slave-trading business is a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia” (231). At this, Williams replies derisively: “Hold! Hold on! Shipmate, I hardly thought you'd have shown your colors so soon. I'll be hanged if you're not as good an abolitionist as Garrison himself” (231).

Thus, we receive the story of the Creole revolt from another white character who has come, through personal experience, to decry slavery and the violences of the slave trade. In this case the conversion is all the more resonant because Grant is a southerner by birth and had long been a willing participant in the internal slave trade militated against by the narrator at the beginning of this section. Of Washington personally, Grant says:

I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. (239)

By drawing us into sympathy with Grant, we are, by extension, brought into sympathy with Madison Washington. These white interlocutors might be imagined to serve the same purpose as someone like William Lloyd Garrison, who in Douglass’s earlier days on the abolitionist circuit would have Douglass tell his own story, but would then step in to provide the “appropriate” interpretation of that story for white listeners. Here, however, given the nature of the story at
hand, one of militant enslaved revolt with a hyper-masculinized black man at its helm, Douglass chooses to employ sophisticated techniques of narrative displacement and mediation afforded him by the textual genre in which the story is being told, that of fiction. Readers are asked to sympathize with Washington on an individual level via the white characters Listwell and Grant and on an ideological level via the principles of 1776 and the white founding fathers who espoused them.

The fact that Douglass—once again showing extraordinary awareness of his audience and of how to manipulate the narrative and rhetorical conventions of his genre to forward his own ideological ends—mediates the telling of the revolt through spatial, temporal, and narrative displacement should not cause us to underestimate the radical, incendiary nature of this episode. Rarely did antebellum writers, especially black ones, depict successful slave insurrections in literature of the time period. And in this case, the story is overtly arguing for the slaves’ right to revolution in the context of the Creole affair, drawing all the while a direct parallel to the ideological origins and violent insurgency of the American Revolution. Arguing in the abstract for slaves’ right to revolution, as a short piece by the Rev. George W. Perkins entitled “Can Slaves Rightfully Resist and Fight?” does in Autographs for Freedom, is quite different from depicting slave resistance and violence carried out against white Americans. Indeed, the author of this piece writes, in relation to the title, “I do not answer this question. But the following facts are submitted as containing the materials for an answer” (33).

The facts submitted are a brief account of the grievances expressed by the American colonists against the British government leading up to 1776, by which time “It was distinctly maintained…that men may rightfully fight for liberty, and resist the powers ordained of God, if those powers destroyed liberty” (33). The writer does directly state, “I do not say that these
positions were right, or that the men of 1776 acted right. But I do say, that if they were right, we are necessarily led to some startling conclusions. […] If it was right in 1776 to resist, fight, and kill, to secure liberty,--it is right to do the same in 1852” (34). “If the reader is shocked by such inquiries and inferences,” he continues, “and as directly and intentionally designed to encourage servile insurrection and civil war, he may be assured, that my aim is entirely different. It is my wish, to secure timely precautions against danger” (39). He also enumerates, in the style of the Declaration of Independence, the many legitimate grievances of the enslaved population against their oppressors in the United States, but remains safely out of the territory of actually suggesting that the enslaved rise up in violent revolt, and he certainly does not depict the kind of insurrection which he argues the enslaved are entitled to based on a comparison to the grievances of 1776.

Another short piece from *Autographs for Freedom* by the Rev. S.J. May entitled “The Heroic Slave Woman” bears mentioning briefly because of its representation of enslaved heroism and resistance. The story relates an incident from 1834, in Connecticut, the author’s home state, in which he and a fellow abolitionist visiting from England happen upon an enslaved woman accompanying her owner on a trip up from Mississippi. They speak with the slaveholder, who acknowledges his belief that slavery is wrong in the abstract, but that it had “become a necessary evil, necessary to the enslaved, no less than to the enslavers” (162), and he gives them permission to attempt to convince his bondswoman that she is legally free now that she has set foot on northern soil. In what follows, they endeavor to persuade her to claim her natural right of freedom and remain in the North, but she flatly refuses on account of having made a promise to her mistress that she would return: “She had bound herself by a promise to her mistress, that she would not leave her; and that promise fastened upon her conscience an obligation, from which
she could not be persuaded, that even her natural right to liberty could exonerate her” (163). The men become enamored with and deeply impressed by such probity, and are “astonished, delighted at this instance of heroic virtue in a poor, ignorant slave” (164).

At one point, the men ask her “is it possible that you do not wish to be free?” (163), to which she replies, “was there ever a slave that did not wish to be free? I long for liberty. I will get out of slavery, if I can, the day after I have returned, but go back I must, because I promised that I would” (163; emphasis in original). This story is of interest because its title is a clear allusion to The Heroic Slave, which represents heroism and resistance of quite a different sort. “Heroism” in this story is to be understood through a gendered prism wherein heroism for women really constitutes something more akin to heroic virtue, or virtue maintained in the face of great obstacles or temptations. This story is really about demonstrating the inherent morality and virtue of enslaved women, and by extension black women, whose character had long been under attack thanks to slaveholders (and their wives) wishing to invent black women’s promiscuity as a cover for their own lascivious behavior and rape of their enslaved women, often producing lighter skinned children. In essence, the story suggests, enslaved black women possess the same innate capacity for virtuousness as white women. But again, while such a message is certainly radical for the time in its own right, and representative of the multi-pronged approach to antislavery critique the volume espouses, it requires significantly less rhetorical and narrative finesse than does Douglass actually depicting militant, violent, enslaved resistance targeted at white bodies as part of a struggle against the system of slavery.

The first mate of the Creole, Tom Grant, begins his telling of the revolt with a discussion of space—namely, the fundamental differences between practices of slaveholding on land and practices of slaveholding at sea: “It is quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on land, where
you have the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command; and where, if a negro shall lift his hand against a white man, the whole community, with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down” (227-28). On land, he suggests, a slaveholder can be confident that his actions will have the physical and legal support of the government, authorities, and greater community, and that he will be defended against enslaved reprisal by these same hegemonic forces. Once at sea, however, things are entirely different: “It is one thing,” Grant explains, “to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty” (229). Through Grant, Douglass sets up the space of the ocean as one naturally associated with freedom, a space particularly conducive to what Hakim Bey has referred to as “Temporary Autonomous Zones.”

Indeed, as the epigraph to this section indicates, Douglass believed that on land the enslaved could be subjected to both physical and legal violences that kept them in subjugation, “but the moment they mount the surface of our unsteady waves, those statutes are obliterated, and the slave stands redeemed, disenthralled” (“Slavery, The Slumbering Volcano”). Following Kim Dovey, I am interested in considering the ontology of space as one of becoming rather than being, resisting essentialist formulations that depend upon a pre-existing place within a space as an originary site for the formation of identity and subjectivity. Such anti-essentialist and anti-nationalist notions of space, place, and subjectivity are also at the heart of Paul Gilroy’s

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conception of the black Atlantic. Bey does not define the Temporary Autonomous Zone, but rather “circle[s] around” it with gestures and examples that illuminate its both material and psychic dimensions across time and space—its potentialities and realities (Bey 97).

Some of Bey’s examples of spaces and sites of social formation akin to or possessing elements of the TAZ are reminiscent of Homi Bhabha’s and Edward Soja’s conceptions of “third spaces”: “camps of black tents under the desert stars, interzones, hidden fortified oases along secret caravan routes, ‘liberated’ bits of jungle and bad-land, no-go areas, black markets, and underground bazaars,” (106) and indeed, Bey makes mention on several occasions of maroon communities from the West Indies to the Great Dismal Swamp, noting their “guerrilla ontolog[y]: strike and run away” (100). For my purposes, I’m interested in the way Washington’s slave revolt aboard the Creole occasions the formation of a kind of TAZ, one which, like most any slave ship revolt (and not just a mutiny, as I will show) forces a near total reversal of the normativized spatiotemporal order of the ship. In the case of the Creole, the TAZ possesses a mobility that is both real and imagined: the enslaved captives turned ship’s crew steer the craft toward British Nassau, to a free port city that will come to act as an extension of the TAZ that they both fought and realized, cognitively, into existence. “The first step,” Bey writes, “is somewhat akin to satori—the realization that the TAZ begins with a simple act of realization” (100).

Grant describes little of the actual revolt’s unfolding because just as he apprehended “the nineteen negroes…all on deck, with their broken fetters in their hands, rushing in all directions,”

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“he put [his] hand quickly in [his] pocket to draw out [his] jack-knife,” but was “knocked senseless to the deck” before he could do so (Douglass 233-34). When he came to “a few minutes later,” the entire socio-spatial order of the ship had been upended: “there was not a white man on deck” (235). He had not been privy to the goings-on below deck, in the space (previously) of the enslaved, where Washington had freed himself (and subsequently eighteen others) of their shackles using a file given to him by Mr. Listwell when he last encountered Washington as a member of a slave coffle en route to the ship’s port of sail in Virginia. The revolt occasions a disruption of normative space on the ship, as the enslaved rise from the depths of the holding area below deck and force most of the crew “aloft in the rigging,” where “they dare not come down” (235). It also occasions a disruption to the normative temporal order of the ship. Captives aboard slave ships were intermittently allowed, at the crew’s discretion and at specific times under heavy guard, to come on deck in gendered groups for forced exercise (often in the form of dancing, derided all the while by the crew) and to allow the crew to hose out the hold, or the captives themselves as they stood on deck.35 The revolt, however, breaks with this enforced, regulatory temporal order, shifting control of time, as well as space, to the enslaved. The spatiotemporal cycle of power, control, and domination which rigidly structures life aboard a slave ship has been upended, creating a temporary autonomous zone, a floating maroon space, a site of marronage at sea.

What does the slave ship become once its human cargo is at the helm, in control of its destination? Its sole purpose—to transport captive bondspeople, to act as a floating conduit in a circuit of human exchange bound up in an Atlantic system of capital circulation and

35 See Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2008) for an analysis of the architecture of slave ships as it relates to regimes of forced captivity and migration as well as opportunities for resistance and revolt.
accumulation—has been thwarted. It can have no static being; its ontology is one of becoming, its existence a continual process in the making rather than something concrete, identifiable. It is now a potential site of provisional freedom, or means toward achieving freedom, and it is marked by the autonomy, agency, and self-determination of the self-emancipated slaves—who can no longer be neatly understood as slaves at all but are, to return to Fouchard’s earlier phrase, “de facto free persons.” “The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State,” writes Bey, “a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen” (Bey 99). Maroon spaces like the one aboard the Creole (and to a certain extent that of the pine forest clearing, and the cave in the dismal swamp) may be understood as types of Temporary Autonomous Zones insofar as they constitute spatial, temporal, material, and psychic dimensions which both reveal and generate the conditions of possibility for a kind of provisional freedom—a freedom that is not the dialectical opposite of slavery, but that is representative of an interstitial, protean subject position existing somewhere between politically, legally, and philosophically codified notions of freedom and enslavement.

In this case, the maroon space/TAZ of the emancipated slave ship, its purpose and its ontology redefined, moves along and within former routes of the Atlantic slave trade to the port at Nassau in the British Bahamas, which is inflected by the ship’s emancipatory potential and itself becomes implicated in the TAZ’s rhizomatic web of influence. In the story, Douglass has Grant describe another reversal of normative order at the port, wherein

...by order of the authorities, a company of black soldiers came on board, for the purpose, as they said, of protecting the property. These impudent rascals, when I called...

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on them to assist me in keeping the slaves on board, sheltered themselves adroitly under their instructions only to protect property,--and said they did not recognize persons as property. I told them that by the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States, the slaves on board were as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold. At this the stupid blockheads showed their ivory, rolled up their white eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity. When these instructions were understood among the negroes, it was impossible for us to keep them on board. They deliberately gathered up their baggage before our eyes, and, against our remonstrances, poured through the gangway,--formed themselves into a procession on the wharf,--bid farewell to all on board, and, uttering the wildest shouts of exultation, they marched, amidst the deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathizing spectators, under the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, MADISON
WASHINGTON. (239-40; emphasis in original)

Their disembarkation resembles the welcoming home of war heroes. The company of black soldiers boarding the ship links the black space of the emancipated slave ship to the black space of the port landing through a militant blackness that is both embodied and, for Douglass, symbolic. The rebels are hailed as heroes by the cheering crowds who welcome them ashore after their victory aboard the Creole—a material victory for them and a symbolic victory for diasporic black populations imbricated in the hemispheric praxis of captivity, subjugation, enslavement, circulation, and multifaceted forms of resistance. The port itself, then, becomes a maroon space as the self-emancipated blacks aboard the Creole re-make the ontology of place as process on the island, “realizing” another space into material liberation via embodied cognition and physical resistant practices.
In the end, Douglass represents the outcome of the *Creole* affair not as a fulfillment of promise but as a reaffirmation of a negative. The *Creole* eighteen, along with all of the enslaved on board, ultimately walk free in Nassau, but for Douglass the possibility of their freedom in Nassau has the effect of reinforcing the current impossibility of their freedom in the United States. However, reading *The Heroic Slave* with particular attention to physical sites of marronage, which are always also (but not, as we have seen, already) sites of resistance, attunes us to embodied experience within and against the backdrop of the material landscape of slavery and Atlantic circuits of human circulation and exchange. Such a reading practice is also significant because it illuminates the materiality and embodied experience of the provisional, interstitial subject positions and spaces of marronage, militating against conceptions of “freedom” and, by extension, “enslavement,” that are evacuated of the materiality, contingency, and provisionality of their historical moment. When these terms become empty signifiers—or, conversely, definitionally overdetermined—in critical discourse, they re-enact the de-humanizing, de-individualizing, commodifying, abstractifying logic which structures the system of chattel slavery in the first place. If, as Ivy Wilson has argued, *The Heroic Slave* is ultimately “an imperfect allegory,” (466) incapable of totalizing symbolic coherency because of Douglass’s aspirational, assimilationist vision for African Americans in the United States and the incommensurability of slave insurrection with that vision in 1853, then these rupture points in the story—these instances of marronage to which I have pointed—may be understood on the one hand as narrative faults and on the other as moments when the provisionality of freedom within fugitive geographies that are at once within and without normative geographies becomes apparent in spite of itself.
Space, Race, and the Provisionality of Freedom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred*

“Illegibility, then, has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy.”

“Marronage was political action on the part of enslaved persons.”

“There is a Canada in the Southern States. It is the Dismal Swamp. It is the dreariest and the most repulsive of American possessions. It is the favorite resort of wild animals and reptiles; the paradise of serpents and poisonous vegetation. No human being, one would think, would voluntary live there; and yet, from time immemorial, it has been the chosen asylum of hundreds of our race. It has been the earthly heaven of the negro slave; the place “where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.”
-- from James Redpath, *The Roving Editor* (1859)³⁹

Coming in at just over 600 pages including appendices and explanatory notes, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s second major antislavery work, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), is a novel of excess, emblematic in its form and length of the excesses of mid-1850s social and political strife in the United States, set off by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the extrajudicial violence that followed both in the events known as Bleeding Kansas and on the US Senate floor. John Brown and his band of antislavery crusaders murdered five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas on the night of 24 May 1856 in retaliation for previous action taken against Free-Staters in the Lawrence area, in which one man had been killed and property had been ransacked, burned, and destroyed. Two days earlier, the Democratic Congressman Preston Brooks from South Carolina had brutally attacked the Republican Senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner (Stowe’s close friend), with a gutta percha cane on the floor of the Senate,

nearly killing him. Incendiary rhetoric, accusations of fanaticism, and eruptions of violence had become the order of the day in regard to the debates over slavery and its expansion, and Stowe’s novel entered a moment of public discourse and conduct that was heated and explosive, to say the least.\footnote{For historical synthesis of these events, see, for example, James Oakes, \textit{The Scorpion’s Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014); and David S. Reynolds, \textit{John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights} (New York: Vintage, 2005).}

Where much of the novel’s excess stems from, though, is its particular subject matter: slave insurrection. I mean this in the sense that slave insurrection as an event exceeds the capacities of white imagination, representing, as it does, a total reversal or upheaval of the normative white supremacist social order and relations between the free white population and enslaved black population in, in this specific case, the antebellum United States. Herman Melville’s novella \textit{Benito Cereno} (1855) is particularly illustrative on this point. In the story, Captain Amasa Delano and his ship the \textit{Bachelor’s Delight} come upon a Spanish slaver, the \textit{San Dominick}, floating off the coast of Chile in apparent distress. Delano offers his assistance to the ship’s captain, Benito Cereno, who is attended constantly by Babo, an enslaved black man. Despite increasing signs that something is seriously awry aboard the ship, Delano does not suspect the horrifying truth until Cereno attempts to dive aboard his boat as the men are returning to their ship. Readers, too, inhabiting Delano’s viewpoint as the story progresses, never suspect that an insurrection had occurred aboard the \textit{San Dominick} and that the enslaved were now in charge and dictating Benito Cereno’s actions. In hindsight, the signs seem obvious, but the shock to first time readers evokes the unthinkability of slave revolt as it was felt viscerally by Delano.

Well-known radical abolitionist James Redpath, an outspoken supporter of John Brown, summed up nicely in 1859 the unthinkability and indescribability of slave revolt:
All other perils are understood. Fire upon land, or storm at sea, wrapping mortals in a wild or watery shroud, may be readily imagined. Pestilence walking abroad in the city, making the sultry air noisome and heavy, hushing the busy throng, aweing into silence heated avarice, and glooming the very haunts of civilization as if they were charnel-houses, can be quickly understood. But the appalling terror of a slave revolt, made instinct with life, and stunning as it pervades the community—the undescribed and indescribable horror which fills and sways every bosom as the word is whispered along the streets, or borne quickly from house to house, or speeded by fleetest couriers from plantation to plantation—‘an insurrection’—‘an insurrection’—must be felt and seen to be realized. (269-70; emphasis in original)

Of course, the likelihood that any significant number of Stowe’s readers would “feel” or “see” a slave insurrection for themselves at any point would have been quite low. The public sphere for which she was writing was much more likely to have encountered slave insurrection discursively, whether through Thomas R. Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), various accounts of shipboard uprisings like those aboard the *Amistad* and *Creole*, or sensationalized newspaper coverage of the violence of the Haitian Revolution. What the excerpt from Redpath also hints at, though, is the terror occasioned by the *fear or suspicion* of a slave revolt, which, as has become increasingly clear (and will be elaborated on further in the following chapter), was a very real and not infrequent feature of southern life, especially in places with large concentrations of enslaved people. With fiction, and with the brilliant mix of dramatic realism, sentimentalism, and rhetorical power that made *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* so successful in bringing the
horrors of slavery into northern US living rooms, Stowe in part attempts to bring the horror of the possibility of slave revolt to life for those same readers in Dred.41

It would, however, be misrepresentative of the novel’s focus to suggest that its central theme or object of attention is slave insurrection or its possibility. The insurrection that Dred is plotting is only ever mentioned in rather oblique terms and usually mediated through Dred’s biblical language and speech patterns reserved for his ruminations on weighty subjects. Its details are never made explicit or elaborated upon, and as we know, Dred himself dies before being able to carry the plan into action. Insurrection becomes a vehicle through which Stowe’s greater rhetorical purpose can be actualized. Conversely, a great deal of time in the novel is spent describing the swamp, life in the swamp for maroons, and Dred’s maroon community of Engedi. The true thing, or at least one of them, that Stowe wants readers to “feel” and “see” in Dred is, I will argue, in fact maroons and practices of marronage. These are, as has been made clear, connected to fears of insurrection and revolt, but in Dred Stowe unleashes the full power of her skill as a novelist and antislavery rhetorician in order to depict the liminal, treacherous, enigmatic, and frequently illegible world of maroons in the swamps of the US South.

Like slave insurrection, marronage too has had a tendency to exceed the capacity of the white imagination. White writers contemporaneous with Stowe as well as those from earlier periods tend to describe and thus represent maroons as variously fantastical, mythical, mysterious, shadowy figures who are otherwise romanticized and idealized.42 Such is the case whether the white perspective on maroons is one of awe and admiration or of terror and

41 My thinking here about how fears of a potential slave revolt drive policy and action is indebted in part to Foucault’s ideas regarding security on the basis of “possible events” rather than events which have already come to pass. See Michel Foucault, Securite, territoire, population: Cours au College de France, 1977-1978 (Paris: Seuil and Gallimard, 2004): 22.
42 See, for example, William Tynes Cowan, The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative (New York: Routledge, 2004).
paranoia. Simply put, maroons might be thought of as the ultimate operators within the spaces of what Rebecca Ginsburg has called the “black landscape.” They are clandestine, concealed, and illegible by necessity, and thus their lives and activities remain mostly the object of speculation on the part of white observers.

The question arises, then, as to exactly what rhetorical purpose Stowe’s focus on maroons and marronage serves in *Dred*, because such a focus must be recognized for what it is, especially in a novel written by the era’s most popular writer: unprecedented, and heretofore inadequately addressed by criticism of the text. As noted, the threat of slave insurrection is not a visceral threat to white northern novel readers, and elucidating the potential of this threat, however real and grave it might be in the South, does not seem a particularly effective way of further convincing readers of the evils of slavery and the need to abolish it. Indeed, Stowe had already made extraordinary strides toward demonstrating these things in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. So what does Stowe aim to accomplish by explicitly and directly depicting maroons on US soil in greater length and detail than any other writer of her time or times prior had ever done? Why *maroons* as opposed to fugitives along the Underground Railroad, or bondspeople subversively plotting rebellion from slave quarters on the margins of the plantation?

As Robert Levine and others have noted, Stowe took seriously the criticism leveled at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by African American writers and abolitionists like Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass, namely on the issue of her endorsement of colonization as a solution to the nation’s slavery problem. According to Levine, “Stowe’s change of mind on Liberia is not an isolated instance of her willingness to attend to black writings and views, and it is precisely her effort to comprehend such views that makes *Dred* more black-centered, revolutionary, and morally challenging than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (xvi). In a sense, there is nothing more “black-
centered” than maroons. Self-exiled, self-determined, and autonomous, they are affirmations of black collectivity and black life within the material spaces of the very system that is designed at every level to negate black subjectivity. And Stowe’s purpose in *Dred* seems less to use maroons as a scare tactic—a la their counterparts in Jamaica, Suriname, and Cuba, along with the looming specter of Haiti—than as an affirmation of the enduring power of black social life in a system categorically committed to black social death.

This chapter argues that Stowe’s depictions of maroons, a maroon community, and marronage in *Dred* work to elucidate the multifaceted self- and community-affirming potential of these peoples and practices as they relate to the causes of abolition, liberation, and black self-determination. By not pigeonholing or reducing marronage to its possibilities for actuating large-scale revolt and potential political autonomy (like in the Caribbean model most exemplified by the maroons of Jamaica, Suriname, Brazil, and ultimately Haiti), Stowe allows for a surprisingly nuanced exploration of the radical, subversive and at times interracial and inter-class potentialities, socialities, and collectivities manifested through these self-exiled people and their alternate community formations in the swamp and at the margins of the plantation zone. This depiction provides us with a continued sense of the ways in which freedom was understood by and for African Americans in particular as an unstable and provisional concept in the United States during the 1850s. By demonstrating, as well, how freedom could be provisional for poorer white characters and southerners with antislavery leanings thanks to the system of chattel slavery, Stowe evokes the possibility of an interracial, inter-class, and inter-sectional coalition-based politics of sentiment and action as a weapon against nationalized, elite slaveholder interests.
For the sake of narrative coherence and a sense of totality in a text that has long been criticized in conventional terms for lacking those very things, *Dred* is organized around the threat of an eventuality, that of slave insurrection. But, by drawing on a sense of morbid curiosity and by stringing readers along with the lure of the sensational, the unthinkable violence and social upheaval of a slave revolt, Stowe opens discursive space to spend hundreds of pages exploring maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp. While it may appear that Stowe hierarchizes forms of enslaved resistance, with insurrection topping the list of possibilities as the most radical and extreme, marronage as resistance emerges as the primary focus of the novel’s attention after Nina’s death and particularly in Part Two. After all, what, perhaps aside from suicide, could be a more damning indictment of the system of slavery and a rebuke to proslavery arguments about its paternalism and benevolence than marronage, what Neil Roberts calls a “total refusal of the enslaved condition” (13)?

As the enslaved woman quoted in the epigraph to this chapter from radical abolitionist James Redpath’s *The Roving Editor* puts it:

> It is the dreariest and the most repulsive of American possessions. It is the favorite resort of wild animals and reptiles; the paradise of serpents and poisonous vegetation. No human being, one would think, would voluntary live there; and yet, from time immemorial, it has been the chosen asylum of hundreds of our race. It has been the earthly heaven of the negro slave; the place ‘where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.’ (289)

Maroons chose a life of desperate peril in the insect and reptile infested morass of the Dismal Swamp, with the ever-present threat of being lawfully murdered as outlaws by any citizen, over life as a chattel slave. Such a choice flies in the face of proslavery claims that enslaved people
were treated well, preferred life in servitude and as Christians, and did not desire to escape or obtain their freedom. Stowe capitalizes on this fact, and the wild, exotic, threatening, but intensely captivating Dismal Swamp comes to serve in *Dred* as a repository—a site of projection—for racially inflected fears, fantasies, and desires that exceed the parameters of normativized social, racial, and class relations. The swamp’s presence—along with that of Dred and the other maroon inhabitants—also exerts a complicated influence on the surrounding area and people, black and white, free and enslaved, which Stowe explores throughout the novel.

**Marronage as Interruption**

As we have seen in *The Heroic Slave*, maroons and marronage have the potential to interrupt the conventional, expected narrative progression of stories about fugitive slaves and their escapes from enslavement in the South to nominal freedom in the North. In *The Heroic Slave*, Madison Washington’s five-year marronage in the Dismal Swamp forestalls the historical fiction’s teleological drive toward its end point: the slave ship rebellion which we know Washington will ultimately carry out. Marronage interrupts the ideological coherency of Douglass’s story through its interruptions of the narrative itself. As we will see in the next chapter, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent’s seven years in the garret also interrupt the geographical progression of what, by 1861, had come to be expected of the fugitive slave narrative genre in the United States. Brent is purposefully immobilized for seven years as a kind of maroon, hiding in plain sight while plans for her eventual escape to the North are worked out amongst family and friends. But *Dred* differs from both of these texts in that it represents

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43 For more on Americans’ changing views of swamp environments and landscapes during the antebellum period and afterward, see David C. Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989); and Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 2005).
marronage directly and at great length. It takes marronage and maroons up as object and as theme, featuring a titular maroon protagonist and a maroon community in the Dismal Swamp complete with separate dwellings, agricultural plots, and hidden entrances and paths. In *Dred* too, however, marronage—specifically the presence and appearances of the maroon Dred—interrupt the text in a variety of ways that tie back to the idea of marronage as excess and thus often exceed perceived boundaries of genre, narrative, geography, space, race, and class.

Dred’s liminal subject position as a maroon is reflected in the ways he momentarily becomes legible in the narrative before disappearing once again into the swamp. In his first two appearances to other characters, he is initially without material form, a disembodied voice speaking from the shadows. The very first time Dred appears to readers is nearly 200 pages into the novel, in a scene where Harry, Nina’s enslaved half-brother, is riding on horseback along a road bordering the swamp. Enslaved characters often take routes through the neighborhoods that border the swamp, for reasons that will soon become apparent. He has just been accosted by Tom Gordon, his half-brother, who demands that Harry tell him where he is going, which Harry refuses to do because Tom, Nina’s ill-tempered and violent brother, is not his owner. Tom strikes Harry in the face with a whip and threatens to purchase and sexually assault his enslaved wife who lives on another plantation. Stowe cannily uses this scene to set up a moment that echoes and then revises Uncle Tom’s brand of nonviolent noncompliance for the new rhetorical project at hand in this novel.

Here the maroon Dred—self-liberated and remaining that way, he says, by virtue of his rifle—interrupts Harry’s “bitter cursing” at the violent humiliation he has just suffered at the hand of Tom Gordon, intervening in the narrative at a highly charged moment that will come to define the parameters of the dialectic in *Dred* whereby white characters and enslaved black
characters interact with one another. The terms of Dred’s legibility to other characters are terms which he sets. Characters do not happen upon him; he appears to them when and where he chooses. For Dred, as for virtually any maroon, illegibility is crucial to survival. Illegibility is a necessary precondition for the other characteristics we associate with maroons and maroon communities: namely autonomy, agency, and self-determination. It is worth emphasizing why “illegible” is the most accurate and precise word to describe maroons, and what maroons must be, in the eyes of the slavocracy and of white society at large. To use Dred as an example, he is not just hidden or unseen, but illegible to the slavocracy in the sense that he is unable to be deciphered, and therefore unable to be known or understood. The aura of mystery that surrounds Dred—and has often surrounded maroons in mythologized and romanticized accounts of their lives—is one that he uses to his distinct advantage. Maintaining that aura is partly intentional and partly a consequence of the way he must operate in relation to plantation society as he navigates through and between its landscapes, both material and perceptual.

