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SUBJECTS OF STRUGGLE: THE INTENSIFICATION OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND
THE FUGITIVE DIMENSIONS OF BLACK FREEDOM IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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SUBJECTS OF STRUGGLE: THE INTENSIFICATION OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND
THE FUGITIVE DIMENSIONS OF BLACK FREEDOM IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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~ ABSTRACT ~

In antebellum America, free and enslaved blacks struggled for imagined forms of freedom at a time when white supremacy's governing authority intensified dramatically; the nation's culture of danger exposed black bodies, minds, and souls to an expanding array of juridical, disciplinary, and regulatory techniques designed to maintain white control of governing institutions and normative democratic ideals. This dissertation explores the interplay between the intensification of white supremacy particular to antebellum America and four interconnected modes of black struggle: refusal, militancy, marronage, and rupture. These modes of black struggle are generative processes that black agents practiced in response to legal, discursive, cultural, and social mechanisms of race. I argue that modes of black struggle are expressive of a form of life – a form of thinking, feeling, acting, *being* – that moves within, beneath, outside, and against racial norms and techniques of control and containment. In this dissertation, I demonstrate how the experience of enslavement and black struggle in antebellum America can be understood in terms of fugitive modes of being. In the context of chattel slavery, fugitive modes of being encompass individual and communal acts of resistance that by virtue of the liminality they occupy, produce, and maintain, exceed the full force of racist instrumentalities and generate the potential for future acts of resistance and future political change.

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~ For Kacia and my family of foodies, even Kyle ~

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Introduction: Fugitive Modes of Being

This dissertation explores the interplay between the intensification of white supremacy in antebellum America and four interconnected modes of black struggle: refusal, militancy, marronage, and rupture. These modes of black struggle are generative processes practiced in response to the legal, discursive, cultural, and social mechanisms of racial liberalism, a term I discuss in more detail below. The first three chapters of the dissertation focus on a distinct mode of struggle as represented in antebellum African American rhetoric and literature. The final chapter examines a mode of black struggle as performed by a postmodern narrativization of the enslaved experience. I contend that modes of black struggle are expressive of a form of life – a form of thinking, feeling, acting, *being* – that moves within, beneath, outside, and against racial norms and techniques of control and containment. I argue that the experience of enslavement and black struggle in antebellum America can be understood in terms of fugitive modes of being.

In the context of chattel slavery, fugitive modes of being exceed the full force of racist instrumentalities and in doing so generate what David J. Watkins refers to as “insulation.” According to Watkins, “insulation” is the aim of “strategies for freedom-seeking” (847). Whereas members of the civic sphere have access to legal and social “insulation” from oppressive norms and laws, the enslaved cannot turn to the government or civil society for such protection. In the context of antebellum America, experiencing enslavement meant living exposed, to one degree or another, to public and private techniques of domination, to social and physical death. Slaves developed psychological, spiritual, cognitive, and communal practices and networks of exchange in order to survive (and more). The ever-present necessity of those practices and networks is definitive of a life lived in slavery. Watkins explains,

Under slavery, social norms and laws are both unavailable as potential sources of insulation. Even incremental steps toward freedom appear to be out of reach. In addition to being subject to domination in all aspects of one's life, slavery cuts off access to the two predominant forms of insulation, social norms and the law, thus making the path out of unfreedom implausible. (851)

Without access to social and legal insulation, Watkins contends, slaves produce their own insulation by developing and practicing "strategies for freedom-seeking." Black modes of struggle also produce "insulation," but I use the term "struggle" instead of "strategies," because the former calls attention to the enslaved subject's intimate relation with the resistant practices necessary to their survival. Struggle was not something antebellum slaves simply deployed; it was a process of resistance embedded within their individual and communal lives; it animated their fugitive modes of being.

In America, modes of black struggle have always been practiced in opposition to the personal and institutional architecture of what Charles W. Mills terms "racial liberalism." In *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, Charles W. uses the term "racial liberalism" to signify the historically dominant form of liberalism "in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized" (29). The artifacts and instrumentalities of racial liberalism include the social contract, which, as Mills says, has really been a "*racial* one...an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit" (29). Within the theoretical framework Mills establishes, "racism is not," he writes, "an anomaly in an unqualified liberal universalism but generally symbiotically related to qualified and particularistic liberalism" (31). In other words, racism and liberal norms are not "incongruent"; they are complementary (31).

Similar in purpose to Mills, Joel Olson proposes that a “political theory of race” is needed to account for the congruent relation between racism and democracy. Such a theory is essential to producing an understanding of “race as produced within the political realm rather than prior to it and therefore as a product of democracy rather than its antithesis. This requires, however, breaking with the dominant theoretical approach toward the American racial order, which tends to bracket race from democracy” (xii). For Mills and Olson, political theory and philosophy need to recognize racism and democracy as compatible and mutually reinforcing entities. In considering how America’s “unfortunate” racist “episodes” are commonly represented as violations “of the egalitarian ethos of the democratic tradition,” Olson asks, “what if we understand these events as perfectly compatible with American democracy” (xv)? In other words, what if we cease to insulate America’s democratic ideals from its racist practices? To attain the democracy Olson imagines as possible means avoiding the idea that “equality and democracy” are solutions to the problem of “exclusion and discrimination.” This is because “democracy is not just a solution; it is a political problem itself” (Olson xvi-xvii). Olson concludes, “The question is not just democracy for whom but what kind of democracy, not just who is to be made equal but what kind of equality, not just who is to be free but what kind of freedom” (xvi-xvii). Within the scope of Olson’s work, taking the history of America’s “political problem” into account makes it possible for a new, more egalitarian democracy to emerge in the future. This dissertation participates in Olson’s critique and is motivated by similar goals; it looks to antebellum African American rhetoric and literature to conceptualize a different “kind of freedom” than that found in racial liberalism, a fugitive mode of being generated through the process of black struggle.

Antebellum America was a formative period of black struggle because of the extent to which the governing authority of white supremacy intensified during that time. The popularization of scientific racism and the normalization of a new conception of citizenship synchronized to generate a pernicious culture of danger. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault frames liberalism as an art of government that “entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship [with] freedom...Liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion and obligations relying on threats, etcetera” (53-54). In other words, Foucault contends that the security of an inclusive liberal system depends on an exclusive mechanism that protects the system from danger and risk. At the same time, the liberal system invokes the prospect of danger to justify the limitations it imposes. Foucault describes “danger” as a feature of liberalism, writing that within the liberal system, individuals “are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger” (66). In antebellum America, unrestrained blackness was commonly understood as a danger to the well-being of the nation’s institutions and ideals, a social fact reinforced by the emergence of scientific theories of race. These theories functioned as the security mechanism central to the protection of the nation’s racial hierarchies and the reproduction of white control. Whereas external differences such as ethnicity or culture previously governed social and legal forms of discrimination, the biological category of race coded blackness as a sign of an uncivilized, irrational, animalistic, and volatile interior nature. Scientific theories of race seized black life from the inside by denying blacks the internal capacity for freedom; to give them access to freedom or citizenship would not only be unnatural, but it would also imperil the political and economic system, threaten the public wellbeing, and many believed, prove harmful to the black race.

In antebellum America, the nation's "culture of danger" exposed black bodies, minds, and souls to an expanding array of racist disciplinary and regulatory techniques in service of maintaining white control of governing institutions and normative ideals. I refer to this process throughout the dissertation as the intensification of white supremacy. The intensification of white supremacy entailed the normalization of the biological category of race and a major shift in how the rights-bearing category of citizenship was understood. In *Liberalism and the Culture of Security*, Katherine Henry explains how prior to the antebellum era, citizenship was understood within the frame of classical republicanism as a sign of self-mastery and self-sufficiency. A citizen would "be able to meet his own and his household's needs without relying on outside help." Exhibiting self-sufficiency was essential to demonstrating one's capacity for civic virtue, "that is, of transcending his own self-interest or the interests of a patron and participating in rational deliberation for the common good" (1). Whereas the republican form of citizenship emphasized self-sufficient behavior as an expression of liberty, the emerging, liberal form of citizenship recognized the state as the paternalistic protector of citizens and their liberties. As Henry argues, "liberty was more and more commonly being figured negatively, as freedom *from* tyranny, as a precious and endangered article that had to be protected from the powers that were always threatening to encroach" (2). This is to say that scientific theories of race and a shifting understanding of liberty coalesced to more forcefully designate blackness as a threat to the integrity of the nation that needed to be contained and controlled.

Within this historical context, slaves engaged in modes of struggle that contested the internal and external limits imposed upon them. Their physical, cognitive, and spiritual survival depended on modes of struggle. This dissertation demonstrates how black struggle produces

fugitive modes of being that exceed the full force of racialized techniques of control and generate the potential for future acts of resistance and future political change.

Chapter one is entitled “Black Agency, Freedom, and the Practice of Refusal in Henry Highland Garnet’s ‘Address to the Slaves of the United States.’” In the 1842 Address, Garnet calls for slaves to cease laboring for their masters, and my chapter considers the practice of refusal he recommends as commanding considerable disruptive and productive potential. Garnet issues his call for the non-violent practice of refusal at the end of a decidedly militant address. Most readings of the Address have attempted to resolve the ambivalent relation between Garnet’s militant rhetoric and his call for a non-violent practice of resistance. I argue that instead of resolving that ambivalence, readings should preserve it in order to recognize how the synchronization of the practice of refusal and militant rhetoric designates the black body – and the male black body in particular - as a liminal site of ungovernability.

The title for my second chapter is “Frederick Douglass and *The Heroic Slave*: The Intensification of White Supremacy and the Reformatory Potential of Black Antislavery Violence.” In this chapter, I consider Douglass’s militant turn in the late 1840s as a strategic response to the intensification of white supremacy’s governing authority, as represented by the passage and enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. In his public rhetoric and in *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass fuses the language of moral reform to the disturbing threat of black violence, marking his militancy as a radical extension of the moral argumentation he privileged earlier in his career. *The Heroic Slave* does not indicate that Douglass abandoned the prospect of moral or political reform; but the narrative’s portrait of black militancy acknowledges the limits of reform and asserts the slaves’ right to respond violently in the face of the continued, systemized denial of black freedom. To highlight the singular nature of Douglass’s militancy, I introduce a contrast

between *The Heroic Slave* and Herman Melville's 1853 novella, *Benito Cereno*. Melville's novella, like *The Heroic Slave*, imagines the eruption of black violence as an inevitable feature of a racist political regime resistant to reform. However, *Benito Cereno* dramatizes the irreformability of racist subjectivities and institutions as evidence of the nation's impending doom. By contrast, *The Heroic Slave* adopts an optimistic outlook. It invokes the prospect of violent black antislavery action to emphasize the need for immediate political reform and to imagine the formation of an international black community that would be independent of a racial state impervious to reform.

Chapter three is entitled "The Potential for Light and Destruction: Marronage as Freedom in Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America*." I read Delany's revolutionary text through the theoretical lens provided by Neil Roberts and his book *Freedom as Marronage*. Roberts describes marronage as a form of freedom born in the African diaspora, and it involves the "multidimensional, constant, and never static...flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the sphere of positive activity and human freedom" (15). As a "normative concept" of freedom and a multidimensional mode of black struggle, "marronage" encompasses the performance of "processes of movement" that create "the possibility for actualizing revolution" and other forms of resistance. I argue that *Blake* features marronage as a resistant practice central to the generation and occupation of liminal geographies and modes of being. I also contend that marronage and the liminal form of freedom it generates can be found throughout antebellum African American literature. To support that argument, I conclude the chapter by constructing a comparison between Delany's *Blake* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I demonstrate how both texts depict marronage as a powerful mode of black struggle with revolutionary potential.

The final chapter retains the theoretical focus on flight established in chapter three but transitions from antebellum African American literature to Colson Whitehead's 2015 *The Underground Railroad*. As a postmodern slave narrative about a fugitive slave named Cora, *Underground* deploys discontinuous historic elements – what I refer to as “anachronisms” – to defamiliarize the slave narrative genre and rupture the national narrative of progress. The structure and anachronistic elements of Cora's journey resist dominant literary and historical norms, thereby identifying *Underground* as a text that engages in a dimension of flight Roberts does not discuss: the discursive performance of flight. In conclusion, I consider the relevancy of Whitehead's depiction of flight to current debates about race and racial reform in America.

~ Chapter 1 ~

Black Agency, Freedom, and the Practice of Refusal in Henry Highland
Garnet's "Address to the Slaves of the United States"

On August 16 of 1843, twenty-seven-year-old minister and former slave Henry Highland Garnet took the stage at the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, New York,¹ and delivered a fiery speech entitled "An Address to the Slaves of the United States." In the speech, Garnet implored slaves to use any means necessary to resist their masters, instructing them that "there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once - rather, *die freemen, than live to be slaves*" (185-186). At a time when moral arguments dominated abolitionist discourse, calling for slaves to resist and possibly "die freemen" sounded to many like a radical call for a black revolution. "Let your motto be," Garnet shouted, "RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! - No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance" (188). Since 1843, most readings of the speech have understood Garnet's call for "RESISTANCE" as a call for violence or revolution, but the standardization of that interpretation has excluded a more circumspect discussion of the specific technique of resistance and freedom the address explicitly proposes: refusal.

According to most readings, Garnet's address and call for "RESISTANCE" endorses revolutionary action and imagines freedom emerging in the absence of slavery. Interpreting Garnet's address as a revolutionary call to action has merit, because the Address characterizes physical action as an immediate moral necessity. In addition, the Address also expresses a certain amount of comfort with violence as a virtuous and masculine form of resistance. In a respectful counter to this line of thought, I contend that the Address does not present freedom solely as the

emancipatory consequence of black insurrection or revolution; rather, Garnet's Address to the Slaves also imagines freedom as a strategic action - as what this chapter terms a *practice of freedom* - capable of authorizing the agency of its practitioners even as they live within the oppressive power relations characteristic of slavery.

Unlike the promise of revolutionary freedom, practicing freedom does not guarantee liberation in any absolute or permanent sense; it is not a revolutionary vehicle to a place or time outside of oppressive power relations. It does not emerge in the absence of oppression. Rather, practicing freedom involves acting strategically to manipulate dominant norms and techniques of power. By practicing freedom, subjects generate a disruptive friction that frustrates the application of dominant governmental techniques. While the exercise of this friction does not guarantee a halt to or an escape from the techniques of power it inhibits, it does generate the potential for further creative displacements to take place and for new forms of individual and communal agency to emerge, even if the agency that emerges is liminal or temporary. Therefore, while practicing freedom may signify a desire for emancipation, its performance engages in a process of a struggle *within* oppressive power relations and institutions.

My understanding of freedom as a practice borrows from work by Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, particularly in their emphasis on freedom as a form of action.² In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt delivers a critique of modern, sovereign-based iterations of freedom that define "freedom" as a kind of internal possession. Instead of defining freedom as an internal gift, Arendt proposes that "to *be* free and to act are the same" (151). For Arendt, it is the performance of the action, not its preceding motivation or subsequent goal, that allows freedom to "come out of hiding" (167). Action of this kind constantly interrupts the automated mechanisms of the world; it [action] "breaks into the world as an 'infinite improbability'" (168).

By acting, in other words, we create the potential for improbability even as our lives travel through channels organized by systematized processes. Freedom of this kind can broadly be defined, then, as the actions that author improbable beginnings within existing power relations.