Dred’s second interruption comes during the lengthy camp meeting scene where, once again, he is heard but not seen, a disembodied voice this time seeming to emanate from the trees themselves as a metonym for nature and the natural world. His intervention into the discourse of the camp meeting is particularly significant given the way the camp meeting is framed and described in the text. The camp meeting is a democratizing affair in which, for a short time and in an almost carnivalesque manner, racial and class divisions are to a certain extent temporarily suspended. This isn’t to say that enslaved people in attendance are free from the routine denigration and violence that characterizes their condition, but they are by and large allowed to attend and move about freely while there. As Anthony Kaye has noted, slaveowners were often less apt to break with codes of civility and decorum in the company of their own, and thus at
such a large-scale public event more leeway was given, and enslaved people took full advantage of this fact. Clayton in particular expounds upon what he calls the “savage freedom” (254) of the camp meeting setting, championing the natural landscape of “flowers, festoons of vine…arces of green” and “underbrush, these dead limbs, these briers running riot over trees, sometimes choking and killing them” (255). Clayton goes on to compare the “savage freedom” and “grotesque growths” of this natural landscape to the “enthusiasms of the masses,” declaring: “I reverence the people, as I do the woods, for the wild, grand freedom with which their humanity develops itself” (255).

Moments later, “every one was startled by a sound which seemed to come pealing down directly from the thick canopy of pines over the heads of the ministers,” the voice of Dred exclaiming: “Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end shall it be for you? The day of the Lord shall be darkness, and not light!” (262). Dred soon retreats and the camp meeting’s reverie continues, but the interruption marks an intrusion into otherwise balmy atmosphere of the event, shaking meeting-goers out of the sense of communal comfort provided by prayer. It is an apt setting for Dred’s intrusion, framed by Clayton’s description of the wild landscape and “savage freedoms” it engenders. The meeting-goers, by setting up camp in the nearby vicinity of the swamp, have entered into Dred’s domain, or at least a place where that domain overlaps with the topography of the plantation zone. The scene presents a striking instance of counter-surveillance, of the typical, normative order of things being suddenly interrupted. Whereas the “planter gaze,” in Rebecca Ginsburg’s formulation, is traditionally the dominant way of seeing and interpreting the landscape, here that gaze is reversed and Dred is

able to see the gathering of slaveholders without them being able to see—and by extension interpret or understand—him.

Dred again appears to Harry on his way home from the camp meeting. Once again, Dred’s appearance comes on his own terms, as he approaches Harry’s horse from behind and places a hand on the bridle. He speaks to Harry of the hypocrisy of the camp meeting preachers, whom he calls “[h]unters of men, their hands red with blood of the poor, all seeking unto the Lord! Ministers who buy and sell us!” (270). Harry agrees with Dred’s assessment, and Dred continues to press him on his plans for a future course of action regarding his tenuous situation with his wife, Nina, and Tom. Dred warns him, “Now, hurry! Come to me, or he [Tom Gordon] will take thy wife for a prey!” (270), but Harry does not yet fully understand the implications of Dred’s warning. This interruption, however, marks another moment in which Dred breaks the narrative momentarily out of its progression by stopping Harry and interjecting his alternate perspective into the story. From Dred’s point of view, from the swamps, Harry should end his servitude by self-exiling and joining Dred as a maroon. Harry appears increasingly convinced of the validity of this plan, but remains in place so he can deal with the plantation’s finances under Nina (his half-sister) and with his wife’s predicament.

Dred appears to Harry once more prior to the time when, ultimately, he will flee to the swamps after assaulting Tom Gordon. This time, Harry is riding along the same “unfrequented path” where he had met Dred twice before, seeming desirous of another meeting, when Dred appears “standing silently, as if he had risen from the ground” (341). At this meeting Dred speaks openly to Harry about the possibilities for violent revolt as a means for emancipation, invoking the name of Nat Turner and also of his father, Denmark Vesey. Dred articulates here a point made earlier about the potency of the fear of slave revolt as a weapon against slavery.
Harry fears that rising up will simply result in a “rush on to our own destruction,” but Dred counters with an invocation of the Turner case: “Nat Turner—they killed him; but the fear of him almost drove them to set free their slaves! Yes, it was argued among them. They came within two or three votes of it in their assembly. A little more fear, and they would have done it. If my father had succeeded, the slaves in Carolina would be free to-day” (341). Dred understands a point that is still needing to be articulated and affirmed in scholarship surrounding slave resistance today: that rebellions, conspiracies, and fear of both contributed in no uncertain terms to the goals of the abolitionist movement and to the driving of the nation to civil war over the question of slavery. Fear, then, is a powerful tool when wielded by the maroon, a tool which can be used to interrupt the slavocracy’s status quo.

**Marronage as Refuge**

Dred’s cast of characters includes many whose subject positions exceed the limits of plantation romance stereotypes or otherwise disrupt the conventional confines of those stereotypes with regard to stable, fixed positions of freedom and unfreedom in the slaveholding society of 1850s North Carolina. For poorer white characters like Abijah Skinflint and his family, the Cripps children under Old Tiff’s care, the antislavery preacher Father Dickson, the slave catcher Ben Dakin with his pack of highly trained dogs, and even the upper-class, esteemed but openly abolitionist-leaning lawyer Edward Clayton, physical proximity to both the Dismal Swamp and its maroon inhabitants comes to constitute a threat to their whiteness and therefore a threat to their freedom, at least in the eyes of the slaveholding elite. The “blackening” of these

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characters and the spaces they inhabit leads to complications in the order of plantation society
social relations as they are organized around the constellating elements of space and race. Taken
together, these situations reveal that, because of the constructedness of race and race’s
relationship to freedom, the notion of “freedom” itself is frustrated and complicated by the
presence of liminal maroon figures inhabiting and traversing liminal swamp spaces.

Very little has been made of Stowe’s depiction of poor whites, or “poor white trash,” in
*Dred*, despite the fact that they play a substantial role in the narrative, far more so than in *Uncle
Tom’s Cabin* where they are almost entirely absent in any significant sense. Allison Hurst has
attempted to rectify this critical oversight, but where she sees Stowe uncritically participating in
a long antebellum tradition of disparaging poor, southern whites as “lazy, shiftless, uninterested
in culture and education, immoral, and oversexed,” I see an affinity, to an extent perhaps not
fully intended by Stowe, between poor whites and black maroons (637). This affinity derives at
its core, as I think Hurst is apt to point out, from both groups’ statuses as “masterless men” not
able to be fully contained or controlled by the slaveholding elite.46

Throughout the novel, members of the slaveholding elite disparage poor white
characters—frequently referred to as “poor white trash.” Even enslaved characters, we are
shown, look down upon them, particularly the Cripps family. Nina’s Aunt Nesbit is convinced
that poor, southern whites would be better off as slaves, and she holds forth on this topic at
length on several occasions. She subscribes to the essentialist, classist, and not so subtly
racialized idea that, like those of African descent, poor whites are inherently unable to care for

46 The concept of “masterless men” was first introduced in another context by A.L. Beier in
Beier defines masterless men as “a large landless element with no firm roots and few prospects”
(1), and analyzes this class of people as a unique challenge in the realm of social control during
this particular period in England’s history.
themselves and their children and elevate themselves in society through industry and hard work. The Cripps family has for some time “squatted,” as Mrs. Nesbit says, “over in the pine woods, near the swamp,” (105) which proximity to known runaways and maroons, and to the swamp itself, inflects the way in which she describes and understands their character. They are, in her opinion, “all of them liars and thieves” (105) who “always will steal from off the plantations, and corrupt the negroes, and get drunk, and everything else that’s bad” (105).

In other words, Mrs. Nesbit accuses the Cripps—and poor whites in general—of the same kinds of things swamp-dwelling maroons like Dred and his compatriots are accused of throughout the novel, and of which real, historical maroons were accused all the time: deception, thievery, and corruption of bondspeople still on the plantations. To her mind, poor whites are all the same, and deserving of the same, as she sees it, “benevolent” fate: “O, I don’t know that I know anything against this family [the Cripps] in particular; but I know the whole race. These squatters—I’ve known them ever since I was a girl in Virginia. […] There isn’t any help for them, unless, as I said before, they were made slaves; and then they could be kept decent” (106; emphasis mine). As “a race” of interstitial figures who do not effectively “belong” and who do not exhibit the characteristics conventionally associated with whiteness in the context of southern plantation society—property, education, refinement, virtue—the poor whites in Dred have more in common with maroons than with the likes of Mrs. Nesbit in the world of the text and according to its white characters.

Mrs. Nesbit’s husband, Nina’s Uncle John, takes the slavery-as-solution idea even further, all the while reinforcing the similarities in interstitial subject position between poor whites and maroons from the perspective of the slaveholding class. According to John, “It’s perfectly insufferable, what we proprietors have to bear from this tribe of creatures! […] There
ought to be hunting-parties got up to chase them down, and exterminate ‘em, just as we do rats. It would be a kindness to them; the only thing you can do for them is to kill them” (190).

Ratcheting down his rhetoric just a little, John concludes that “The government ought to pass laws—we will have laws, somehow or other,—and get them out of the state” (190). John’s ideas, cruel and brutal as they may seem, are in fact exactly the legal solutions that had been arrived at in North Carolina and other southern states for dealing with maroons (outlawing and killing them) and free blacks (deporting them from the state) at various times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To John, poor whites are, like maroons, a population at once threatening and disposable, both being outliers with whom the law should deal swiftly and harshly. And if it will not, as we will see in the case of another character, Father Dickson, extralegal violence must be employed to achieve the desired ends: expulsion or death.

Regarding the practice of outlawing runaway slaves, the narrator explains: “A provision of the Revised Statutes of North Carolina enacts that slaves thus secreted in the swamps, not returning within a given time, shall be considered outlawed,” and that “it shall be lawful for any person or persons whatsoever to kill and destroy such slaves, by such ways and means as they shall think it, without any accusation or impeachment of crime for the same” (qtd. in Stowe 240). “[I]t also provides,” the narrator continues, “that when any slave shall be killed in consequence of such outlawry, the value of such slave shall be ascertained by a jury, and the owner entitled to receive two thirds of the valuation from the sheriff of the county wherein the slave was killed” (240-41). The “Revised Statutes” being referred to were revised in 1831 after the publication of David Walker’s incendiary Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829) and Nat Turner’s Southampton rebellion in Virginia in 1831, but North Carolina had had statutes on the books for outlawing runaway slaves since 1741, though gestures toward the
outlawing provisions existed even in the colony’s first official Slave Code of 1715 (‘An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color’). 47

These outlawing statutes officially criminalized acts of marronage in the eyes of the state and placed responsibility for punishment and restitution also in the state’s or auxiliaries of the state’s domain. Enslaved people who fled were generally outlawed once it was determined that they had engaged in more than an act of petit marronage, or short-term flight, and had instead left without any intention of returning on their own. But these decisions were of course arbitrary and decided by slaveowners, often based on past behavior patterns of the enslaved who had fled. Outlawing led to a rise in the class of professional slave hunters with trained hunting dogs that are the subject of much terror and revulsion in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Outlawing also increased the stakes of any act of marronage, putting the maroon at risk for being

47 While some critical attention has been given to operations of the law in relation to slavery in Dred, none of it has focused on the law as it relates to maroons or, as it would have been more accurately described in the parlance of the time, the practice of outlawing slaves for “lying out” or “truancy.” Several chapters of Dred not discussed here focus on a local trial taken up pro bono and prosecuted by the attorney Edward Clayton. The case centers around the murder of an enslaved man by his owner. Clayton attempts to argue that the murder was unlawful and initially wins the case, but on appeal it is overturned by none other than his father, Judge Clayton, who, although he too abhors the institution of slavery and the violences it encourages, is a purist who is compelled to rule in favor of the defendant on the grounds that, in short, enslaved persons are property and the slave owner in question did not break the law by executing lethal punishment of said property. For work that focuses on this trial and other aspects of the law in Dred and antebellum US culture, see: Clymer, Jeffory A. “Family Money: Race and Economic Rights in Antebellum US Law and Fiction.” American Literary History 21.2 (Summer 2009): 211-238; DeLombard, Jeannine Marie. “Representing the Slave: White Advocacy and Black Testimony in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred.” New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters 75.1 (Mar. 2002): 80-106; Korobkin, Laura H. “Appropriating Law in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred.” Nineteenth-Century Literature 62.3 (Dec. 2007): 380-406; Noguchi, Keiko. “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred: Legal Exploration in a Sentimental Novel.” Tsuda Review: The Journal of the Department of English Literature, Culture, Language, and Communication 55 (Nov. 2010): 1-24; Smith, Gail K. “Reading with the Other: Hermeneutics and the Politics of Difference in Stowe’s Dred.” American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography 69.2 (June 1997): 289-313.
mistaken for an outlawed bondsperson and being chased, hunted, and shot at by slave catchers and ordinary citizens overzealously looking to cash in on posted reward money. The original outlawing clause from the 1741 Slave Code, titled “R’naway slaves may be outlawed in certain cases,” is worth looking at in full because it establishes much of the language that would be used by slaveowners, authorities, and white observers to describe maroons and their activities for the next one hundred and twenty years:

Whereas many times slaves run away and lie out hid and lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places, killing cattle and hogs, and committing other injuries to the inhabitants of this State; in all such cases, upon intelligence of any slave or slaves, lying out as aforesaid, any two justices of the peace for the county wherein such slave or slaves is, or are supposed to lurk or do mischief, shall, and they are hereby empowered and required to issue proclamation against such slave or slaves (reciting his, or their names, and the name or names of the owner or owners, if known) thereby requiring him or them, and every of them forthwith to surrender him or themselves; and also to empower and require the sheriff of the said county to take such power with him as he shall think fit and necessary, for going in search and pursuit of, and effectual apprehending such outlying slave or slaves, which proclamation shall be published at the door of the court house, and at such other places as said justice shall direct. And if any slave or slaves against whom proclamation hath been thus issued, stay out and do not immediately return home, it shall be lawful for any person or persons, whatsoever to kill and destroy such slave or slaves,
by such ways and means as he shall think fit, without accusation or impeachment of any
crime for the same. (“An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color”))

The legal designation of “outlaw” is a curious one, as it admits and codifies the very agency and
subjectivity denied to enslaved people by virtue of their status as property, or chattel. Above all
else, the existence of such a detailed statute as this with precursors dating to the early
seventeenth century and in many southern states suggests in the strongest terms the fear that
maroons occasioned in the minds of planter society. Making it lawful for “any person or persons,
whatsoever to kill and destroy such slave or slaves, by such ways and means as he shall think fit,
without accusation or impeachment of crime for same” served also as a means by which the
planter class might enlist the assistance of poor whites in removing the scourge of marronage
from local neighborhoods and communities. For, as we will soon see, poor whites sometimes
engaged in illicit trade with maroons that undercut planter control over the movements and
activities of their enslaved populations. The need to control and contain maroons was crucial, but
so too was the need to keep maroon and poor white interests from intersecting in ways that
subverted the regulatory mechanisms of the slavery system.

The Cripps children, depicted as representatives of the class of “poor white trash” who
are a problem population and a plague on white southern elites, are left almost entirely in the
care of the elderly, enslaved Old Tiff thanks to their mother’s chronic sickliness and their
father’s itinerant drunkenness. Tiff, we are led to understand, has chosen to remain with the
Cripps family out of genuine love and concern for the children as well as an allegiance to their
mother’s family name, that of Peyton, an old, monied Virginia family who has since, to his

South. North Carolina Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.)
knowledge, lost their fortune. Tiff’s “hut” near the swamp (which is technically the Cripps’, but is tended to entirely by Tiff), we are told, “stands alone, in the heart of a dense pine forest, which shuts it in on every side” (85). Though we know from Nina’s aunt and uncle that this hut stands quite near their home—on their property, in fact, but in the uncultivated pine woods—it is described as if it is very much isolated, “shut in on every side” where “no sound was heard but the shivering wind, swaying and surging in melancholy cadences through the long pine-leaves,—a lonesome, wailing, uncertain sound” (85).

The interstitial, intermediary space these characters physically inhabit and which their subject positions reflect is, in Diouf’s terms, a borderland space, meaning one close to and very often literally bordering plantations and developed landscapes. In the United States context along with that of the prior British colonies, the southern borderlands were the most common haunts of maroons—both short-term and longer-term—as opposed to the hinterlands (to use Diouf’s other term), or highly remote areas distant from towns, cities, or villages, as was the case in the infamous examples of the Jamaican and Surinamese maroons who established communities in often distant mountains and jungles. In the description of Tiff’s hut, then, we find a striking commonality with contemporaneous descriptions of maroons and maroon settlements, which were frequently understood to be “hiding in plain sight,” or rather paradoxically both present and absent, far and near, shifty and unpredictable.

Much later in the novel, after Nina’s abrupt death from a local cholera outbreak has foregrounded the Dred and marronage dimension of the plotline, crisis strikes Tiff and the Cripps children when their father, drunk, brings home a new woman—a “low woman,” in Tiff’s estimation—to replace their mother who had finally succumbed to her illnesses. Sensing the impending threat to the children’s livelihood, Tiff answers their repeated queries of “What shall
we do? What shall we do?” (401) with “I’s a good mind to go off wid you in de wilderness, like de chil’en of Israel…though dere an’t no manna falling nowadays” (401). Tiff thus proposes a kind of marronage, a flight from danger into the wilderness, though it might at first appear quite strange to imagine an enslaved black man and his two “poor white” charges undertaking a life of marronage. Historically, however, the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and, in the case of Dred, North Carolina, played home to all manner of exiles and outcasts, the dispossessed, oppressed, disenfranchised, outlawed, criminalized, and wanted. From the time of the first European surveys and explorations, beginning in earnest with William Byrd II in 1728, the swamp was characterized as a place of refuge for undesirables, whether they be indigenous people perceived as a threat or fugitives from labor or crime, black and white.49

Fearing the consequences of two drunken parents who are violent and unable to provide for the children, Tiff does indeed whisk them off into the woods, heading toward none other place than Dred’s maroon encampment in the swamp “where he knew many fugitives were concealed,” (406) which, as was quite common amongst enslaved populations, was known to the local black inhabitants by general location and as a site of refuge in a way that it simply was not known by whites—especially slaveholding whites. The contrast between the children’s life at home and their life of flight or marronage in the swamp, even before they encounter Dred, is stark. As she does throughout the novel, Stowe romanticizes the swamp landscape, emphasizing Fanny Cripps’s peaceful delight at the “soft and fragrant pine-foliage” and the “still patter of falling dew-drops, and the tremulous whirr and flutter of leaves” about the makeshift shelter Tiff had constructed for them (168).

49 See Sayers, A Desolate Place for a Defiant People, and Bey, T.A.Z.
That same night on the outskirts of the swamp, Dred comes upon Tiff and the children as they sleep, and we learn more about the relationship between maroons and the enslaved, as well as between the swamp landscape and the nearby plantations:

But, though Tiff and the children slept all night, we are under no obligations to keep our eyes shut to the fact that between three and four o’clock there came crackling through the swamps the dark figure of one whose journeyings were more often by night than by day. Dred had been out on one of his nightly excursions, carrying game, which he disposed of for powder and shot at one of the low stores we have alluded to. He came unexpectedly on the sleepers, while making his way back. His first movement, on seeing them, was that of surprise; then, stopping and examining the group more closely, he appeared to recognize them. Dred had known Old Tiff before; and had occasion to go to him more than once to beg supplies for fugitives in the swamps, or to get some errand performed which he could not himself venture abroad to attend to. Like others of his race, Tiff, on all such subjects, was so habitually and unfathomably secret, that the children, who knew him most intimately, had never received even a suggestion from him of the existence of any such person. Dred, whose eyes, sharpened by habitual caution, never lost sight of any change in his vicinity, had been observant of that which had taken place in Old Tiff’s affairs. When, therefore, he saw him sleeping as we have described, he understood the whole matter at once. (171)

This scene and the narrator’s reflections upon it reveal a great deal about the interplay between space and race in the world of the novel and within the context the historical reality the novel is intended to reflect. The narrator gives readers the idea that they are being given a glimpse into something not usually accessible to them, by virtue of their position as largely white northerners,
nor to white characters in the novel itself, by virtue of the ways in which cognitive landscapes and their material projections manifest along racialized lines. Typical of maroons, even those living and moving about deep within the swamps, Dred conducts the majority of his business by cover of darkness. More important, though, is the way the scene hints at two types of connections integral to the kinds of shadow networks and economies that helped sustain maroons and in some cases—like Tiff’s here—provide temporary relief to the enslaved: connections between maroons and the still enslaved, and connections between maroons and the “poor white” population, which together reveal the multifaceted interconnectedness of all three groups. This interconnectedness only posed a further threat to elite, slaveholder interests in the area, as the swamp space came to represent a space without control, one of discord, chaos, and ominous potential.

We learn, for example, that Dred knows Tiff, like he did Harry earlier, and has for quite some time. What’s more, Tiff has apparently assisted Dred by providing him with hard to find supplies for the swamp dwelling maroons and by performing unspecified “errands” which, we might imagine, involved communicating information to bondspeople further from the swamps or transacting business with merchants or traders on Dred’s behalf to acquire particular supplies for his encampment. But, just as readers were earlier surprised by Harry’s familiarity with Dred, we learn here that the Cripps children would be equally surprised to learn of Tiff’s familiarity with him, for Tiff, like Harry, maintains true knowledge of Dred’s existence as a closely guarded secret, while for white characters a figure like Dred is shrouded in mystery, more myth than man, hovering at the margins of legibility (409).

Another liminal and poor white character in the novel, a keeper of one of the “low stores” alluded to in this same excerpt, Abijah Skinflint runs a small trading operation out of his log
cabin, which stands between the large plantation estates of John Gordon, Nina’s uncle, and Nina’s own plantation, Canema. Already marginalized by his lower class status, his position as an outsider to plantation society is reinforced by the space he physically inhabits: a liminal space literally in between two plantations, on land that remains uncultivated for agricultural purposes and thus and without use in the realm of the plantation economy. The narrator informs us that Skinflint’s establishment “was a nuisance in the eyes of neighboring planters, from the general apprehension entertained that [he] drove a brisk underhand trade with the negroes, and that the various articles which he disposed for sale were many of them surreptitiously conveyed to him in nightly installments from off their own plantations” (Stowe 231). Not only does Skinflint conduct “underhand trade with the negroes,” but it is also suggested that he can be counted among the “low white traders in the neighborhood” who “knew Dred well” (212). If as a poor white man living and conducting business in the interstices of plantation society, Skinflint has come to be seen as a nuisance, then his association with shadow networks of trade and especially with Dred and Dismal Swamp maroons elevates him to the level of a threat.

The suspicion that Skinflint was pilfering items from the surrounding plantations to sell for himself was often a suspicion and accusation leveled at maroons inhabiting the swamps and borderland areas in the vicinity of plantation society—though maroons were more likely to pilfer items like food, blankets, or tools to use for themselves or to trade for things they needed rather than to sell for profit, as money generally served little purpose in the swamp. Stowe herself has the narrator explain these connections in a manner that has subsequently been supported by historians’ assessments:

The negroes lying out in the swamps are not so wholly cut off from society as might at first be imagined. The slaves of all the adjoining plantations, whatever they may pretend,
to secure the good-will of their owners, are at heart secretly disposed, from motives both of compassion and policy, to favor the fugitives. They very readily perceive that, in the event of any difficulty occurring to themselves, it might be quite necessary to have a friend and protector in the swamp; and therefore they do not hesitate to supply these fugitives, so far as they are able, with anything which they may desire. The poor whites, also, who keep small shops in the neighborhood of plantations, are never particularly scrupulous, provided they can turn a penny to their own advantage; and willingly supply necessary wares in exchange for game, with which the swamp abounds. (211)

In the eyes of the likes of Aunt Nesbit and Uncle John (and even sometimes Nina), then, Skinflint, despite his whiteness, has more in common with maroons and the underclass of enslaved blacks than he does with the slaveholding elites. Skinflint is perceived as threatening because he operates at least in part within the black and fugitive landscapes of Dred’s North Carolina. In the above description, the narrator intimates the existence of shadow networks of knowledge and communication amongst the enslaved population, the maroons, and to a certain extent the “low” whites who conduct business with them. These networks, like maroons themselves, are threatening because they exceed the capacity of the slavocracy to police, control, and contain them.

“On the verge of the swamp, a little beyond Tiff’s cabin, lived Ben Dakin,” another poor white character who, despite the fact that his vocation is slave hunting, tends to be, from the vantage point of social class, grouped together with maroons and enslaved blacks rather than propertied, slave owning whites. The narrator describes Dakin thus: “Ben was a mighty hunter; he had the best pack of dogs within thirty miles round; and his advertisements…detailed with great accuracy the precise terms on which he would hunt down and capture any man, woman, or
child, escaping from service and labor in that country” (233). Dakin represents a particularly interesting case because, unlike Skinflint or Cripps, his vocation makes him part of the economy of trade and labor in human beings, a necessary adjunct to an “imperfect” system in which the living chattel cannot always be forced into submission. Still, though Dakin has one foot in the world of the slaveowners, he nevertheless occupies a marginal position relative to that class as well as to its “official” economy and plantation community. Like Cripps (and Tiff), he lives in close proximity to the swamp, though in his case this proximity provides obvious benefits to his profession, as the swamp is the most frequent destination of the runaways he is hired to track down. But he remains an outsider, a member of a poor, uneducated white underclass employed by slaveowners but scorned by them, and rightfully feared and despised by the enslaved population and blacks in general. Dakin is thus “blackened” via his profession, which though it involves hunting down fugitive slaves still involves associating with them regularly, and via the space he inhabits near and in the swamp.

The preacher Father Dickson represents perhaps the most compelling case illustrating the precarity of whiteness—and thus freedom—in swamp and maroon-inflected spaces. Father Dickson lacks pretensions to upward class mobility, seeming content to live without artifice or ostentation as a man of God. What sets him apart from other members of the local clergy and puts him at odds with some in the community, however, is the fact that he “had never yielded to the common customs and habits of the country in regard to the holding of slaves. A few, who had been left him by a relation, he had at great trouble and expense transported to a free state, and settled there comfortably” (247). Not only does Father Dickson refuse to own slaves or to engage in any aspect of slave trading, he also actively, as the novel progresses, begins speaking out against the system and practice in his personal life and in his sermons. Like most of the other
poorer white characters previously described, Father Dickson lives in a woodland hut near the outskirts of the swamp. What’s more, he preaches in what the narrator describes as a “rude church which stood deep in the shadow of the woods” (479). He therefore comes to be seen by the slavocracy as a kind of triple threat: poor and white, living and preaching in woodland seclusion, and openly harboring antislavery opinions.

A common form of deflection on the part of slaveholders was to blame abolitionist sentiment for agitation amongst the enslaved population, as if the enslaved needed any other reason to be desirous of their freedom than the fact of enslavement itself. Father Dickson becomes the victim of such deflection tactics late in the novel as tensions are rising between slaveholders and southerners with openly abolitionist sentiments. As Father Dickson rides up to his church one Sabbath day to preach his sermon, he is surprised by “quite a throng of men, armed with bludgeons and pistols” (478) who accost him regarding his purported antislavery preachings. The men have come together to serve justice, as they perceive it, outside the realm of the law and without its legal backing or authority. In response to Father Dickson’s query regarding whether the men “have any warrant from the civil authorities to stop [him],” he receives a telling response: “‘Now... you may as well know fust as last, that we don’t care a cuss for the civil authorities, as you call them, ‘cause we’s going to do what we darn please; and we don’t please have you yowping abolishment round here, and putting devilry in the heads of our niggers!’” (479). As noted, this is a standard refrain, blaming abolitionism for enslaved unrest, and Father Dickson refuses to budge on the issue, standing his ground and indicating that he is determined to preach his sermon.

Tom Gordon emerges as the leader and organizer of the group, and he informs Father Dickson that he “shall sign a pledge to leave North Carolina in three days, and never come back
again, and take [his] whole spawn and litter with [him]” (481). Dickson refuses, the situation continues to escalate, and what follows is one of the more harrowing scenes in the novel. The men forcibly lead Father Dickson back to his home, where, in view of his sickly wife and two young children, they proceed to strip him down to his undergarments, bind him to a tree, and whip him. “He is so dreadful fond of the niggers, let him fare with them!” (481) is Tom Gordon’s rallying cry to the inebriated, lurid mob as one of them begins delivering blows to the still unwavering Dickson.

This scene demonstrates in no uncertain terms the fate that awaits white southerners who publicly profess antislavery sentiments and refuse to disavow them. They will, ultimately, be treated like slaves: subjected to the racialized, extrajudicial violence of the lash. In this particular case, Father Dickson’s proximity not only to enslaved blacks but also to maroons exacerbates the threat he poses and therefore the punishment he receives at the hand of Tom Gordon and his ilk. Father Dickson is a loner, an outlier; he lives in a shack near the swamp and preaches in a woodland church far off from the town center. He cannot be monitored and controlled through the usual mechanisms of the slavocracy, and as a result he is singled out for punishment in a way that resembles—though of course without the sentence of death—the way outlawed slaves were dealt with.