In his Address to the slaves, Garnet proposes a practice of freedom with the potential to end slavery and transform the world in which he lived; he tells slaves to refuse to labor for their masters. “Let every slave,” he says, “throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered” (188). When Garnet instructs slaves to refuse to labor, he instructs them to engage in a practice of freedom with the potential to generate and maintain an improbable vision of themselves as more than an appendage of labor. Such a vision is improbable because in the context of antebellum America, free society depended upon – and valued – laboring black bodies. Although refusing labor, according to Garnet, will eventually bring an end to slavery, emancipation does not take place as a direct consequence of it. When he says, “the days of slavery are numbered,” he categorizes the death of slavery as an inevitable but gradual consequence of slaves refusing to labor. Slaves refusing to labor demonstrate their individual and communal agency by depriving the plantation of its workforce and the country of its most valued commodity.

My use of “agency” in this chapter borrows from Sharon Krause’s work. According to Krause, “Agency properly conceived is the affirmation of one’s subjective existence, or personal identity, through concrete action in the world. To be an agent is to have an impact on the world that one can recognize as one’s own” (4). Within this framework, agency cannot be figured as an individualized internal capacity, although internal faculties such as believing and desiring are involved. The reason being, as Krause explains, is that the effect we have on the world depends upon the communities around us and how they respond to or understand our actions. Slaves who

refuse to labor create a form of agency, because they perform an action that provokes a recognition of black bodies as something other than submissive tools naturally suited for a life of labor. That recognition may be permanent, fleeting, or incomplete; it may belong to the master, the slave performing the refusal, or to communities who bear witnesses to or learn about the performance of the practice. Ideally, the practice of refusal's power to impact the slave system also increases according to how many in the slave community engage in its practice - and how many in or out of the slave community recognize it. This means that the practice of refusal's power to frustrate slavery's logic runs parallel to the breadth of its acceptance within the slave community. The more slaves who practice it, the more powerful and disruptive it is. The act of refusal thereby qualifies as a practice of freedom that creates the potential for individual slaves and communities to destabilize slavery, irrevocably alter the antebellum world slavery helped build, and develop a durable sense of individual and communal agency.³

As mentioned, my analysis of the practice of refusal pushes back against readings that reduce Garnet's call for "RESISTANCE" to a call for insurrection. Due to the Address' ambivalence (a feature I discuss in more detail below), I am uncertain as to whether Garnet intended to promote black revolution when using militant rhetoric in his Buffalo address. I argue that Garnet's instruction for slaves to refuse to labor needs to be considered alongside his militant rhetoric. Of particular importance is how the practice of refusal designates the black body – and especially the black male body - as a liminal site of ungovernability. The practice of refusal accomplishes this by appropriating dominant norms and deploying them to carve out a liminal space on the threshold between two identities stereotypically assigned to black males living in free and slave society: the submissive, obedient child and the violent brute. To be more specific, practicing the refusal Garnet recommends involves appropriating the norm of self-

reliance in order to violate the first stereotype (obedient child) without occupying the second (violent brute), and vice versa. Appropriating the norm of self-reliance does not amount to a claim of personhood, because such a claim requires legal recognition. If legal recognition were to occur, then slaves who become persons would be incorporated as subjects into normative governmental techniques. The practice of refusal amounts to a decision to be governed as one sees fit. Because slaves cannot legally make such a decision, any slave practicing refusal creates an identity that is incompatible with slavery and has no place within the normative forms of government that discipline and regulate citizens. As a site of ungovernability, the black body that refuses creates and maintains the disruptive potential of liminal identities and communities.

In pursuit of this argument, I divide this chapter into four distinct yet interrelated sections. The first section analyzes the Address' broad reception history and Garnet's canonical reputation as a militant abolitionist. In this initial section, I also explain how my argument contributes to the scholarly territory surrounding Garnet and his Address. The second section narrows the chapter's focus to the antebellum abolitionist movement of the 1830s and 40s and analyzes how Garnet's aggressive rhetoric represented a challenge to the normative ideology of moral suasion, a dominant set of non-violent principles that, at the time, informed most abolitionist strategies and techniques. Garnet signals his divergence from moral suasion by using what Jacqueline Bacon terms "adaptory rhetoric" a rhetorical strategy he used to challenge male slaves to act and resist. The third section argues that the Address' emphasis on action should not be understood as an unequivocal endorsement of revolution or insurrection. Instead, we need to take the Address' ambivalence in relation to action more seriously, this ambivalence being the messy product of the union between Garnet's revolutionary rhetoric and his explicit recommendation for slaves to refuse to labor. Simply put, the practice of refusal offers us another

way of thinking about the form of freedom the Address recommends. Rather than casting freedom as a possession coterminous with the absence of oppression, the practice of refusal casts freedom as a willed action that designates the black body and community as productive, liminal sites of ungovernability.

Part I. The Reception History of Garnet's 'Address to the Slaves'

The reception history of Garnet's Buffalo Address can be organized roughly into three primary eras: the antebellum United States (more specifically the immediate months and years following Garnet's 1843 delivery), the Civil Rights era of the 20th century, and more recent scholarship published in the 21st century. In this section of the chapter, I explain how the Address earned its reputation for militancy, how recent scholarship maintains and challenges that reputation, and how my argument contributes to and expands the discursive boundaries of the Address' reception.

From 1842-1843, abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Gerrit Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet each delivered their own address to the slaves.⁴ Philosophical differences distinguished the three men and the content of their addresses. Smith and Garnet were active members of the newly formed Liberty Party, an emergent political party that sought to use existing legal and political mechanisms to abolish slavery. In contrast to the Liberty Party's political brand of abolitionism, Garrison and the Garrisonians treated slavery as a moral problem, meaning that they focused on shaping public opinion via moral reform rather than through existing legislative means. Differences aside, when Smith, Garrison and Garnet decided to include slaves as members of their audience, they marked an important shift in abolitionist rhetorical strategy. Until that time, most abolitionists in the United States considered citizens,

primarily in the North, their target audience. By including slaves as members of their audience, the three Addresses imagined slaves as agents of their own freedom.⁵

The audience in Buffalo attending Garnet's Address to the National Convention of Colored Citizens consisted of a few hundred people, including fifty-eight conference delegates. This was a relatively small crowd in contrast to the New England Anti-Slavery Convention (NEACS), a Garrisonian convention hosted in Boston sixteen months prior where Garrison delivered his address to the slaves to an audience numbering in the thousands.⁶ Whereas the storied Faneuil Hall played host to the NEACS, the Buffalo convention took place at a nondescript public hall on the corner of Washington and Seneca street, described by Frederick Douglass, who was in attendance, as "an old dilapidated, and deserted room formerly used as a post office" (qtd. Harrold 50). As far as Garnet's audience was concerned, one reporter explained that they could be recognized as "poor and shabbily dressed...ragamuffins." More populated conventions, such as the NEACS in Boston and others organized in upstate New York, tended to maintain a predominantly middle-class - and white - audience.

While Garnet's audience was characterized as a collection of "ragamuffins," Garnet's tall and muscular physique was said to have presented a "striking figure," a characterization supplemented by the fact that one of his legs had been amputated just below the knee (Harrold 51).⁷ His close friend Alexander Crummel depicted Garnet as the model of masculine regality. He was a man whose "large and noble head" crested a "majestic" stature and his "very presence impressed one with the idea of might and manliness" (qtd. Stuckey 151). The heroic import of Crummel's praise depends, in part, upon leaving unmentioned the color of Garnet's skin. His romantic account of Garnet's masculinity attempts to elevate Garnet beyond the boundaries of racial categorization and the normative assumption of black inferiority. Additionally, his praise

gives us a rhetorical example of how writers often portrayed Garnet as an exceptional black man, a status that differentiated him from other black men even as it marked him as similar – though not equal - to his white peers.

Crummel's praise also offers us a window into how Garnet's supporters and critics employed a logic of difference to distinguish him as either a heroic or dangerous exception to certain social and racial norms. On the one hand, Garnet's performance in Buffalo, along with his prior speaking engagements, earned him a reputation as an exceptionally intelligent and well-spoken black man. However, as was the case with the language Crummel used, Garnet's exceptionality was often articulated in a manner that portrayed him as superior to his black peers; these accounts often praise Garnet while simultaneously reaffirming popular assumptions about black inferiority and white supremacy. For instance, following the Buffalo address, a letter to the editor published in the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* expressed admiration for Garnet's persuasive powers, and the writer noted that although he had heard many of the nation's "first men" speak, "they never held their audience under such complete control as Garnet" (qtd. Harrold 51). This same writer also mentions that he did "not believe there was a white man present who was not forced to acknowledge himself, that for one hour his mind had not been his own, but wholly at the control of the eloquent negro, the gifted man" (qtd. Harrold 51). The most convincing proof of Garnet's rhetorical skill, in other words, lies in his ability to impress and even *possess* white men. Garnet's eloquence elevates him - a 'negro' - beyond the racial limitations his black skin supposedly imposes and identifies him as a kindred spirit to the universal "gifted man." His exceptional status differentiates him from the other blacks in attendance - as well as the slaves for whom the Address is intended - just as it places him in the company of the nation's "first men," who were themselves "gifted" men. The complimentary

letter's condescension is rooted in the implication that Garnet deserves special recognition for behaving unlike a "negro" normally would and for exercising a power of persuasion belonging to the country's elite white founders. Garnet is not simply any negro; he is an exceptionally "*eloquent* negro" because he speaks like a "gifted man." In a flourish of benevolence, the phrase "gifted man" masks Garnet's race and elevates him onto a universal pedestal where he can be perceived as something more, something better, than black.⁸

Many published responses to Garnet's Address portrayed Garnet as an exceptional black man, and others used a logic of difference to highlight Garnet's radical militancy and register him as a threat to the social order. For example, when Garnet delivered his Buffalo address, William Lloyd Garrison had stepped away from his editorial position at *The Liberator*, temporarily ceding his responsibilities to Maria W. Chapman. Chapman published a scathing review of Garnet's Address on November 22, 1843. She judged Garnet's address an "evil" call for insurrection in conflict with the peaceful virtues of abolitionism and praised the convention for voting to reject the Address (a vote that prevented the Address' immediate publication). "It is a matter of thankfulness," she explained, "whenever the spirit of freedom and of good, of love, forgiveness, and magnanimity prevails, even in a single heart, over evil; hatred, force, revenge, and littleness. It did so, in a measure, at this Convention; - the address to the slaves, of the reverend H. H. Garnet, expressing the idea that the time for insurrection had come, having been rejected." Chapman interpreted Garnet's Address as a militant call for slave insurrection best forgotten in the name of forgiveness and magnanimity. She uses a logic of difference in order to locate Garnet in opposition to civil, universal values such as "freedom," "good," "love," "forgiveness," and "magnanimity."

Frederick Douglass attended the Address and objected to it for similar reasons, saying that the convention delegates should officially reject Garnet's message of "physical force" because it might "lead to an insurrection" if endorsed and distributed (qtd. In Pasternak 73). Like Chapman, Douglass was at the time an active Garrisonian loyal to the principle of non-violence. During the Buffalo delegation's debate about whether the convention should endorse or reject Garnet's address, Douglass introduced a resolution that instructed abolitionists to rely on "moral suasion" rather than Garnet's "physical force." In the end, the convention sided with Douglass and rejected Garnet's Address, though only by a single vote. The narrow margin, rather than cementing Garrisonian influence over the black abolitionist movement, made more visible a growing divide between those loyal to the American Anti-Slavery Society's non-political agenda and those interested in using existing legislative mechanisms and even violence to combat slavery. Given moral suasion's dominance as an abolitionist strategy in the 1830s, Garnet's near victory sent a clear signal that moral suasion was no longer the unquestioned strategy of the abolitionist movement. By the early 1840s, moral suasion had begun to cede support to more politically-minded forms of abolitionism.

In 1847, Garnet delivered the Address again at a national meeting in Troy, New York. Even though the meeting took place at Garnet's church and, according to Joel Schor, "produced more sympathy for the Address," the delegates still refused to endorse it (32). Garnet finally published the Address in 1848 in a pamphlet that also included David Walker's famous 1830 "Appeal." At the 1849 Ohio State Convention, black abolitionists requested five hundred copies of the pamphlet in order to distribute it, but the pamphlet's distribution did not spark a reaction like the one that followed its original delivery in 1843 (Schor 33). By the late 1840s and early

1850s, the aggressive rhetoric featured in the Address in 1843 had been embraced by a significant portion of the black abolitionist community, Frederick Douglass included.

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1970s, the significance of Garnet's Address was reevaluated and its militant potential reappraised. Like the antebellum responses, Civil Rights era critics often interpret Garnet's Address as a militant endorsement of slave revolt. However, while many antebellum responses used a logic of difference to represent Garnet's militancy as a threat to the nation's security and moral values, Civil Rights era critics by and large identified Garnet's militancy as a form of virtue. In a 1979 article, Joel Schor documents Garnet's lifelong rivalry with Frederick Douglass, concluding that "Giving Garnet...his rightful due, albeit posthumously, has been the intent of this article" (36). In his 1971 article published in *The Journal of Black Studies*, Steven Shiffrin notes how Garnet's militancy "appealed to the almost universally accepted right of self-defense" (50). In the historical context of the Civil Rights era, the black militancy Garnet represented created fertile ground for fresh assertions of black dignity and equality. For example, in 1976 Harry Reed credits Garnet for advancing "a program of emancipation" that was "the first of its kind," because it considered "the slave as an active agent in his own liberation" (386). To summarize, while many antebellum writers distanced themselves from the Address' aggressive rhetoric because of its dangerous militant potential, Civil Rights readings were more likely to identify that potential as a virtuous and desirable asset.

Most recently, scholarship by Stanley Harrold, Eddie Glaude Jr, and James Jasinski complicate and, in Jasinski's case, challenge the institutional fact of Garnet's militancy. Collectively, their work contextualizes the Address within a network of cultural and rhetorical traditions and discourses, and as a result, complicate and challenge the conclusions of past readings. Jasinski reads Garnet through the lens of the Calvinist theological tradition and argues

that Garnet's Calvinist heritage should lead us to reject militant interpretations of Garnet's Address and instead see it as an appeal for what he terms "passive obedience." According to Jasinski, passive obedience was a "prominent sixteenth-century concept" familiar to reformers in the revolutionary period who sought a middle ground between "Paul's injunction to submit to higher powers with Peter's admonition (in Acts) to obey God and not man" (44). More simply put, passive obedience "functioned as a middle-course between simple, abject submission and overt rebellion" and it was a strategic method of resistance that allowed "reformed Christians to negotiate a double-bind situation where (a) they are enjoined by God to obey their superiors but (b) their superiors have ordered them to engage in a type of action which violates God's commandments" (44). Christians practicing passive obedience disobey the "superior's order but willingly submit to any punishment their superior might choose to inflict" (44). Enduring that punishment situates Christians as the "suffering servant" noted in 1 Peter 2:18-25,⁹ a martyr whose method of resistance resembles, Jasinski suggests, Maria W. Chapman's notion of "active non-resistance," a term she coined in 1839. Curiously, Jasinski acknowledges in a footnote, "There is, of course, some irony in suggesting that Chapman's 1839 'active non-resistance' might resemble Garnet's 1843 call for resistance, given the former's negative reaction to the latter's 'Address'..." (57). Jasinski does not consider the matter further, and the tag of "irony" seems intended to resolve any tension generated by the discrepancy between Chapman's proposal of "active non-resistance" and her damning criticism of Garnet's militancy. In the end, the discrepancy Jasinski attempts to resolve seems more significant than the footnoted use of "irony" suggests. Like many of her peers, including Frederick Douglass, Chapman is confident of her interpretation of Garnet's Address as a call for slave insurrection, a historical fact that puts

pressure on Jasinski's claim that the practice of resistance Garnet endorses fits the mold of Chapman's peaceful "active non-resistance."