Before the men can give Father Dickson the “six and thirty” they first set out to, Edward Clayton happens upon the scene and interrupts it. Though the interruption saves Father Dickson any further violence and humiliation, it turns the mob’s increasing wrath on Clayton, already an unpopular figure in the neighborhood because of his own outspoken antislavery views and the radical experiments he is carrying out on his plantation, teaching bondspeople to read and write and allowing them to earn personal savings toward their eventual freedom. Soon enough, it will
be Clayton’s turn to feel the mob’s fury, and in his time of need it will be his proximity to maroons and spaces of marronage that saves him.

Continuing his violent spree, Tom Gordon finally tests Harry to his breaking point, and in a heated argument at Canema, Harry strikes Tom and promptly flees out the window, headed, as we will learn, for the refuge of the swamp. He flees on Tom’s horse to his cottage, collects his wife Lisette, and they ride immediately to “the place where he [Harry] had twice before met Dred,” where Dred, with his characteristic prescience, is already waiting for them (389). “And before sunset of that evening,” the narrator proclaims, “Harry and Lisette were tenants of the wild vastness in the centre of the swamp” (389). Like Tiff before him, albeit for different reasons, Harry seeks the refuge of the swamp and the maroons he knows to inhabit it in his time of need. The black socialities that extend through and within the spaces of both the swamp and the plantation zone enable Harry to call upon his affiliation with Dred and move himself and his wife to a space of relative safety when he knows his life is in immediate danger. By having Dred already waiting for Harry, improbable in actuality as it may be, Stowe reinforces the idea that clandestine networks of communication, intelligence, and sociality existed between enslaved people and maroons and outside the regulatory mechanisms of the slavocracy. At Engedi, Harry joins a growing group of self-exiled refugees from slavery, among them Old Tiff and the white Cripps children under his care.

In a final act of vicious brutality, Tom Gordon attacks Edward Clayton. Clayton decides to ride over and spend the night at Father Dickson’s cottage in order to provide him some measure of protection and reassurance after he had been assaulted by Tom and the mob. “[A]rming himself with a brace of pistols” and “[r]iding deliberately through the woodland path in the vicinity of the swamp,” he is startled by three men on horseback, who approach him from
behind, one striking him in the head with a gutta percha cane before he could recognize any of them (492). He rises to defend himself, but is struck down once again by Tom Gordon, who accuses him of being a “renegade abolitionist” who is “covertly undermining our institutions” (493). However, just as Tom prepares to strike once more, “a violent blow from an unseen hand struck his right arm, and it fell, broken, at his side” (493). Tom calls out for his men to “look for the fellow,” but the only answer they receive is “the crack of a rifle, and a bullet which passed right over his [Tom’s] head…from the swamp” (493).

It is Harry and Dred, who have been watching from the swamp, enacting a kind of reverse surveillance on the plantation zone from the liminal space of the swamp. They decide the best course of action is to bring Clayton “to our stronghold of Engedi, even as Samson bore the gates of Gaza. Our women shall attend him, and when he is recovered we will set him on his journey” (494). With Clayton’s admittance to Engedi, its interracial and inter-class potentiality has reached its apotheosis in the text. Indeed, we learn in the chapter that follows more about Dred’s plan for insurrection than we have throughout the rest of the novel. As Denmark Vesey’s son, Dred is motivated by a sense of personal and community vengeance, but he submerges this desire for the greater good of his people in bondage. Deriving his justification from the Bible, Dred sent throughout the swamp associates whose job it was to prepare “the minds of the people, and he was traversing the swamp in different directions, holding nightly meetings, in which he read and expounded the prophecies to excited ears” (499).

Mere pages later, however, in a chapter titled “All Over,” Dred is killed attempting to assist a fellow fugitive in the process of escaping slave hunters, and everything we have just learned about his plans becomes, at least for the narrative arc, moot. The question arises, then, as to whether the radical, coalitional politics of resistance articulated through representations of
marronage in this text are suddenly contained, deflated, or negated by Dred’s death and the concomitant death of his plan for insurrection. In what follows, I will suggest that, over the course of its narrative, *Dred* opens up many more possibilities for subversive action than it forecloses, despite Dred’s death near the end of the story. While Dred’s death does precipitate a movement northward by many of the inhabitants of Engedi, activating a more familiar storyline in which enslaved people flee captivity in the South to some form of nominal freedom in the North, readers are left to ponder both what will become of the other countless and nameless maroons dwelling in the swamps as well as the implications of the radical space and race-upsetting politics of resistance indexed by practices of marronage throughout the text.

**Conclusion: Marronage and (Im)mobility**

Maroons simultaneously run away and refuse to leave. In the eyes of the slavocracy, they simultaneously possess an unruly mobility and an infuriating stasis. *Dred* reveals the way in which maroons enact this dynamic in the setting of a series of overlapping and interrelated neighborhoods that border the Dismal Swamp and thus lie in proximity to its maroon inhabitants. Dred’s appearances in the novel alternate between intruding into the borders of the plantation zone and hiding out in his swamp stronghold of Engedi. As readers, we become privy to both his extraordinary mobility and his ability to stay put, both results of the freedom he has obtained for himself by fleeing enslavement and taking up life as a maroon. Dred’s mobility, along with the freedom he has to remain in place when he so chooses, make him a threat to the very cornerstone of freedom as understood through the political philosophy of liberal democracy that undergirds conceptions of citizenship and belonging in the United States. As Hagar Kotef argues in *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom* (2015), “Africans, indigenous Americans…as well as
women and paupers keep appearing in the texts of liberal thinkers as either too stagnant or too mobile” (9). Maroons, as I have argued, appear as both of these things together.

Kotef further explains that “[t]hrough the production of patterns of movement…different categories of subjectivity are produced. Regimes of movement are thus never simply a way to control, to regulate, or to incite movement. Regimes of movement are integral to the formation of different modes of being” (15; emphasis in original). The regime of movement instantiated by maroons, one that upsets the hegemonic ordering and regulating of space and the bodies that exist in that space, in fact indexes, I contend, a mode of being fundamentally at odds with the ordering of movement as it relates to freedom in conceptions of liberal subjecthood. Of course, anything like a liberal subject only exists in relation to its opposite, the illiberal or nonliberal subject, she who is unfree: the bondsperson. Articulating the freedoms of the liberal subject required the existence of a population who was denied and could never have those freedoms, and as Kotef continues:

Colonized subjects who were declared to be nomads, poor who were seen as vagabond or thrown into vargrancy as they lost access to lands, women whose presumed hysterical nature was attached to their inability to control bodily fluids, all were constituted (or rather deconstituted) as unruly subjects whose movement is a problem to be managed.

This configuration was the grounds for justifying nonliberal moments—and spaces—within liberal regimes. (5)

But the situation with maroons does not constitute an example of a “nonliberal” moment within a liberal regime. The practice of outlawing fugitive bondspeople does, certainly, but maroons must be understood on their own terms as people who have not only rejected in its entirety the condition of enslavement, but also the aspirational ontology of liberal subjecthood and its
precursors altogether. Enslaved people, by virtue of their existence and of their perspective, fundamentally challenged dominant ways of seeing and being in the world, and in turn they challenged the hegemonic spatial representations that resulted from that dominance. Maroons compound the challenge by inhabiting and operating within spaces, like swamps, that always already exist outside the spatial order proclaimed and enacted by that hegemony. What’s more, they move between the realms of what is ordered (the plantation zone) and what remains in disorder (the swamps), never allowing hegemonic spatial representations to be rendered fully coherent as a result.

Maroons like Dred thus represent a singular threat in the sense that, as formerly enslaved people whose non-subject position was in some ways the foil against which something like the liberal subject could be imagined in the first place, they re-corporealize the liberal subject and embodied its founding tenet of freedom of movement in the face of one of the most repressive, controlling, containing systems ever designed to prohibit exactly that thing: race-based chattel slavery. Stowe’s depiction of Dred theorizes via embodied representation the existence of liberal subjectivity in the place where it in theory could not be, in self-liberated, de facto free people: maroons, inhabitants of the very states that recognized them only as property. These representations challenge the ideology and political philosophy and legal mechanisms by which US hegemony organized normative conceptions of freedom, space, mobility, movement, and liberal subjecthood.

Thought this way, the threat of marronage is amplified in Dred when it takes on the interracial and inter-class valences I have been elaborating throughout this chapter. Dred becomes part of a constellation of texts—including all of those under consideration in this dissertation—which articulate a black-centered politics of resistance based on a freedom of
movement disarticulated from liberal conceptions of citizenship and the nation state. The mobility exhibited by runaway enslaved people who sought freedom by heading north, sometimes via the Underground Railroad, has been made to comport with the teleological narrative of the liberal subject in US history so as to appear as an example of those wrongfully denied liberal subjecthood valiantly striking out in search of it. The mobility exhibited by maroons, on the other hand, has been largely ignored in the US context because it does not comport with racial ideologies of assimilation and integration.

Marronage is not just a wholesale rejection of the condition of enslavement, as Neil Roberts has argued. It is a rejection of the normativized aspiration of liberal subjecthood altogether. Marronage upsets Douglass’s ideological program in *The Heroic Slave* precisely because it has no aspirations toward assimilation, recognition, citizenship, or subjecthood. Not only does it not aspire to these things; it actively conspires against them. The politics of marronage are ultimately a politics of disaffiliation, disaffection, rejection, and unrecognition. While Dred must die, his plot for insurrection along with him, and the remaining maroons of Engedi flee the swamp toward various northern destinations at the conclusion of the novel, this conventional turn simply cannot negate the black-centered, alternate politics of material and rhetorical resistance offered up by the text’s extended, sympathetic representation of maroons and marronage.
A Maroon in the Garret: Rethinking the Politics of Fugitivity in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

“Five hundred years of flights from captivity, into communal and conceptual wilderness, created the maroon philosophers’ natural habitat at the boundary of democracy. Such outsider terrain superficially appears as a reservation or cell; yet it is in part a trajectory into freedom.”


Since Jean Fagan Yellin’s confirmation in 1987 that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was in fact written by former bondswoman Harriet Ann Jacobs, under the pseudonym Linda Brent, and recounts the real events of her enslavement in North Carolina and eventual freedom in New York City, much has been written about her intransigence in the face of sexual and physical violence, her revelations of the particular horrors of slavery for women, and the extent to which her narrative borrows elements from sentimental, reform, and gothic fiction. Indeed, *Incidents* has quickly become one of the most canonical antebellum African American slave narratives and literary texts—certainly the most canonical of the anchor texts under consideration in this dissertation and the most canonical of the slave narratives written by women. While this uptick in attention to Jacobs as one of the most important black abolitionist women and her text as an indispensable first-hand account of the horrors of slavery for women

has certainly been a welcome development, it has also served to advance the problematic
tendency, as Carla Peterson has noted, to privilege *Incidents*—along with Frederick Douglass’s
*Narrative*—as “the metonym for nineteenth-century African-American literary production” (5). It
is a lot of weight for one text (or two) to bear, and I think Peterson and others such as Michael
Drexler and Ed White are taking the field of early African American literary studies in the right
direction by paying serious attention to lesser-known, neglected texts that have a chance to
broaden and enhance our understanding of early African American literature in its variegated
forms and genres.  

But they are certainly not suggesting that we abandon critical efforts related to Jacobs and
*Incidents*, or to other canonical or “representative” African American literary texts. To my mind,
their work also demonstrates a need for scholars to approach *Incidents* in novel ways, to think
outside the familiar tropes and themes that have been valuable to explore but also perhaps
unintentionally circumscribe the text’s boundaries of meaning and possibility. I agree with
Albert Tricomi’s suggestion that “Jacobs’s conception of her book was different from [Lydia
Maria] Child’s,” her editor, and that “the way most readers today perceive the autobiography—
as a personal history of female sexual oppression and maternal longing—is, in part, the result of
Child’s editing” (243–44). Indeed, a survey of the scholarship that has been produced on
*Incidents* since Yellin’s authentication of the text indicates that Child’s editorial interventions
seem to have conditioned the critical lenses through which modern readers, scholars, and
teachers approach the text. By no means am I dismissive of this body of work, as it has been
instrumental in laying the groundwork for the serious critical attention that Jacobs and her text
deserve. But it will be my purpose in this chapter to place *Incidents* and Jacobs’s life growing up

53 Michael J. Drexler and Ed White, Eds. *Beyond Douglass: New Perspectives on Early African-
in Edenton, North Carolina within the context of the contemporaneous print public discourse surrounding marronage and its relationship to more overtly resistant practices like rebellion and insurrection.

A good deal of attention has been paid to Brent’s seven years spent living in the garret—the small loft-like crawl space between the ceiling and roof of the shed above Brent’s grandmother’s house.\(^{54}\) While there have been some compelling arguments made about the spatial and architectural politics of this “loophole of retreat,” as Brent calls it, I am proposing to read Brent’s time in the garret in a way that I think generatively expands and complicates our conception of the narrative and its place in the tradition of American fugitive slave narratives. This chapter considers what happens to our understanding of Brent’s (i.e., Jacobs’s) experience of fugitivit\(^{55}\) As the previous two chapters have demonstrated, historical sources and literary texts traditionally represent maroons in the United States as inhabiting the dense, undeveloped, and inhospitable southern swamps of places like Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida—spaces that often confounded slave catchers but allowed maroons to survive by retaining a network of supply and communication with friendly bondspeople on neighboring plantations.

However, I will argue that Brent’s fugitivity in the garret—geographically inside but physically removed from the plantocracy, sustainable partially by herself and partially by assistance from complicit partners, hidden, as it were, in plain sight—is in many significant ways

\(^{54}\) See, most recently: Miranda A. Green-Barteet, “‘The Loophole of Retreat’: Interstitial Spaces in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *South Central Review* 30.2 (Summer 2013): 53-72. Green-Barteet employs architectural history to explore the meaning of the garret in the domestic spatial imaginary of nineteenth-century Americans.

\(^{55}\) For the remainder of this chapter while discussing the narrative, I will refer to Jacobs as Linda Brent, her pseudonym throughout *Incidents*. I will use “Jacobs” when describing Harriet Jacobs as the text’s author.
proximate to the experiences of the more familiar swamp maroons. Indeed, the narrative itself is suffused with various forms, notions, and practices of marronage which have gone unrecognized as such in scholarship surrounding the text. It will be my purpose, then, to interrogate the ways in which thinking Brent as a kind of maroon and her experience as a kind of marronage reconfigures our conception of her resistance to slavery and our frameworks for understanding the possibilities for freedom and unfreedom for fugitive slaves in the antebellum period. I aim as well to demonstrate that Incidents’s references to swamp marronage and Brent’s garret “marronage,” along with its elided (and unfortunately lost) final chapter on John Brown, suggest a strain of militancy in Jacobs’s text that has long been downplayed or gone unrecognized in scholarship on the narrative. This militancy runs against the grain of white, northern abolitionist rhetorical proscriptions for how a slave narrative should operate in order to best garner sympathy for and trust in the black, formerly enslaved writer, and thus belief in the evils of slavery and the cause of abolitionism.

Ultimately, by offering a new way of reading Incidents that foregrounds attention to the issue of marronage as a feature of both Jacobs’s world growing up in Edenton, North Carolina and her narrative, in ways that are both literal and metaphorical, I hope to shift our geographically circumscribed critical approach to Incidents specifically as well as slave narratives more generally. In the process, I will argue that by constellating her experiences in the garret with those of maroons in the Southern swamps or forests, Jacobs challenges binaristic understandings of the possibilities for freedom for fugitive slaves that have arisen from the critical praxis of slave narrative studies, and in turn she gestures toward meanings of freedom—both embodied and conceptual—that complicate a rigid possibilistic dichotomy between free and enslaved.
Marronage, Insurrection, and Slave Conspiracies in Harriet Jacobs’s World

The state of North Carolina was a hotbed of suspected slave insurrections and subversive slave and maroon activities during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Harriet Jacobs was born into the midst of frequent, widespread panic over alleged plots for revolt and insurrection, many of which were attributed in some way to the involvement of maroons and their surreptitious activities in the state’s many swamps, including a large portion of the Great Dismal Swamp, believed throughout the antebellum period (and by a scholarly consensus today) to be home to the largest concentration in the United States of maroons and maroon communities.\(^{56}\) But as we will soon see, Edenton itself, Harriet Jacobs’s birthplace in 1813, experienced its fair share of purported maroon activity and subversion in the years before her birth and long afterward.

Following closely on the heels of Gabriel’s Rebellion, a suppressed slave revolt wherein the enslaved, literate blacksmith Gabriel had apparently planned to lead a group of insurrectionists to take over Richmond, Virginia’s capitol, in the summer of 1800, a vast insurrectionary conspiracy was uncovered in neighboring North Carolina in 1802. Scores of counties in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina were gripped in a state of panic as letters ostensibly written by the conspirators surfaced containing details about the plan, which included “kill[ing] the whites, taking their weapons, and burn[ing] down their houses.”

\(^{56}\) As early as 1939, Herbert Aptheker contended that the “most noted” maroon community in the history of the United States was located in the Great Dismal Swamp, where “[i]t seems likely that about two thousand Negroes, fugitives, or the descendants of fugitives, lived… . They carried on a regular, if illegal, trade with white people living on the border of the swamp.” More recently, Sylviane Diouf and Daniel Sayers, conducting historical and archaeological research, respectively, on the Great Dismal Swamp, have agreed with Aptheker’s assessment that the largest communities were to be found there from the seventeenth century through the Civil War, though specific numbers are of course impossible to come by. See Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” Journal of Negro History 24 (1939): 167-184.
with the intent of then, like Gabriel two years earlier, marching on Richmond and sacking the capitol (Diouf 260). Letters indicate that participants in the rebellion were coming from as far as Edenton, NC and Norfolk, VA (260).

Although the rebellion never came to pass, the backlash against the free and enslaved black population in both states was swift and brutal: “searches, arrests, interrogations, whippings, ear cropping, and hangings followed” (260). The alleged leader of the conspiracy was one Tom Copper, who was said to have lived in the swamps on and off as a maroon for some years, hatching his plans there and possibly stockpiling weapons and supplies. Interestingly, Tom Copper had been enslaved on Andrew Knox’s plantation in Nixonton, NC, in the county of Pasquotank, the same plantation on which Harriet Jacobs’s father, the skilled carpenter Elijah Knox, was also held in bondage. Knox’s plantation was only worked by approximately thirty bondspeople, so in all likelihood Tom and Elijah knew each other (260). There is no indication that Elijah had any role in Tom’s machinations, but one wonders what kinds of stories about the infamous swamp maroon Tom and his conspiracy might have been shared amongst Elijah’s family, and in hearing of his daughter Harriet, who was thirteen when her father died suddenly in 1826. Regardless, it is safe to assume that, like most plantation slaves in antebellum North Carolina, Elijah was well aware of the presence of maroons in the swamps neighboring Knox’s plantation, and he may very well have been aware of some aspect of Tom’s plot against the slave system.

During the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth, another threat posed itself to residents of southern cities all along the eastern seaboard, and specifically, for my purposes, to residents of the city of Edenton, a small but bustling port city located in Chowan County along the Albemarle Sound. This threat came in the form of refugees
fleeing the enslaved uprising turned full-scale revolution on the French colonial island of Saint-Domingue, known today as the nation of Haiti. Planters fearing for the safety of themselves and their families fled the island in droves, landing in places from New Orleans to Charleston to Philadelphia to Edenton—and many brought their slaves along with them. Saint-Domingue’s population distribution in 1791, at the beginning of the uprising—“30,000 whites, 40,000 mulattoes and free blacks, and some 400,000 slaves”—was staggeringly disproportionate (Yellin 5). In Edenton, though obviously much smaller than Saint-Domingue, enslaved people also outnumbered whites: the 1790 census shows “1,000 black slaves—half owned by five large slaveholders—and 600 whites, a third of whom owned no slaves” (5).

No event in the history of slavery and colonialism in the Western hemisphere caused greater terror for slaveholders than the violent uprising in Saint-Domingue. That disparate but eventually united maroon bands constituted the original prongs of the uprising was not lost on US observers; rather, this connection served to increase anxieties about local maroons and the latent possibility that they might mount a Saint-Domingue-esque uprising on US soil. The French-speaking refugees fleeing the violence and bloodshed on the island imported that terror to Edenton and the other places they landed, also increasing the already pervasive fears about enslaved blacks outnumbering whites in many parts of the US South. This terror was embodied in the refugees who fled, but even more tangibly in the enslaved people they brought with them, who southern slaveholders feared had been infected with the “contagion of liberty,” exposed to slave revolt and the successful overthrow of the French colonial regime by the formerly enslaved blacks on the island. The egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution had influenced the leaders of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, and keeping these ideas from US slaves became an obsession as more and more refugees arrived. Indeed, as early as 1800, Gabriel’s Rebellion,
mentioned above, was thought to have been influenced by the revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue.

In response to these heightened fears, as early as 1808 Edenton imposed an official curfew on bondspeople and free blacks that was designed to stop what townspeople believed were “nighttime thefts by fugitive slaves hiding in the woods and swamps” (Yellin 6). The Edenton Gazette, the newspaper of record for the town, contains various reports of maroons and maroon communities being rooted out around this time, though they are never called by these names. In March 1811, the paper ran a story reporting that “a party of men, in scouring…Cabarrus’s Pocosin, came across a Negro Camp, which contained 5 runaway Negroes, 2 wenches and 3 fellows, who were armed” (qtd. in Yellin 6). Both women were captured in the raid, and two of the three men were killed, the other having successfully escaped. The article continues: “These fellows, we are credibly informed, had bid defiance to any force whatever, and were resolved to stand their ground: which resolution was exemplified by the resistance they were about to make. Each fellow stood with his musket pointed, watching a favorable opportunity” (qtd. in Yellin 6). Cabarrus Pocosin, located just southwest of Edenton, is the actual name of what Jacobs calls the “Snaky Swamp” in Incidents (6). It is, as I will discuss later, the place in which Jacobs spends two nights hiding out while her uncle Phillip prepares the garret in which she will famously remain concealed for almost seven years.

The War of 1812, which began when the United States officially declared war on Great Britain in June of that year, also intensified fears of slave revolt in Edenton and the Chowan county area. Local whites feared that attention to the enemy without might distract from the threat of the ever-present enemy within: the slave population, who they always imagined, especially after Saint-Domingue, was biding its time, waiting for the right moment to strike
(Yellin 6). In 1816, when Jacobs was three years old, “Chowan County court empowered the sheriff to raise a troop to capture eleven ‘runaway negroes,’ ordering that if they did not surrender, ‘any person or persons may kill and destroy the said Slaves…by such means as he or they may think proper…without incurring any penalty” (qtd. in Yellin 9). As usual in official southern documents, the words maroon or maroon community are not used to describe the “runaways,” a term much less fraught with Saint-Domingue and Caribbean-inspired connotations of violence, tactical organization, and vehement collective self-determination. In February of 1819, the Edenton Gazette reported on “an armed raid on a fugitives’ camp in the swamp” that “resulted in the capture of an outlaw…called ‘Dilworth,’ known as ‘General Jackson’” (10). The article claimed that this man was “the noted ringleader of the band of runaway Negroes, who have for a long time been depredating upon the property of the good citizens of this Town and Country” (10). The same issue reported a gunfight between “a number of gentlemen” and “another gang of…desperadoes” (10).

As Yellin suggests, a young Harriet Jacobs almost certainly had to be aware of these violent confrontations between maroons and white citizens as they unfolded right in the Edenton area and drew the close attention of all the local residents, whether white or black, enslaved or free. In May of 1819, the year in which Jacobs’s mother died, the Edenton Gazette reported that “On Tuesday evening last Negro Shadrach, formerly the property of Dr. Norcom, who had been a runaway for two years, was shot near this town, and expired next morning” (qtd. in Yellin 11). Dr. Norcom (Dr. Flint in Incidents) would be the owner to whom Jacobs was sold in 1825, as an attendant to his young daughter. The article continues: “He [Shadrach] had long been depredating upon property of the inhabitants of this town, and county; and was discovered lurking around the house of a widow lady…with a view, no doubt, of ascertaining whether she
had any person to protect her, that he might plunder with impunity” (qtd. in Yellin 11). Shadrach met his unfortunate end, however, when a fourteen-year-old boy who was in the house shot him.

Two other insurrectionary conspiracies based in North Carolina bear mentioning briefly here because of the suspected involvement of maroons in each, reinforcing the idea—whether true or not, but most likely not, according to Diouf’s research—amongst residents of the state that maroons were inextricably linked to violent plots against the system of slavery and the persons who upheld it. Panic once again struck North Carolinians in Onslow, Bladen, Carteret, Jones, and Craven counties in the southern part of the state during the summer of 1821, when fears of an insurrection led by “a number of outlawed and runaway slaves and free negroes” reached a fever pitch (Diouf 265). Based on an intensive analysis of communications between local justices, elected officials, and militia commanders, Diouf argues that the rise in overt, “increased,” and “predatory” maroon activity that summer was probably just the result of several different maroon groups raiding storehouses stocked with foodstuffs from previous harvests of corn, rice, and potatoes (271). While her argument is quite convincing, the fact remains that more than six hundred militiamen from five North Carolina counties were raised to scour the local woods and swamps in search of the suspected maroons, sending locals throughout the area into a sustained state of alarm. Ultimately, only two men were detained in connection with the supposed “insurrection”; neither man was convicted, which suggests that when the dust settled it became apparent that the threat had been considerably overblown (270).

In 1830, when Jacobs would have been seventeen and thus more attuned than ever to much-discussed happenings around the state, evidence of another supposed slave conspiracy surfaced in connection with David Walker’s already infamous *Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles* (1829). So incendiary and unequivocally devoted to promoting violent resistance on the part of
the enslaved, the *Appeal’s* militancy kept it from gaining currency among well-established abolitionists, white or black, but it did cause yet another outbreak of dread amongst the white populations in the above-mentioned southern states. The *Appeal* instructed enslaved blacks: “[I]f there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed. Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?” (qtd. in Diouf 273; emphasis in original). That dread coalesced in the summer of 1830 with the alleged “Christmas Conspiracy” and its connection to the North Carolinian Walker’s *Appeal*. North Carolina governor John Owen had received several letters from local officials and prominent slaveholders indicating that rumors of an uprising had been circulating amongst slaves in several counties. The trail apparently led to an elusive fugitive slave named Moses, who “had been a maroon for years, ‘lurking’ in Jones and Onslow counties” and who was “well acquainted with all the haunts of the neighborhood of the runaways” (qtd. in Diouf 273). Moses was captured and jailed, at which time he produced a lengthy confession detailing the alleged plot: “different gangs [of maroons and runaways] were to come down on the whites, fire their houses, & kill all they met with. That the other negroes would then rise and help them” (qtd. in Diouf 275).

But Diouf’s investigations into the affair have revealed that it is very likely that no such concerted plot ever really existed (275). Moses had been tried and condemned to death in North Carolina on the charge of murder, and Diouf argues that Moses, by revealing details about a conspiracy to authorities, may have “[seen] a chance to ingratiate himself with the authorities in the hope that this might lead to the commutation of his death sentence” (275). Without going into the minutiae of the case and the historical evidence here, suffice it to say that, regardless of the veracity of Moses’s testimony, the whisperings of this Christmas Rebellion sparked a panic amongst the populace that eventually reached the North Carolina legislature. Federal troops were
brought into Wilmington, NC from December 19 through May 14 and the legislature passed “An Act to Prevent the Circulation of Seditious Publications,” which ordered whipping and jailing for a first offence and death for the second. If anything, this incident is a prime example of how quickly and easily whites in slaveholding states could be stirred into a state of hysteria over even the smallest inklings of slave rebellion. It didn’t take much for these ever-latent fears to boil over, and the results were always devastating for the slave population, whether guilty or innocent.

Whether or not Jacobs read Walker’s *Appeal* is impossible to know with certainty; if she did, it’s more likely that she would have done so after her successful escape from slavery in 1842 than beforehand, especially given her lengthy confinement in the garret. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Jacobs met and developed connections with many of the leading abolitionists in the North, including Frederick Douglass, Amy Post, Lydia Maria Child, and others. The *Appeal* also became more widely accepted in abolitionist circles when it was re-published along with a biological sketch of Walker in 1848 by the well-known black minister, newspaper editor, and abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet. In any event, the affects of the *Appeal*’s circulation in North Carolina were swiftly and harshly felt by Jacobs and the entirety of the enslaved population. In the summer of 1830 the North Carolina state legislature passed measures incurring severe financial penalties on anyone caught teaching slaves to read or write. It also made the legal processes involved with manumission more strict, and it further restricted both slaves’ and free blacks’ already limited rights to movement, congregation, and collective worship. Another new law required any black person—free or enslaved—entering North Carolina via ship to be confined, and it prohibited interaction between incoming and resident blacks.
Despite these repressive measures enacted in North Carolina and similar ones in its neighboring states, slaveholders’ greatest fear was realized in Southampton County, Virginia in August of 1831, when the bondsman Nat Turner led his infamous revolt in which dozens of unsuspecting whites were slaughtered while they slept in their homes. The plantation on which the violence began was only forty miles from Chowan County. Turner’s revolt is extremely significant for my analysis of Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents* (which contains an entire chapter devoted to the event and its aftermath), and I will attend to it in greater detail later in the chapter.

What I hope has become apparent through this abbreviated cultural history of slave revolts allegedly related maroon activity in North Carolina, and more specifically in the Edenton and Chowan County areas, is that Harriet Jacobs would have been intimately aware of maroons, maroon communities, and the practices of marronage and suspected insurrection from an early age and throughout her time as a slave and then a fugitive or kind of maroon herself hiding out in the garret. I would also like to suggest that Jacobs’s familiarity with marronage and understanding of the maroons’ unique interstitial subject position between freedom and enslavement contributed to her evaluation first of her own circumstances as a fugitive in the garret and then in the North, and later to her broader conclusions regarding the geography of fugitive freedom in the antebellum United States. Marronage, as the text demonstrates, reveals a heightened sense of the provisionality of freedom in the 1850s that can be easily lost on contemporary observers.

As a young Harriet Jacobs grew up in Edenton and acquired the ability to read and write under her first mistress Margaret Horniblow’s tutelage, she would be surrounded by stories of maroons and runaways lurking in the nearby swamps—stories circulated through rumors and gossip amongst the local bondspeople, overheard in conversations between whites and between
the motley assortment of characters at Edenton’s port, and printed constantly in the newspapers. Her mother, father, and grandmother all lived through the revolution in Saint-Domingue and the slave uprisings in 1800 and 1802, and they would have been directly exposed to the fears incited by “French-speaking negroes” arriving at Edenton’s and other nearby ports, fears which lingered in the cultural consciousness up until the outbreak of civil war in 1861. Of her mother Jacobs wrote that “they all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly” (10). Of her father, she wrote, “By his nature as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skilful [sic] mechanic, [he] had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves” (9). Jacobs’s brother says that his father had “taught [him] to hate slavery” (7). And of her grandmother, the woman who would serve as the most enduring maternal and familial influence in her life, Jacobs pours forth an endless stream of praise and gratitude. Despite fearing for her children and grandchildren’s welfare, the “good grandmother” supported efforts at escape and resistance whenever possible. Harriet Jacobs grew up with resistance to her condition as chattel slave in her blood, and she was surrounded by bondspeople attempting to achieve freedom, agency, and autonomy by almost every conceivable means possible: refusing to work, stealing from their masters, fighting back physically against masters and overseers, fleeing north, taking to the swamps as maroons, rising up in armed revolt, committing suicide, and many others that she references in her narrative. For my purposes, of course, marronage will be paramount.

**Imagining Linda Brent as a Maroon and the Garret as a Maroon Space**

Critics have taken up the meaning of the garret space as a site of confinement, resistance, and freedom in various ways since Yellin authenticated Jacobs’s narrative. Caleb Smith, Douglas Taylor, and Keith Michael Green have situated the narrative within emergent discourses on
penology in the United States, fruitfully illuminating Smith’s notion that slavery and imprisonment are “mutually constitutive institutions” (213). 57 Georgia Kreiger has argued that Brent’s time in the garret is a metaphor for death, that she is “playing dead” in the garret, “an extended entombment before her ‘resurrection’ in the North” (607). Most agree that the garret is in some way a space of empowerment for Brent (as Jacobs repeatedly asserts as much in the narrative) despite the nature of its physical and psychological confinement. Gloria Randle points to Brent’s “ability to creatively construct sites of temporary refuge where none exist; to discover space where there is no space,” (43) and Katherine McKittrick concludes that “The garret makes available a place for Brent to articulate her lived experiences and emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery” (41). Opening up a provocative new avenue on our understanding of the garret space, Miranda Green-Barteet has recently engaged with the discourse of architecture to argue that the garret is an “interstitial space,” or “a border space, one that exists betwixt and between more clearly defined spaces” (53). She contends that “It is the garret’s in-between status, its very interstitiality that renders the space useful to Jacobs when she finally determines to escape slavery” (54).

In arguing for Linda Brent as a maroon and the garret as a maroon space, I mean to suggest that Jacobs deliberately drew her experience into approximation with the conditions and spaces of marronage with which she was familiar and which were prominent features of both enslaved and slave owner knowledge in the Edenton area and throughout the swamps of North Carolina and its neighboring states. I also mean to suggest that imagining Brent as a maroon

figure and privileging her time in the garret as such presents a novel challenge to the codified
geospatial arc of the slave narrative genre, in which, as early scholars of the slave narrative such
as William L. Andrews and James Olney (among many others) have argued, the defining
movement is almost always from South to North, from enslavement to freedom, from silence to
literary voice. Reading *Incidents* in this way forces us to confront an alternative set of
geographical coordinates of freedom and enslavement. It frustrates our conceptions of these
abstract terms and experiential conditions as well as the North/South, free/unfree binary that
necessarily structures the slave narrative for white, northern abolitionist aims wherein the South
is presented as offering no solace for fugitive slaves while the North stands as a beacon of
freedom, hope, and progressivism. The reality is, of course, significantly murkier.

*Incidents* spends more time than most of the well-known antebellum slave narratives
(especially Frederick Douglass’s) describing the singular dangers for the fugitive slave in the
North, and, as I will argue below, focusing on marronage—literal, metaphorical, and
tropological—in the text works to upend these binaries and commonplace interpretations from
within. Because slave narratives have been studied as literary texts, as autobiography or memoir,
but also (problematically, given the layers of white mediation and ideological tailoring—though
this is a fact more and more scholars have been attending to in recent years) as a sociological
entry point into the life and experiences of former slaves and fugitive slaves, there has been a
tendency to imagine that slave narratives appropriately represent the scope and dimensions of
these historical experiences, which negates the lives and circumstances of people like maroons,
whose very existence depended upon concealment, and who are almost entirely unrepresented in
the genre’s current canon. I hope that my reading pushes back against this tendency by
differentiating between the world of the text and the real historical moment surrounding it, while
at the same time revealing the interconnections between the two that the text itself gestures toward.

Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent, mentions several instances of “conventional” marronage in *Incidents* itself, which are significant to my reading of the text because they invoke maroons as a social and political feature of slavery in Edenton and Chowan County; they would have called up for readers associations with the more well-known maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp who had received a significant uptick of attention in the antislavery print public sphere of the mid-to-late 1850s; and because they draw marronage into a dialectical relationship with other subversive and resistant enslaved practices as they function within the greater slave system in the world of the text itself. Significantly, as well, these examples suggest that Jacobs’s conception of practices and experiences of marronage was a heterogeneous one, attuned to the nuances, contingencies, conditionality, and relationality of the phenomenon even in the microcosm of Edenton and surrounding Chowan County. In this respect she anticipates Richard Price when he writes, “Marronage was not a unitary phenomenon from the point of view of the slaves, and cannot be given a single locus along a continuum of ‘forms of resistance’” (23). In the “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders” chapter, for example, Brent describes an enslaved man named James’s flight to the woods after an especially vicious beating:

> After a severe whipping, to save himself from further infliction of the lash, with which he was threatened, he took to the woods. He was in a most miserable condition—cut by the cowskin, half naked, half starved, and without means of procuring a crust of bread. Some weeks after his escape, he was captured, tied, and carried back to his master’s plantation. (Jacobs 43)
James has engaged in a version of what scholars of marronage in the French colonies have termed *petit marronage*, or absconding for a short period of time, usually to a place not far from the plantation (to the kinds of places borderland maroons would inhabit, in Diouf’s terms), and often, but not always, with the intent to return on their own. Richard Price describes *petit marronage* thus: “repetitive or periodic truancy with temporary goals such as visiting a relative or lover on a neighboring plantation” (3), and he emphasizes the frequency with which it occurred in myriad formations in the US South. In James’s case, he does not return on his own; instead, “Some weeks after his escape, he was captured, tied, and carried back to his master’s plantation,” at which point he was once again severely whipped, brine was rubbed in the wounds, and he was ordered placed between the screws of the cotton gin for the same number of weeks he had been missing in the woods (Jacobs 43). After only four days, however, James is discovered dead in the machine, his body partially devoured by “rats and vermin” (43). We cannot be sure whether James meant to exile himself to the woods as a maroon or to attempt to flee north, but given his desperate, enfeebled state after the initial whipping, it seems likely that he meant the woods to be a temporary respite from the bite of the lash and the torment of perpetual violence. Without planning, supplies, or preparation, his chances of escaping north would have been very low, indeed.

In another instance, an enslaved man named Harry finds that his previous master has deceived him, and that while his wife has been given her freedom, his children remain enslaved. Brent explains: “The unhappy father swore that nobody should take his children from him. He concealed them in the woods for some days; but they were discovered and taken. The father was put in jail, and the two oldest boys sold to Georgia” (45). The youngest daughter, too little to work, was sent to live with her mother until she was of appropriate age, and the other three
children were put to work immediately on the master’s plantation. In another example of a kind of *petit marronage*, here a desperate father takes to the woods with his children, also without preformed plans or preparation. We are left to imagine what his next steps might have been had he not been discovered, but it once again seems unlikely that he intended to make a break for the north with six children in tow. Rather, the woods were likely a staging ground for his next move, a place in which he could assess his situation and decide how to proceed without the imminent threats of family separation and the lash hanging directly over his head.

In the only case in *Incidents* in which other people’s experiences of forms of *petit marronage* do not end in heartache and disaster for the bondspeople involved, Brent describes what sounds like a common practice amongst black women—enslaved but also potentially free, for Brent does not make a distinction in her description—during the muster she refers to in the “Fear of Insurrection” chapter: “Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their [the poor whites’ and country bullies’] way” (56). The muster, which I will treat in more detail later, was a show of force organized by the slaveholders but carried out primarily by the poor, non-slaveholding whites, in this particular case in reaction to news of Nat Turner’s revolt in Southampton, Virginia. While I do not always agree that the term *petit marronage* can be applied wholesale to instances of short-term marronage in the context of US history or literature, in this case the designation seems apt since the marronage is indeed temporary and Brent suggests that the women intend to and do in fact return each time. Irrespective of terminology, all of these examples of marronage work together in *Incidents* to presage and set the stage for Brent’s own literal experiences of marronage before holing up in the garret.

Brent experiences versions of *petit marronage* for herself on five separate occasions worth noting before she enters the garret, and while none of these end tragically like the others
she has previously mentioned, by no means are they comfortable or desirable. They are, like any act of petit marronage, driven by desperate circumstances and fierce self-determination. Prior to successfully holing up in the garret for what will be an agonizing seven years (or six years and eleven months, to be historically precise), Brent endures some of the perils more conventionally associated with escaping from slavery and also with marronage. Hiding out at her friend Sally’s after she has first run away, for example, she flees briefly into what becomes a preview of the treacherous inhospitality of the woods thinking that her pursuers had tracked her down:

I flew out of the house, and concealed myself in a thicket of bushes. There I remained in agony of fear for two hours. Suddenly, a reptile of some kind seized my leg. In my fright, I struck a blow which loosened its hold, but I could not tell whether I had killed it; it was so dark, I could not see what it was; I only knew it was something cold and slimy. The pain I felt soon indicated that the bite had been poisonous. I was compelled to leave my place of concealment, and I groped my way back into the house. The pain had become intense, and my friend was startled by my look of anguish. I asked her to prepare a poultice of warm ashes and vinegar, and I applied it to my leg, which was already much swollen. The application gave me some relief, but the swelling did not abate. The dread of being disabled was greater than the physical pain I endured. (150)

In a matter of only two hours, while hiding in a thicket of bushes presumably very near Sally’s house, Brent is exposed to the dangers that lurk in the southern forests and that often await and impede slaves who attempt to escape into them and navigate their way north. The brief scene at once reveals Brent’s fragility and her strength, for while she is very nearly incapacitated by a poisonous bite, she manages to strike a fierce blow to the creature and also demonstrates her awareness of remedies for such bites. The scene effectively introduces readers to the singular
hazards of life outside the spatial order of the plantation, big house, and community system. On Dr. Flint’s plantation she is repeatedly exposed to the threat of rape and sexual violence, along, of course, with that of brutal physical punishments. Although Brent had become adept at parrying Flint’s lascivious advances, nothing had yet fully prepared her for what danger awaits outside the confines of the plantation system and the loving household of her grandmother. Characterized by darkness, uncertainty, immobility, fear, anxiety, and life-or-death dangers, these places present a forbidding juxtaposition with the even limited comforts of domestic life for enslaved people, most of which come from affective family and kinship-based relationships.

In the second instance, after she has fled Sally’s house and is in need of new and safer accommodations, Brent is taken in by a white woman (left anonymous in Incidents because Jacobs fears for the social and legal repercussions the woman would face if she were found out) who is sympathetic to her situation despite the fact that she and her husband are slaveowners. Brent is first concealed in “a small room over her [the white woman’s] own sleeping apartment” that was used to “store away things that are out of use” (85). Similarities between this “small room” and the garret Brent will soon inhabit abound: they are both tiny and not intended as human dwelling places; they are both dark, stifling, and cramped; they are both attic-like spaces; and they both contain means by which Brent is able to secretly observe goings-on outside. Brent refers to the room as a “cell,” though mainly because she feels trapped inside of it knowing that Dr. Flint is lurking outside and relentlessly searching for her. The garret will become a “cell” in a much more literal sense because of its harrowingly cramped space and especially because of the amount of time she is forced to spend in it. Both spaces, however, do afford Brent the opportunity to act as a kind of spy. She is able to see Dr. Flint walking about outside, and she gathers intelligence on the search being conducted for her by overhearing conversations.
happening in the nearby street. This ability to clandestinely overhear, along with the web of allies—black, white, free, and enslaved—to whom she imparts information and from whom she receives it, will be crucial to Brent’s survival and successful fugitivity, or marronage, in the garret. Such shadow economies of information, supplies, and affective support were also crucial to the maroons who inhabited the swamps surrounding Edenton and the greater Chowan County area.

Quite soon, however, in a devious attempt to scare Brent out of hiding and into the open, Dr. Flint informs her grandmother that he has discovered her place of seclusion and intends to recapture her forthwith. The grandmother relays this information to the bondswoman Betty, who decides to deal with the situation on her own without informing her white mistress, and Betty immediately moves Brent to another hiding place: “We hurried down stairs, and across the yard, into the kitchen. She [Betty] locked the door, and lifted up a plank in the floor. A buffalo skin and a bit of carpet were spread for me to lie on, and a quilt thrown over me” (87). Brent only remains here a few hours, until noon, the time at which Flint had promised he would seize her, and then she returns to her place of concealment “above stairs” (88). Flint’s plan had been a ruse, but Brent and her protectors were unwilling to take any chances. Hiding places such as this one, which had clearly been set up and perhaps used before Brent occupied it, might be more traditionally associated with “stations” along the Underground Railroad that helped ferry fugitive slaves north during the antebellum period. Here, however, it is a way station that provides temporary refuge for Brent, who has at this point in the narrative no intention of fleeing north. In my interpretation, it acts as one of several (among the others being described here) scenarios of fugitivity dialectically constellated around the practice of marronage in the text.
Brent is once again exposed to the harshness of the wilderness and the perils of marronage—this time specifically in a swamp environment—when she is brought by her Aunt Nancy’s husband to the Snaky Swamp to hide out until her Uncle Phillip has prepared the garret wherein she will begin her indefinite fugitivity. This passage is worth reproducing at length:

About four o’clock, we were…seated in the boat, and rowed three miles to the swamp. My fear of snakes had been increased by the venomous bite I had received, and I dreaded to enter this hiding-place. [...] Peter landed first, and with a large knife cut a path through the bamboos and briers of all descriptions. He came back, took me in his arms, and carried me to a seat made among the bamboos. Before we reached it, we were covered with hundreds of mosquitos. In an hour’s time they had so poisoned my flesh that I was a pitiful sight to behold. As the light increased, I saw snake after snake crawling round us. I had been accustomed to the sight of snakes all my life, but these were larger than any I had ever seen. To this day I shudder when I remember that morning. As evening approached, the number of snakes increased so much that we were continually obliged to thrash them with sticks to keep them from crawling over us. The bamboos were so high and so thick that it was impossible to see beyond a very short distance. Just before dark we procured a seat nearer to the entrance of the swamp, being fearful of losing our way back to the boat. [...] I passed a wretched night; for the heat of the swamp, the mosquitos, and the constant terror of snakes, had brought on a burning fever. (171)

The second night in the swamp, Brent tells us, “Peter took a quantity of tobacco to burn, to keep off the mosquitos. It produced the desired effect on them, but gave me nausea and severe headache. At dark we returned to the vessel. I had been so sick during the day, that Peter declared I should go home that night, if the devil himself was on patrol” (172). This experience
builds directly on the terror and treacherousness of Brent’s encounter with the poisonous reptile in the thicket near Sally’s house, in that it is both longer and involves almost unimaginable confrontations with poisonous snakes and the general inhospitality of the swamp environment. It constructs the swamp as a place of malady, degeneration, and lassitude, suggesting that Brent is lucky to survive even for two short nights there. However, as we know from earlier parts of *Incidents* and from the brief historical survey in the previous section, many fugitive slaves in the area did in fact inhabit the swamps surrounding Edenton as maroons. Indeed, later in the narrative when Brent is finally making her escape North, the captain of the boat she has taken remarks upon passing by and pointing toward the Snaky Swamp, “There is a slave territory that defies all the laws” (240). Brent is reminded of the “terrible days [she] had spent there, and though it was not called the Dismal Swamp, it made [her] feel very dismal as [she] looked at it” (240).

It is worth noting that the above-quoted direct reference to the Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and Virginia, along with indirect allusions via the adjective “dismal” to describe her “den” and “hole,” invoke the real-world Great Dismal Swamp with which many of Jacobs’s readers may have been familiar after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s publication of her second antislavery novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* in 1856. That this novel follows the machinations of Dred, a swamp-dwelling maroon who constructs a hidden community called Engedi in the morass, is also significant given that *Dred* sold over 200,000 copies in the nineteenth century, and 100,000 alone in its first year of publication (Levine ix). It would not be a stretch to claim that *Dred* was in large part responsible for introducing antebellum American novel readers writ large to the connection between the Great Dismal Swamp and marronage. Following *Dred’s* publication, articles by major writers of the time like Frederick Law Olmsted,
David Hunter Strother (under the pseudonym Porte Crayon), and James Redpath in popular periodicals during the late 1850s helped further satisfy an increased public curiosity about both the exoticism of the swamp environment and its enigmatic maroon inhabitants.58

We can assume that at least some of Incidents’ readers would have understood these references in the text as evolving out of an ongoing discursive interest on the part of antislavery writers in marronage and the Great Dismal Swamp, along with the many other Southern swamps that served as places of refuge for maroons. This is yet another small way in which Jacobs embeds gestures toward the conditions, positions, plights, and achievements of maroons in her narrative. These simple word choices would have activated associations in the minds of antebellum readers that are largely lost on a contemporary critical community that is unfamiliar with the historical realities and literary or discursive representations of marronage because of the dearth of scholarship that exists on the relationship between the two in the US context. But I am convinced that attention to these references and an understanding of their relevance to Jacobs’s text is crucial if we are to arrive at a reading of Incidents that accounts for its sustained interest in maroons, maroon spaces, acts of marronage, and how these might be related to Jacobs’s own experiences of enslavement, fugitivity, and freedom.

Having painstakingly detailed the odious nature of the Snaky Swamp, and following on the heels of negative experiences with Southern wilderness environments, Brent finally establishes herself in the garret, of which she says, despite its cramped space and myriad discomforts: “Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so

58 Frederick Law Olmsted’s writings on the subject are collected in A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy (1856); James Redpath’s various articles are collected in Redpath, The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States (1859); David Hunter Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” Harper’s Monthly 0013.76 (September 1856): 441-55.
good a place of concealment” (178). Concealment, especially of a sustained nature, lies at the heart of my formulations of the condition of marronage and of the conditions of possibility and success for maroon spaces. Even in recent work by Ted Maris-Wolf that examines “free” black communities in the Northern states as kinds of maroon societies, I believe that concealment remains operant as a defining feature of the maroon experience.\(^5^9\) In one of these such communities, fugitives from slavery are “concealed” by the fact of their membership in a community, by their ability to blend into a variegated and numerous population devoted to mutual aid and protection. In any condition of marronage, concealment remains paramount because detection would obviate all other concerns and set the maroon into flight once more.

The garret does indeed appear to be Brent’s best place of concealment in slaveholding territory, preferable to swamp marronage for a variety of reasons that she describes as the narrative progresses. At the same time, Brent’s extensive use of metaphors to describe the garret and her time within it, along with the actual material conditions she faces as its inhabitant, constellate her unique experiences with those of the swamp maroons who did in fact dwell amongst the “wild beasts” in the Snaky Swamp and swamps all throughout the South. To begin with, as mentioned above, once Brent enters the garret she begins an extended period of hiding or concealment while, like a maroon, still within slaveholding territory. Upon entering the garret she also enters that nebulous, interstitial ontological state—or, perhaps, ongoing, shifting, protean process—that defines the existence of the maroon somewhere between enslavement and freedom.

Right from the outset, the metaphorical language she uses to describe the garret suggests a deliberate affinity with spaces of swamp marronage. For example, when entering it for the very

first time, she refers to the garret as “a dismal hole” in which “the air was stifling; the darkness total” (Jacobs 96). She refers to the garret as a “hole” four times and as a “den” nine times throughout the duration of the narrative. These metaphors, along with her use of the descriptor “dismal,” employed a total of five times, quite strikingly evoke the idea that the garret is just barely able to support human life. It is a habitation much more like that of a wild animal, but one to which it would retreat only for shelter from predators or the elements. Much like any maroon space it is, in other words, a liminal space that blends elements of the public and the private, the domestic and the wild, the safe and the unsafe, the free and the unfree, almost beyond recognition. Indeed, Brent is not fully protected from either the elements or the unwelcome intrusions of insects and rodents. While she is safe from predators like venomous snakes and other reptiles, she remains “tormented” “for weeks” “by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through [her] skin, and produced an intolerable burning” (175). In addition, she is subjected to the seasonal changes and their attendant drops and rises in temperature, which severely inhibit her relative comfort as well as her movement and even faculty for speech. During the first winter, despite her grandmother’s “bed-clothes” and “warm drinks,” Brent’s “shoulders and feet were frostbitten” (177). These descriptions reinforce both the idea that the garret is not a fully domestic or “indoor” space and that it in fact shares certain unavoidable qualities with maroon dens.

More to the point, however, words like “hole” but especially “den” had specific connotations related to maroons that Jacobs would certainly have been aware of even if her reading audience largely was not. In Slavery’s Exiles, Diouf argues that “The borderland maroons’ most emblematic lodging…was neither a tree, nor a cabin, nor a cavern, but a cave,” here in the sense that a cave is defined as a man-made structure (99). Diouf continues: “These
caves, also called dens, were dugouts, underground houses: the ultimate man-made invisible shelters. Once they entered them, maroons quite literally disappeared from the face of the earth” (99). Diouf provides extensive archival evidence of maroon cave dwellings from the antebellum period located in North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, though it is likely that they could be found elsewhere in the Southern states. Former enslaved persons interviewed as part of a Works Project Administration initiative in the late 1930s predominantly use the term “den” over “cave” to describe maroon habitations they had either seen, heard of, or lived in themselves at some point. Another intriguing example Diouf points to in regard to evidence of the predominance and influence of maroon cave/den dwellings is North Carolina Confederate deserters. She argues that these deserters’ remembrances strongly indicate that they “borrowed the maroons know-how. They were most likely former patrollers, militiamen, and slave hunters who had previously pursued, discovered, and captured borderland maroons” (100). As Diouf notes, despite the fact that Southern newspapers reported with some frequency on the discovery of maroon dens and these stories were often reprinted in the Northern press, serious interest in the dens or their occupants never really arose, not even in abolitionist circles (106).

One exception, though, arises out of the story of Nat Turner’s fugitivity and eventual apprehension, which was covered with great interest (though the details were often distorted, sensationalized, or outright factually incorrect) in both Northern and Southern presses. In the well-circulated and much-read Confessions of Nat Turner (1831), however, Turner himself provides a brief glimpse into his final hiding place while he was on the run: “I was pursued almost incessantly until I was taken a fortnight afterwards by Mr. Benjamin Phipps, in a little hole I had dug out with my sword, for the purpose of concealment, under the top of a fallen tree” (qtd. in Diouf 282). Like Jacobs, Turner had been, to a certain extent, hiding in plain sight when
he was caught in his hole in the immediate vicinity of several plantations. Prior to that, Turner claims that he had “scratched a hole under a pile of fence rails in a field, where I concealed myself for six weeks, never leaving my hiding place but for a few minutes in the dead of night to get water…[and] thinking by this time I could venture out, I began to go out about in the night and eaves drop on the houses in the neighborhood” (Gray 17). Turner laments, much like Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*, that “I know not how long I might have led this life, if accident had not betrayed me,” when a passing dog smelled and stole some meat he had stashed in his cave, and the next day led “two negroes having started to go hunting with the same dog” to his hiding place (17). Turner’s facility with digging caves suggests that he had done it before, had seen it done, or had had the knowledge of how to do so imparted to him by unknown borderland maroons.

My point here is that when Jacobs employs metaphors like hole, cave, and den to describe the garret, she is calling to mind the most publicized account, Nat Turner’s, of such a hiding practice as conducted by maroons in the antebellum South. To use these metaphors is not, I would argue, simply a way to make her garret experience more vivid to readers through figurative language that is suggestive of the inhuman or un-human nature of her living conditions. Rather, it is evocative of the contemporaneous print public discourse surrounding maroons and marronage as they relate to fears of slave violence and insurrection, and it is one significant way at the most fundamental textual level in which Jacobs intimates a parallel between the space she inhabits and her subject position vis-à-vis notions of freedom and enslavement and those of actual maroons.

Several other aspects of Brent’s position and condition in the garret liken her circumstances to those of a conventional maroon. For one thing, if her hiding place was to
remain a secret—inconspicuous to slave hunters, patrols, militias, musters, and even the accidental passerby or person who was not in on the plan—then it must have a concealed entrance, the same being a necessity for maroons living in the wilds. The maroon Goober Jack of South Carolina, for example, dug out a cave in the forest with a trap-door entrance made from “an old plank window shutter ingeniously constructed into a suitable cap for a ventilator shaft,” into which he “bored holes with an auger” (qtd. in Diouf 101). Like most cave-dwelling maroons, Jack would have swept leaves, dirt, and underbrush over the top of the shutter to make it blend seamlessly into the forest landscape.

Similarly, Brent explains that “My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trapdoor, which communicated with the storeroom [from the garret above]” (Jacobs 96). Though bereft of light for some time in the garret, where “[the] continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light,” Brent eventually stumbles upon a gimlet left behind by her uncle when he was preparing the space. Ever resourceful, and in the tradition of maroons like Goober Jack, she bores out three small holes to serve as apertures through which she might covertly observe and listen to the goings on outside and in the nearby street. Thanks to this improvement, Brent is able to clandestinely eavesdrop on conversations “not intended to meet [her] ears” (177), some of which pertain directly to herself and suggestions of her whereabouts. Given her unique position—simultaneously inside a domesticated space but outside an actual habitation and therefore treading the boundary between public and private—Brent is able to overhear conversations that would be unlikely to occur within known earshot of slave living quarters. No one suspects the presence of a fugitive slave there, listening in and gathering information and intelligence about slave hunts, and speculative gossip about where she might be hiding. This
vigilance and access to information is key to Brent’s survival and to the livelihood of those networked bondspeople and complicit parties who are charged with keeping her secret for so long.

The apertures allow Brent to subvert and resist her condition as both enslaved person and fugitive by virtue of the insight she gains into local happenings, but they also provide her with much-needed illumination, by which she “contrived to read and sew” (177). Reading, in and of itself, would have been understood by the time of Jacobs’s text’s publication as a subversive activity when conducted by enslaved people—literate bondspeople being the most feared as inciters of rebellion and insurrection, and often believed to be more likely to try to run away. But perhaps even more significant is Brent’s ability to sew, to produce new clothes for her children and contribute to their welfare despite her condition of fugitivity or marronage. Her sewing also has the effect of further supporting the idea that she has escaped north. She overhears a conversation wherein her son Benny assures a skeptical friend that Santa Claus must be real and that mothers cannot be the ones filling children’s stockings, for “Santa Claus brought Ellen and me these new clothes, and my mother has been gone this long time” (179). Thus in her condition of absent presence, of fugitivity—or refugitivity—she continues to indirectly provide care for her children and, like the most successful of the US maroons, retain an affective support network of friends and family.