Jasinski's reading, while invaluable for its excavation of the relationship between Garnet's theological leanings and his abolitionism, excludes the militant potential of Garnet's rhetoric. Moreover, Jasinski's essay does not discuss Garnet's relationship with an evolving abolitionist movement, nor does he consider the ways in which Garnet's roots in the slave community may also have influenced his thinking about slavery and freedom. Instead, his argument focuses primarily on the traces of Calvinist doctrine in Garnet's rhetoric, and while his analysis skillfully demonstrates how that rhetoric expresses Calvinist doctrine, it largely excludes Garnet's racial and cultural heritage from the field of interpretation.

In contrast to Jasinski, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. contextualizes Garnet's Address within the "exodus politics" of the Black Convention Movement, thereby conjoining Garnet's religious background with his membership in the imagined community of antebellum African Americans. While Glaude Jr., like Jasinski, recognizes the importance of Garnet's religious background, he dedicates more attention to Garnet's racial and cultural connections to slavery and their influence on his pessimistic view of the country's politics. Garnet's pessimism, according to Glaude, led to "a pragmatic view of race - the recognition that social and political conditions make racial solidarity an important political and social strategy" (147). For Glaude Jr., it is the spirit of racial solidarity that "frames the 1843 address," an observation that leads him to place Garnet's abolitionism in conversation with the black convention movement in which he participated, the movement being a vital antebellum expression of black solidarity (1843).

Like Glaude Jr., Stanley Harrold situates Garnet within the historical context of antebellum abolitionism, but he does not focus his attention on Garnet's links to the black

convention movement. Rather, Harrold places Garnet's Address in conversation with the two other addresses made to the slaves in the early 1840s, one by Gerrit Smith in January of 1842 and the other by William Lloyd Garrison in May of 1843. As Harrold explains, each of the addresses compels slaves to confront their masters, but they each caution against open insurrection. Therefore, their support of confrontational tactics occupies an ambiguous middle ground between violence and passivity. Harrold terms this emerging brand of abolitionism "aggressive abolitionism" in recognition of the abolitionist community's growing willingness to adopt aggressive antislavery tactics in the early 1840s.

While I rely extensively on Harrold's thoughtful analysis and research, an important difference distinguishes our respective approaches. Whereas I use Garnet's historical context to explore the unique nature of his Address and the form of freedom it recommends, Harrold uses Garnet to explore the intricacies of his historical context. His work offers a meticulous account of the political and cultural landscapes the three Addresses to the Slaves occupy. He examines the history of the abolition movement, provides context about each speech's convention (information about notable delegates and speakers included), evaluates the immediate and long-term effects of the Addresses, and argues persuasively that Smith, Garrison, and Garnet considered the slaves a real audience that could be reached - meaning that addressing the slaves amounted to more than a symbolic gesture. In his introduction, however, Harrold leaves room for debate when he introduces his work on Garnet as more comprehensive and nuanced than the work of past historians. While past historians have treated Garnet's Address to the Slaves as unique in its "demand for action," Harrold seeks to correct how such a focus takes too narrow a view of Garnet's significance. In order to address this constraint, Harrold situates Garnet's address in a more comprehensive context where it can be evaluated alongside Smith's and

Garrison's addresses. He first makes his intentions known when he notes that little scholarly attention had been given to the addresses since the 1960s, explaining that Garnet's address "has gained currency as an illustration of antebellum black militancy" (2). Of that currency's questionable value, he elaborates:

Some historians assume that Garnet's Address is unique. They contend that it demonstrates dissonance between a black abolitionist demand for action and a white abolitionist tendency toward abstract debate. When the three speeches are grouped together and placed in their physical and cultural contexts, however, a more complex and nuanced situation emerges. The Addresses are products of changing circumstances, emerging perspectives, abolitionist factionalism, romantic masculinity, biracialism, and a growing willingness to acknowledge the role of slaves in the movement (Harrold 2).

In many respects, I agree with Harrold. Historical accounts of Garnet's Address and its context have often employed a reductive binary separating black abolitionism from white abolitionism. It is also accurate to note how past scholarship has focused on the ways in which Garnet's rhetoric qualifies as a militant call to action, or on how Garnet's rhetoric evokes a "romantic masculinity" or signifies "abolitionist factionalism." Harrold's account of how past historians have understood Garnet's Address to the Slaves is fair, but the contrast he employs to distinguish his work from theirs risks excluding the Address' unique meaning and relevancy to black audiences.

Harrold's contrast juxtaposes the canonical understanding of Garnet's address with his own interpretation; the latter places Garnet's Address in relation to Smith's and Garrison's addresses in order to arrive at a "more complex and nuanced situation." While placing Garnet in conversation with Smith and Garrison does create a "more complex and nuanced situation" by

complicating our understanding of early 1840s abolitionism, Harrold's contrast also creates an interpretive framework wherein Harrold's "complex and nuanced" analysis corrects past interpretations that "*assume* that Garnet's Address is unique" (emphasis mine). By characterizing the work of past historians as work informed by assumptions, and by attaching the label of "complex and nuanced" to his own work, Harrold implies that an understanding of Garnet's Address as a uniquely black call to action is unsophisticated. My argument, in contrast, recognizes Garnet's Address as a unique black call to action. At the very least, we should consider the Address' singular relevance to free and enslaved blacks, especially since Garnet delivers his address from a perspective and subject position vastly different than Garrison's and Smith's. Unlike those two abolitionists, Garnet experienced slavery; when he uses revolutionary rhetoric and tells slaves to resist and cease laboring for their masters, his words exercise a particular force that is not available to Smith or Garrison. To conclude, whereas Harrold uses Garnet, Smith and Garrison to articulate a useful and complex understanding of their historical context, my argument uses their historical context to arrive at a more complex understanding of the Buffalo Address, namely, of the ambivalence created by its use of revolutionary rhetoric and the practice of refusal it explicitly recommends.¹⁰

Part II. Moral Suasion as "Civic Reform" and 1830's Abolitionism

Garnet's use of revolutionary rhetoric signals his pessimism about moral suasion's efficacy as an antislavery strategy. The abolitionist movement championed moral suasion and respectability politics in the early 1830s as amenable strategies at a time when anti-abolitionist violence was rising. Within the context of 1830's abolitionism, moral suasion invoked universal standards of morality in order to persuade people to see slavery as a sinful and unjust system. If,

as abolitionists argued, blacks were persons fully capable of living as virtuous and productive members of society, then slavery must be morally reprehensible. Abolitionists turned to moral suasion in order to achieve what Adam Chamberlain terms a “foundational effect,” whereby “enough opinions” are transformed “through social pressure to create a cadre of activists prepared for political engagement” (57). In other words, abolitionists sought to create a moral foundation supportive of their antislavery mission rather than engage in overt political action through existing legislative mechanisms, in large part because Garrisonians perceived those mechanisms as corrupted by their association with slavery. By discussing “moral suasion,” I map a foundational component of the abolitionist discursive landscape to which Garnet’s Buffalo address responds and challenges. My analysis of moral suasion constructs the first half of a contrast that I will put into conversation with Garnet’s revolutionary rhetoric in the next section.

Moral suasion grew out of the American Quaker community before being appropriated by the black abolitionist community in the early 1830’s. Then, as Tunde Adeleke has noted, the Garrisonian abolitionist faction officially adopted moral suasion in 1832 when Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society. It is important to note that the Garrisonians organized around moral suasion “*after* the First National Negro Convention in Philadelphia in 1831, at which black attendants acknowledged their problems and shortcomings and expressed faith in the redemptive power of moral suasion by pledging to work strenuously to ‘encourage simplicity, neatness, temperance and economy in our habits; in order to disprove preconceived notions and prejudices’” (127). By living according to these principles, blacks made an indirect appeal to the national conscience to demonstrate they were deserving of equal treatment and political standing.

The moral habits abolitionists preached reflected a pervasive anxiety about what Christopher Castiglia refers to as “civic interiority,” an interiority in line with the middle-class notion of privacy and its supportive values (8).¹¹ The 1820s and 30s was a period of widespread reform, and institutions such as abolitionist parties and temperance societies relied heavily on the idea that everybody possessed some measure of reformability. Importantly, this meant that judgments about the interiority of individuals came to define individual identity, and individuals who failed to develop their “civic interiority” properly were judged as deviants in need of moral reform and the benevolent instruction reformers were ready to provide. Before the emphasis on “civic interiority” became the norm, social reform organized around making structural changes, but in the antebellum period, structural reform gave way to the reform of individuals, thereby turning “institutions of privacy into sites of surveillance and habitual correction” (Castiglia 8). In this context, “public opinion” came to function as an important corrective of individual behavior and identity; in fact, Castiglia goes so far as to claim that the reform movement and its keen interest in regulating people’s private lives gave birth to the very concept of “public opinion.” As the reform movement expanded and intensified, so too did public opinion and its influence. Castiglia writes that the “527 U.S. Antislavery societies in 1836 more than doubled to 1,300 by 1838, claiming 109,000 members, while in 1835 an estimated 1.5 million Americans belonged to temperance societies. Through these societies and their vast networks of publications and lectures, reformers helped construct ‘public opinion,’ over which they maintained an unshakable hold” (8). Abolitionist emphasis on moral suasion was therefore one branch of many in a growing discursive network dedicated to spreading the gospel of middle-class values and principles, the internalization of which was meant to mold individual interiorities so that they could be safely included as productive additions to the body politic. Black interiorities were

commonly believed to be in particular need of reform given - depending on the point of view - their racial or environmental deficiencies. In brief, 1830s abolitionism relied on a moral message that framed black persons as potential citizens due to their internal capacity for reform and virtuous behavior. If the movement could articulate the reformability of black persons, then a serious blow would be dealt to proslavery arguments which held that blacks were inherently unfit for a life of freedom.

In the hands of abolitionist organizations such as the AASS and the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS), moral suasion's paternalistic tone becomes more prominent. For example, when the AMRS was established in 1835, it declared that "moral reform, intellectual culture, and preserving industry" were the necessary ingredients to black respectability." With this statement, the AMRS implied that blacks were in need of the "moral reform, intellectual culture" and industrial commitment modeled by white, middle-class America. Once learned, middle-class values would elevate blacks into respectable and productive members of society, and the country as a whole would be better for it. The AMRS' paternalistic stance was typical for reform-minded groups, and abolitionists also used rhetoric representing slaves as children in need of the moral and intellectual care Northern abolitionists provided.

This paternalism notwithstanding, blacks appropriated the principles of moral suasion in the North to their own advantage. Philadelphia, for example, was viewed as a mecca of black prosperity and for good reason. As Adeleke writes, whether they were born poor and lucky enough to come from wealthy backgrounds, Philadelphia blacks,

"all shared a consensus on the potency of the economically self-made man. Their economic success induced and strengthened faith in Jacksonian society - believing earnestly that whites would welcome and embrace a morally upright, industrious,

intelligent and economically elevated black man. Consequently, not only did blacks imbibe the predominant abolitionist values, but concurred implicitly, if not explicitly, with the contention that they, themselves, had contributed to much of their problems and should, therefore, assumed greater roles in resolving them. (129)

While moral suasion provided an ideological conduit through which blacks could tap into middle-class values and some degree of economic prosperity and social belonging, it also held blacks wholly responsible for their economic and political wellbeing.

In the 1830s, values like hard work, economic success, and self-reliance were potent symbols of virtue and personal responsibility. The relation between virtue and individual achievement proved to be a serious handicap to blacks in America looking to prove their worth outside the sphere of slavery. The Jacksonian era's emphasis on personal responsibility for one's achievements and self-worth brought, as Graham Hodges notes, "a sense of economic opportunity that provided tremendous motivation for individual striving but also created great uncertainty. If the race for success was open to all, then all must compete and run the risk of losing. Failure became personal and not, as for earlier generations, a result of a divine ordering of society" (55). Moral suasion's focus on individual reform, its privileging of values that encouraged personal responsibility in work and at home, provided a foundation for blacks to compete, along with whites, for their economic well-being and social standing. While moral suasions' principles grounded a growing abolition movement and black middle-class, they also promoted the idea that blacks themselves were responsible for the systematic inequities separating them from white citizens. Within the framework moral suasion constructed, racial inequities could be interpreted simply as an effect of black private failure rather than as evidence of systematic racial injustice.

Abolitionists supportive of moral reform sought to provide blacks with a moral education that would help them live better, more virtuous lives (Adeleke 131). In the move to discredit popular prejudices that defined blacks as incapable of moral improvement or social betterment, moral suasion functioned as an optimistic doctrine, one reliant upon the assumption that blacks pursuing private, internal reform would be met with public approval. By practicing moral behavior, it was believed, blacks could take responsibility for how they were perceived and treated; they could demonstrate that they deserved the rights and respect afforded to all U.S. citizens. Within this optimistic framework, blacks would eventually be recognized as equals, and such recognition would bring about the end of slavery, just as long as they were patient and lived in accordance with accepted moral norms.

Part III. Reform and Resist: Garnet's Revolutionary Challenge to Moral Suasion

Garnet did not expect slaves to wait patiently for emancipation; his Address is designed to persuade them to act and “RESIST.” The speech’s immediatist call for resistance sets it at odds with moral suasion’s gradualist doctrine of patient virtue, but like moral suasion, it also emphasizes the importance of personal reform. While the speech communicates a clear need for slaves (particularly male slaves) to reform, it is not altogether clear what form of action or resistance it wants slaves to take. At times, the speech seems to endorse the prospect of a slave revolution, and yet, near its conclusion, Garnet explicitly warns against it. As a first step towards making sense of this ambivalence, we should consider the speech’s message in relation to the audience whom it explicitly persuades to act. While the benefits of “RESISTANCE” would apply to all slaves, the speech directs its appeals to black male slaves, repeatedly challenging them to protect their female family members. It also calls on them to honor the legacy of past

black male revolutionaries such as Nat Turner, Joseph Cinqué, and Madison Washington. At one point, he tells slaves they have a “SOLEMN AND IMPERATIVE DUTY TO USE EVERY MEANS, BOTH MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND *PHYSICAL*, THAT PROMISE SUCCESS” (184, emphasis mine). They should do whatever possible, in other words, to secure a better life for them and their families. However, towards the end of the speech, Garnet includes a warning that seems to contradict the speech’s revolutionary content. “We do not advise you [slaves] to attempt a revolution with the sword, because it would be INEXPEDIENT. Your numbers are too small, and moreover the rising spirit of the age and the spirit of the gospel, are opposed to war and bloodshed” (187-188). The “spirit of the age” and its fear of “war and bloodshed” was animated by the public memory of recent slave rebellions. Nat Turner’s rebellion took place in 1831. Joseph Cinqué led a successful slave revolt on the *Amistad* in 1839, and in 1841 Madison Washington led fellow slaves on board the American ship *Creole* in a successful rebellion against their captors, after which they sailed to safety and freedom in Nassau. Farther back still loomed the bloody memory of the Haitian Revolution. Garnet’s words of caution reflect an understanding of the public’s fear of black violence and black freedom. Nevertheless, Garnet’s rationale of inexpediency leaves intact the notion that slaves have a *right* to rebel. When he advises slaves against revolutionary violence, it reads as a pragmatic recommendation¹² to avoid violence, not as a complete disavowal of revolution as a desirable practice or outcome.

Additionally, Garnet makes a radical move that cements the black right to revolution *and* critiques the country for failing to live up to its egalitarian promise; he argues that slaves have a stronger claim to the right of revolution than did the founding fathers. His reasoning is twofold: slaves are more masculine, and they can draw upon their experience of suffering in a way that the “heroes of the American Revolution” could not and in a way that that current U.S. citizens

cannot. For one, the exceptional experience of slave suffering authorizes slaves' claims to revolution and liberty. "From the first moment that you breathed the air of heaven," Garnet says, "you have been accustomed to nothing else but hardships. The heroes of the American Revolution were never put upon harder fare, than a peck of corn, and a few herrings per week. You have not become enervated by the luxuries of life. Your sternest energies have been beaten out upon the anvil of severe trial" (186). In this remarkable passage, Garnet implies that slaves have more cause for revolution than did the founding fathers. Whereas the "heroes of the American Revolution" suffered from mild dietary restrictions, slaves "have been accustomed to nothing else but hardships." Garnet uses suffering as a measure of oppression, oppression being the tyrannical force that justifies revolutionary action. The contrast he constructs between the revolutionary "heroes" and the slaves he addresses locates the more profound suffering in the experience of enslavement; therefore, if the slaves do not have a right to revolutionary action, then neither did the founding fathers.

Garnet extends the contrast between revolutionary heroes and slaves through the principle of self-reliance. In the next line, he tells the slaves that "You have not become enervated by the luxuries of life." The phrase "luxuries of life" encompasses abstract rights, social standing, and material possessions – all of that which slaves are denied. The sentence organizes the revolutionary "heroes" as the object of the "luxuries" they enjoy, placing them in a dependent position. To establish the contrast between the heroes' dependence and the slaves' self-reliance, Garnet continues and tells the slaves, "Your sternest energies have been beaten out upon the anvil of severe trial. Slavery has done this, to make you subservient to its own purposes; but it has done more than this, it has prepared you for any emergency" (186). Their exposure to suffering has "prepared" slaves to be self-reliant. Moreover, the contrast between

Garnet's heroes and slaves is directly contingent upon the exposure to suffering. In other words, the revolutionary heroes and their descendants have led protected lives of luxury, leaving them unequipped to act in the face of a threatening "emergency." Because they have endured a life of suffering and a constant state of emergency, slaves have proven themselves to be self-reliant; therefore, they are the ideal models of revolutionary action.

Near the speech's conclusion, Garnet's revolutionary rhetoric crescendos when he channels Patrick Henry and declares that the time has come for male slaves to make a choice between liberty or death. He proclaims, "Fellow-men! Patient sufferers! Behold your dearest rights crushed to the earth! See your sons! Murdered, and your wives, mothers, and sisters, doomed to prostitution! In the name of the merciful God! And by all that life is worth, let it no longer be a debatable question, whether it is better to choose LIBERTY or DEATH! (186). In this passage, Garnet creates an inside wherein masculine men - like himself - choose "LIBERTY" and an outside where "patient sufferers" wait for deliverance. "Patient Sufferers" represents those slaves whose liberty and life are dependent upon the benevolence of others. The passage juxtaposes the dependent "patient sufferer" to Garnet's self-reliant "fellow-men."¹³ Unlike those who wait for a peaceful resolution to slavery, Garnet and his men know "there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood" (185). They know they must act to save themselves.

Opposing slavery while avoiding "the shedding of blood" was definitive of moral suasion's antislavery strategy, and its message of personal reform preached "patience" as a universal virtue conducive to the public good in part because blacks (and whites) practicing it allowed for the negotiation of a peaceful resolution to the problem of slavery that would see the institution ended and the Union preserved. Paradoxically, as Adeleke explains, moral suasion's

successes in the 1820s and 30s revealed its failure. “By the late 1840’s the number of morally upright and economically elevated blacks more than doubled. Their rewards, however, came in the form of increased anti-black violence. It dawned on many that the key factor was not condition but race; and consequently, no matter how hard blacks worked to cultivate moral suasion, the chances of integration remained bleak. Moral suasion then gave way to immediatist political strategies” (140). Blacks improved their own condition in antebellum America, but doing so did not earn them just treatment or equal standing. Therefore, Garnet’s challenge to “Patient sufferers” can be understood as a protest of an abolitionist strategy naively optimistic about the country’s ability to solve its racial problems through internal moral reform and the improvement of economic conditions. Garnet’s challenge was in line with the abolitionist community’s transition away from moral suasion’s gradualist reforms in favor of a more immediate and, at times, revolutionary agenda.

As Jacqueline Bacon has shown, black abolitionists like Garnet who used revolutionary language could not effectively invoke conventional interpretations of founding revolutionary texts such as the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. The reason being was that the meaning of those texts was (and is) a contested matter; in antebellum America proslavery and antislavery arguments appealed to the principle of equality in the Declaration, for example. Therefore, in order to deploy the topoi of revolution effectively, African American abolitionists appropriated the dominant discourse in order to redefine revolution “in service of abolition” (Bacon, “Do You” 55). Case and point, Garnet appropriates domestic and revolutionary norms in order to challenge black men to act and emphasize the unjust exclusion of blacks from civil society. This means that Garnet adopts a combative stance towards multiple audiences so as to amplify his message, a strategy he executes using what Bacon terms “advisory rhetoric.”

Advisory rhetoric can be best understood by defining its opposite, “adapitory rhetoric.” According to Bacon, adapitory rhetoric emphasizes “the shared values of rhetor and speaker, rather than the conflict between them” (“Do You” 56). Black abolitionists who used adapitory rhetoric chose to identify shared values in America’s founding documents, particularly in the Declaration of Independence. Abolitionists using adaptor rhetoric deployed “the measured *ethe*¹⁴ of those asking for their rights” and defended “their inclusion in American society” (Bacon 56). Basically, adapitory rhetoric seeks to create an identification whereby blacks are recognized as persons deserving of the rights afforded to U.S. citizens.

Whereas adapitory rhetoric emphasizes shared values to create an inclusive rhetorical space, adapitory rhetoric emphasizes “conflict and dissent between rhetor and audience” while also “challenging conventional attitudes” and judging audiences harshly (Bacon, “Do You” 56). Advisory rhetoricians employed a rhetoric of moral absolutism to “authorize their harsh messages” and often evoked “shock” in order to reveal an audience’s hypocrisy (Bacon, “Do You” 56). When used strategically, advisory rhetoric allowed “African-American men to create emphatic, harshly critical arguments, marshaling the dominant culture’s texts and myths to condemn them both in overt and subtle ways and to imply radical action - even violent means - to end slavery” (Bacon, “Do You” 56). To compel his audiences to *act*, Garnet uses advisory rhetoric to challenge the moral hypocrisy of his audience members, both free and enslaved.

In terms of “marshaling the dominant culture’s texts and myths,” Garnet channels the language of the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence to emphasize how blacks are excluded from enjoying the liberty that such language promises. When he highlights this exclusion, he employs a “rhetoric of moral absolutism” to challenge his audience to confront the truth of American hypocrisy and reverse the exclusion. Garnet begins this process by praising the

colonial revolution, stating, “The declaration was a glorious document. Sages admired it, and the patriotic of every nation revered the godlike sentiments which it contained” (182). If we’re reading with Bacon’s terms in mind, we might think Garnet begins this passage by using adaptory rhetoric to emphasize a common desire for freedom. However, upon reading the next sentence, it becomes clear that Garnet constructs a rhetorical common ground *in order* to highlight the exclusion of blacks from American society, at which point his language becomes much more antagonistic to white audiences. “When the power of Government returned to their hands,” he asks of the Founding Fathers, “did they emancipate the slaves? No; they rather added new links to our chains. Were they ignorant of the principles of Liberty? Certainly they were not” (182). This attack on the Founding Fathers likely achieved the “shock” characteristic of advisory rhetoric, and the use of “they” organizes his black audiences in opposition to a white ruling class and the many violent exclusions responsible for maintaining their power.

Garnet’s judgment of the Founding Fathers would likely agitate white audiences and polarize them. Within the framework of advisory rhetoric, this last effect is a strategic feature of the rhetor’s message. As Bacon writes, “...agitators endeavor to create a strong negative emotional response on token issues that force a choice between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The harsh portrayal of the intemperate or the ‘ignorant,’ then, suggests to audience members that to ignore their elevation is to choose the side of the oppressor” (“Do You” 57). In other words, those who criticize Garnet’s attack on the Founding Fathers defend the country’s hypocrisy and its failure to live up to the principles foregrounded in the Declaration of Independence. To criticize Garnet’s critique of the Founders signals the acceptance of “the torture and disgrace” of “noble mothers,” and the corruption of “wretched sisters, loving virtue and purity, as they are driven into concubinage, and are exposed to the unbridled lusts of incarnate devils.” Those who accepted the

Address' narrative about American hypocrisy would have little choice but to side with Garnet and his call for "RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE!"

Speaking from a manufactured position of moral absolutism, Garnet chastises white audiences to unify black ones. He also chastises black male slaves in order to compel them to take responsibility for their lack of freedom and their family's safety. While slaves inherited the state of oppression in which they lived, to submit to such a life qualified as a sinful act of cowardice. "TO SUCH DEGREDDATION," Garnet says, speaking of slavery, "IT IS SINFUL IN THE EXTREME FOR YOU TO MAKE VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION." For male slaves, submitting to slavery is sinful, because it prevents them from living as Christian men in two ways. It replaces one's heavenly master with an earthly one *and* it robs them of the paternal authority necessary for their families' protection. Within the normative paternal framework of Christian duty Garnet invokes, men have a sacred duty to protect and provide for their family members, particularly their wives and daughters. However, a slave had no authority to stop his master from assaulting or raping the women in his family (something Garnet refers to explicitly in the Address), and female suffering can therefore be blamed on the male slave's "*voluntary submission*" (emphasis mine). This is to say that male slaves who submit to slavery submit their female family members to sexual predation and exploitation.

While Garnet holds the male slave responsible for their family's continued suffering, he also equates the failure of manly responsibility with a failure of Christian duty, making clear that submitting to slavery carries heavenly consequences. He warns, "You are not certain of Heaven, because you suffer yourselves to remain in a state of slavery, where you cannot obey commandments of the Sovereign of the universe. If the ignorance of slavery is a passport to heaven, then it is a blessing, and no curse, and you should rather desire its perpetuity than its

abolition” (183). If slaves desire abolition and possess the capacity for personal agency, then they hold some responsibility for the physical and spiritual consequences of their enslavement. Slaves who suffer themselves “to remain in a state of slavery” choose to live in a state of sin and in breach of God’s commandments. By using advisory rhetoric to criticize male slaves for such “sinful” behavior, Garnet presents resistance as a moral and spiritual imperative, thereby organizing black persons and communities in support of his call to action.

Garnet’s bid to unify blacks in opposition to slavery benefits from the liminal position he occupies as a former slave *and* excluded member of a nominally free society. Speaking from this rhetorical position grants him the credibility to identify with free and enslaved blacks. So, when he adopts the paternalistic tone characteristic of advisory rhetoric’s use of moral absolutism, he does so as a member of both audiences, and as a result, he can criticize them and remain their ally in the struggle against slavery and racial prejudice. The Address attempts to unify black audiences, free and enslaved, by using advisory rhetoric to create an “us vs them” mentality. While this binary may be reductive, it does not adhere to the typical dichotomy of abolitionists and slaveowners. Rather, by calling his black audience members’ attention to their common experience of suffering and exclusion from the Founders’ dream, Garnet attempts to organize black communities to accept the urgent moral and spiritual imperative of active resistance.

If unifying black communities in the name of “RESISTANCE” is a primary goal of the Address, what does Garnet expect the black community to do? What about free black individuals? What kind “RESISTANCE” does the Address imagine and advise as feasible for slaves? These are difficult questions to answer because, as mentioned earlier, the Address valorizes revolution while cautioning against it. Its language claims the *right* of revolution on behalf of the slaves, but it does not explicitly instruct slaves to practice revolution as a practical

next step. In fact, Garnet explicitly cautions slaves against revolution because of its impracticality, saying “We do not advise you to attempt a revolution with the sword, because it would be INEXPEDIENT. Your numbers are too small...” (187-188). In the end, Garnet issues a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis in order to argue that the price of revolution would be too great and its chances of success too slim.

The heated rhetoric throughout the Address seems to contradict Garnet’s warning against revolution, particularly when the Address invokes what Bacon terms “the rule of justice,” a rhetorical strategy that justifies revolutionary violence. A rhetor invokes the rule of justice when he or she,

argues for ‘giving identical treatment to beings or situations of the same kind,’ particularly when there is precedent to do so...The resulting arguments are not only insistent, but militant, supporting potentially violent action by African Americans to overthrow slavery, including slave insurrection. (*The Humblest* 62)

Garnet invokes the rule of justice when he constructs a comparison equating the history of black oppression in the U.S. to the founding fathers’ revolution against Great Britain. The comparison implies that if the founding fathers were justified in their revolution against Great Britain, as his praise of the Declaration indicates,¹⁵ then the slaves have the moral authority to rebel as well. In an extension of the rule of justice, Garnet includes a brief history of several notable slave revolts in the paragraphs preceding his concluding remarks, and his descriptions of the revolts use patriotic language and romanticize the revolts and their leaders. In that list he includes heroes - all male - from Western revolutions and heroes from the more recent slave rebellions. Denmark Vesey initiates the list, followed by “Moses, Hampden, Tell, Bruce, and Wallace, Touissant L’Overture, Lafayette, and Washington” (187). He continues by praising the

“patriotic Nathaniel Turner” and “the immortal Joseph Cinque, the hero of the Amistad.” Garnet represents each of these men as models of patriotic masculinity to be admired. Black and white, they each struggled against injustice, and their violent resistance was therefore justified.

According to Garnet’s use of the rule of justice, slaves are like any other oppressed people; they have the right to protect themselves, violently if need be.

Garnet’s list of revolutionaries also recognizes black insurrection as a heroic tradition, likely in order to appeal to the masculinity of black male slaves while asserting the agency of the black community. Elsewhere in the speech, he takes a different tact in trying to persuade a male audience. As discussed above, he repeatedly employs advisory rhetoric to chastise male slaves for failing to protect female family members from sexual predation. The Address equates the failure to protect female family members to a failure of masculinity, and judging male slaves for their failure, Garnet asserts his own moral authority and compels his audience - specifically male slaves - to act and fulfill their masculine duty. For male slaves, doing the right thing means doing more than enduring the suffering of their family members and patiently waiting for it to end.

“But you are a patient people,” he says.

You act as though you were made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit, while your lords tear your wives from your embraces, and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust. (188)

As with the heroic legacy of black revolutionaries, these “dead fathers” represent an integral chapter of black history whose memory slaves have a moral obligation to honor. In meeting that obligation, they fulfill their duty to the heritage of the black community, and they fulfill their masculine duty by protecting their families from the violence and suffering slavery imposes.

In this passage and in others, Garnet frames resistance as a moral *and* masculine imperative. When considering the aggressive tone and content of Garnet’s rhetoric, it is not farfetched to read the passage above - and other moments in Garnet’s Address - as an attack on moral suasion’s plea for patience, as a militant call for revolution, or as an endorsement of violence justified by years of oppression and suffering. But, while Garnet’s Address might be said to entertain dreams of a slave revolution, it never explicitly recommends it as a strategic practice suited for the present “emergency.” While the Address represents black revolution as a right and gestures towards the generative potential of violent action, the action Garnet’s Address explicitly recommends – the refusal of labor – asserts individual and communal agency by producing the black body as a liminal site of ungovernability.