Two final features of Brent’s experience in the garret further suggest an affinity with marronage and maroons: the affective and material support network that aids her and she aids in return, and the way in which she is able, from her unique position of being able to hide nearby her family, to keep an eye on them, gather intelligence about the ongoing search for her, and plot ruses to throw Dr. Flint off her trail. Diouf argues that in the historical case of North America,
was actually very infrequent that maroons and maroon communities were entirely self-sufficient. They depended on complicit family members and friends to provide essential supplies for living in the wilderness, especially clothes, foodstuffs, and various tools. In some cases, particularly if a maroon’s clandestine nighttime exchanges with bondspeople on nearby plantations were found out, they might resort to theft, but these accusations were often overblown by slaveholders who wanted to alarm the authorities sufficiently to quash any threat nearby maroons might pose to their slaves and their equipment. Other times maroons might take the enormous risk of entering cities or towns to engage in trade for supplies they needed. Maroons in the Dismal Swamp could collect and sell oysters, fish, or blackmoss to traders and merchants. Those who possessed certain skills or trades could weave baskets or construct shingles in the swamp to sell or more likely trade since money would not serve them very well back in the swamp.\(^{60}\)

In *The Heroic Slave*, for example, Madison Washington depends on his wife to visit him each week and bring him food to supplement that which he can hunt and gather on his own. In *Blake*, Henry Blake is supported by the generosity of a network of like-minded African Americans—some free but most enslaved—as he makes his way throughout the US South sowing the seeds of insurrection. In both of these cases, as in the cases of real-life maroons, it was not just material objects that maroons received from their kith and kin; the psychological support they received was also paramount. Life as a maroon, or life in the garret, was an extraordinarily trying and difficult one, fraught with everyday physical dangers as well as the possibilities for crippling psychic damage. Knowing that family members and friends were close by certainly contributed to maroons’ ability to withstand the trials of life in the swamp or forest, just as it did for Brent as she lay barely able to move onto her side for seven years in the garret.

\(^{60}\) See Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, Introduction and chapters 1 and 2.
Brent was able to obtain food and supplies like blankets and clothes from her grandmother and other relatives, and her location made it possible for her to remain abreast of developments in her children’s lives.

To be sure, living as a maroon in close proximity to plantations meant certain risks, but many maroons decided that the advantages described above outweighed the potential dangers. Another advantage to having a line of communication with bondspeople still held in slavery on nearby plantations was that maroons could collect information about slave hunts, fugitive slave ads advertising rewards for their capture, and gossip about the potential selling of loved ones or anything else pertinent to their safety or the well-being of their family and friends. Brent enjoyed this small but significant opportunity, as well, by virtue of her place in the garret. She was able to overhear conversations between her tormentor Dr. Flint and others in the street, some of which regarded her potential whereabouts and Flint’s plans for tracking her down and returning her to slavery. Eavesdropping became a way to pass the time in the garret, and Brent took full advantage of its possibilities, collecting as much information as possible about Dr. Flint’s search for her, the well-being of her children, and anything else pertinent to maintaining her secret concealment. Hardly just a passive receiver of information, Brent actively used what she learned to create ruses that would confuse Dr. Flint and convince him that she had already made it to the north. In the most effective instance, she contrives to have a letter she has written to Dr. Flint brought north by a sea-faring acquaintance of her friend Peter, who would then deliver it to a friend in New York who would mail it from the post office there, giving the appearance that she was in fact in New York. In this chapter, the twenty-fifth in the narrative, entitled “Competition in Cunning,” Brent turns the tables on Flint and demonstrates the unique advantages of inhabiting the maroon space that is the garret.
Nominal Freedom and the Reproduction of Marronage in the North

“…but every where I found the same manifestations of that cruel prejudice, which so discourage[s] the feelings, and repress[e] the energies of the colored people.”

-- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)  

Early on in her narrative, while introducing for the first time Dr. Flint’s lecherous sexual predations, Jacobs offers the following aside: “Surely, if you credited one half the truths that are told you concerning the helpless millions suffering in this cruel bondage, you at the north would not help tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the south” (27). Thus begins the text’s sustained interest in the ways the North is complicit in the bondswoman’s plight in the South and her tenuous position of freedom should she succeed in reaching the North. If my purpose in the previous section has been to demonstrate via *Incidents* the ways in which marronage represents a challenge to homogenizing conceptions of the South as a place of unfreedom, my purpose here is to show how *Incidents* itself and what we know about Jacobs’s life in the North deeply unsettle the idea that the North was a place of freedom.

Harriet Jacobs escaped from slavery in June of 1842 and arrived in Philadelphia eight years before President Millard Fillmore would sign the Fugitive Slave Bill into law in 1850. And while the Fugitive Slave Law, which, as I have suggested, occasioned a major shift in the way the enslaved population conceived of the geographical coordinates of freedom and unfreedom in the United States, did not affect Jacobs for her first eight years in the North, its passing casts a shadow over the entirety of the narrative and informs the way she conceptualizes her fugitive status in the Northern states. This is not to say, however, that her nominal freedom was not extremely tenuous prior to 1850; it was. But the federal government’s capitulation, as she saw it,

to slaveholders’ interests and demands, and its officialization via law of an obligation on the part of Northerners to report and return all fugitive slaves to their masters in the South, represented an egregious threat to her safety and that of her children, and it colors the way she describes the situation for fugitives like herself in the North even prior to the law’s passage.

After spending the night aboard the small boat on which she escaped from slavery, Brent describes her feelings upon waking the next day: “The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I then believed it to be” (131; emphasis in original). This is only the first of many, many instances in which Brent qualifies or undercuts her expressions of feeling free in the North. She goes on to say that “We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters” (131; my emphasis), and falling asleep on her first night in Philadelphia, secure in the home of Mr. Durham, “I verily believed myself to be a free woman” (135; my emphasis). These qualifications offer a sense of foreboding and immediately, literally at the very moment Brent sees a free state for the first time, destabilize the idea that the North will offer her safety from the long reach of slavery. Indeed, as Brent prepares to depart Philadelphia for New York by train in search of her daughter Ellen, she learns that “they don’t allow colored people to ride in the first-class cars for any price” (135). “This was,” she continues, “the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States. Colored people were allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people, at the south, but they were not required to pay for the privilege. It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery” (135). Not only does the North ape the customs of slavery, it also, perversely, further delimits the freedom of blacks under a kind of early separate but equal system that appears to foster equality by letting blacks ride on the train and
buy tickets like white people but in reality subjects them to a thinly veiled racist logic by which Northern industry might profit by black bodies in transit while still treating them like slaves.

More alarming to Brent, though, is the situation in which she finds Ellen in Brooklyn, showing “signs of neglect” and barely knowing her letters at the age of nine (136). Ellen had been left by Mr. Sands in the care of his cousin Mrs. Hobbs, who was to see to her education and welfare while Linda bided her time waiting to come north. Brent is horrified to learn that Mr. Sands had not in fact emancipated Ellen, and Mrs. Hobbs made clear to Brent immediately the stakes of the situation Ellen now found herself in: “Mrs. Hobbs looked me coolly in the face, and said, ‘I suppose you know that my cousin, Mr. Sands, has given her to my eldest daughter. She will make a nice waiting maid for her when she grows up’” (137; emphasis in original). Ellen inhabits a liminal position in the Hobbs home, one in which she is not entirely free but not entirely unfree. But Brent understands all too well the ways this liminal status can be used against her daughter, even before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. She recalls that Mr. Hobbs had previously been successful but had failed in business and been forced to take up a “subordinate situation in the Custom House” (137). “Perhaps,” she fears, “they expected to return to the south some day; and Ellen’s knowledge was quite sufficient for a slave’s condition” (137). The more time Brent spends in New York, the more she begins to realize that the city and its inhabitants are inextricably connected to the South and to the institution of slavery. Very little stands between her family and re-enslavement in the South, likely at the hands of Dr. Flint or his family, and so she determines that “In order to protect my children, it was necessary that I should own myself. I called myself free, and sometimes felt so; but I knew I was insecure” (137-38).

Brent becomes consumed with checking the newspapers for notices of the arrivals of Southerners
and which hotels they had put up in, especially during the summer months when the city experienced an influx of Southerners seeking respite from the heat.

Worse still was the revelation that Ellen, like Linda years earlier, had been repeatedly subjected to sexual harassment by Mr. Thorne, Mr. Hobbs’s partner in drinking and general dissipation. Along with “being sent to the store very often for rum and brandy,” and having “to pour out the liquor for them [Mr. Thorne and Mr. Hobbs]” because their hands trembled so much, Ellen had had “vile language” poured into her ears by Mr. Thorne (146). Although Ellen was not a slave, she was in a precarious situation, working for a white family with southern roots and proclivities, one that had already expressed in no uncertain terms its plans to “give” and “take” Ellen between family members as they pleased, keeping her in their possession until she “grows up.” Ellen had also not technically been emancipated by Mr. Sands, so she could be returned to or sold back into slavery at any moment.

The language used by the Hobbses to describe Ellen and her situation within their home replicates the language of slavery and involuntary servitude, and her position reflects that language. Ellen’s circumstances in New York, to her mother’s utter horror, in many ways resemble Brent’s when she was a fifteen-year-old slave girl trying desperately to escape Dr. Flint’s sexual harassment in Edenton. The very thing that Brent most wanted to avoid for her daughter by sending her North (ahead, even, of herself) has in fact happened in its own form anyway, despite the fact that New York is a supposedly “free state.” Here the North apes the customs of slavery in the vilest of ways for Brent personally, as she knows her daughter is being abused but does not yet have sufficient funds to establish a home of her own for her family. And so Ellen must continue in this liminal state, free in certain respects but ultimately bound by the
unfreedom for blacks that structured the white supremacist logic by which social relations operated throughout both the North and the South in the antebellum period.

Despite having found reliable and consistent employment as a baby nurse in the Bruce household soon after arriving in New York City, Brent is constantly reminded of her status as a fugitive. On three occasions she is forced to flee New York and, in desperate solutions that eerily resemble her earlier acts of petit marronage in the South, conceal herself for a time in the homes of friends and relatives. The first occurs still before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law when it is discovered that Mr. Thorne has written a letter to Dr. Flint indicating that he knows where Brent is and believes she could be captured and brought back to him with relative ease. Before departing hastily for Boston where her brother was living, Brent exclaims, exasperated: “Again I was to be torn from a comfortable home, and all my plans for the welfare of my children were to be frustrated by that demon slavery!” (147). Finally, Brent reveals the secret that she is a fugitive from slavery to Mrs. Bruce, who takes sympathy on her and hides her in a friend’s house until her brother’s arrival. Linda, her brother, and her daughter travel together to Boston, where “[she] felt as if she was beyond the reach of the bloodhounds” (149). At this point Brent decides that New York is too perilous and that Boston, with its robust abolitionist presence, would offer better solace for her family, so they remain there for the duration of the winter.

She returns to New York only after receiving news that Mrs. Bruce had died, and out of deference to the deceased, who had helped her in her time of need, she agrees to accompany Mr. Bruce and their daughter Mary to visit Mrs. Bruce’s relatives in England, her home country. Here she experiences a kind of freedom she calls “pure” and “unadulterated,” a kind of freedom that, for her, exists nowhere in the United States, North or South, free state or slave state. “For the first time in my life,” she writes, “I was in a place where I was treated according to my
deportment, without reference to my complexion” (149). But immediately following her declaration that “I laid my head on a pillow, for the first time, with the delightful consciousness of pure, unadulterated freedom” comes the following line: “As I had constant care of the child, I had little opportunity to see the wonders of that great city” (149). While Brent is indeed free in England from the racism and threats of re-enslavement she experiences in the North, she remains well aware of her subordinate situation in regard to Mr. Bruce. And as Jean Yellin notes in her biography of Jacobs, Nathaniel Parker Willis, the real-life Mr. Bruce, had quite a different reaction to the way black people were treated in England. Willis, she writes, was “shocked” at “the presence of black people in Britain” and “the natives’ interactions with them” (Yellin 85). Willis, who by this time was an extremely successful New York writer, editor, and magazinist, sent back snippets of his experiences in England for his American readers, some of which present racist caricatures of blacks and represent them as childlike. He also pokes fun at and trivializes pervasive English antislavery attitudes (85-6). Willis had been accused before of harboring pro-slavery sentiments by none other than Frederick Douglass, a fact that surely made Jacobs’s life under his roof in the 1840s and 50s difficult and complicated in ways we will never fully understand because of a lack of documentation. But I will attempt to tease out some of the ramifications of this fact regarding the actual composition of Incidents shortly.

“It is a sad feeling to be afraid of one’s native country,” Brent laments upon her return to New York and to the United States (Jacobs 151). And indeed, she had good reason to be afraid. Brent returns to New York and back to Boston to find that her son Benny has left his apprenticeship and shipped out on a whaling voyage. His fellow apprentices had one day “accidentally discovered a fact that they had never before suspected—that he was colored!” (151). Treated first with “silent scorn” and then “insults and abuse,” Benny refused to
countenance such discrimination and sought refuge on a whaling ship, which had long been known for assessing sailors according to ability rather than skin color. Brent also learns that the Flints have been apprised of her movements, as she receives a letter from the former Miss Emily Flint, now Mrs. Dodge, mentioning her trip to England with Mr. Bruce and entreating her to return south. Mrs. Dodge tells Linda that she may purchase herself if she likes, or she may come live with her new family in Norfolk, Virginia. But Brent is well aware of the true nature of these machinations. “I knew the law would decide that I was his [Dr. Flint’s] property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children,” she writes, “but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect” (152-3). With a wonderfully clever turn of phrase, Brent evokes the language of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney’s decision in the 1857 Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which affirmed that all blacks “had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*).[^62]

This decision had come to pass by the time Jacobs was writing her narrative, but not at the time the events being described in the narrative actually happened. In fact, this was almost a decade before the Dred Scott decision. But Brent continues this short but significant digression, introducing what is perhaps the most important political decision of the era for her: “The Fugitive Slave Law had not then passed. The judges of Massachusetts had not then stooped under chains to enter her courts of justice, so called. I knew my old master was rather skittish of Massachusetts. I relied on her love of freedom, and felt safe on her soil” (153). Yet another qualification follows, however: “I am now aware that I honored the old Commonwealth beyond

her deserts” (153). It is not a stretch to assume that Jacobs would have imagined that her readers would take this last statement as a reference to the nationally publicized and enormously controversial case of Anthony Burns, a fugitive from slavery who was discovered and arrested in Boston on 24 May 1854. This case resulted in Burns being paraded through the streets in shackles, tried as required by the law, and returned to slavery in Virginia. It stirred up a great deal of abolitionist fervor, but for someone like Harriet Jacobs, it made all too clear the fact that the North—and even Boston, that supposed bastion of abolitionism—was reproducing the very same structures of unfreedom for blacks that continued to bolster the institution of slavery in the South.

After alluding to it and its significance several times before, Jacobs devotes the penultimate chapter of her narrative to a discussion of the Fugitive Slave Law and its effects on her and the greater community of African Americans living in New York City.63 Mr. Bruce had remarried and asked Linda if she would like to return to New York to act as nurse to the couple’s new baby, a decision about which “[she] had but one hesitation, and that was [her] feeling of insecurity in New York, now greatly increased by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law” (155). Once again Brent highlights the extent to which the law inhibited fugitive but also black mobility in general, on top of, of course, of personal, family, and community security in the North. Though the image of fugitives running and hiding from slave hunters is one we typically tend to associate with the South and the geography of plantation society, Brent makes it clear that the Fugitive Slave Law blurred hard distinctions between North and South and the lived experiences of fugitive slaves in both places in the 1850s.

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63 The chapter is titled “THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW.”
Turning again to roughly contemporaneous events of political import to the African American population as a whole, she mentions the case of “The slave Hamlin, the first fugitive that came under the new law,” who “was given up by the bloodhounds of the north to the bloodhounds of the south” around the same time she returned to New York City (155). Hamlin is a pseudonym for James Hamlet, who was indeed the first fugitive to be captured and tried under the law in the northern states, specifically in New York City. Hamlet, a porter for the Tilton and Maloney firm on Water Street, was arrested while working on 26 September 1850 (DeLombard 35). Though, like Anthony Burns would be four years later, he was returned to slavery in Baltimore, supporters quickly raised $800 to purchase his freedom and did so, welcoming him back to New York only several days later as a free man (35).

But this ultimately favorable outcome offered little solace for Brent, who knew the Flints would use means both legal and extralegal, overt and covert, to try to capture her or lure her back into the clutches of enslavement. She describes the changes to her daily routine wrought by the Fugitive Slave Law and the frightening public cases like that of James Hamlin’s:

I seldom ventured into the streets; and when it was necessary to do an errand for Mr. Bruce, or any of the family, I went as much as possible through back streets and by-ways. What a disgrace to a city calling itself free, that inhabitants, guiltless of offence, and seeking to perform their duties conscientiously, should be condemned to live in such incessant fear, and have nowhere to turn for protection! (Jacobs 156)

If enslaved persons in the South lived under a kind of early surveillance state in the antebellum period especially, when slave patrols had become increasingly standardized and regularized, a similar system or network was instituted and given the suggestion of having been instituted on a large scale—a strategy necessary to the successful operation of any surveillance state—in the
North after 1850. Brent once again turns the familiar geography of slavery on its head, suggesting a fundamental lack of freedom for black people in the North, and refusing at this point to locate freedom anywhere within the geographical purview of the United States as it was understood through the lens of the Compromise of 1850. Such a description of the perilous situation for black people in the North post-1850 is eerily familiar to the situation Linda describes earlier in the narrative regarding the terror wrought on the black population after Nat Turner’s revolt. And it’s also quite similar to the casual and incessant terrorizing of black people in the South that went on after the kinds of suspected slave conspiracies and revolts described earlier in this chapter. Innocent blacks—free or enslaved, with or without passes—could be and would be accosted by whites on the street and subjected to violences and degradations for which they would never be punished. For Brent, who had experienced these things first-hand in the small and insular town of Edenton, seeing them reproduced in the North was, as she says, “a disgrace” to a city, and ultimately to a state, and a portion of the nation, calling itself free (156).

Around the same time, Brent experiences another scare regarding the Flints, one that forces her, once again, to flee into temporary hiding, despite living on “Northern soil,” though she “no longer called it free soil” (157; emphasis in original). And reaching an especially poignant emotional and rhetorical crescendo before getting into her next incident with the Flints, Brent proclaims: “I was, in fact, a slave in New York, as subject to slave laws as I had been in a Slave State. Strange incongruity in a State called free!” (158). Brent explains that she had received word that some of Dr. Flint’s “northern tools” had informed him of her whereabouts, so she went to Mrs. Bruce for assistance, who sent her to New England, “where she was sheltered by the wife of a senator” (158). “This honorable gentleman,” Brent writes, “would not have voted for the Fugitive Slave Law, as did the senator in ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’; on the contrary, he
was strongly opposed to it” (158). However, she is quick to qualify this statement with another:  
“but he was enough under its [the Fugitive Slave Laws’] influence to be afraid of having me remain in his house many hours” (158). Without much further detail, Brent explains that she spent a month in the country until she “supposed Dr. Flint’s emissaries” had “given up the pursuit for the present” and she could return to New York (158). Mere pages before the end of the narrative and the final chapter, “Free at Last,” she remains fixated on the extent and severity of the unfreedom she experiences in the North, going so far as to call herself a slave in the North just as she was in the South.

The former Emily Flint, now Mrs. Dodge, and technical owner of Brent now that Dr. Flint has died, continues the relentless persecution of Brent and her children that was begun by her father so many years earlier, and so even after Dr. Flint’s death, Brent remains within the reach of slavery and of her original tormentors. She learns that the Dodges have arrived in New York City and taken up at a hotel on Courtland Street, prompting her to turn to the sympathetic Mrs. Bruce for assistance once more: “A carriage was hastily ordered; and closely veiled, I followed Mrs. Bruce, taking the baby again with me into exile” (160). A fugitive on “free soil” yet again, Brent is forced, as she says, into exile, this time thanks to Emily Flint, but much like she had been back in Edenton when she exiled herself to the garret to escape Dr. Flint’s pursuit. We learn that Mr. Dodge has fallen on hard times financially, which has motivated his decision now to pursue Brent at nearly all costs. Understanding this, Mrs. Bruce entreats Brent to leave the city, but she has had enough: “I was weary of flying from pillar to post. I had been chased during half my life, and it seemed as if the chase was never to end” (162). In the North, as in the South, Linda has been ceaselessly pursued, a fugitive wherever she goes, whether North Carolina or New York City, inexorably bound by slavery’s yoke, which does not know a definite
boundary after 1850. But Mr. Dodge is unrelenting, and Linda and Ellen are forced to flee to New England. Brent is prepared to travel to California to live with her brother, but Mrs. Bruce intervenes without her knowing and arranges to have her freedom purchased from Mr. Dodge for $300 on the condition as well that he “relinquish all claim to [Brent] or [her] children forever” (163). Dodge begrudgingly accepts, concluding that, “half a loaf was better than no bread,” and through a letter from Mrs. Bruce Brent learns that she is now, finally, legally free: “So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion” (163; emphasis in original).

Brent explains that she does come around to the circumstances of her purchase and the means by which her freedom was secured, feeling an enormous sense of relief and that a burden was lifted from her that she had carried her entire life. But even at the very end of the narrative, she remains suspicious of the North’s promise of freedom and of the federal government’s loyalty to the ideal of freedom over the economic interests of the slaveholding states:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. (164; emphasis in original)

These sentiments are not unsurprising considering the fact that the Supreme Court ruled in 1859 that the Fugitive Slave Law was in fact constitutional, not a blow this time to Jacobs specifically, but certainly one to her fellow fugitives in the North still leaving in constant fear of being captured and returned to slavery.
Although Jacobs’s narrative concludes with the events of the year 1852, the year in which she became a free woman, we know more about her life thereafter thanks to Jean Yellin’s biography. I would like to conclude this section with a brief look at the circumstances under which Jacobs actually began composing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* beginning in 1853, while still employed as a caretaker in the Bruce (Willis) family. Building on the argument above, wherein I claimed that the post-Fugitive Slave Law North reproduced material and psychic conditions of unfreedom that likened Jacobs’s experiences there to her previous experiences as a fugitive in the South, here I will argue that her complex positionality vis-à-vis the Willis (Bruce in the narrative) family by whom she is employed and the state in which she is now a legally free inhabitant creates the conditions of possibility for what I am calling a kind of maroon perspective. I contend that this maroon perspective, a particular type of personal, social, political, and authorial orientation which simultaneously circumscribes certain freedoms while opening up the means to others, is akin to the maroon-like positionality I have previously argued that Brent inhabits in the garret.

Prior to beginning the manuscript for *Incidents*, Jacobs wrote two letters to the editor of the *New York Daily Tribune* which were published on June 21, 1853 and July 25, 1853, respectively. Each is meant as a kind of corrective to previously published accounts concerning different aspects of slavery. In the first Jacobs offers her own personal testimony as a means to set the record straight about the complex and demeaning circumstances under which enslaved blacks are sold in the South. The second again calls on an incident she bore witness to back in Edenton in 1833, the murder of the fugitive bondsman George Cabarrus by white men seeking the bounty on his head. While the letter, entitled “Cruelty to Slaves,” ostensibly purports to demonstrate the extent of such cruelty with an example wherein a fugitive who is believed to
have been legally outlawed but is actually not is decapitated by the white men, who leave his body to decompose in a canoe in the blistering August sun after finding out they would not be receiving their bounty, in reality it serves another purpose as well. Jacobs is entering her own voice into the print public sphere and the discourse surrounding the southern practice of outlawry, the legal means by which an enslaved black person was stripped of any recourse whatsoever to the institutions of civil society. Any white person could maim or kill any outlawed slave without facing any legal consequences, and owners of outlawed slaves would receive compensation from the state if their outlawed slaves were injured or killed in the process of capture or pursuit. The most common reason for an enslaved person’s being outlawed was extended periods of truancy, many of which, we can imagine, were in reality instances of marronage. Indeed, in the example Jacobs mentions, she writes that George Cabarrus had been “a runaway from his master twelvemonths” (3). And considering he was captured right in the Edenton area from which he had run away, it wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine that he had been living as a borderland maroon, perhaps even in Cabarrus’s Pocosin, or the Snaky Swamp in Incidents.

Certainly I am very interested in the mere fact that Jacobs was actively writing and thinking about outlawry, marronage, and their legal ramifications as she began imagining herself as a writer and as she began establishing a voice for herself as a free black woman in the North. But what interests me most at this point is the way Jacobs signed each of these letters: the first, “A Fugitive Slave,” and the second, “A Fugitive.” Whatever her motivation for doing so, such a move is striking considering the fact that she was legally free when she penned these letters. As I hope my reading of her time in the North has demonstrated, however, we know she felt profoundly unfree in the North, both before and after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, but
especially so afterwards. Without a doubt, she retained an identification with those fellow blacks among her who were still fugitives from slavery, liable at any moment to be arrested and returned to bondage. But such a rhetorical move for an emerging writer is evocative of the conditions under which she found herself composing these initial letters, and ultimately the manuscript for *Incidents* itself.

As Yellin demonstrates through correspondence between Jacobs, Lydia Maria Child, Amy Post, and others, Jacobs secretly composed her first letter at night, in the attic, where the servants’ quarters were located, in Nathaniel Parker Willis’s posh New York City apartment. While the famed writer worked downstairs during the day, and Harriet labored as an attendant to the child, at night she stole what precious moments of free time she had to pen this first anonymous letter, unceremoniously announcing the entrance into the discursive sphere of a writer who would go on to be remembered long after Willis was forgotten. In July of 1853 the Willises relocated to Idlewild, a country estate in the Hudson Valley, because of Nathaniel’s declining health, and Harriet agreed to stay on with them. There she would continue to write in secret, once again in the attic—the servant’s quarters—at night and by candlelight, first penning her second letter to the *Tribune*, and then eventually beginning her narrative manuscript. As Yellin has demonstrated via correspondence between Jacobs and Amy Post, Jacobs was constantly fearful that Mrs. but especially Mr. Willis would find out about her writing. She strongly suspected, as mentioned earlier, that Nathaniel Willis harbored pro-slavery views, a sentiment shared by fellow abolitionists from the time period. But regardless, she did not want to undermine her position in the household, which afforded her a steady income and the means by which she hoped to establish an independent home for her family: her ultimate wish.
What I would like to end with here is the suggestion that Jacobs’s positionality in the attic, writing her narrative in secret, resembles her maroon positionality in the garret, concealing herself from Dr. Flint and avoiding the horrors of enslavement, but also enabling certain freedoms: the ability to maintain contact with her family and friends, to keep watch over her children, and to keep tabs on Flint’s search for her and arrange plots by which he might be thrown off her trail. What we imagine as a negative state—fugitivity—one defined by the oppressor, who labels the enslaved person a fugitive as a means of criminalization, Jacobs reclaims in Willis’s attic, infusing it with the potentialities of the maroon perspective she initially discovered in the garret. And so ultimately the concealment, the obfuscation, the adaptability, the particular kind of marginality that come with marronage work in Jacobs’s favor here as she composes her narrative and ultimately publishes it under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Maintaining this distance from the text—this mediated discursive position that mirrors the mediated physical position of a maroon who is within slaveholding territory but concealed from its surveilling mechanisms—affords Jacobs a feeling of security in concealment that she recalls as a feature of her otherwise debilitating years in the garret.

**Interlude: Harriet Jacobs, Nat Turner, and the John Brown Question**

Another way in which Jacobs attempted to subvert the conventions of the slave narrative genre and its white abolitionist mediation was by adding in a final chapter on John Brown. I will argue in this section that this political inclination also draws *Incidents* into further proximity with issues of marronage and the possibilities for freedom that marronage represents both discursively and materially. Preserved correspondences between Jacobs and noted abolitionist, writer, and women’s rights activist Lydia Maria Child, who edited and penned the Introduction to *Incidents*, have revealed that Jacobs initially planned to include a chapter on John Brown to conclude her
narrative.\textsuperscript{64} Child wrote to Jacobs regarding the chapter: “I think the last Chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted. It does not naturally come into your story, and the M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grandmother” (Child qtd. in Mills 255). Investigations by Jean Fagan Yellin, Bruce Mills, Albert Tricomi, and Caleb Smith have concluded, unfortunately, that this chapter has been lost, but the fact of its one-time existence—and the relationship between Child, Brown, Jacobs, and, as we will see, Nat Turner—bears considerable importance, as I hope to show, to the argument I have been advancing about the role of marronage in both Incidents and Jacobs’s world during her time in the South.