Part IV. The Practice of Refusal

Near the conclusion to the Address, Garnet makes several interrelated rhetorical moves that distinguish his message from the revolution his rhetoric winks at but does not explicitly endorse. First, the Address appeals to its audience to see themselves as dignified members of two imagined communities: the United States and Africa. He reminds the slaves “of the undying glory that hangs around the name of African: - and forget not that you are native-born American citizens, and as such, you are justly entitled to all the rights that are granted to the freest” (185).

This passage can be read as an effort to convince slaves that they should reform their understanding of themselves; they should see or know themselves not as slaves but as a proud people whose mixed heritage commands respect. Garnet asserts black membership in the imagined communities of America and Africa as fact in order to argue that black persons are dignified persons who deserve equal standing and treatment. By referencing the unifying heritage of Africa, Garnet makes clear that black dignity does not depend on the success of revolutionary action, nor solely on the legal recognition of the natural rights denied to them.

Garnet then expands his defense of black dignity by calling attention to the value of slave labor and the manner in which that labor's relation to liberal rights has, up to this point, gone unrecognized. He says, "Think how many tears you have poured out upon the soil which you have cultivated with unrequited toil, and enriched with your blood" (185). In this passage, the "tears" and "blood" are black investments that produce *and* lay claim to the "rights...granted to the freest." If American "soil" is enriched" with the "rights...granted to the freest," it is because black bodies have "cultivated" it with their "toil" and fertilized it with their "blood," the same blood connotative of the "undying glory" of Africa. Garnet emphasizes here that slaves are "justly entitled" to the rights "granted to the freest," not simply because of their abstract status as persons, but because their labor and blood has purchased them; moreover, Garnet represents their labor as foundational, not only to their rights, but to the legal existence of rights in the first place. Without the labor of slaves, American "soil" would not be "enriched." In essence, Garnet compels slaves to claim the rights they make possible, and the first step toward doing so requires reforming their understanding of their labor's importance. Rather than see themselves as a "patient" people waiting for the rights of personhood to be conferred (a position that calls into question whether or not slaves deserve their rights), Garnet calls on slaves to see themselves as a

people denied the abstract rights their material labor produces and their African heritage warrants.

Immediately following the passage where Garnet tells slaves to reform their understanding of their labor's importance, he tells them what he wants them to do. The first set of instructions directs male slaves to attempt to earn their freedom peacefully by reasoning with their masters. Tell them "plainly," he says,

that YOU ARE DETERMINED TO BE FREE. Appeal to their sense of justice, and tell them that they have no more right to oppress you, than you to enslave them. Entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you, and to remunerate you for your labor. Promise them renewed diligence in the cultivation of the soil, if they will render to you an equivalent for your services. Point them to the increase of happiness and prosperity in the British West Indies, since the act of emancipation. Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire, is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice...If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences. You had far better all die - *die immediately*, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. (185)

Regardless of whether we think Garnet intends for this suggestion to be taken seriously, the passage neatly distributes responsibility between slaves and masters. When addressing their masters, the slave should "appeal," "entreat," "promise," "point" (as in, "point out" or indicate), "tell," and "inform." These verbs frame the initial interaction between slave and owner as a peaceful, civil, and rational discussion, and it is the slave's responsibility to engage with their

master as if such a peaceful discussion could achieve its goal. Therefore, the slave's persuasive efforts qualify as a strategic rhetorical application that avoids, at first, asserting any kind of authority over the slaveowner. This changes when God's judgment is introduced as a consequence for the master's role in a sinful institution. If the slaves are refused their freedom, then the owners will face "righteous retributions," and if they do not set the slaves free or if they "commence the work of death," then the owners will be "responsible for the consequences." If these latter threats came to pass, the slaves are not responsible. They are not responsible for the "righteous retributions" nor for the "consequences" of commencing "the work of death." That responsibility belongs to the masters. On the other hand, slaves are responsible for initiating - or attempting to initiate - a civic dialogue that, even if unsuccessful, serves as evidence of their capacity for rational thought and virtuous conduct. Appealing, entreating, promising, pointing, telling, and informing coalesce in a sequential rhetorical strategy that counters the connotation of chaos and barbarism often affixed to the notion of black freedom and the interiority of black persons. Slaves who would use reason to persuade slaveowners to relinquish their rights of ownership refute the normative assumption that slaves (and blacks) are either obedient and childlike or violent and barbaric. In order to represent a rational black identity to his audience, Garnet uses verbs that chart a middle course between stereotypes characterizing black persons as either violent or submissive. This is to say that by engaging in rational discussion with their owners, slaves prove to Northern audiences and themselves that they are neither obedient and childlike nor violent and barbaric. Importantly, the passage's purpose is not to provide slaves with a feasible method with which to secure their freedom; rather, the passage teaches slaves and free blacks how to perform a rational, virtuous identity into existence amid oppressive power relations that would presumably justify a range of responses. Garnet's strategy is an ideal

response, because it sends the message to all audiences involved that blacks are rational persons with the capacity to argue persuasively and righteously for their freedom.

When Garnet instructs slaves to engage in rational discussion and virtuous behavior in order to signal their identity as rational and virtuous persons, he nearly echoes the principles and goals of moral suasion, which advised blacks to manage their behavior according to the dictates of normative virtues. However, there is a key difference between Garnet's recommendation of virtuous conduct and conduct shaped by the principles of moral suasion. Whereas moral suasion preaches black virtue partly to distinguish black freedom from black violence, Garnet leaves the relation between black freedom and violence intact and powerfully ambivalent. Whereas moral suasion is a peaceful doctrine that aims to avoid violence altogether, Garnet instructs slaves to engage in rational debate with their masters without excluding violence as a potential consequence of that action. Moral suasion works towards a collaborative and peaceful resolution to the problem of slavery and prejudice; Garnet's rhetoric works toward establishing the fact of black dignity, rationality, and virtue through peaceful means, even if such a demonstration provokes the outbreak of violence.

By leaving violence on the table as a possible consequence of black action, the Address is anchored by an ambivalent purpose. It's not altogether clear whether the Address endorses black dignity, revolution, or both. In addition, when Garnet warns that slaveowners, upon hearing slaves arguing for their freedom, who "commence the work of death...will be responsible for the consequences," he is not explicit about what consequences those are nor who would implement them, an ambiguity that could easily be read as a threat. The consequences in question might refer to slaveowners beating or killing slaves who refuse to labor. Or the consequences might refer to a slave insurrection. The first reading represents slaves as martyrs, and it would be in

agreement with a reading like Jasinski's, which claims that Garnet aimed to persuade male slaves to accept punishment as a consequence of resistance.

According to Jasinski, Garnet repurposes the stereotypical image of the suffering servant to craft a middle ground wherein male slaves could "engage in strenuous yet restrained public action" (45). Slaves would practice, in other words, what Jasinski terms "passive obedience," a standard of behavior that "directed Christians to disobey their superior's order but willingly submit to any punishment their superior might choose to inflict" (44). The refusal to work or be recognized as a slave qualifies as the "strenuous" action that is also "restrained" in its simultaneous eschewal of violence and acceptance of punishment. However, Jasinski's reading does not discuss the possibility that the Address implicitly encourages slave violence by framing black revolution as heroic and just. Instead of accepting the Address' ambivalent relation with slave violence and revolution, Jasinski's reading resolves and excludes slave violence as a possible goal because it does not fit with the religiously-minded objectives he identifies as essential to the Address' message. When Jasinski's critique restricts the meaning of "consequences" to slaveowners punishing their slaves, a range of potential interpretations and audiences are also restricted. For instance, if the Address was to be heard or read by white publics in the North or in the South, then we need to consider how the word "consequences" might be received. What kind of "consequences" might a white public imagine if they felt weary of black freedom, revolution, or revolt? Perhaps more importantly, what kind of "consequences" might a black public imagine, particularly if many of its members were embittered by people telling them to behave and wait patiently for the deliverance of freedom and equality? Would they hear Garnet's "consequences" as a call to martyrdom or a justification of violent retribution?

Another example that highlights the Address' ambivalence can be found in the passage following Garnet's mention of "consequences." Garnet tells the slaves,

You had far better all die, *die immediately*, than live as slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation, here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once - rather, *die freemen, than live to be slaves*. (185-186)

Does this passage instruct slaves to accept the punishment (the "shedding of blood") that will surely follow their refusal to labor (as Jasinski argues), or does the passage incite slaves to fight, and if need be, spill the blood of their masters? Put more simply, exactly whose blood is to be shed and by whom? The answer is not completely clear. Garnet places the conditional "If you [the slave] must bleed" immediately following a sentence ending with the more ambiguous phrase "shedding of blood." The close proximity of the two phrases could suggest that "shedding of blood" refers to slaves sacrificing their lives as a consequence of refusing to work. While this reading is plausible, the Address' ambivalence means that the "shedding of blood" also signifies violent forms of resistance necessary to securing "Redemption" for current slaves and their future generations, a process that would also require slaves to "bleed." The first reading interprets "shedding of blood" as a predictable consequence of peaceful resistance; the second interprets "shedding of blood" as a predictable consequence of slaves engaging in violent and even revolutionary acts of resistance.

Rather than resolving this ambivalence and deciding the Address' singular purpose, I suggest we keep the ambivalence in view and treat it as a strategic rhetorical feature that allows the Address to characterize violent slave insurrection as a *potential* outcome of the practice of

refusal, the specific action the Address explicitly recommends. By framing violence as a potential consequence of practicing refusal, Garnet transfers responsibility for the insurrection, if it occurs, from slave to slaveowner and justifies it without giving his outright endorsement. Represented as a potentiality, slave insurrection functions as both a jeremiadic promise and warning. For blacks and slaves, it promises a day of retribution is coming.

While the Address hints at future violence, the act of resistance it explicitly endorses is decidedly nonviolent; Garnet tells slaves to “cease to labor for tyrants who will not remunerate you. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been - you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. RATHER DIE FREEMEN, THAN LIVE TO BE SLAVES. Remember that you are THREE MILLIONS” (188). In this critical passage, Garnet recommends slaves engage in a labor strike, an act of resistance whose applicability extends beyond the borders of Southern slave states and into the Northern states. Striking or refusing to labor amounts to a refusal of racial management, and its assertion of black agency threatens the stability of the entire system of slavery and the larger economic system dependent upon it. Essentially, the practice of refusal provides individuals and communities believed to be incapable of managing themselves with a practice whose performance recalibrates their relation to oppressive governmental institutions and norms. By practicing refusal, black agents and communities exercise the potential to destabilize not only the institution of slavery, but the national economy, thereby identifying themselves as authoring subjects rather than laboring objects.

In order to recalibrate the relation between slaves and slavery, the practice of refusal appropriates the discourse of “management,” a discourse often deployed in defense of slavery and white supremacy. Generally, slaves and indigenous people were judged to be incapable of

managing themselves or their affairs. Deficiency of management justified their dispossession and exclusion from the sphere of rights. On the other hand, (white) men inherently capable of management maintained an elevated position in the social hierarchy. Furthermore, possessing an inherent capacity for management justified the seizure and ownership of lands and persons, especially ownership of those persons whose capacity for management was suspect. When Garnet's Address recommends a practice that calls for slaves to manage themselves and their labor, it offers slaves a strategic means of destabilizing a foundational pillar of United States racial discourse.

David Roediger credits labor economist and historian John R. Commons for identifying how techniques of labor management merged with racial discourse to formalize "racial management." The concept and practice of racial management stretches back to the colonial era, when "American colonists developed a sense of their own whiteness by casting their race as uniquely fit to manage land and labor, and by judging how other races might feature in the service of that project" (82). Moreover, as Roediger notes, Americans made decisions about how to manage resources based "on what sort (and quickly on what 'race') of coerced labor was most economical, skilled, durable, efficient, and tractable" (82). In the antebellum US, denying black slaves the opportunity to manage themselves or their labor stabilized a racial and social hierarchy dependent on the production of black docility and the mitigation of black freedom.

The nineteenth century saw the formalization of "race management" take place as Northern institutions of labor adopted practices originally pioneered on the southern plantation. For example, Roediger and Robin Blackburn note how the plantation provided a model of labor that was used to make factories more efficient. As on the plantation, factory workers were tasked with a single discipline and worked in a single location. In addition, the word "overseer,"

Roediger explains, has the same literal meaning as “supervisor.” The former names the manager tasked with “watching and speeding up the labor of slaves” while “supervisor” names “the [factory] manager performing just the same roles in industry...” (83).¹⁶

Ironically, racial management and Garnet’s Address share a common value. As explained above, racial management sought to maximize worker efficiency. Likewise, when Garnet recommends slaves refuse to work on the grounds of “inexpediency,” he too appeals to the principle of efficiency. Engaging in revolution, according to the Address, would be a waste, because the bloody labor required would produce suffering rather than the desired end to slavery. In the end, Garnet represents the practice of refusal as a more efficient means of resistance than revolution.

Beyond ensuring the death of thousands of slaves, a slave revolution in the South would have produced an intense white backlash, something Garnet was surely aware of when drafting the Address. Nat Turner’s insurrection, a historical event the Address mentions, had taken place only 10 years earlier, and it was swiftly followed by legal and extralegal forms of racial violence. In response to the Turner insurrection, the Virginia legislature convened a debate about slavery’s legitimacy that resulted in an increase in the legal oppression of slaves *and* free blacks. As Eric Foner explains, a bill that passed the Virginia House in February of 1832 called for the deportation of all free blacks from Virginian territory. The bill was ultimately defeated in the Virginia Senate, but other “measures barring slaves or free blacks from holding religious meetings, strengthening the patrol system and militia, and prohibiting free blacks from owning firearms were enacted” (*Great Lives* 9). The backlash spread to other states. Foner describes how in North Carolina, free blacks and slaves were barred from preaching. Maryland and Tennessee went so far as to prohibit free blacks from entering their states. In Alabama, distributing

“incendiary pamphlets” became a capital crime. Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana feared inheriting rebellious slaves from Virginia and outlawed the interstate slave trade. “Such laws were never effectively enforced,” Foner notes, “but they reveal the lengths southern legislatures were prepared to go to strengthen the slave system in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion” (*Great Lives* 9). In southern states, legal means of racial oppression relied on and contributed to a racial discourse dedicated to the management (and pacification) of black bodies.

Racial stereotypes complemented legal efforts to manage blacks in the wake of Turner’s rebellion. For instance, on September 3, 1831, the Richmond *Wig* published an article comparing the savagery of Turner’s band with that of Native Americans, invoking a logic of identification categorizing blacks and Native Americans as inherently violent and barbaric. “A bloodier and more accursed tragedy was never acted, even by the agency of the tomahawk and scalping knife” they wrote. In this passage, blacks and Native Americans are replaced by the “tomahawk and scalping knife” in order to categorize both peoples as inherently violent and in need of racial management. Objectified as weapons, these racialized others require proper management if future tragedies in the mold of the Turner rebellion are to be prevented.

In the spirit of fair-mindedness, the same article laments the “slaughter of many blacks, without trial” as a regrettable “procedure” directed “under circumstances of great barbarity” (*Great Lives* 19).¹⁷ How many have thus been put to death (generally by decapitation or shooting) reports vary; probably however some five and twenty and from that to 40; possibly a yet larger number. To the great honor of General Eppes, he used every precaution in his power, and we hope and believe with success, to put a stop to the disgraceful procedure” (*Great Lives* 19). While this quote seems to designate all forms of extralegal violence as barbaric, the word “procedure” sanitizes the decapitation or shooting of “many blacks, without trial” by classifying

it as an organized, methodical, and, civilized action performed by rational white agents. Moreover, the language in the passage also applies the tag of “barbarity” to the “circumstances” surrounding the rebellion, not to the white actors or their actions, thereby relieving them of responsibility for the “slaughter.” In the end, the passage justifies the violent and racist management of black bodies by framing white violence as regrettable but not irrational, a characterization in direct contrast with the racialized objectification of black rebels as dangerous weapons. As the passage demonstrates, the discourse of racial management denies black bodies the capacity for rational conduct in the interest of maintaining and protecting the dominant racial hierarchy.

If racial management can broadly be defined as the governance of racialized others and their conduct on the basis of an essentialized irrationality and inferiority, slaves practicing the refusal of labor frustrate that governance by conducting themselves as rational, civilized actors. In other words, they demonstrate their capacity for rational self-management by avoiding the traps of irrationality and inferiority, both of which were used to categorize the conduct of either obedient or disobedient blacks. Slaves refusing to labor practice a particularly powerful form of disobedience, but unlike Turner’s revolutionaries or the “patient sufferers” of moral suasion, their act of resistance creates a liminal identity incompatible with racial stereotypes. For instance, practicing refusal is not violent; therefore, slaves who refuse to labor do not qualify as blood-thirsty brutes. In addition, practicing refusal is an act of disobedience; therefore, slaves who refuse to labor are not submissive or docile. Practicing refusal makes racial management’s denial of black rationality more difficult, because it refutes stereotypical identities assigned to the black body in order to govern or manage it. Employed as techniques of racial management and government, racial stereotypes and knowledge designate the black body as an inferior but

knowable thing. The practice of refusal is a rational act in conflict with established, racialized knowledge of black bodies. The proliferation of scientific theories of racism in the early 19th century meant that racial knowledge functioned as an intrusive form of racism, because it laid claim to the essential characteristics of black interiorities. The performance of refusal generates a friction between black actors and the racial discourse that claims to know them from the inside out. Therefore, black agents practicing refusal designate the black body as a liminal and unknowable site of ungovernability.

The labor strike Garnet recommended never came to pass, and we can never know if it would have dealt the institution of slavery a fatal blow. Regardless, the practice of refusal stands as a powerful imagining of how slaves could assert individual and communal agency. Near the beginning of this chapter, I relied on Sharon Krause's definition of agency as the "affirmation of one's subjective existence, or personal identity, through concrete action in the world. To be an agent is to have an impact on the world that one can recognize as one's own" (4). This definition envisions agency as the consequence of an individual action given social recognition. Slaves refusing to labor challenge the material and logical infrastructure of slavery, but the disruptive force of the refusal depends upon the practice's acceptance within the slave community. In other words, the practice of refusal can create a dynamic kind of agency similar to that which Krause defines, but the dynamic potential of that agency depends upon the community, not the individual. As a strategic, communal practice, refusal extends the ungovernability of the black body to the black community.

Notes

¹ The Buffalo convention was the first Black National Convention organized since 1835.

² In his essay “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” Foucault writes that “Liberty is a *practice*...The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws intended to guarantee them. This is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable of being turned around – not because they are ambiguous, but simply because ‘liberty’ is what must be exercised...I think that it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom. The guarantee of freedom is freedom” (354).

³ In Krause’s words, “Individual agency... is an emergent property of intersubjective exchanges...not solely a function of faculties such as the will that are strictly internal to the individual. Because agency depends on social uptake, it is a socially distributed phenomenon” that “eludes personal control and...extends beyond intentional choice,” making it “a *non-sovereign* experience” (4-5).

⁴ All three men advised slaves to resist their masters in the pursuit of freedom, but Garnet’s was the most militant in tone and content.

⁵ Each of the Addresses did, however, maintain a paternalistic disposition towards the slaves, because each Address sought to advise and/or educate slaves about how they should resist their masters.

⁶ For the names of those delegates and a complete account of the convention’s proceedings, refer to “Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo on the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th of August 1843 for the Purpose of Considering their Moral and Political Condition as American Citizens.” New York, Piercy & Reed, Printers, 1843.

⁷ Little information is available about how Garnet injured and eventually lost his leg. The most descriptive account comes from Earl Ofari, who writes that Garnet worked for two years on a farm as a contract laborer in Smithtown, Long Island. This would have taken place around 1829-1831, when Garnet would have been fifteen or sixteen years old. “While employed there,” Ofari writes, “he lost the use of his right leg in an accident; later the leg had to be amputated” (4).

⁸ Not all praise of Garnet’s speech featured this type of condescension. As Martin Pasternak notes, Garnet’s friends seemed to hold the speech in high regard. “Gerrit Smith wrote the following week, ‘of course the speech was a good one; he never makes a bad one.’ [Alexander] Crummell later wrote that the address should be preserved as a document of ‘like character to the Magna Carta or the American Declaration of Independence’” (74).

⁹ 1 Peter 2:18-25 (KJV): “¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. ¹⁹ For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. ²¹ For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps. ²² Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth. ²³ Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: ²⁴ Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. ²⁵ For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

¹⁰ A related problem with Harrold's implication is that it ranks as superior studies of Garnet that frame him as an ideological analogue to aggressive white abolitionists such as Smith and Garrison. To be sure, Garnet's interrelationship with aggressive white abolitionists is deserving of attention, but such a focus, if exclusive, risks discounting the significance of Garnet's unique relation and contribution to the black abolitionist movement, to changing conceptions of black identity and masculinity as well as emerging practices of freedom vital to the construction of black agency. Scholars who have addressed Garnet's relevance to the black antebellum community include Glaude, Jr. and Sterling Stuckey, among others.

¹¹ Castiglia writes that "antebellum reformers normalized or vilified forms of sociality depending on whether they affirmed or challenged the values and arrangements of emerging middle-class privacy. Throughout the 1840s, reform targeted modes of sociality that were public, collective, nostalgic, pleasurable, and unproductive (although they often involved the sharing of material goods and information) and that therefore countered the middle-class values of futurity, privacy, self-restraint, generational productivity, and competitive individualism. These adjudications between valuable and reformable socialities were made in the name of health rather than economics or social power (masturbation was said to waste reproductive energy needed to generate children, for instance, while eating spicy foods over-stimulated the nervous system, unfitting one for work)" (10).

¹² It should also be noted that of the three slave rebellions mentioned, only Nat Turner's ended in failure, although other plots such as Denmark Vesey's were discovered and swiftly suppressed. Secondly, only Nat Turner's rebellion took place on the U.S. mainland, a space whose

geographical constraints presented considerable obstacles to organizing and executing an effective rebellion.

¹³ Garnet's emphasis on self-reliance could be attributed to the influence of liberal individualism. As Stuart Hall makes clear, there are many variants of liberalism, but "Individualism was at its center," individualism being "built around the idea of the sovereign individual" (Hall 39). This is to say that Garnet's emphasis on self-reliance - a characteristic foundational to the idea of the sovereign individual and the moral suasion movement - can be interpreted as a product of liberal individualism. However, as Sterling Stuckey's work on Garnet and slave culture indicates, Garnet's belief in self-reliance can be credited to his membership in the New York Pan-African community. Garnet was active in the New York abolitionist scene, and the nationalist and Pan-African movement in New York was founded upon the belief that self-assertive blacks were needed to free oppressed Africans. What is key here is that Stuckey argues that Garnet's "autonomy" (a word I interpret as a form of self-reliance) was in place *before* coming to New York as a young man. He writes, "the autonomy at the core of nationalism was a part of his [Garnet's] being before he arrived in New York. The nationalist tradition in New York City, however, helped nurture that impulse into the richness of Pan-Africanism, which held that only a great flowering field of self-assertive blacks could free the people of African ancestry, an understanding Garnet arrived at within a few years of his escape from slavery" (148). In other words, Garnet's self-reliance and value for freedom may have had ideological roots external to the liberal political tradition. As Stuckey writes, "In stressing the self-generative nature of freedom in the slave community, Garnet was essentially advancing an African conception of freedom..." (155).

¹⁴ “*Ethe*” is the plural form of “*ethos*.”

¹⁵ Of the Declaration of Independence, Garnet says, “The declaration was a glorious document. Sages admired it, and the patriotic of every nation revered the godlike sentiments which it contained” (182). Garnet’s praise being noted, he then proceeds to call out the country’s hypocrisy for keeping slaves in a country founded upon the idea of liberty. “When the power of Government returned to their hands, did they emancipate the slaves? No; they rather added new links to our chains” (182).

¹⁶ Roediger’s analysis also describes how race management skills were valued throughout the U.S. class structure. He writes,

Overseers and drivers were prized and hired for their racial knowledge. Slave markets literally traded on that same knowledge, however unsystematically acquired, while non-slaveholders were conscripted onto ‘patrols’ literally observing and managing slaves, and even poor white craft workers in the South strove to hire a slave as a temporary ‘third hand.’ Moreover, the ripening logic behind speedy removal of even agriculturally based, ‘friendly’ Indian tribes in the early nineteenth century was clearly intended to make management of nature the sole province of white men, grounding their claim to entitlement to the soil. (84)

¹⁷ The paragraph discussing the slaughter of blacks reads as follows: “It is with pain we speak of another feature of the Southampton Rebellion; for we have been most unwilling to have our sympathies for the sufferers, diminished or affected by their misconduct. We allude to the slaughter of many blacks, without trial, and under circumstances of great barbarity. How many have thus been put to death (generally by decapitation or shooting) reports vary; probably

however some five and twenty and from that to 40; possibly a yet larger number. To the great honor of General Eppes, he used every precaution in his power, and we hope and believe with success, to put a stop to the disgraceful procedure” (*Great Lives* 19).

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~ Chapter 2 ~

Frederick Douglass and *The Heroic Slave*: The Intensification of White Supremacy and the Reformatory Potential of Black Antislavery Violence

At the 1842 National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, Frederick Douglass listened to Henry Highland Garnet deliver his fiery “Address to the Slaves of the United States.” Garnet’s speech was intentionally provocative, and the revolutionary tenor of his cries for “LIBERTY OR DEATH,” and his call for slaves to “RESIST! RESIST! RESIST!” struck Douglass as dangerous in their aggression. As a Garrisonian, Douglass was committed to nonviolent anti-slavery tactics, placing him at odds with the perceived militancy of Garnet’s message. In a meeting organized shortly after Garnet spoke, the Convention delegates debated whether they should officially endorse Garnet’s address for publication. Douglass led the opposition, and the Address was defeated by a single vote. Douglass argued the Address exercised “too much physical force” and, if published, risked sparking a slave insurrection. At the time, the prospect of slave violence triggered white nightmares of San Domingo and Nat Turner, and a public endorsement of violent antislavery action – particularly *black* antislavery violence - would almost surely alienate white citizens sympathetic to the abolitionist cause.

Douglass’s concern about the “physical force” of Garnet’s rhetoric indicates he perceived militant abolitionism as an impractical strategy that risked alienating northern whites terrified of the prospect of black violence. By the 1850s, Douglass’s evaluation of black militancy had changed, as evidenced by his consistent invocation of revolutionary themes and use of militant rhetoric in his speeches and writings. Why did he pivot to embrace tactics he once criticized for exercising “too much physical force”? We know for certain that Douglass strategically

constructed his militant appeals to accomplish several interrelated goals. For instance, in order to increase the persuasive appeal of black militancy, he relied on the discourse of revolution to depict black antislavery violence as a defense of the nation's founding values. He also portrayed violent black resistance as a rational act of self-defense, thereby eschewing stereotypes that would categorize black interiors as inherently violent and in need of external management or control. He relied on a rhetoric of individual and national virtue to portray slavery as an oppressive, corruptive influence that needed to be cleansed of its relation to the individual conscience and the nation's institutions. Once framed as an action undertaken in response to an oppressive and corrupting power, Douglass could represent black violent resistance as a sign of individual virtue and as a revolutionary endeavor undertaken in defense of the nation and its values. Most radically, he portrayed black violence as a fearful inevitability if citizens – and slaveholders in particular - failed to reform their personal affiliation with white supremacy and sever the ties binding the nation's institutions to slavery. Finally, his depictions of violent black resistance asserted communal black agency and dignity as facts independent of white, social recognition.

Robert Levine connects Douglass's militant turn to the political context of the 1850s, and he suggests that an "urgency" can be found in the "rhetorical and ideological" content of Douglass's work during that time. Douglass "increasingly saw the need for blacks to use violence to oppose fugitive slave hunters and enslavers," and he framed that violence as a "morally legitimate form of self-help" befitting "the Revolutionary tradition" (127). For Levine, Douglass's "turn to violence" represents an alignment of his views with David Walker's, as expressed in the latter's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. In the *Appeal*, Walker calls on blacks to "KILL OR BE KILLED." As Levine explains, both men were well

aware of how “acts of black violence and their narrative representations could reinforce white stereotypes of blacks as vicious savages” (127). Such stereotypes normalized the exclusion of blacks from the liberal sphere by categorizing them as incapable of managing their animalistic instincts. These stereotypes diagnosed blackness as a threat to freedom unless properly managed, whether by institutions like the plantation or even the mental hospital.¹

This chapter builds upon Levine’s argument and considers Douglass’s militant turn as a strategic response to the intensification of white supremacy’s governing authority, an intensification embodied by the passage and enforcement of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. The literary anchor of my analysis is Douglass’s only published work of fiction, the novella *The Heroic Slave*, which offers a fictionalized retelling of the 1841 *Creole* slave revolt. *The Heroic Slave* was first published in 1853 in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, and its plot revolves around the revolt’s leader, the slave Madison Washington. At the beginning of the novella, we witness Washington praying just outside of the Virginia plantation where he is enslaved. Soon thereafter, he escapes, and with white assistance, makes his way to Canada. Washington then returns to Virginia to rescue his wife, but is captured, re-enslaved, and shipped on the *Creole* to New Orleans. While at sea, Washington frees himself from his chains – aided once again by white assistance – and helps 18 of his fellow slaves escape. The narrative portrays the revolt that follows as a relatively bloodless affair (this was the case in actual fact) that sees Washington seize control of the *Creole*. Under Washington’s direction, the former slaves sail the ship to Nassau, where they are freed by the British authorities despite the protests of the *Creole*’s officers.

Throughout the narrative, Douglass does not grant the reader access to Washington’s internal thoughts or feelings; rather, the reader witnesses the unfolding of the narrative primarily

from the perspective of two white men, Mr. Listwell and Tom Grant. Their encounters with the ostensibly heroic, virtuous, and manly Washington convince them of the black capacity for moral conduct and self-restraint, both of which are essential to framing Washington's violent actions on the *Creole* as a measured, orderly response to the corrupt, oppressive power of slavery. Because of Washington's display of virtue and restrained use of violence, Listwell and Grant experience an internal reform of their racist beliefs. Listwell's reformation is so complete as to transform him into a devout abolitionist. The novella represents the reform of the white conscience as exercising the potential to affect political, institutional change, but that potential can only be realized if the internal reform inspires immediate action. By the time he wrote and published *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass knew too much to wager the success of the abolition movement or the prospect of black freedom upon the hope of reforming white subjectivities. He turned to militant rhetoric in the late 1840s to emphasize the need for immediate antislavery action. In addition, he reserved the black right to violence if the reform of white subjectivities failed to produce immediate antislavery action. Written at a time when the regime of white supremacy significantly tightened its grip on the interiority of black life, *The Heroic Slave* appeals to the political potential of individual reform even as it warns that the failure to act immediately will lead to violence. With an eye toward the potential failure of reform and an awareness of the intractability of racialized subjectivities and institutions, Douglass uses a rhetoric of reform that retains the threat of black violence, marking his militancy as a radical extension of the moral argumentation he privileged earlier in his career. *The Heroic Slave* does not indicate that Douglass abandoned the optimism he held for moral reform; but the narrative's portrait of black militancy acknowledges the limits of reform and asserts the slaves' right to respond violently in the face of the continued, systematized denial of black freedom.