Child, long known for her Garrisonian views on abolition—emphasizing moral suasion and nonviolent tactics—nonetheless responded to Brown’s apprehension and arrest after the Harpers Ferry raid of October 16-18, 1859 with an outpouring of sympathy and an offer of personal support. In a letter to Brown in jail dated 26 October 1859, Child wrote: “I think of you night and day,” “bleeding in prison, surrounded by hostile faces, sustained only by trust in God and your own strong heart” (Child qtd. in Mills 260). Later in the same letter she goes on to tell Brown “I long to nurse you, to speak to you sisterly words of sympathy and consolation” (Child qtd. in Mills 255). Child was quickly forced to defend such statements when Governor Harry A. Wise of Virginia, to whom she had written regarding coming to visit Brown in jail, evidently had this letter published on 12 November 1859 in Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune (Mills 260). Like Garrison would do as well, she came out strongly in favor of Brown’s motivations but did not condone his methods, as a letter to Brown from 26 October 1859 attests: “Believing in peace principles, I cannot sympathize with the method you chose to advance the cause of freedom. But

\textsuperscript{64} These letters are collected in Lydia Maria Child, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880, eds. Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Microform, 1980), and Child, Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880, eds. Milton Meltzer, Patricia G. Holland, and Francine Krasno (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1982).
I honor your generous intentions” (Child qtd. in Tricomi 240). If a textualized relationship between Jacobs and Brown no longer exists, a robust one certainly does between Child, Brown, and those responsible for his incarceration and legal proceedings.

In light of these facts, one might wonder why, then, Child was so adamant that Jacobs remove the final chapter on Brown and end instead with the one on the death of her grandmother. Bruce Mills has argued persuasively that Child’s concerns “seem more structural than political: she encourages Jacobs to omit the material because it does not ‘naturally’ fit the story and because it is not as ‘appropriate’ a conclusion as the grandmother’s death” (Mills 255). Critics who have studied the relationship between Child and Jacobs and between Child and Jacobs’s final text, particularly Caleb Smith, tend to agree. Smith writes:

Child explained her objections in terms of the organic development of Jacobs’s narrative, and of a gendered propriety—but as studies of these negotiations by Bruce Mills and Albert Tricomi suggest, the revision was part of Childs’s larger design for Incidents, an effort to disassociate it from Brown’s militancy and align it with the Garrisonian circle’s program of ‘nonviolent reform. (Smith 744)

While Tricomi differs from Mills and Smith in that he believes Child to have exerted significant influence over the final, published version of Incidents (along with the way it was received and interpreted), he agrees that Child’s intention was to further the abolitionist cause from her position and within her ideological framework in the best way she knew how. In an effort to reach, hold the attention of, and persuade the broadest possible reading audience (which, according to Jean Fagan Yellin and others, would have consisted primarily of Northern white women), it made sense for Jacobs to organize the narrative more like a piece of sentimental fiction: the story begins and ends with the grandmother—the moral center of Brent’s universe.
and her greatest caretaker and protector—and though not with marriage, with freedom, as Jacobs
cannily deploys but revises from within features of the by then longstanding tropes of
sentimental fiction.

My interest in the Child, Jacobs, Brown connection lies in the potentialities it opens up
for expanding my auxiliary argument in this chapter that *Incidents* may be a significantly more
militant and incendiary text than most scholars give it credit for. Its clear associations with and
invocations of swamp marronage—often construed by the slaveholding elite for its own political
and safety concerns as a violent threat through plantation raids, insurrections and uprisings, and
its potential for inciting other bondspeople to seek refuge in the swamps—situate it, as I have
been attempting to show, in an emergent black radical tradition in conversation with other
militant anti-slavery texts and recent or contemporaneous events like the Compromise of 1850,
the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, Bleeding Kansas, the Dred Scott case, the John Brown
affair, and the looming outbreak of sectional violence bordering on civil war, among others. I
also hope to have demonstrated that these associations with marronage—along with the chapter’s
central argument which reads Jacobs’s time in the garret as a kind of metaphorical marronage
infused as well with elements of the literal and embodied experiences of marronage—would
have activated in readers by 1861 cultural associations with marronage that had proliferated
during the 1850s but had been familiar to antebellum Southerners since the beginning of large-
scale plantation slavery operations.

Albert Tricomi has argued compellingly that Jacobs’s and Child’s personal views on how
abolition should be achieved differed, probably quite considerably. While Child’s allegiance to
Garrisonian nonviolence is evinced with consistency throughout her published writings and
collected letters, Tricomi notes that it is significantly more difficult to arrive at a clear sense of
Jacobs’s antislavery and abolitionist position(s) and the ways in which they may have evolved during the 1850s, particularly during the period between Jacobs’s initial composition of the narrative and its ultimate publication. We know from Yellin’s painstaking work that Jacobs completed the manuscript in 1858 and must have felt compelled by the events at Harpers Ferry in 1859 to pen the additional chapter, which was in fact written in 1859. As evidence of a militant current in Jacobs’s thinking that very likely put her at odds with Child, but failed to alter the narrative given the clear power dynamic between the pair, Tricomi quotes a reflection Jacobs wrote on her work after the publication of Incidents in aiding fugitive slaves swarming North, which I think is worthy of reproduction in its original form here:

the good God has spared me for this work  the
last six months has been the happiest of all my
life. somtime my sky is darkened but my faith
in the omnipotent is strong – our prayers &
tears have gone up as a memorial of our wrongs
before him who created us – and who will judge
us – Man may desire to stand still but an arm
they cannot repel is leading them on – they may
stop to worship the Idol that is making desolate
their hearthstones   a just God is settling the
account – it is fearful to think what Man will
Suffer before he is willing to do justice to his
Fellow man – (Jacobs qtd. in Tricomi 242)
Tricomi also quotes a letter from Jacobs to Amy Post from March 1857, right in the aftermath of the watershed Dred Scott decision and at the time Jacobs was writing her manuscript. In it, Jacobs concludes that “I see nothing for the Black man – to look forward to – but to forget his old Motto – and learn a new one his long patient hope – must be might – and Strength – Liberty – or Death” (Jacobs qtd. in Tricomi 243). Taken together, these writings attest to a militant strain in Jacobs’s thinking that, as Tricomi importantly points out, preceded even the Harpers Ferry raid. Jacobs’s image of a wrathful God inexorably punishing slaveholders for their sins against their fellow men and her exhortation that patience and hope must be replaced with might, strength, and ultimately liberty—or death—clearly echo the militant, urgent, and defiant sentiments of John Brown and, earlier, Patrick Henry and the esteemed revolutionary generation.

So while the chapter on John Brown has been lost and was never published, we can still glean here some of the polemical and rather radical (at least compared to Child and the Garrisonians) elements of Jacobs’s sensibility that, while they might not be so explicit in the published version of *Incidents* with the excised Brown chapter, I would argue still exist as a pervasive undercurrent in the narrative, seeping through the textual seams in certain particular moments, often with connection to marronage, that I have been and will continue attending to.

Although the John Brown chapter was ultimately excluded from the final version of *Incidents*, Jacobs includes a chapter on Nat Turner’s 1831 revolt (she would have been around eighteen years old at the time of the uprising) and the brutal crackdown on the enslaved and free African American populations of Virginia and North Carolina as a result. The chapter evokes sympathy for blacks who were unfairly and publicly brutalized in the wake of the revolt, and it also evokes the intense, pervasive fear of slave revolt that haunted Southern slaveholders in places where the enslaved populations had been steadily increasing since the 1830s. Child
herself, in fact, had pushed Jacobs to include this chapter, presumably because she thought it would garner further sympathy for the plight of bondspeople, especially those with no connection whatsoever to Turner’s violent uprising but who suffered anyway as a result. The principal fact to be revealed was that innocent bondspeople and even free blacks had no recourse to the wrath of the plantocracy once its always latent fears of slave revolt reached a fever pitch. In the same letter from Child to Jacobs dated 26 October 1859, Child writes, in relation to Turner’s revolt: “What were those inflictions? Were any tortured to make them confess? And how? Were any killed? Please write down some of the most striking particulars, and let me have them to insert” (Child qtd. in Smith 758). Smith writes that “[Bruce] Mills suggests, plausibly, that Child would have expected readers to understand these passages as oblique, coded reflections on the John Brown case” (Smith 758), a curious, unelaborated point that I wish to investigate further.

My particular interest at this point is in expanding upon Smith’s assertion about Mills’s argument in order to examine the ways in which Jacobs’s direct references to Turner and, by extension, indirect references to Brown, further radicalize her narrative through sympathetic intertextual references to these infamous and heavily reported outbreaks of militant antislavery resistance. The language and techniques of encoding radical and subversive sentiments into antislavery texts by both black and white writers is an overarching concern of this entire study since, as I have mentioned in the previous two chapters, Southerners often used coded terms like “bandit,” “outlaw,” “outlier,” “runaway,” and “bush negro” to describe the maroons and maroon communities in their midst in an attempt to disassociate their own marronage problem from those well-known ones in the Caribbean and Latin America. An investigation into marronage in US literature and the lived reality of US maroons requires a rigorous unpacking and decoding of
these references in order to understand the true extent to which marronage existed and was perceived to exist in the antebellum South—facts often at odds with each other, but an important tension to examine nonetheless.

One particular chapter from *Incidents*, “Fear of Insurrection,” provides the entry point into the aforementioned analysis I wish to undertake. While it might be impossible to prove that Jacobs had Brown and the events of Harpers Ferry in mind when she wrote this particular chapter, I would argue that her known sympathy for Brown (as exhibited previously), age at the time of the Harpers Ferry raid (forty-six, which would have made her intimately aware of such explosive happenings), high level of literacy, long-standing involvement with prominent figures in the abolitionist movements, the ubiquity of Harpers Ferry in the American historical imaginary (via print discourse throughout the nation, in particular), and the fact that she wrote the ultimately excised chapter on Brown suggest that this is a generative line of inquiry. If, as Bruce Mills and Caleb Smith both suggest, readers of *Incidents* would have detected indirect references to and commentary on Brown via Turner in the “Fear of Insurrection” chapter, then I would like to spend some time here exploring in more detail how and why that might have been so. Doing so will, I hope, expand our sense of the narrative’s militancy, draw it into closer association with figurations of radical, violent methods of resistance against slavery, and connect further to its abiding interest in representations of slave marronage and the singular resistant practices of maroons given the fact that both Turner’s and Brown’s plots had, as I will explain below, strong connections (some real and some imagined, but still influential) to marronage and maroon-related guerrilla warfare tactics. And while Brown is perhaps the primary militant abolitionist Jacobs had in mind while writing the chapter on Turner’s insurrection, I would also like to suggest that the chapter invokes an even broader legacy or genealogy of the most
infamous and heavily publicized slave revolts that rocked the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, including Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800, the German Coast Uprising (in Louisiana) in 1811, and Denmark Vesey’s South Carolina conspiracy in 1822, all of which were immediately followed by mass—and, more often than not, harrowingly arbitrary—slave executions and large-scale crack downs on slave meetings, mobility, and what petty freedoms the enslaved might have previously been granted.

“Fear of Insurrection,” the narrative’s twelfth chapter, was, as previously mentioned, penned by Jacobs at Child’s explicit request. The title, in and of itself, gestures broadly toward general fears of insurrection, rather than the aftermath of Turner’s revolt specifically, which is what Child had asked for particular details about. And while Jacobs’s account of the searches, patrols, casual violences, and humiliating degradations perpetuated upon slaves and free blacks alike is told as a specific recollection of treatment she herself witnessed or heard of in the wake of Turner’s revolt, much of these descriptions could be accurately applied to the aftermath of any slave revolt or conspiracy in the United States—and even in the greater hemispheric context, as well. This is, then, actually a moment in which the very things that made the text’s authenticity so difficult to verify—its use of pseudonyms, lack of dates, and lack of specific place names—functions as a useful rhetorical strategy for making the particulars of Jacobs’s post-Turner experiences feel universal—universal in the sense that they are representative of the violent backlash against the black population that followed any uprising—real or merely conspiratorial—among the bondspeople throughout the slaveholding South. As Jacobs makes clear in the narrative, the slaveholding elite took full advantage of these moments of heightened alarm in order to perform a “muster,” a brutal show of force led largely by the poor, non-slaveholding whites who, as Jacobs aptly notes, “had no negroes of their own to scourge. They
exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation” (Jacobs 55-6). Slaveholders carefully orchestrated these musters—which included deploying ragtag local militia groups in military garb and formation, perverse parodies of the real thing as they may have been—as a way to assert their total authority over the enslaved population, though ironically demonstrating all the while, as Jacobs notes, that they themselves were significantly more cruel and barbarous than the enslaved people they meant to frighten into submission. Such musters also resemble Southern responses to rumors about maroons “lurking,” “skulking” or committing “depredations” in their vicinities, as evidenced in the earlier section on marronage and slave insurrections in Jacobs’s world.

Readers of Jacobs’s narrative would have recognized certain parallels between Turner and Brown as they made their way through this chapter, probably most clearly the deeply held religious and spiritual convictions that motivated the two to perpetuate their acts of violent defiance against the slave system. Such a connection had been immediately made in the press following Brown’s attack on Harpers Ferry, and it continued up until and after his eventual execution. In December of 1859, for example, right after John Brown’s hanging on the morning of December 2nd, the black-run *Anglo-African Magazine* published a lengthy article comparing Turner and Brown that is representative of the kinds of connections drawn between the two by contemporaries of these events (Reynolds 55):

There are many points of similarity between these two men: they were both idealists; both governed by their views of the teachings of the Bible; both had harbored for years the purpose to which they gave up their lives; both felt themselves swayed as by some
divine, or at least, spiritual, impulse; the one seeking in the air, the earth, and the heavens, for signs which came at last; and the other, obeying impulses which he believes to have been fore-ordained from the eternal past; both cool, calm and heroic in prison and in the prospect of inevitable death; both confess with child-like frankness and simplicity the object they had in view—the pure and simple emancipation of their fellow men; both win from the judges who sentence them, expressions of deep sympathy. (qtd. in Reynolds 386)

To these apt points of comparison I would also add that both men were possessed of great charisma, “natural-born leaders,” so to speak, who inspired great confidence in their followers, all of whom were willing to die or face extreme legal consequences for their causes; both were fanatical, even perhaps monomaniacal, yet patient and fastidious in their planning and pursuits; both adopted the techniques of slave rebellions and maroons stretching back to the earliest days of African slavery in the Western hemisphere (surprise attack by night, makeshift weapons—perhaps most infamously Brown’s pikes—guerilla-style tactics, planned retreat to a well-known wilderness hideout in the Allegheny Mountains, among other things); and both men possessed some degree of military or at least strategic combat acumen and the ability to withstand the profound physical and psychological difficulties of warfare—Brown from his earlier militant antislavery exploits in Kansas and Missouri, and Turner in that he had engaged in previous acts of petit marronage, but more importantly in the sense that Henry Highland Garnet suggests in his “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (1843), wherein he argues that all slaves are uniquely prepared, by virtue of their condition, to endure the hardships of armed combat against their oppressors:
You [the enslaved] will not be compelled to spend much time in order to become inured to hardships. From the first moment that you breathed the air of heaven, you have been accustomed to nothing else but hardships…Your sternest energies have been beaten upon the anvil of severe trial, Slavery has done this, to make you subservient to its own purposes; but it has done more good than this, it has prepared you for any emergency…if you meet with pain, sorrow, and even death, these are the common lot of the slaves. (7-8)

In 1847, during a visit with Frederick Douglass, Brown declared that “Slavery was a state of war to which the slaves were unwilling parties and consequently they have to right to anything necessary to their peace and freedom” (Brown qtd. in Reynolds 104). Similarly, David Walker, in his enormously controversial (and quickly banned throughout the South) *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) had, like Garnet, urged bondspeople everywhere to rise up in armed rebellion against their masters, this being the only way to secure their freedom: by seeking the means of that freedom through their own calloused hands and with their masters’ weapons or the very tools with which they labored without compensation. In the minds of key radical antebellum black thinkers and writers like Garnet and Walker, among others, enslaved people were prepared for war at any time because they had unwittingly been engaged in a form of warfare from the moment they were born into or sold into chattel slavery. “The heroes of the American Revolution,” Garnet writes in his “Address,” “were never put upon harder fare than a peck of corn and a few herrings per week” (7). Bondspeople, he implies, had long been subjected to much, much worse, and were thus almost universally prepared for the hunger, deprivation, and physical trials associated with prolonged combat situations. Moreover, Ted Maris-Wolf has recently argued that maroons “everywhere shared a fundamental political orientation to the world around them. They were
‘under siege’” (458). This extension of the analogies between slavery and warfare explicitly brings maroons into the fold in a way that I think resonates with Turner, Brown, and also, importantly, Jacobs. For if being perpetually “under siege” is part and parcel of the condition of marronage, Jacobs’s time in the garret, during which she is pursued by Dr. Flint without relent and lives in constant fear of being found out, sounds a lot like being besieged.

The anonymous (but almost certainly black) writer of *The Anglo-African Magazine* article, entitled “The Nat Turner Insurrection,” goes on to ominously warn readers that “Emancipation must take place, and soon. There can be no long delay in the choice of methods. If John Brown’s be not soon adopted by the free North, then Nat Turner’s will be by the enslaved South” (qtd. in Reynolds 386). Indeed, in *John Brown, Abolitionist* (2005), David Reynolds argues, “So close was the association between the two figures that a nineteenth-century historian of American blacks described Turner as a ‘Black John Brown’” (56). Our closest textual access to Turner lies in Thomas R. Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner, Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA* (1831), in which Gray purported to record Turner’s own version of the revolt, largely focusing on his motivations for undertaking it. At the outset of *The Confessions*, Turner describes to Gray an incident from his childhood in which he apparently related the particulars of an event that had occurred before he was born to some other children, and upon further questioning he was able, he says, to provide further details surrounding this event—though it is never described in any detail—about which he could not possibly have known. This led his parents and other bondspeople on the plantation to the conclusion that “[he] surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn [him] things that had happened before [his] birth. And [his] father and mother strengthened [him] in this [his] first impression, saying in [his] presence, [he] was intended for some great purpose” (Gray 7). Such would be the beginning of
Turner’s path toward the taking up of arms in violent rebellion against the slave system in Virginia.

To be sure, Turner took these words to heart, beginning to devote his “time to fasting and prayer” (9). He goes on to relate a series of visions and revelations that convinced him he was intended, ultimately, to lash out at the slave system with violence, to counter its egregious violences with his own. Turner claimed that over the next two years he was being spoken to by “the Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days” and that the revelations he received from the spirit convinced him he was “ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty” (9). Deeply held Christian beliefs were the principal motivational factor guiding Turner’s radicalization and the actualization of his revolt, as The Confessions continues to evidence.

Turner reflects on an incident in which he absconded from his plantation for a month and lived in the woods, an act of petit marronage. This was the case in the scenario Turner relates:

About this time I was placed under an overseer, from whom I ran away - and after remaining in the woods thirty days, I returned, to the astonishment of the negroes on the plantation, who thought I had made my escape to some other part of the country, as my father had done before. But the reason of my return was, that the Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of this world, and not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master—‘For he who knoweth his Master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus, have I chastened you.’ (9-10)

At this point Turner indicates his commitment to carrying out a major act of defiance against the slave system, and he intends to begin recruiting his most trusted companions for the mission. His ironic deployment of the oft-quoted biblical passage above, usually used by the
slaveholding class to attempt to induce complacency in their bondspeople, is itself a scathing rhetorical attack on the hypocrisy of slaveholders and their cherry picking from the Bible for nefarious purposes. It represents one moment among many in the *Confessions* during which Turner actively subverts Gray’s ideologically loaded textualization and narrativization of his confessions. Turner must return to do the bidding of his earthly master so that he might later have the opportunity to murder him. Like Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*, Turner becomes sure of himself and his purpose during his un-narrated time in the wilderness, in a forest space or a maroon space where he is able to ruminate without the interference of forced labor and an overseer’s threatening whip. Turner claims to have had another vision in the forest in which he “saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened,” after which he had the opportunity to be formally baptized along with several of the men who would later join him as part of the revolt (10).

After this, he experienced another visit from the Spirit on 12 May 1828, during which he was informed that “the Serpent was loosened” and he should “take it on and fight against it [the serpent], “for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first” (10-11). He then describes the series of “signs from the heavens” that led him to determine when he should rise up and carry out the attack which was his decided purpose on Earth. That Turner spent his time as a fugitive after the insurrection hiding out (allegedly) in the Great Dismal Swamp and in the forests surrounding the Southampton area (assuredly, as the corroborated story of his capture in a self-made cave makes clear) living like a maroon, is also important to my analysis here. The nation, or at least the slaveholding states and the Atlantic coast, understandably held its collective breath during Turner’s two months of fugitivity and followed his pursuit with great interest. An article published in the *New York Gazette* and
reprinted in several other newspapers, including William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, on 17 September 1831, concisely articulates fears of collusion between Turner and Dismal Swamp maroons, which were most likely way overblown and never proven in any tangible, reliable way, but nevertheless aroused great alarm in the South:

_Somewhat alarming._ — A letter by yesterday’s mail states, the militia of Norfolk, Nansemond, and Princess Ann counties, and the United States troops at Old Point Comfort, had been ordered out to scour the Dismal Swamp, in which it is asserted from 2 to 3000 blacks are concealed. It was ascertained that there had been a concert between those concerned in the late massacres and those in the swamps; and apprehensions were entertained that there would be a new breaking out. (3)

“Somewhat alarming,” perhaps, to residents of New York City or Boston, but extremely alarming to residents of Virginia and especially the Southampton area—really to slaveholders anywhere. The Great Dismal Swamp lay about twenty-five miles from the plantation where Turner’s attack began, but as the excerpt above indicates, slaveholders constantly feared that maroons there were engaged in surreptitious activities designed to undermine the slave system. And in some cases, though the slaveholders may not have been this time, they were right. Similar fears are deliberately evoked to great effect in Martin Delany’s *Blake*, wherein the titular insurrectionist hero meets with a high council of maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp, some of whom claim to be veterans of Turner’s insurrection and great supporters of the Virginia bondsman Gabriel, leader of the aborted plan (because the conspiracy had been discovered) to take over Richmond and thus destroy slavery from its local capital in the summer of 1800.65 This significant literary representation of Dismal Swamp maroonage will be treated in more detail in

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65 1800 also happens to be the year in which both Nat Turner and John Brown were born.
the final chapter. Turner’s revolt had begun during the cover of night on Sunday, August 31, 1831, when Turner, along with six of his most trusted enslaved comrades, went from plantation to plantation indiscriminately slaughtering sleeping women, children, babies, and men with makeshift weapons like axes, hatchets, and crude swords. They managed to murder fifty-five whites before a heavily armed party on horseback was assembled to stop them. According to David Reynolds, “An untold number of blacks—reportedly hundreds—were slaughtered in the chase” (53). After almost two months on the run, Turner was captured and soon hanged along with sixteen other blacks; twelve more were sold out of the state as punishment (Reynolds 53). The backlash was swift and uncompromising, as Turner’s revolt had shaken the slave system to its very core, with its greatest fears being realized in a most terrifying form.

Historians, literary scholars, and contemporaries of slavery and slave revolts have long suggested that literacy and religiosity were two of the most common traits associated with those blacks who led or intended to lead slave uprisings—or at least, these were the traits that got scapegoated by southerners in the wake of slave violence. But in many ways this association holds true among the most well documented slave uprisings in the antebellum United States. Laws against educating slaves had been passed in many Southern states between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War. The words of North Carolina’s law make explicit the feared connection between slave literacy and rebelliousness: “teaching slaves to read and write tends to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion” (qtd. in Reynolds 57).

Jacobs acknowledges this fact in the chapter that follows “Fear of Insurrection,” entitled “The Church and Slavery.” One of the last things she describes in “Fear of Insurrection” is the demolition of an all-black church that had been built in the woods by local slaves. It included a
burial ground for deceased friends and family of the church, and according to Jacobs it was the source of some little solace for the enslaved population in the area. She also describes a terrible scene in which “a respectable old colored minister” was dragged through the streets by the then-inebriated mob, whose intention was to “shoot him on Court House Green” (58). A small amount of shot had been found during the search of his home, which, Jacobs tells us, his wife had used to balance her scales. But the combination of learned religiosity and ammunition occasioned a singular dread in the minds of the ragtag militia turned drunken mob, who would have been particularly alarmed by the prospect of a man of education and religion—especially one who held considerable sway amongst the local enslaved community—possessing any kind of weapons or items that could be construed as weapons. In the midst of their heightened paranoia immediately following the revolt and their distorted perceptions of the enslaved population, the “connection” to Turner would have been all too clear.

In “The Church and Slavery,” Jacobs explains that after the initial panic caused by Turner’s insurrection had subsided, “the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters” (59). This religious instruction, of course, would be administered only by whites or by blacks who had been co-opted by the slaveholders to feed slaves a steady diet of Christian instruction designed to demonstrate to them their subserviency to their earthly masters and the punishments—both physical and spiritual—they would face if they were to disobey those masters. Evidence of enslaved populations being subjected to this kind of religious instruction, explicitly tailored to inure them to their condition and accept it as their earthly lot, abounds in slave narratives throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and earlier. The text of the first sermon Jacobs heard at the new religious meetings for slaves that had been convened by the
slaveholding elite was entitled “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (59). This title serves as a classic example of the kind of religious instruction that was offered to or, perhaps more accurately, forced upon enslaved persons in the US South. The slaveholders decided that if slaves were interested in the Bible and Christianity, and that if some of them were literate enough to read the Bible for themselves and pass on its lessons to fellow bondspeople, it was in their best interest to harness that religious curiosity for the dual purposes of promoting submission and instilling fear. That so many bondspeople came to identify with Moses’s struggle to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, and to adopt the crossing of the river Jordan as a metaphor for their own longing to escape to freedom (as evidenced by numerous slave spirituals and “sorrow songs”), dismayed slave owners who feared these religious teachings would incite slaves to run away, rebel, or become maroons. But it was this literacy, infrequent as it may have been, that allowed enslaved people to read and interpret Biblical passages on their own, and to pass what they learned onto their illiterate fellow bondspeople, thus perpetuating a dissident stream of Christianity, like Turner’s, at odds with the carefully tailored instruction offered by their masters.

If, as Bruce Mills suggests and Caleb Smith agrees, readers would have recognized some of these parallels between John Brown and Nat Turner while reading Incidents, then parsing them out for contemporary scholars seems crucial if we are to more fully appreciate the text’s investment in thinking about marronage as it relates to both militant abolitionism and the practices of actual maroons. Both Brown and Turner were a part of this dialectic in the late 1850s and early 1860s, as each man perpetrated an act of violence against the slave system and also employed—or planned extensively to employ, in Brown’s case—the tactics of maroons as a part
of their militant antislavery practices. That Harriet Jacobs was clearly aware of these connections and had lived through both Turner’s insurrection and Brown’s raid, and had felt compelled to write a final chapter for her narrative on John Brown just as she was concluding the manuscript, suggests the largely overlooked fact that *Incidents* is in many ways a radical and militant political document, and Harriet Jacobs was a seriously engaged political and philosophical thinker both consuming and contributing to the fiery antislavery discourse of her moment surrounding questions of freedom, enslavement, rebellion, rights, and democratic citizenship.

**Conclusion: Feeling Like a Maroon**

The genre of the antebellum slave narrative has been rightfully decentered from studies of early African American literature in recent years as scholars, influenced by black Atlantic formulations of subjectivity untethered from the construct of the nation-state, have thought more capably about who exactly constitutes an African American writer, what constitutes African American literature, and how we should define “literature” in the first place given the significantly broader meaning it had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than it does today. My desire, therefore, is not to re-ensconce the slave narrative as the defining genre of an early African American literary tradition, but rather to submit that we consider the slave narrative, along with other genres of antebellum African American antislavery literature, anew in light of the issues I have raised in this essay. It is worth thinking about lateral and southerly

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movements and destinations in slave narratives in particular not just as waypoints or detours on an inevitable northward trajectory into “freedom,” but as themselves movements and sites of potentiality with regard to enslaved agency and the existence of a provisional freedom. The more texts we look at in this way, the more the prevalence of a complex, multivalent geography unbound from sectionalist histories becomes apparent.

To imagine Linda Brent as a maroon and the garret as a version of a maroon space is to force the conventional narrative arc of both *Incidents* specifically and slave narratives more generally into sharp relief, revealing the limitations of an interpretive geospatial imaginary that holds fast to the idea that the South was always a place of enslavement and unfreedom for enslaved persons, even fugitives, and that the North was a place of freedom and security. Privileging marronage and the ways it disrupts binaristic thinking about the coordinates of freedom and unfreedom for fugitive slaves, along with the way it frustrates commonplace interpretations of the slave narrative genre, seems to me one way to begin rethinking the entrenched paradigms through which we interpret early African American literature and the narrativized antebellum African American experience. Early African American literature cannot be fairly characterized by a paradigmatic investment in normative, (white) abolitionist geographies or an investment solely in the condition of enslavement as its defining feature, as the trope of marronage and its historical reality as a presence in African American life make clear.

In *Freedom as Marronage* (2015), political scientist Neil Roberts argues, as I have here, that scholars studying slavery have for too long assumed a “polarized, static conception of slavery and freedom with no attention to the liminal spaces between these states and the relational nature of freedom” (9). I have shown that Brent, as an occupant of the garret, and Jacobs, by suggesting an affinity between Brent and a maroon and the garret and a maroon space,
are gesturing toward one of the kinds of liminal, interstitial states that Roberts bemoans the lack of attention to above: the state of the maroon. Perhaps, then, what we have in *Incidents* is an example of a formerly enslaved person and fugitive utilizing the reflective composition of her slave narrative to think through the shifting and unstable nature of what freedom does and can mean for a fugitive slave who remains in the South for an extended period of time. Intentionality aside, though, I am convinced that *Incidents* provides us with a unique opportunity to imagine, via Brent and the associated discourse surrounding marronage that the text invokes and about which I have outlined some cultural-historical particulars, what it is to “feel like a maroon,” by which I mean to feel, as Brent does in the garret, suspended between normative conceptions of freedom and enslavement, particularly as they would have been understood while slavery remained the law of the land and these distinctions were a marked, lived, tangible, physical reality.
Marronage Disavowed: Martin Delany, Henry Blake, and the Specter of Insurrection in the 1850s

“…all sustained slave revolts must acquire a Maroon dimension.”
-- Orlando Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts” (1970)\textsuperscript{68}

“Time does not pass, it accumulates.”
-- Ian Baucom, \textit{Specters of the Atlantic} (2005)\textsuperscript{69}

This final chapter begins with the premise that Henry Blake, rebel-protagonist of Martin R. Delany’s (possibly) unfinished, serialized novel \textit{Blake; or, The Huts of America} (1859-62), can be generatively understood as a type of maroon figure in the text. If the liminal, maroon-like state afforded Linda Brent by virtue of her position in the garret is one associated with both enhancements and constrictions in her relative freedoms, Henry Blake’s maroon status is, I will argue here, almost entirely liberatory. Indeed, the ambiguity of his interstitial position between freedom and enslavement is perhaps his greatest weapon in the extended campaign against the slave system that he undertakes throughout both the US South and Cuba. By comparing Blake’s mobility in the South with his mobility in the North, this chapter will also continue the previous one’s interest in interrogating the ways in which the Fugitive Slave Law altered the geographical coordinates of freedom and unfreedom for bondspeople, fugitive slaves, and African Americans in general in the decade before the Civil War. In \textit{Blake}, as I will demonstrate, Delany overtly thematizes the link between marronage and insurrection that US Southerners feared already existed in their states and was being amplified by the success of the Haitian Revolution and the

importation of bondspeople from the Caribbean who had been exposed to marronage, revolt, revolution, and the “contagion of liberty.”

While *Blake* scholarship has not directly attended to the idea of Henry Blake as a maroon, some critics have engaged with aspects of Blake’s radicalism that I would argue subtend his subject position as a maroon. Rebecca Biggio has argued that it is the threat of “black community” rather than “black violence” that is most unsettling about *Blake*, suggesting that the text enacts black community through “plotting, spreading, or protecting the knowledge of black conspiracy, even and especially maintaining the illusion of conspiracy where there is none.

Through *Blake*, Delany exploits white fear of black conspiracy to promote his vision of a unified black community” (440). Jeffory Clymer privileges *Blake*’s obsession “with the political quandaries that arise as people and commodities move and are moved across borders,” arguing that we must attend to Delany’s conceptions of various forms of property in the text as they function in the “antebellum international political economy” (710). Jean Cole has recently examined the ways in which the extraordinary mobility of the protagonists in *Blake* and “Theresa—A Haytien Tale” contrast with the extremely limited notions of enslaved black mobility that have arisen from the privileging of the slave narrative in our understanding of “African American Literature.” I share her interest here in de-centering the slave narrative and its codified geographical coordinates for black freedom and unfreedom in hopes of expanding our knowledge of the possibilities of antebellum black experience.

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71 Rebecca Skidmore Biggio, “The Specter of Conspiracy in Martin Delany’s *Blake*” *African American Review* 42.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 439-54; Jeffory A. Clymer, “Martin Delany’s *Blake*”
Many scholars, beginning with Paul Gilroy and Eric Sundquist, have recognized Blake’s vision of a pan-African or hemispheric black radicalism that is disassociated from the structuring logic of the nation-state. Building on the transnational and hemispheric turns in American Studies and US literary studies that have generated many insightful readings of Blake, Andy Doolen has recently made a compelling case for the text’s wholesale rejection (very much unlike The Heroic Slave) of the rhetoric and ideology of the American Revolution as a “failure that cannot serve as the ideological origin for a black independence struggle that exceeds national time and space” (157). All of these facets of Blake—its interest in the relationship between black violence, conspiracy, and community; its negotiations of property (both person and otherwise) across state and national borders; Henry’s mobility as a challenge to inscribed notions of limitations of enslaved movement; and its transnational or hemispheric declaration of black radicalism and a struggle outside the constraining boundaries national time and space—factor into Sylviane Diouf’s theorization of the “maroon landscape” and Rebecca Ginsburg’s theorization of the fugitive or “black landscape,” concepts that will soon emerge as crucial to my own theorization of the stakes of interpreting Henry Blake as a maroon figure.72

Marronage represents a possibility for black freedom that does not require white intervention in the realm of the material or white mediation in the realm of the discursive. One might take this a step further and argue that Blake itself operated as a kind of maroon text in its own moment with regard to its positionality vis-à-vis the mainstream, white-dominated

abolitionist publishing industry and the types of black uplift and assimilationist narratives it tended to produce. These points are, I am convinced, essential for understanding why *Blake*, and Blake, represent such a radical threat to the dominant white supremacist sociopolitical order of the late 1850s and early 1860s. Delany imparts a voice, social life, and collective political agency to those who have been systematically and variously disavowed, denied legal personhood and recognizable rights, and excluded from democratic citizenship in the United States. As I have been suggesting throughout this dissertation, maroon spaces and maroon states (which consist of both material and psychological elements) in the United States context and particularly in the context of its literature are capacious and flexible ones, inextricably related to but also untethered from the long histories and theorizations of marronage in the Caribbean and Latin America. But the Southern disavowal of marronage, maroons, and maroon communities in the United States led to the phenomenon and its attendant interstitial material and psychic subject positions’ conspicuous absence from antislavery discourse, at least in those specific terms. This disavowal also contributed, I would argue, to the rather monolithic development in the twentieth century of the Underground Railroad paradigm as a critical construct, which since then has become the prevailing means through which we apprehend the geography of freedom for enslaved persons who fled their captivity as well as the structuring interpretive paradigm for antebellum African American literature, still dominated in the popular imagination, at least, by the genre of the slave narrative. As I have been arguing, this critical construct fails to account for maroons and the alternate spaces of freedom they enacted outside the linear South-to-North trajectory of the Underground Railroad’s imagined geographical axis.

By approaching *Blake* on its own terms, and more importantly the terms through which it would have been understood at the time of its serialized publication with regard to US
geographies of freedom and the place of marronage in that mid-nineteenth century dialectical imaginary, the text’s political interventions via its imaginative, even speculative fictional project begin to emerge more clearly.\footnote{For an extended argument engaging the idea of \textit{Blake} as a work of speculative fiction, see: Britt Rusert, “Delany’s Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation.” \textit{American Quarterly} 65.4 (2013): 799-829.} I contend that through \textit{Blake} Delany turns the hegemonic practice of disavowal against US slaveholders, portending the traumatic effects such a disavowal will ultimately have on their way of life.\footnote{Writing of disavowal here I am invoking the title and primary argument of Sibylle Fischer’s book \textit{Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution} (Durham: Duke UP, 2004). I am also thinking alongside Neil Roberts’ definition of disavowal from \textit{Freedom as Marronage} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015): “I use the word disavowal to indicate the simultaneous acknowledgment and denial of an agent or event. A disavowal differs from silence, and it leads to traumatic effects” (14). The simultaneous acknowledgment and denial is key to understanding US slaveholders’ engagement with maroons and marronage.} \textit{Blake} compresses the vast space and time of the circum-Atlantic slave trade’s violences and yokes the centuries of militant black resistance that arose against those violences together into the explosive potentiality for hemispheric insurrection actualized by and infused with a disavowed and latent maroon element.

\textbf{Into the Maroon Landscape: Henry Blake in the South}

Sylviane Diouf argues that Southerners “reserved the terminology maroons for the people of Jamaica and Suriname...[and] were precursors to the denial of the American maroons’ existence. They called the people in their midst outliers...or runaways and banditti; and in the same spirit never called maroon settlements by their names or gave them any, thus negating their very existence” (3). Eugene Genovese, in his landmark study \textit{From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World} (1979), is largely dismissive of US maroons, writing that “they typically huddled in small units and may be called ‘maroons’ only as a courtesy” (77). He continues: “They [maroons] occupied unfavorable terrain with only minimum security and rarely had an opportunity to forge a viable community life. Consequently,
many degenerated into wild desperadoes who preyed on anyone, black, white, or red, in their path” (77). Genovese and other historians writing field-changing new studies of slavery and slave resistance in the 1970s and 80s tended to fall into the trap laid by US Southerners described by Diouf above, even if they did at least acknowledge the sustained existence of maroons in the American colonies and the United States from the early colonial period through the Civil War. For Genovese, the “question concern[ed] less the existence of marronage—it did exist—than of marronage on a scale that could affect the politics of the slave society, especially the politics inherent in any encouragement to slave revolt, in a manner comparable to that in Brazil, Surinam, or even Colombia or Venezuela” (76-7; emphasis in original). Such a conclusion makes sense when we remember Genovese’s subject matter—slave revolts—and also that he is drawing from a Latin American and Caribbean (and Brazilian) historiography of marronage and slave rebellion that understands the two phenomena as inextricably related and also understands marronage through a rather neat binary logic of petit (short-term) versus grand (long-term), the latter emphasizing large-scale, organized, and longstanding communities that often clashed with colonial authorities.75

Many scholars since Genovese—including Diouf—have also argued that the expansiveness of US geography, diffuseness of the enslaved population relative to the situation on small islands like Saint-Domingue, and emphasis on a self-perpetuating enslaved workforce rather than continual mass importation created circumstances unfavorable to large-scale marronage and large-scale revolt or marronage-infused revolt with revolutionary potential in the

75 The petit marronage/grand marronage binary was first formulated by Gabriel Debian in “Le marronage aux Francaises au XVIIIe siècle.” Caribbean Studies 6.3 (1966): 3-43. It has since become a standard way of interpreting flight from slavery throughout the Western hemisphere in studies across various disciplines, though its efficacy as an interpretive sociopolitical and geographical paradigm for US marronage has been challenged recently by Sylviane Diouf, Daniel Sayers, Ted Maris-Wolf, and others.
United States. But, as the previous chapter in particular and much of this dissertation in general have sought to demonstrate, these facts did not stop antebellum slaveholders from living in terror of slave rebellion and scapegoating maroons (or “outliers,” “outlaws,” “runaways,” “bandits,” and “bush negroes”) when rumors of insurrection arose or actual plots were discovered, no matter how small. Blake cleverly plays on a combination of this ambient fear of revolt, the perceived connection between marronage and enslaved rebellion, and the fundamental, if often unadmitted, illegibility of maroons and their activities to the slavocracy in order to build a sense of creeping terror around Henry’s developing plot for a “general insurrection” in the text.

In *Slavery’s Exiles*, Diouf differentiates maroons from runaways or truants and classifies maroons in the following way: “they settled in the wilderness, they lived there in secret, and they were not under any form of direct control by outsiders” (1). This umbrella definition is useful because it accounts for contingencies of time and space that impacted the evolution of marronage throughout the Western hemisphere and even on the African continent itself. Blake cannot be said to be simply a fugitive, runaway, truant, or outlier in the conventional senses. He intends decidedly to remain in the US South—or Cuba as an extension of the US Southern slaveholding regime—in order to foment his large-scale slave rebellion from within the ranks of the enslaved themselves. Far from being a desertion or abandonment of his enslaved brethren in the United States, Blake’s Cuban expedition represents a direct challenge to antebellum Southern interests in the annexation of Cuba and the expansion of slavery there. Indeed, he hopes that success on a smaller scale in Cuba, where there is already a revolutionary sensibility brewing, will be the catalyst and model for the overthrow of slavery in the United States.

Even a cursory gloss of Blake’s intentions, actions, and experiences reveals that they comport with Diouf’s broad characteristics for maroons. Though he does not settle in the
wilderness per se, he uses it as his means for travel, hiding, and habitation when he is between visits to slave quarters and the homes of complicit parties during his travels. Like a maroon, he takes advantage of the inhospitable and sometimes nearly impenetrable nature of the southern swamps and forests in order to avoid detection by slave catchers, dogs, patrols, and people in general who would be suspicious of a black man traveling on his own. When forced to interact with white people, he invents clever stories to explain why he is where he is and what he is doing there—most notable, perhaps, is his story that he is pursuing his master’s runaway race horse. Using intelligence and information gathered from bondspeople in the various areas he visits, he is able to alleviate suspicions by naming the right names and plantations. In other situations, he pays people off—like ferrymen—using the money he has saved.

So Blake is certainly operating in secret; that is, his true identity and motivations are known only by those he wants to know them, and when he appears in public places it is always under a carefully constructed false identity and pretenses. His spreading conspiracy is very much operating on a kind of “lower frequency,” (37) to borrow Paul Gilroy’s phrase, that flies beneath the radar of the ever-suspicious forces of white domination. And Blake is most assuredly not under any form of direct control by outsiders; he exhibits total autonomy over his own actions and movements, defying at every turn the rules and laws governing the life of the enslaved population. Though he is a wanted fugitive throughout the South, he dexterously avoids detection and capture by employing many of the tactics of maroons: keeping to the swamps and forests, traveling by night, maintaining a network of communication and intelligence amongst complicit black populations, developing autonomous and subversive social formations with fellow bondspeople, using tricks to throw dogs off his trail, and interacting with the plantation system as it suits his needs and benefits.
The ease with which Blake traverses the slaveholding South is so extraordinary that it can sometimes appear to border on the fantastical. He is perpetually in the process of both being and becoming, always on the move both mentally and physically, negotiating and renegotiating his relationship with the surrounding landscape, its people, and its structures and systems of power, dominance, and control. While the sale of Blake’s wife without his knowledge, a common trope in slave narratives and antislavery literature, sets the story in motion by influencing him to flee from enslavement, what follows upends conventional expectations regarding a fugitive slave’s movements outside the normativized spatial order of the plantation system. When Blake sets out from the plantation in Mississippi on which he, his wife, and his young son had been held in bondage, he enters a physical and psychic realm that is at once within and without the epistemological and ontological purview of the slaveholder, a kind of palimpsestic and multivalent space containing both oppressive assemblages and the means to subvert them. Here I think Diouf’s concept of the “maroon landscape” is worth quoting at length:

The maroons’ landscape was a place of exile whose settlers sought not only freedom but also self-determination. It was a dynamic site of empowerment, migrations, encounters, communication, exchange, solidarity, resistance, and entangled stories. It was also, of course, a contested terrain that slaveholders, overseers, drivers, slave hunters, dogs, militias, and patrollers strove to control and frequently invaded. Still, it was a space of movement, independence, and reinvention where new types of lives were created and evolved; where networks were built and solidified, and where solidarity expressed itself in concrete ways that rendered the maroons’ alternative way of life possible. (11)

The maroon landscape—which is to say not only the South, but also the North, from a particular kind of subaltern perspective which is by its nature illegible to the slaveholding class—is a
contested zone, one shot through with conflict and disruptions, rather than a static place of total unfreedom for the enslaved, the fugitive, and the maroon. That this was the case should not, it seems, come as much of a surprise in our critical moment, after over two decades of scholarly work beginning especially in the 1990s on the intricacies and subtleties of enslaved resistance, from the everyday to the insurrectionary, and on the complex psychologies and social dynamics of the enslaved. But a strong critical tendency remains, as Walter Johnson has recently argued, to read the buildup of sectional tensions in the 1850s backward through the lens of the hyper-sectionalized Civil War years and their aftermath, imparting a teleology to the preceding decade that obscures its complex, dynamic geography of freedom and the extent of its outward, hemispheric preoccupations.\textsuperscript{76} Steven Hahn has even gone so far as to suggest that we might be better served by interpreting the antebellum period through the lens of state formation rather than sectional conflict, as state formation emphasizes the reality of slavery as a \textit{national} institution over the fantasy of slavery as a strictly southern institution in the 1850s.\textsuperscript{77}

In light of these considerations, it is important for me to be clear that I am not interested in making a neat, simple argument here that Blake \textit{is} a maroon or that this is a stable, static identity or subject position which we can ascribe to him or a category into which we can, or should, uncritically place him. Doing either one of these things would be antithetical to both Delany’s rhetorical strategy in \textit{Blake} and to the reality of maroons’ existences, which depended at the most basic level upon being unable to be pinned down, literally and discursively—unable to be located, defined, tracked, mapped, or made visible and identifiable to the slaveholding regime. Hahn argues that, in the context of the United States, “Perspectives on marronage, like


perspectives on slave rebellions more generally, have for the most part been informed by rather limited and one-dimensional imaginations and understandings of what a maroon is” (26). For my purposes, I am interested in the ways Blake operates like a maroon, adopts maroons’ survival tactics and subaltern communication networks, and engages in practices and techniques of marronage as they suit his specific agenda. Marronage in the United States, especially as conceptions and theorizations of it arise out of these literary texts themselves, must be understood as something protean, something dynamic and shifting, contingent upon particularities of time, space, and politics that are in this case unique to the United States in the 1850s. The subject position of the fugitive slave is always in some ways a liminal one, occupying contested and nebulous space between the codified (and reified by the law) poles of freedom and enslavement. But Blake’s particular, peculiar status of fugitivity, while certainly rendering him within this in-between subject-state, has more in common with that of the maroon than with that of the fugitive slave associated with fugitive slave narratives and with the Underground Railroad, the fugitive who is striking out for the free states, beholden to a geographical logic that Blake seeks to defy from its outset.

The action in Blake opens with a discussion between two white characters, the southern slaveholder Colonel Stephen Franks and his cousin, the northerner Mrs. Arabella Ballard, regarding the Compromise of 1850. I reproduce a segment of the conversation here because, as I will elaborate on shortly, I argue that it acts as a framing device for the political geography of freedom with which Delany is concerned in the text:

“Tell me, Madam Ballard, how will the North go in the present issue?” enquired Franks.

“Give yourself no concern about that, Colonel,” replied Mrs. Ballard, “you will find the North true to the country.
“What you consider true, may be false—that is, it may be true to you, and false to us,” continued he.

“You do not understand me, Colonel,” she rejoined, “we can have no interests separate from yours; you know the time-honored motto, ‘united we stand,’ and so forth, must apply to the American people under every policy in every section of the Union.”

“So it should, but amidst the general clamor in the contest for ascendancy, may you not lose sight of this important point?”

“How can we? You, I’m sure, Colonel, know very well that in our country commercial interests have taken precedence of all others, which is a sufficient guarantee of our fidelity to the South.”

“That may be, madam, but we are still apprehensive.”

“Well, sir, we certainly do not know what more to do to give you assurance of our sincerity. We have as a plight of faith yielded Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—the intelligence and wealth of the North—in carrying out the Compromise measures for the interests of the South; can we do more?” (4)

This exchange is significant because it establishes the idea of slavery as a national rather than a sectional or strictly southern issue in the 1850s. As Harriet Jacobs made clear in the previous chapter, slavery’s material and psychic violences infected the North as well as the South; the “peculiar institution” was not peculiar to the South at all but was, even into the Civil War years, very much a driving feature of the entire nation’s social, economic, and political life. The conversation reveals the sociopolitical reality of slavery’s scope in the 1850s in contradistinction to the postbellum ideological construct that would come to imagine the South as backward and morally bankrupt, clinging to the outdated institution of slavery while the progressive North
sought to modernize, industrialize, and embody the democratic promise of the nation’s founding.

Even “Lost Cause” narratives of the Civil War that gained traction in the 1870s and 80s and were exemplified in the turn of the century fiction of Thomas Dixon depended upon imagining the North and South as irreconcilably different and separate. Madam Ballard’s assurances that the North would uphold its end of the bargain in regard to the Fugitive Slave Law, and her references to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—high-profile cities where by 1852 (the first date explicitly mentioned in Blake) judges had upheld the law and remanded fugitive slaves to bondage—stage the geopolitical reality of the terrain Blake enters and inhabits once he leaves Colonel Franks’s plantation, the place on which he and his family have been enslaved. That Blake will find no quarter in the Northern states is the subject of the next section; for now, however, what is important is the quarter he *is* able to find, paradoxically, in the “huts of America” all over the slaveholding Southern states.

One more telling incident occurs before Henry, described as “a pure Negro—handsome, manly, and intelligent…a man of good literary attainments—unknown to Colonel Franks, though he was aware he could read and write—having been educated in the West Indies” decides to set off from the plantation and begin disseminating his plan for insurrection (16). Henry, obedient up until this point, it is made clear, only for the sake of his beloved wife and child, refuses to go riding with his master and mistress on the morning he has learned that his wife was sold away in secret. Henry calmly announces to Franks that he will refuse to obey him any longer and does not, and never has, recognized his authority over him. Franks launches into a rage, and dashes into the house in search of a revolver, prompting his frightened wife to exclaim:

“Colonel! What does all this mean?”
“Mean, my dear? It’s a rebellion! A plot—this is but the shadow of a cloud that’s fast gathering around us! I see it plainly, I see it!” responded the Colonel, starting for the stairs. (19)

This brief scene is significant for two reasons. First, we learn three critical facts about Henry: he is a “pure Negro,” he is highly literate, and he is originally from the West Indies. All of these were features commonly associated with rebellious slaves and those most likely to run away and lead violent uprisings during the antebellum period. His vague West Indian origins are of especial import, as they connect him with Caribbean islands like Haiti, Jamaica, Santo Domingo (The Dominican Republic), and Cuba on which marronage and insurrection had been ongoing phenomena throughout the eighteenth century and into the first half of the nineteenth. The importance of the connection to Haiti and the specter of the Haitian Revolution and long tradition of marronage on that island, as I will discuss more shortly, cannot be overstated. With regard to Henry’s being from the “West Indies,” such elusiveness of reference and nomenclature in the realm of representation mirrors maroons’ elusiveness in the realm of the material. In this case, ambiguity and uncertainty are more unsettling than their opposites, just as with maroons, where their existence might be known, but uncertainty about their numbers, location, intentions, and activities is what makes them especially unsettling to slaveholders.

We do, however, eventually learn some specifics about Blake’s origins: he was born in Cuba as “Henrico Blacus.” Marronage in Cuba presents a singular case, according to Gabino La Rosa Corzo, whose Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba: Resistance and Repression (2003), presents the most comprehensive and authoritative study of the phenomenon on this island. La Rosa Corzo argues that in Cuba, a third class of maroons outside the petit/grand binary deserves its own designation, that of the “armed band of runaway slaves,” or caudrillas de cimarronajes.
(8). He describes them thus: “Each armed band of runaway slaves kept on the move through isolated areas, occasionally spending the night in a cave or temporary settlement of runaway slaves. These runaways did not engage in agriculture but lived by hunting, fishing, bartering, and—especially—stealing” (8). Previous historians of US slavery, like Eugene Genovese mentioned earlier, and also John Blassingame, to name but two, suggested the prevalence of such groups of maroon “bandits” in the antebellum United States, though more recent scholarship has shown that US maroons probably engaged in such behavior rarely, at least in a sustained or concerted way. In any event, however, Blake’s association with Cuba and by extension Afro-Cuban forms of marronage linked directly to violence is an intriguing one, especially considering the fact that maroon-related conspiracies and slave rebellions in the Caribbean were reported in US antislavery publications in the antebellum era with some frequency.

Second, Colonel Franks’s (over)reaction to Henry’s refusal is worth a closer look. At first it does indeed seem like an exaggerated response, an overreaction that demonstrates the point made earlier about how easily slaveholders could become hysterical over even the slightest inkling of organized violence or revolt on the part of the enslaved. It also, however, functions as very early foreshadowing, especially when we remember the novel’s original serialized format. Contemporary readers, with only Floyd J. Miller’s 1970 version of the text available, would know coming into the text, thanks to the summary blurb on the back cover, that Henry “is a West Indian slave who travels throughout the South advocating revolution, and later becomes the general of a black insurrectionary force in Cuba,” and thus would recognize Delany’s deliberate foreshadowing in this moment. So, is the takeaway, then, that slaveholders are right to be afraid, even here in what seems like an exaggerated circumstance? That they’re right to be afraid but are ultimately powerless to stop someone like Henry—determined, willful, clever, educated,
fearsome as he is—from carrying out such a plan once he has set his mind to it? That they’re right to be afraid because any one of these “insubordinate” bondspeople could turn out to be the next Nat Turner, or as I will suggest in a moment, the next Dutty Boukman? Any interpretation places agency ominously in the hands of the enslaved.

The scene also reveals a misunderstanding on Franks’s part regarding how insurrection would begin—the divide between the slaveholder perspective and the enslaved perspective, as it were. Franks exclaims that “he sees it plainly, he sees it,” but in reality he does not see it at all—though he might be right, ultimately, about the rebellion, the plot, he is incapable of “seeing” how such a thing would be organized and ultimately come to pass. He is not privy to the shadow networks of communication and organization that structure the planning of such a plot, the lower frequencies or registers on which the enslaved mobilize collective action. His loud proclamations of discovery only further reinforce this point, as Delany makes apparent the gap between white and black perceptions and understandings of the operational mechanisms of enslaved revolt. Rebecca Ginsburg argues that “We can understand the black landscape as the system of paths, places, and rhythms that a community of enslaved people created as an alternative, often as a refuge, to the landscape systems of planters and other whites,” which was largely a “landscape of display and vistas” (54). And she continues: “…enslaved workers knew the land through a different set of cognitive processes than did whites” and “enslaved people’s views of their surroundings assumed less of a ‘godshead’ perspective than did male planters’ views, in particular” (52). Ginsburg’s formulations make clear the distinction between planter perception and enslaved perception of the same landscape and of the possibilities and pitfalls that exist within that landscape.
These points bring us to Dutty Boukman. Laurent Dubois calls Boukman “the most visible leader during the first days of the insurrection [in Saint-Domingue],” a former maroon “who had worked first as a driver and then as a coachman” (99). It became well known after the insurgency began that Boukman had led a religious ceremony with organizers and participants from various neighboring plantations at a place known as Bois-Caiman either a week or two weeks prior to the beginning of the rebellion (99). According to the only surviving first-hand account of this ceremony that was written soon after it actually took place, Boukman and his men “took an oath of secrecy and revenge, sealed by drinking the blood of a black pig sacrificed before them” (100). As Dubois and others such as Jean Fouchard and Carolyn Fick have noted, the sacrificial aspect of the ceremony was probably derived from West African traditions.

I mention Boukman’s ceremony because Henry conducts a similar kind of ceremony with his closest compatriots, the bondsmen Charles and Andy, when he imparts to them his scheme for insurrection in a previously agreed upon secret meeting place, a thicket in the woods nearby Franks’s plantation. The meeting begins with a prayer, at Henry’s request, which Andy offers, who “was a preacher of the Baptist pursuasion [sic] among his slave brethren” (Delany 38). Afterwards, Henry shares with them the nature of his secret plan: “Clasping each other by the hand, standing in a band together, as a plight of their union and fidelity to each other, Henry said, ‘I now impart to you the secret, it is this: I have laid a scheme, and matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery!’” (39). Charles and Andy are immediately on board with the plan, but are desirous of understanding how it is to be organized and executed. Once again, though, Henry calls the group to prayer before sharing

78 Both Boukman and Blake are also dismissive of Christianity as the religion of their oppressors. While Blake does not dismiss it entirely, he interprets scripture according to the needs of his particular emancipatory project, just as slaveholders interpreted it according to their own desire to inure African descended peoples to their enforced condition of bondage.
the details of his plot: “Well then, first to prayer, and then to the organization. Andy!” said Henry, nodding to him, when they again bowed low with their heads to the ground, whilst each breathed a silent prayer, which was ended with ‘Amen’ by Andy. Whilst yet upon their knees, Henry imparted to them the secrets of his organization” (40).