My chapter's first section discusses the intensification of white supremacy to which Douglass's militancy and *The Heroic Slave* responds. More specifically, I examine the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the expanding discursive and legal apparatus surrounding it. When considering Douglass's direct protest of the Fugitive Slave Act and his willingness to invoke the prospect of black violent resistance, an illuminating intersection emerges between Douglass and Herman Melville that I discuss in the chapter's second section. Like Douglass, Melville also authored a novella in the 1850s about a slave revolt at sea: *Benito Cereno*. Published in 1853, *Benito Cereno* is a contemporary of the 1855 *The Heroic Slave*, and it too imagines the eruption of black violence as an inevitable feature of a racist political regime resistant to reform. Their similarities being noted, *Benito Cereno* does not share *The Heroic Slave*'s optimism about personal and political reform; instead, it depicts the irreformability of racist subjectivities and institutions as the catalyst for the inevitable eruption of black violence and the nation's impending doom. In the chapter's conclusion, I elaborate on how the contrast between *Benito Cereno*'s pessimism and *The Heroic Slave*'s circumspective optimism reveals how Douglass invoked the prospect of violent black antislavery action to emphasize the need for immediate antislavery reform and to imagine the potential formation of an international black community independent of the racial state.²

I. The Fugitive Slave Act and the Intensification of White Supremacy

Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* and Melville's *Benito Cereno* both respond to a context in which the legal and extralegal enforcement of slaveowner property rights was intensifying. The passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act exemplifies this intensification in that its display of federal power committed the nation's institutions and individual citizens to the enforcement of

slaveowner property rights. The Act did not invent the legal impetus to return slaves to their owners, but it did strengthen and extend existing federal legal requirements on the matter, in particular the laws and precedents established by the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act and the 1837 case, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*.

In March of 1837, a Maryland lawyer named Edward Prigg kidnapped a black woman named Margaret Morgan, along with her children. Morgan was a second-generation slave who moved to Pennsylvania in 1832 after marrying a free black man. The heiress of the Morgan family's former owner had employed Prigg to capture Margaret and return her to Maryland. In compliance with the Pennsylvania Law of 1826,³ Prigg requested a warrant from a local magistrate granting him the legal authority to seize Morgan. The magistrate denied Prigg's request, after which Prigg abducted her and her children in violation of the Pennsylvania law. Prigg was arrested and convicted for the crime of kidnapping, but he appealed his case to the United States Supreme Court. When Justice Joseph Story decided the case in Prigg's favor, he established a controversial legal precedent that recognized the enforcement of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act as a legal obligation "exclusive to the national government" (qtd. Campbell 12). Although Story's decision ensured that state institutions would not be required to oversee or participate in the enforcement of the standing fugitive slave clause, "the national government was bound, through its own proper departments, legislative, judicial, and executive, to enforce all the rights and duties growing out of this clause in the constitution" (qtd. Campbell 12). Story's decision thereby aligned the notion of "good government" at the federal level with the protection of slaveowner property rights. The decision laid the legal groundwork for the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a law that would bolster the federal government's authority of enforcement.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* in 1827, and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 comprise a legal arch mapping the intensification of the complementary relationship between whiteness, liberty, and national security. This is not to say that these laws were passed without controversy or opposition; they are simply evidence of a developing consensus about how the rights of citizenship - and the federal government's role as protector of those rights - was understood.⁴ As Katherine Henry argues, the antebellum understanding of citizenship moved away from an earlier emphasis on mastery towards a definition that cast citizenship as "a zone of protection" and the state as its paternalistic protector. This meant that "liberty was more and more commonly being figured negatively, as freedom *from* tyranny, as a precious and endangered article that had to be protected from the powers that were always threatening to encroach" (Henry 2). By increasing the legal protection afforded to property rights under the 1793 law, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 reinforced a racialized zone of protection that identified fugitive slaves (and those who assisted them) as a threat to the freedom of citizens and the integrity of the public order. Moreover, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 expanded federal power on the issue, because it compelled state court officials *and* U.S. citizens to facilitate the enforcement of slaveowners' property rights, in effect extending the legal responsibilities of a national militarized security apparatus to state court systems and citizens.⁵ Jeffrey Hole describes, for instance, how the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 financed and authorized "federal marshals to press US citizens into the service of law enforcement (*posse comitatus*)" (219). In 1851, President Millard Fillmore sought legal action against abolitionists who rescued or helped fugitive slaves and requested "legislation that 'would make it easier for him to use army, navy, and militia forces in the execution of federal law'" (219).⁶ As Fillmore's rhetoric and the authorization of *posse comitatus* demonstrates, enforcing

the Fugitive Slave Act involved and inspired the violent application of state sovereignty in the interest of maintaining the reciprocal relation between federal law and slaveowner property rights. Legally sanctioned violence was therefore a key component of a security apparatus that construed threats against (white) property rights as threats to the nation's integrity and well-being. The gradual implementation and extension of this security apparatus, as highlighted via the trajectory of the three laws mentioned above, aligned the nation's egalitarian ideals with the practice of slavery in order to stabilize the integrity of the nation at a time when the national debate about slavery threatened to rip it apart.

The debate about slavery was in many respects a debate about the meaning of the nation's foundational values. While pro-slavery apologists invoked the concept of liberty to protect slaveowner property rights, abolitionists invoked it to argue that slaves should be included within the state's zone of protection. Despite abolitionist opposition, Northern public opinion about the Fugitive Slave Law was ambiguous, and fear of secession, economic and political instability, and the possibility of war motivated support for the Law and the 1850 Compromise. As Stanley Campbell explains, "clergymen, businessmen, and industrialists in the large Cities, as well as Washington politicians" cooperated "in their support of the Fugitive Slave Law" so as to prevent "disruption of the Union" (66). Elections that took place after the Law's passage indicate that these fears commanded considerable political weight. In the fall of 1851, elections in New York and Pennsylvania resulted in victory for Democrats who supported the Compromise (Campbell 65). In addition, legislatures in "Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, and New Hampshire in 1851, and New Jersey and Connecticut in 1852, adopted resolutions approving all the compromise measures" (Campbell 65). The Connecticut legislature explicitly "resolved that the Fugitive Slave Law was 'in accordance with the provisions of the constitutions, containing

merely provisions in detail necessary to carry into effect the provisions of that instrument” (Campbell 66). Furthermore, the state had a duty to enforce the law “by all lawful and proper means” (qtd. Campbell 66). Then Secretary of State, Daniel Webster sided with Southern lawmakers like Henry Clay when, in a speech, he criticized those willing to resist the Fugitive Slave clause for failing to do their “constitutional duties.” (17). He concluded, “In that respect, it is my judgment that the South is right, and the North is wrong” (qtd. Campbell 18). As a member of the Committee of Thirteen responsible for authoring the proposal that became the 1850 Compromise, Webster supported the Fugitive Slave clause because he did not think the Union could be preserved peacefully without it. In his support of the Act, Webster equates the Union’s security to the enforcement of slaveowner property rights, thereby nationalizing the dependent relationship between white freedom and chattel slavery. According to Eric Foner, the Fugitive Slave Law “embodied the most robust expansion of federal authority over the states, and over individual Americans, of the antebellum era” (125). Its passage organized America’s nationalized security apparatus in opposition to slave fugitivity, and its extension of state sovereignty coincided with the emergence of a disciplinary and regulatory apparatus dedicated to the containment and control of black bodies and interiors, a point discussed in more detail later in the chapter. Although many abolitionists explicitly cautioned against using violence as a means of resisting the Law’s enforcement, abolitionist rhetoric endorsing violent resistance became more commonplace than it had been prior to 1850.⁷

In his 1851 speech, “Resistance to Blood-Houndism,” Douglass issued a forceful condemnation of the letter in which President Fillmore requested “legislation that ‘would make it easier for him to use army, navy, and militia forces in the execution of federal law” (219). In his speech, Douglass characterizes Fillmore’s request for the militarized enforcement of the Fugitive

Slave Law as a dangerous abuse of sovereign power. “This law,” he declared, “has had pledged to its support the military and naval power of this Government. It is the only law which, for a long time, has been deemed necessary, that the Executive should openly pledge for its support the whole power of the army and navy – aye, even to collusion with our citizens, whom he might have to slaughter in its execution. This is the law. It is one about to be rigorously pressed” (273). Douglass depicts the law as the foundational component of an oppressive police state. As far as who the state will oppress, Douglass leaves that information ambiguous. He writes that the law “is one about to be rigorously pressed,” but pressed upon whom? Douglass does not name the object of the law’s enforcement, thereby implying that any and all are vulnerable to the violent exercise of state power that the law authorizes.

While supporters of the law understood slave fugitivity as a threat to domestic security and property rights, abolitionists represented the law itself as the true source of danger, and many resolved to form their own zone of protection. After Theodore Parker and Wendell Phillips publicly condemned the law at a meeting in Boston on October 15, 1850, a committee of approximately 50 people was “organized to protect the Negroes of the city” (Campbell 51). For his own part, Douglass spoke repeatedly about the importance of protecting blacks in the North, even to the point of bloodshed. At Pittsburgh’s National Free Soil Convention in August of 1852, he declared the “slaveholders not only forfeit their right to liberty, but to life itself.” According to Douglass, making “a dozen or more dead kidnappers” was the only way to make the Fugitive Slave Act a dead letter (qtd. Campbell 52). “A half dozen or more dead kidnappers carried down South,” he continued, “would cool the ardor of Southern gentlemen, and keep their rapacity in check” (qtd. Campbell 52-53). He expressed a similar sentiment in the aforementioned speech “Resistance to Blood Houndism.” “Are we not invited to the work of slaying kidnappers” he

asked? “What we must do is make it unsafe for a slaveholder or his agent, or a United States officer to undertake to kidnap any man or woman among us...I do believe that two or three dead slaveholders will make this law a dead letter” (277).

With an eye toward justifying his appeals for violent resistance, Douglass often invoked the country’s revolutionary legacy and constructed a comparison between the slave’s struggle against slavery and the Founders’ struggle against monarchical tyranny. Moreover, he represented his calls for violence as emanating from a desire for peace. In his famous “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” delivered in 1852, Douglass said of the Founders, “They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression...They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny.” Douglass’s sequence of inversions identifies slavery as an oppressive, tyrannical threat to the peaceful “order” the founders fought to establish. In addition, the contrast between slavery and the Founders prepares his audience to accept Douglass and his fellow slaves as “peace men” whose actions are inspired by a willed desire for peace rather than by an instinctive predisposition for violence.⁸ The phrase “peace men” also contrasts the virtuous interiority of the founders to the tyrannical order of slavery. In other words, the founders were “men” with a *private* regard for “peace”; their revolutionary actions, therefore, were dedicated to securing a peaceful *public* order.

By chance, Douglass’s relation to the Fugitive Slave Act intersects with that of Herman Melville through the figure of Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw. Both men wrote narratives in the 1850s dramatizing historical slave revolts, and both narratives interrogated the complementary link between private interiorities and public political reform. In 1851, Shaw’s decision in the case of the fugitive slave Thomas Sims⁹ was the first in the country to affirm the

Act's constitutionality. Melville was Shaw's son-in-law, having married his daughter Elizabeth in 1847, but the two families had long been close. Douglass, on the other hand, began his career as an abolitionist protesting Shaw's decision in the 1842 case against George Latimer, a light-skinned mulatto from Norfolk, Virginia. As Robert Wallace explains, Douglass was very involved in protesting Latimer's case and Shaw's handling of it (44). Douglass was 24 years old at the time; he was a fugitive slave and a newly minted member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁰ He likely joined the large protest outside the Court House on October 20, and when another protest was scheduled for Feneuil Hall on Sunday, October 30, Douglass was selected as a featured speaker.¹¹ He was not yet a well-known figure, only recently having joined the Society; regardless, it is safe to say that his speech did not go as planned. Wallace reports that Douglass was slated to follow abolitionist Wendell Phillips in the speaking order. But, when Douglass "came to the podium, a near riot was underway" (44). As the *Boston Daily Mail* reported, "another colored man, by the name of Douglass, attempted to address the meeting. He gesticulated to the noisy audience for about twenty minutes, but not one word in a hundred he uttered could be heard" (qtd. Wallace 47).¹²

In the 1850s, when the country teetered on the precipice of armed conflict, Douglass and Melville turned to the theme of violent slave resistance. *The Heroic Slave* (1855) and *Benito Cereno* (1853) offer narratives that attempt to imagine the possibility of rehabilitating white subjectivities, democratic ideals, and national institutions corrupted by their intimate relation to white supremacy. Each narrative turns to the slave rebellion as a thematic heuristic through which a future free from white supremacy might be imagined – with conflicting results. Although *The Heroic Slave* stands apart from *Benito Cereno* by representing violent black resistance as a virtuous extension of America's founding revolution, both narratives enlist the

impending prospect of black violence to warn (white) readers to reform their private and public relation to white supremacy and slavery.

II. Melville's Pessimism: White Supremacy and the Problem of Security

Benito Cereno imagines the reform of white subjectivities – as dramatized through the example of the naïve Captain Delano – as a near impossibility given their vulnerability to the disciplinary effect of white supremacy. The narrative depicts white supremacy as a resilient ideology that weaponizes the violent black resistance it inspires in the service of expanding and securing its sphere of influence. Unlike *The Heroic Slave*, *Benito Cereno* concludes that dominant racial norms, white subjectivities, and political institutions are incredibly resistant – if not impervious – to meaningful reform given their dependence upon the security mechanism of race. In a racialized political system, the criteria of race governs the sphere of citizenship and secures its integrity from the ever-present threat of black violence; therefore, the security apparatus of such a system includes the prospect of black violence as an inevitable, productive feature.¹³ With the prospect of reform doubtful and the potential for violence assured, *Benito Cereno* portrays black resistance as a dreadful consequence of the nation's dependence on racial oppression and as a harbinger of the nation's doom.

Published serially in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1855, *Benito Cereno* fictionalizes the events surrounding the 1805 *Trial* revolt as described in Amasa Delano's 1817 *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*. In Melville's fictionalized account of the revolt, the merchant captain Delano and his crew aboard the *Bachelor's Delight* encounter a seemingly derelict vessel in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Chili. The ship in question is the Spanish slaver *San Dominick*.¹⁴ Unbeknownst to Delano, the *San Dominick's* human cargo has revolted and killed many of the Spanish sailors and

officers. When Delano boards the ship to offer aid, he is greeted “by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks,” with “the latter outnumbering the former more than could have been expected...” (167). He is quickly introduced to the ship’s sickly Captain, Benito Cereno, and his faithful servant, Babo. In truth and unbeknownst to Delano, Babo is the revolt’s mastermind and is holding Benito Cereno and the surviving Spanish sailors hostage. Over the course of the next day, Delano observes various scenes of labor aboard the *San Dominick* that are in truth part of an elaborately choreographed performance designed to lull the American captain into a false sense of security that would allow the slaves to steal his ship. When Delano abruptly learns the truth about Babo and the state of revolt aboard the *San Dominick*, he orders his men to retake it, an order they execute in a brutal display of force. There are two sections of narrative that follow the action aboard the *San Dominick*. The first takes the form of a recorded legal deposition in which the court establishes an official account of the revolt and its aftermath, thereby cementing the guilt of the slaves who revolted and justifying Delano’s use of deadly force in the recapture of the *San Dominick*. In the narrative’s final scene, the reader witnesses Babo’s execution and dismemberment.