The two scenes are similar in their elements of secrecy, religiosity, and brotherhood, and in that they mark the beginning of a shared promise of collective, militant black action against slavery. While Gregory Pierrot has recently argued quite convincingly that “With *Blake*, Delany set out to break to paralyzing status of the Haitian Revolution as the absolute referent of black revolt and autonomy” (177), I remain convinced that in this instance Delany calls upon the familiar history of Haiti in order to establish a sense of revolutionary, hemispheric import for the events that are about to unfold, even if the specific terms, figures, and mythologies of that revolutionary history will be revised to account for specific contingencies of time and place as the narrative progresses. Linking Blake and Boukman and by extension Blake’s plot and the Haitian Revolution establishes a hemispheric episteme through which the unfolding action might be interpreted, and most importantly for my analysis, it draws an explicit connection between marronage and insurrection in the Haitian Revolution and in the case of Blake’s plot for rebellion.

Henry goes on to explain to the eager Charles and Andy how, exactly, they should go about assisting in the organization of Henry’s secret plot, and maroon tactics are the means by which the plans for the insurrection are to be spread:

All you have to do, is to find one good man or woman—I don’t care which, so that they prove to be the right person—on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion and impart the secret to them, and make them the organizers for their own plantation, and they in like
manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on. In this way it will spread like smallpox among them. (41)

Henry suggests that Charles and Andy replicate the very scenario whereby the plan was originally communicated to them: a secret, woodland “seclusion.” He is suggesting, in other words, that they take advantage of the maroon landscape and the kinds of liminal, interstitial spaces it affords to bondspeople who wish to temporarily skirt the regulatory mechanisms of the plantocracy’s surveillance state. Before the three men split up, Henry provides one last crucial bit of instructions:

I now go as a runaway, and will be suspected of lurking about in the thickets, swamps, and caves; then to make the ruse complete, just as often as you think it necessary, to make a good impression, you must kill a shoat, take a lamb, pig, turkey, goose, chickens, ham of bacon from the smoke house, a loaf of bread or crock of butter from the spring house, and throw them down into the old waste well at the back of the old quarters, always leaving the heads of the fowls lying about and the blood of the larger animals. Everything that is missed don’t hesitate to lay it upon me, as a runaway, it will only cause them to have the less suspicion of your having such a design. (41)

Here Henry engages directly with white fears regarding maroons, specifically with borderland maroons (those who remained in close proximity to plantation society) and acts of petit marronage, in order to play those fears against slaveholders and by doing so maintain the illusion that he is engaged in petit marronage instead of the more ominous grand marronage, which is in fact the reality as he intends to depart and traverse the slaveholding states spreading his plan. The language of “lurking about” in “thickets, swamps, and caves” aligns precisely with the terms deployed by southerners to describe maroons and maroon activities, the terms of
disavowal that associate them with the less threatening class of “runaways” who are imagined to simply be seeking personal freedom rather than escaping enslavement and plotting against the system from within the terrain of the maroon landscape as it overlaps with the plantation order. Not naming Henry as a maroon, his actions as acts of marronage, or his tactics as maroon tactics comports with Delany’s rhetorical strategy and with maroons’ own need for concealment and obfuscation as a means for survival. The fact that petit marronage can serve as a cover for what Henry is truly engaged in, something more akin to a form of grand marronage but still, importantly for my argument, outside that binary formulation, also suggests the extent to which both slaveholders and the enslaved were aware of various forms and practices of marronage in their communities.

Henry’s travels through Louisiana, the first place he heads after leaving Franks’s plantation, conjure up a particularly significant history of enslaved uprising involving maroons, maroon tactics, and maroon communities. In 1853, the kidnapped free black man Solomon Northup’s narrative Twelve Years a Slave brought the issues of marronage, rebellion, and their intersections in the Red River region of Louisiana to the attention of the antislavery reading public in striking detail, though this aspect of the narrative is infrequently discussed. The region had also been represented previously in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), as it was the location of Simon Legree’s plantation, the place where the bestselling novel’s titular protagonist made his fateful last stand. These texts, along with Blake, suggest that slavery is especially brutal in the deep south recesses of rural Louisiana, but Henry believes he can turn this fact to his advantage: “The river is narrow, the water red as if colored by iron rust, the channel winding. Beyond this river lie his hopes, the broad plains of Louisiana with a hundred thousand bondsmen seeming anxiously to await him” (69). Northup notes a similar situation,
where despite the fact that capture is always imminent, “the woods and swamps are, nevertheless, continually filled with runaways” (241). And of the prospect of armed revolt in the area, he writes: “Such an idea as insurrection…is not new among the enslaved population of Bayou Boeuf. More than once I have joined in serious consultation, when the subject has been discussed, and there have been times when a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance” (248). Northup proceeds to relate his knowledge of the bondsman Lew Cheney’s militant emancipatory scheme from 1837, a year before he had arrived in the area:

The year before my arrival in the country there was a concerted movement among a number of slaves on Bayou Boeuf, that terminated tragically indeed. […] It has become a subject of general and unfailing interest in every slave-hut on the bayou, and will doubtless go down to succeeding generations as their chief tradition. Lew Cheney, with whom I became acquainted—a shrewd, cunning negro, more intelligent than the generality of his race, but unscrupulous and full of treachery—conceived the project of organizing a company sufficiently strong to fight their way against all opposition, to the neighboring territory of Mexico. A remote spot, far within the depths of the swamp, back of Hawkins’ plantation, was selected as the rallying point. Lew flitted from one plantation to another in the dead of night, preaching a crusade to Mexico, and, like Peter the Hermit, creating a furor of excitement wherever he appeared. At length a large number of runaways were assembled; stolen mules, and corn gathered from the fields, and bacon escaped from smoke-houses, had been conveyed into the woods. (246-48)

Cheney’s covert movements between plantations “in the dead of night,” spreading his plan, very much resemble Henry’s, and the meeting of assembled runaways in the swamps is evocative of
Boukman’s prior to the enslaved uprising on Saint-Domingue. But, according to Northup, the expedition’s hiding place was discovered before the plan could be executed, at which point Cheney turned on his followers and “proclaimed among the planters the number collected in the swamp, and, instead of stating truly the object they had in view, asserted their intention was to emerge from their seclusion the first favorable opportunity, and murder every white person along the bayou,” (247-48) an objective resonant with the outcome of Nat Turner’s revolt only six years prior. Unsurprisingly, “such an announcement,” Northup writes, “filled the whole country with terror,” and mass, indiscriminate hangings followed that were only stopped when “a regiment of soldiers…arrived from some fort on the Texan frontier, demolished the gallows, and opened the doors of the Alexandria prison” (248).

Blake continues to draw maroonage into association with insurrectionary plots during Blake’s visit to New Orleans, “the portentous city” (98). He arrives during the Mardis Gras festivities, when the black population, free and enslaved, was allowed significantly greater privileges of movement and congregation than usual, and he uses all of this to his advantage. Traveling through Arkansas, Blake had been counseled to “Keep in de thicket, chile, as da patrolas feahd to go in de woods, da feahd runaway ketch ‘em! Keep in da woods, chile, an’ da ain’ goin’ dah bit! Da talk big, and sen’ der dog, but da ain’ goin’ honey!” (91), suggesting a robust maroon presence in the area, or at least the perception of one amongst the slaveholders and slave patrols. In another “seclusion” reminiscent of Boukman’s and of Blake’s previous ones, he meets under the guise of the Mardis Gras celebration with black leaders from fifteen plantations in a rented house. One of the bondsmen, Tib, becomes convinced that now is the time to strike, to put Blake’s plan into effect, and leaves the house exclaiming “Insurrection! Insurrection! Death to every white!” (107). Panic quickly ensues, as “Intelligence soon reached
all parts of the city, that an extensive plot for rebellion of the slaves had been timely detected. The place was at once thrown into a state of intense excitement, the military called into requisition, dragoons flying in every direction, cannon from the old fort sending forth hourly through the night…” (107-108).

In what follows, the imagined insurrection initiates a hypothetical reversal of circumstances: “The inquisition held in the case of the betrayer Tib developed fearful antecedents of extensive arrangements for the destruction of the city by fire and water, thereby compelling the white inhabitants to take refuge in the swamps, whilst the blacks marched up the coast, sweeping the plantations as they went” (109). It might seem fantastical that whites would be the ones resorting to petit marronage in order to escape from the violence of black insurrection, but such an event has historical precedent in the New Orleans area. In January of 1811, somewhere between 60 and 130 bondspeople (though other estimates put this number at between 200 and over 500) in the German Coast region of Louisiana (along the east bank of the Mississippi River in what are now St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Parishes) rose up, armed themselves with farming tools, and marched around twenty miles toward New Orleans, burning plantation houses, sugar houses, and crops along the way (Genovese 592). Reports indicated that the rebels’ numbers increased as they moved through plantations recruiting other bondspeople to their cause, and rumors circulated that maroons (known to populate the area’s many swamps) were involved, a fact that is likely true in this particular case. While only two whites were killed in the uprising, its bloody aftermath left nearly 100 blacks dead. The man who came to be recognized as the leader of the uprising, the bondsman Charles Deslondes, had been

born into slavery in Saint-Domingue and brought by his owner to the Orleans Territory as a result of the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. This is yet another example of Blake’s engagement, though this time more implicitly, with the historical tradition of slave rebellions and marronage in the United States, and it also once again links Blake with hemispheric practices of marronage.

After moving through Alabama and Georgia, holding many more successful seclusions in each, Blake arrives in “haughty South Carolina,” where he meets for the first time explicitly with maroons: “These gatherings were always held in the forest. Many of the confidants of the seclusions were the much-dreaded runaways of the woods, a class of outlawed slaves, who continually seek the lives of their masters” (110). It is worth asking why Delany, like white southerners, chooses not to use the words “maroon” or “maroon community” to describe these people and their hidden retreats. Why employ the negating language of the southern elite rather than the subversive one of the autonomous fugitives to describe those runaways peopling the South Carolinian forests? On one level, white southerners’ deliberate avoidance of these terms kept them out of discursive currency, as these people largely controlled southern presses and thus dictated the language through which the landscape of slavery was articulated and understood. But on another level, Delany’s matter of fact statements that they are “much-dreaded” and “continually seek the lives of their masters” belie the seemingly casual and benign parlance of “runaway” and “outlaw.” If Southerners can deny the truth about maroons in their midst, Delany can answer by exaggerating it, suggesting a fact—that they are ever in pursuit of their masters’ lives—that does not hold up to current systemic historical analysis of their behavior and motivations. But here, as throughout the text, Delany capitalizes on exaggerated white fears of
slave violence, revolt and insurrection, many of which, as Diouf has shown, were tied—albeit tenuously—to very real fears of maroons and maroon communities in the South.

The last thing Blake does in South Carolina is visit with “one of the remaining confidentials and adherents of the memorable South Carolina insurrection,” a reference to bondsman Denmark Vesey’s aborted slave rebellion in the Charleston area in 1822. The old man to whom Henry “imparts his fearful scheme” exclaims excitedly, “I been prayin’ dat de Laud sen’ a nudder Denmark ‘mong us” (112). If we imagine Blake as a roving maroon traversing the Southern landscape—swamp, forest, city, town, and plantation—spreading the contagion of liberty and insurrection, this moment explicitly connects his marronage with a real historical tradition of slave uprisings and plots in the United States. While historical sources do not suggest a strong link between maroons and slave uprisings, Delany engages here with conspiratorial fears regarding maroons that plagued Southern slaveholders despite what the facts appear to suggest. Diouf contends that while maroons were a convenient scapegoat when it came to alleged insurrectionary conspiracies, and slaveholders may have deliberately pointed some of the blame at them in order to influence authorities to root them out to protect their own property and interests (borderland maroons who lived nearby plantations sometimes raided them at night for provisions and livestock, frequently assisted by complicit slaves), evidence of their involvement with the major conspiracies of the early national and antebellum periods is hard to come by (Diouf 284). But their lurking presence on the borders of legibility, visibility, and control most certainly made them be perceived as a very real threat, and plantation owners frequently expressed fears that their flouting of law and order would influence other bondspeople to do the same.
Blake next continues his travels into North Carolina, specifically into the Great Dismal Swamp, where further associations with slave rebellion arise: “When approaching the region of the Dismal Swamp, a number of the old confederates of the noted Nat Turner were met with, who hailed the daring young runaway as the harbinger of better days” (112). Delany’s description of the swamp’s physical environment and history as a safe haven for maroons injects it with an element of the fantastical, calling its inhabitants “denizens of the mystical, antiquated, and almost fabulous Dismal Swamp, where for many years they have defied the approach of their pursuers” (112). He goes on to describe how “In this fearful abode for years of some of Virginia and North Carolina’s boldest black rebels, the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and General Gabriel [Prosser] were held by them in sacred reverence; that of Gabriel as a talisman” (113). Maudy Ghamus, the leader of this High Council of aged maroons in the swamp, states to Henry that “the Swamp contained them [rebel-minded slaves] in sufficient number to take the whole United States; the only difficulty in the way being that the slaves in the different states could not be convinced of their strength” (114). Such proclamations align with facts put forth in contemporaneous publications by Frederick Law Olmsted, David Hunter Strother (Porte Crayon), and James Redpath, all of whom had visited the Great Dismal Swamp in the 1850s and reported on its status as a singular haven for maroon activity. In calling up Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, Delany reaches back to the year 1800—the year of Gabriel’s Rebellion—drawing the long sweep of the US tradition of enslaved rebellion into association with Blake’s own fictional plot.

Blake’s experience with the Dismal Swamp maroons is significant for a variety of reasons: it activates what would have been contemporary associations with the fear of maroons living there; it suggests a residual but still potent radicalism aligned with the most notorious of
slave uprisings in the United States (Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800, Denmark Vesey’s in 1822, and Nat Turner’s in 1831); and it identifies these rebellions and their surviving compatriots as the kind of forefathers of a militant black radical tradition and community that may culminate with the uprising Blake has been planning. These men and the rebel-organizers with whom they sympathize and in some cases fought are more appropriately, following Jeffory Clymer’s analysis, the ideological basis for the kind of radicalism Henry espouses, as opposed to the forefathers of the American Revolution. Most importantly for my analysis, the experience directly aligns the history of US slave rebellion with that of US marronage—particularly because some of these maroons are actually themselves supposed to be fugitive participants from the previous uprisings mentioned. Such a rhetorical technique works to collapse and internalize time, emphasizing the notion of time—and here, its attendant radical potentialities—as an embodied experience rather than an external, abstract phenomenon. The space-time of militant black radicalism is thus embodied in the Dismal Swamp maroons Blake meets, and his meeting with them constellates his own experience and plot with the historical reality of theirs, situating Blake’s coming insurrection in a temporal schema that lends it a sense of inevitability, as if every previous revolt has been leading up to his.

**Expanding the Maroon Landscape: Henry Blake in the North**

Historians and literary scholars working on African Americans and the political geographies of freedom and unfreedom in the antebellum period have recently begun to explore in earnest the commonalities between maroon communities in the South and purportedly free black communities in both the North and the South. Steven Hahn argues that settlements of blacks in the North resembled maroon communities for several reasons, not the least of which was because they very often contained numerous fugitives from slavery, who after (but also
before 1850, were living in a situation of extreme precariousness (Hahn 30). He suggests that “…the northern settlements and enclaves of fugitives and freed blacks—like maroons—everywhere shared a fundamental political orientation to the world around them. They were ‘under siege’” (34). “…Northern blacks lived in constant fear,” he continues, “whatever their legal status, and, like maroons in the southern states or in other parts of the hemisphere, they and their communities had to be perpetually alert, perpetually on guard, perpetually self-protective” (36). Similarly, Ted Maris-Wolf has recently challenged scholars to think beyond conventional ideas about maroon communities in the United States by looking at fugitive black laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp. He argues that we should imagine communities of these fugitive laborers as maroon communities “hidden in plain sight,” existing right at the “center of large-scale industrial operations” (Maris-Wolf 446). We must, therefore, understand and acknowledge the ways in which slavery’s scope and the ubiquity of federalized, legislative, and institutional white supremacy flattened national space and defied sectional considerations in its regulation and oppression of antebellum African Americans—free, enslaved, fugitive, or maroon. And we must also maintain an expansive conception of what a maroon or a maroon community could be in the context of the social, political, economic, cultural, historical, and geographical contingencies of the antebellum United States. By holding fast to limited definitions of maroons and maroon communities from the Latin American and Caribbean context, we are reproducing the practice of elision and denial carried out by white southerners in the antebellum period and by earlier scholars of African American history and literature.

Upon returning to Mississippi, and after a clandestine meeting with Charles and Andy in “the forest, two and a half miles from the city,” (127) Henry returns to Colonel Franks’s Natchez plantation to find that he has been threatening to sell the elderly Mammy Judy and Daddy Joe to
slave traders. But Henry, always at least one step ahead, has already established a plan to escort all of them to safety and freedom in Canada. That very night they leave and meet Henry at a designated spot, “the old burnt sycamore stump above the ferry” (131) at two o’clock in the morning. The boatman, a white man, is also already in on the plan, and loudly asks Henry for a pass “as a ruse, lest he might be watched by a concealed party” (131). Coming upon another river, the Arkansas, Henry is forced this time to deal with a boatman who he has not already co-opted as part of his grand scheme. The man is resistant at first, telling Henry “I want none of yer nigger passes…They ain’t none uv ‘em good ‘or nothin’, no how!” (136), but Henry quickly convinces him by “presenting the unmistakable evidence of a shining gold eagle, at the sight of which emblem of his country’s liberty, the skiffman’s patriotism was at once awakened, and their right to pass as American freemen indisputable” (135). Such instances illustrate the ways in which people and forces at odds with the fugitives’ enterprise are themselves part of the maroon landscape where Henry operates and can be made to serve the fugitives’ ends with, in this case, bribery. The old burnt sycamore stump, meaningless through the planters’ gaze, is pregnant with meaning through that of the enslaved person and fugitive.

At the Ohio River crossing, the ferryman the group meets makes it clear, despite his confusion, that the Fugitive Slave Law has made the North unwelcoming of and inhospitable to fugitives from slavery: “This are a law made by the Newnited States of Ameriky,” he explains to Henry, “an’ I be ‘bliged to fulfill it by ketchin’ every fugintive that goes to cross this way, or I mus’ pay a thousand dollars, and go to jail till the black folks is got, if that be’s never” (141). Henry is able to convince him otherwise with yet another bribe, but the stage has been set for the troubles the fugitives will face once they cross into the Northern states and land on the shores of Illinois. The group proceeds in this way, producing gold in lieu of papers as necessary, until they
reach “a village in the center of northern Indiana” (143). “Supposing their proximity to the British Provinces made them safe,” the narrator relates, “with an imprudence not before committed by the discreet runaways, when nearing a blacksmith’s shop a mile and a half from the village,” Andy breaks out into song. He sings of being on the way to Canada, having “now resolved to strike the blow, / For Freedom or the grave,” and all unite in the chorus: “O, righteous Father / Wilt thou not pity me; / And aid me on to Canada, / Where fugitives are free? / I heard old England plainly say, / If we would all forsake, / Our native land of Slavery, / And come across the lake” (144). The song suggests that the fugitives fully understand that the North is unsafe and that Canada offers a safer haven, outside the purview of United States law. But this episode leads to disaster for the fugitives. They are sold out by a seemingly friendly blacksmith and his wife, who offer them a brief respite from their journey. In the blacksmith’s shop, Henry discovers a handbill “fully descriptive of himself and comrades, having been issued in the town of St. Genevieve, offering a heavy reward” in the blacksmith’s possession (145). Having made it out of the slaveholding South without major incident, it is ironically in the North that the clutches of slavery come closest to re-ensnaring the band of fugitives. The complicity of the elderly black couple (who claim to have both once been slaves themselves) in the group’s capture is also worth noting. Delany makes clear by this example that no one in the North was to be trusted, that even former slaves and former fugitives from slavery could not be counted on as allies.

Although they do make it to Windsor, Essex County, Canada West without further incident, Delany begins the penultimate chapter of part one not with exultations of freedom, but with a lengthy description of the discrimination faced by those of African descent in Canada:
Poor fellow! he [Andy] little knew the unnatural feelings and course pursued toward his race by many Canadians… […]. He little knew that while according to fundamental British Law and constitutional rights, all persons are equal in the realm, yet by a systematic course of policy and artifice, his race with few exceptions in some parts…is excluded from the enjoyment and exercise of every right, except mere suffrage—voting— even to those of sitting on a jury as its own peer, and the exercise of military duty. He little knew the facts, and as little expected to find such a state of things in the long-talked of and much-loved Canada by the slaves. It had never entered the mind of poor Andy, that in going to Canada in search of freedom, he was then in a country where privileges were denied him which are common to the slave in every Southern state. (154)

While the narrator does admit, “But Andy was free—being on British soil—from the bribes of slaveholding influences; where the unhallowed foot of the slavecatcher dare not tread; where no decrees of an American Congress sanctioned by a president born and bred in a free state…could reach” (154), this catalogue of injustices remains striking nonetheless. It does, however, align with the sense of strategic, subaltern geography that Delany articulates throughout Blake. The northern, so-called “free” states have been compromised by the Fugitive Slave Law, and Canada, while allowing black residents legal freedom, harbors racial prejudices that are reflected in its societal and institutional structures. Hopes for freedom on a grand scale cannot be rooted in Canada, the text suggests, as the perils of this one journey north reveal the impossibility of mass escape to that place. It is in the heart of the South, where the enslaved population is concentrated on large plantations, that we must place such hopes. And it will be through maroon tactics and insurrection that freedom will be won for the enslaved, not through a mass exodus to some outside landscape.
Conclusion: Toward a Hemispheric Dialectic of Freedom

In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), Edouard Glissant writes:

The rigid nature of the plantation encouraged forms of resistance, two of which have a shaping force on our cultures: the camouflaged escape of the carnival, which I feel constitutes a desperate way out of the confining world of the plantation, and the armed flight of *marronnage*, which is the most widespread act of defiance in that area of civilization that concerns us. (248)

And, more recently, in *Freedom as Marronage* (2015), Neil Roberts argues: “for centuries it [marronage] has been integral to interpreting the idea of freedom in Haiti as well as other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries including the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Suriname, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico” (4). If marronage has long been understood—and very much continues to be so—as a defining feature of any dialectic of freedom arising from Latin America and in particular the Caribbean, this has not been the case in the United States.

However, if we zoom out, thinking hemispherically or diasporically rather than nationally, marronage appears as a definitive link between enslaved populations mounting resistance across the space-time of the era of slavery and colonization in the Western hemisphere. And, as historians of US slavery like Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, and especially Walter Johnson have recently shown, it is a mistake to imagine the United States in the 1850s and into the Civil War as an insular, inwardly-focused state, largely preoccupied with growing sectional conflict between North and South and the ongoing processes of Indian removal and westward expansion. To do so is to project the outcome of the war backward onto its buildup, to impart a teleological inevitability to the outbreak of Civil War that simply does not comport with lived experience during the 1850s. As Johnson and others illustrate, Southerners remained
intensely preoccupied with issues beyond the borders of the United States in these years, namely with how they might expand slavery by colonizing Cuba or taking over Latin American nations. Their gaze was definitively outward, focused on expansionist, imperialist fantasies that could sustain the institution of slavery that was the backbone of southern life for the slaveholding elite.

With designs further south, into Latin America and the Caribbean, to the very kinds of places where maroon communities developed to the point where colonial authorities waged war against them, US southerners were at the very least implicitly drawing marronage into any conversation about military conquest and imperialist ventures. A hemispheric dialectic of freedom unbound from US national borders therefore must, I would argue, incorporate marronage as a constitutive feature. And the fact is that debates over the meaning of freedom in the United States, influenced by both Enlightenment philosophy and the existence of the manifestly unfree black population held in bondage, were also influenced by events unfolding throughout the Atlantic world system in which the United States was deeply implicated. What’s more, marronage, flight, and the formation of alternative geographies of freedom unbound from contemporaneous (and current) totalizing narratives of westward expansion and sectional conflict—exemplified and reified, following Martha Schoolman, in normative abolitionist geographies—clearly played a role in shaping the way African Americans imagined possibilities for freedom. How could African American conceptions of freedom in the antebellum period not concern themselves with fugitivity? After all, the US Constitution itself contained the much-debated Fugitive Slave Clause (given legal authority by the first Fugitive Slave Act of 1793), which enforced the seizure and return of fugitives from labor to their owners or employers. Fugitivity—from enslavement, from indentured servitude, from imprisonment—had been a
publicly debated and legislated issue since the inception of the first British colonies in North America.

Recent critical work on the early African American press is demonstrating the extent to which antebellum blacks were concerned with various dimensions of fugitivity, especially as it related to enslavement, flight, emancipation struggles, and militant resistance. A look at what else was published in *The Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, the year in which the magazine began serial publication of *Blake*, is instructive on this point. There are two articles on Jamaica, “Effects of Emancipation in Jamaica” and “Struggles for Freedom in Jamaica”; a poem by Frances Ellen Watkins entitled “The Dying Fugitive”; two articles on John Brown and his raid, “The Outbreak in Virginia” and “The Execution of John Brown”; and an article on Nat Turner, “The Nat Turner Insurrection.” Taken together, these pieces articulate a diasporic consciousness that sees enslaved struggles for freedom throughout the hemisphere as interrelated, their participants interconnected. And of course, the twin pillars of fugitivity and insurrection are deeply intertwined in these formulations.

If marronage has been absent from conversations about the nature of freedom in the United States, it is partially because of the rhetorical energy white southerners devoted to obscuring maroons’ lives and existences. It is also because Western philosophy’s considerations of freedom have come from a traditionally white male perspective. But critics like Susan Buck-Morss, whose *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009) argues that Hegel’s master-slave dialectic is rooted in the material reality of the Haitian Revolution rather than the realm of philosophical abstraction, are beginning to show how the history of black self-emancipation influenced white, European thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If we shift our frame of analysis to the work of postcolonial theorists like Glissant, Aime Cesaire, and Frantz
Fanon, to name but a few, marronage as an operant element in understandings of freedom arrives front and center. In a related vein, Cedric Robinson, in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), devotes considerable attention to marronage as a form of enslaved resistance that began conterminously with the advent of slavery in the Western hemisphere. And other critics have written about practices of marronage as they arose on the African continent itself in reaction to mass kidnappings and forced marches to the coastal slave prisons and holding ships. Even DuBois, in his 1909 biography of John Brown, makes clear the connections between Brown’s plan for a fugitive community in the Alleghenies and enslaved uprisings in Haiti, Jamaica, and the United States.

As mentioned briefly above, Diouf’s archival research suggests that maroons in the United States never played a significant part in the major enslaved uprisings about which there is extensive historical documentation. But her research shows that for a variety of reasons maroons were often scapegoated and targeted for involvement by southern authorities in moments when news of slave conspiracies and uprisings broke. In some of her examples, this scapegoating is blatantly self-serving. It allowed slaveowners to deflect blame for discontent among the enslaved to these outliers, preventing them from having to admit that the seeds of discontent were always right among them on their own plantations. It also provided an excuse to exaggerate the maroon problem and take advantage of the heightened alarm in order to petition for the raising of a militia or the dispatch of state or federal troops to the area. Slave owners did, at the very least, fear that the presence of maroons would influence other bondspeople to run away, so if the opportunity arose to eliminate the threat, it makes sense that they would take it.

While I find Diouf’s arguments on this point largely convincing, I still believe there’s more to the persistent scapegoating of maroons. The rhetorical potency of marronage derives not
only from its potential as a material threat to social order but from the deeper ideological threat it poses to the fantasies of racial essentialism and white supremacy that underpin that social order.

Marronage represents a threat to the social construction of whiteness in part because it represents a threat to that of blackness. *Blake* provides exceptional evidence of this fact. Henry Blake, much like Delany himself, is everything the racist logic of antebellum southern society believed he should not—could not—be: educated, intelligent, resourceful, mobile, highly literate, with great affection for his family and friends. If blackness is the necessary mirror against which whiteness is constructed, and the stability of whiteness depends upon blackness being associated with unfreedom, submission, passivity, and obedience, then Henry Blake in his roles as maroon and would-be insurrectionist entirely upends that construction of blackness and by extension the construction of whiteness that is its corollary.

Because maroons, maroon communities, and marronage were almost categorically disavowed by US southerners, maroons became sublimated into the larger discourse surrounding slave conspiracies and revolts. The subject position of the maroon resembles the desired subject position of participants in slave insurrections—that is, a state of freedom and autonomy in the South, in slaveholding territory itself. Even if, then, maroons were not major participants in US slave rebellions, the fact remains that the subject position they inhabit or represent vis-à-vis the state subtends discourse on insurrection in that it is a material example of a version of the subject position organized, rebellious bondspeople desired to achieve via the vehicle of armed revolt.

And again, one cannot forget the very real link between marronage and militant black action in the Caribbean and Latin America, a history that *Blake* invokes in part by virtue of Henry’s being originally from Cuba and traveling there to execute the final stages of his insurrectionary plan.

Imagining Blake as a maroon and his movements throughout the US South as a kind of
marronage sheds considerable light on the rhetorical workings of the text and on the extent, in both degree and kind, to which the radicalism of its warning would have been understood by contemporary readers.
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