Although *Benito Cereno*’s central plot revolves around the revolt and its bloody consequences, the story is concerned, as Carolyn Karcher notes, with the workings of “the white racist mind and how it reacts in the face of a slave insurrection” (128). When in the presence of black subjectivities, Delano’s mind moves between two modes of being: denial and violence. Black subjectivity is the object of Delano’s denial and violence, because its existence troubles the integrity of his identity, disciplined as it is by the discourse of white supremacy. As Maggie Montesinos Sale argues, “*Benito Cereno* does the cultural work of representing one central anxiety driving the silencing of slave rebellion, the unspoken, suppressed, and unacknowledged

fear that ‘they’ may be as intelligent as – or more so than – ‘we’” (170).¹⁵ Delano suppresses his awareness of black intelligence by adopting the role of a benevolent, paternal figure, a self-fashioned identity that leads him to perceive the *San Dominick* and its slaves as infantile members of a harmonious domestic order.

After boarding the *San Dominick*, Delano encounters clear signs that a revolt has taken place, but the racial knowledge he has internalized produces and secures his ignorance. The narrative’s central conflict plays out as a tug-of-war between Delano’s racialized subjectivity and the reality before him; in other words, Delano’s interiority is the stage upon which the narrative’s conflict unfolds. Upon reaching the ship’s quarter-deck, Delano spies,

some eight feet above the general throng...the cross-legged figures of six other blacks; each with a rusty hatchet in his hand, which, with a bit of brick and a rag, he was engaged like a scullion in scouring; while between each two was a small stack of hatchets, their rusted edges turning forward awaiting a like operation. (168-169)

Clearly, something is wrong. It is unusual for unattended slaves to polish hatchets on the deck of a slave ship, and Delano has an obvious reason to worry about his safety and that of the Spanish crew; but Delano’s mind, as the text indicates, is “enchanted.” Just prior to Delano’s encounter with the slaves polishing their hatchets, the reader encounters a paragraph that provides some insight about the American captain’s mental state. The paragraph describes how, “upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one,” an “impression” is generated. A house or a ship populated by “strange inmates,”

hoard[s] from view their interiors till the last moment; but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that the living spectacle it contains, upon its sudden and complete

disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. (168)

The passage's metaphor illustrates how the "living spectacle" of the slaves aboard the ship, viewed in contrast to the surrounding oceanic expanse, disorients Delano's sight. Moreover, the passage indicates that Delano will have trouble seeing black life as anything other than a spectacle: Delano sees the slaves, but he is blind, his perception thoroughly conditioned by the racist knowledge of black inferiority. The black bodies on the ship appear as a chaotic "living spectacle," not as a collection of thinking, individual subjects. Upon boarding the *San Dominick*, he is shocked to find that blacks "outnumber" whites "more than could have been expected..." (167). Delano's shock stems from the fact that the scene before him rejects his tools of categorization; As Dana Nelson argues, Delano is troubled by "a lack of proper authority on the San Dominick" (114-115).¹⁶ With the comforting presence of white authority largely absent, Delano takes on the role himself, and he turns to the racialized category of labor to impose a sense of order upon the chaotic scene around him. He has no language to explain the slaves polishing the hatchets except the language of race, and it leaves him mentally unequipped to perceive their labor as anything other than an expression of a natural, innate docility. He cannot countenance the possibility of a black intelligence performing the act of labor as a disguise for violent intent. With the novella's third-person narration limited to Delano's perspective, the passage performs Delano's racialized domestication of the scene before him. As Delano watches,

the six hatchet-polishers neither spoke to others, nor breathed a whisper among themselves, but sat intent upon their task, except at intervals, when, with the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime, two and two they sideways clashed their

hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din. All six, unlike the generality, had the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans. (169)

Despite the threatening aspect of the labor he observes, Delano's racialized perception of attempts to harmonize the scene and his relation to the black interiors populating it. When Delano attributes the slaves' silent "intent" to "the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime," he diagnoses their labor as the product of a childlike and docile black interiority. The "love" that unites "industry with pastime" can be found "*in negroes.*" At the same time, the knowledge that supposedly grants him unfiltered access to black interiorities produces the knowledge of his own racial superiority and empowers him to assume his "natural" role as an autonomous and paternal master or foreman.

Melville includes language throughout the narrative suggesting that Delano maintains a limited awareness of the *San Dominick's* volatile state. The clashing of the hatchets produces "a barbarous din," and the six hatchet polishers, "unlike" the mass of slaves first encountered on the ship, "had the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans." The use of "barbarous" and "raw" connotes a form of blackness that has not yet been tamed or civilized. And yet, the passage employs a vocabulary that indicates how Delano's subjectivity is constituted by the inclusion of these excessive, "barbarous" characteristics into his cohesive, racialized worldview. Similar to the diagnosis of black docility, the use of "barbarous" diagnoses the *internal character* of its object rather than simply describing its external appearance, physical traits, or actions. Within Delano's racialized worldview, barbarity is an essential quality of black interiors whose limited potential for improvement or reform can only be achieved by virtue of white management. The incongruous reality his logic constructs, a reality in which black interiors are essentially docile *and* barbaric, affords Delano the tools he needs to authorize his social and biological superiority.

The racial discourse foundational to his subjectification produces knowledge about black interiors that facilitates their containment and control. The processes of subjectification and suppression occur simultaneously, and both are essential to the stability of his mental state and social position.¹⁷ With his will-to-power disguised and his control of the situation authorized, Delano is practically blind to the fact that all is not what it seems. The final tag of “unsophisticated African” resolves the initial confusion he feels about the hatchet-polishers and their curious labor; their “barbarous din,” he decides, is but the product of their unsophisticated, black character. With his confusion abated and the integrity of his worldview stabilized, Delano continues his tour of the ship naïve to the presence of an ulterior reality in which, as Michael Rogin writes, there is “a black intelligence” that can take “revenge on the master in the act of obeying him” (323).¹⁸

Delano’s perceives *The San Dominick* as a model domestic space, a racialized fantasy nearly impervious to meaningful reform. For instance, while speaking with the *San Dominick*’s captain, Benito Cereno, Delano witnesses a black boy on deck grab a knife and strike a Spanish boy “over the head, inflicting a gash from which blood flowed” (179). Shocked by the slave’s audacity in striking a racial and social superior, in public no less, Delano suggests to Cereno that he “would find it advantageous to keep all your blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task, and no matter what happens to the ship” (180). As this scene illustrates, Delano’s subjectivity, disciplined as it is by the discourse of white supremacy, cannot accept the idea that a black subjectivity or intelligence exists, much less one capable of causing him or the natural social order any harm. As a man governed by the discourse of race, Delano interprets the boy’s eruption of violence as the product of a barbaric black interior, an interiority in need of his management and the pacifying effect of labor.

Benito Cereno's central moment of crisis occurs as Delano prepares to leave the *San Dominick* upon a small ship sent from *The Bachelor's Delight* to collect him. Just as the boat is about to leave, "Don Benito sprang over the bulwarks, falling at the feet of Captain Delano" (225). Initially, Delano suspects Benito Cereno to be a "plotting pirate" trying to kill him. As he grabs Cereno by the throat, he watches as Babo leaps over the *San Dominick's* rail with dagger in hand, "as if with desperate fidelity to befriend [sic] his master to the last" (226). At the same time, "the whole host of negroes, as if inflamed at the sight of their jeopardized captain, impended in one sooty avalanche over the bulwarks" (226). Delano "flung the Spaniard aside," "wrenched away" Babo's dagger, and held Babo down with his right foot (226). Only when Babo brandishes a second dagger and attempts to "snakishly" crawl toward Benito Cereno does Delano decipher the state of revolt aboard the *San Dominick* and Babo's intention to kill the Spanish captain.

That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating in unanticipated clearness his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day...Both the black's hands were held, as, glancing up towards the *San Dominick*, Captain Delano, now with the scales dropped from his eyes, saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt. (227)

The phrase "piratical revolt" classifies the slaves as nationless outlaws whose possession of the ship violates state sovereignty and threatens Delano's personal well-being. He reflexively categorizes the slaves, not as oppressed individual subjects with the right to revolutionary action, but as a dangerous, inhuman mob whose "tumult" demands a violent response. When the slaves'

puncture Delano's fantasy of docility, his internal security mechanism – the governing criteria of race - snaps into a different gear; he sees the slaves – *knows* them - as a threatening black mass devoid of subjectivity. Delano's identification maintains the erasure of black subjectivity essential to his identity and authorizes the use of violence so that private and public order can be restored. Delano's reflexive racism decides, as Michel Foucault writes in "Society Must be Defended," "what must live and what must die." Delano's racism, and that of the state, adopts a "positive relation" that produces a "relationship of war" (Foucault 255). In this relation, the life of the individual and of the social order depends upon destroying that which threatens it. "In order to live," Foucault writes, "you must destroy your enemies" (255). The racial knowledge that disciplines Delano necessitates the application of violent force; his reflexes are primed to adopt a relationship of war when black bodies shed their docility and adopt a threatening aspect. Lisa Lowe emphatically states, "Nothing has been a more powerful force against the dehumanizing subjugation of a people than the imminent threat of their rebellion and uprising" (13). Delano orders the *San Dominick* retaken by force, and the revolt is soon suppressed.

The legal deposition following the events of the revolt catalogues the slaves' names, crimes, and punishment. It creates an official record of the revolt and its participants that decides their guilt and justifies Delano's use of deadly force.¹⁹ Essentially, the deposition determines the eruption of slave violence to be a criminal rather than revolutionary act; it normalizes the assumed criminality of blackness. Just as Delano reflexively resorts to the category of race to authorize his violence, so too does the court. The institutional architecture of white supremacy, having been designed to exclude black subjectivities and erase white culpability, is foundational to the integrity of the legal, socio-economic order. Babo's execution comprises the final scene in the narrative. After his capture, the leader of the revolt chooses not to speak in front of the

tribunal deciding his guilt; nor does he speak during his execution. In Lima, several months after the court decides his guilt, he is “dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule” (247). His “body” is then “burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtelty, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites...” (247). The deposition’s imposition of criminality as well as Babo’s public execution and the display of his dismembered body perform what Eric Sundquist terms “the countersubversive containment of revolutionary energy” (38). The legal apparatus and the discourse of white supremacy collaborate in the containment and control of the existential threat of Babo’s intelligence. That containment is accomplished through a process of objectification whereby the discourse of scientific racism and the court’s legal authority determine Babo’s interiority as inherently violent and criminal.

And yet, Babo’s head stares. Despite the sovereign power of the apparatus designed to define and contain him, his “hive of subtlety” retains the unknowable interiority white supremacy eagerly and fearfully wants to claim. Even in death, Babo’s head harbors and exudes a subversive energy that exceeds the discursive and legal bonds enclosing it. Sale writes of how Melville does not create a subject position for Babo. “*Benito Cereno*,” she says “gapes wide where the rebels’ perspective might have spoken” (170). Because he does not occupy a subject position, and because he maintains his silence through the legal proceedings, Babo’s blackness remains a mysterious, disturbing signifier that reveals white supremacy’s vulnerability; the knowledge it produces of black and white interiors is suspect, and the mental and institutional states it secures are perpetually unstable and vulnerable. The implication being that Babo’s death does nothing to foreclose the inevitability of future eruptions of violence. Eventually, the security mechanism will fail, and the racist state will fall to the threat it knows but cannot see.²⁰

II. *The Heroic Slave* and White Subjectivity: Internal Reform and Effective Democratic Action

In *Benito Cereno*, Delano's subjectivity is impervious to reform, because it proves too vulnerable to the disciplinary reach of racial discourse. From an institutional perspective, Melville's novella does not imagine an outside to the sovereign power of the racist state; race governs who lives and who dies on a global scale. Although *The Heroic Slave* indicates that the reform of white subjectivities may not effect meaningful political change on the issue of slavery, it does imagine a space and a life outside the racial state, one contingent upon the creation of an international black community.

First published in 1853 in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, *The Heroic Slave* offers a fictionalized retelling of events leading up to the successful 1841 revolt on the American brig, the *Creole*. The novella's plot revolves around the revolt's leader, the slave Madison Washington. Douglass composes his narrative by fictionalizing events from Washington's life that the reader witnesses primarily from the perspective of two white men, Mr. Listwell and Tom Grant. Their encounters with the ostensibly heroic, virtuous, and manly Washington dramatize the potential of reforming racist white subjectivities. Both men encounter Washington directly and experience the reformation of their racist beliefs as a result.

The first character to encounter Washington is Mr. Listwell, whom we meet at the beginning of the novella as a Northern "traveler" riding through the Virginian countryside. During his ride, he witnesses Washington alone in the forest at the edge of a plantation, praying for his wife. Listwell perceives Washington as "Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong," a man gifted with "A giant's strength" as well as a "giant's heart" (7). The passage cements Washington's physicality ("strength") as a manifestation of his virtuous character. The portrait

also indicates that Washington's feelings inform his actions, but not to the extent of determining them. He is a man of feeling, but his feelings do not govern him. Douglass's portrait of Washington as a masculine, virtuous, and devout family man frames him as someone with the capacity to control his appetites, thereby preparing the reader to pass a favorable judgment on his violent actions later in the novella. With Listwell watching, Washington prays about his desire to escape slavery but worries about leaving his wife, Susan, who is also enslaved in the South. Instead of surrendering to his instinctual desire to flee, Washington demonstrates his control over it by praying for help and returning to the plantation. In essence, Washington's actions evidence his capacity for self-management and highlight the balanced and stable nature of his nervous state. According to Christopher Castiglia, the "nervous state" refers to the "increasingly discordant human interior...with its battles between appetite and restraint, desire and deferral, consciousness and unconsciousness..." (2). Castiglia argues that the nervous state,

became...a microcosm of the equally riven sociality of nineteenth-century America. As the inside became a reflection (and increasingly a displacement) of the ideological conflicts of the social world, citizens were encouraged to understand the incessant labor of vigilant self-scrutiny and self-management as effective democratic action. (2)

Washington's actions and bearing model the "self-management" essential to "effective democratic action" and identify him as an ideal citizen. Listwell experiences a moral conversion immediately after witnessing Washington's example. Upon finishing the prayer, Washington walks away and returns to the plantation, leaving Listwell in "motionless silence" to meditate "on the extraordinary revelations to which he had listened" (8). Washington's words, we are told, "rung through the chambers of his [Listwell's] soul and vibrated his entire frame" (8). The

“vibrations” Listwell experiences deliver the persuasive appeal of Washington’s example and reform his “nervous state,” inspiring him to scrutinize the relation between his actions, white supremacy, and the institution of slavery.

We know the reform of Listwell’s nervous state is complete when he declares, a moment later, “From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land” (9). Listwell proves true to his words, and his declaration behaves like a felicitous speech act. Listwell finalizes, by virtue of his utterance, a reformed interiority. Therefore, despite Washington’s inspirational prayer, Listwell’s individual reform is the product of self-management, a crucial component of “effective democratic action” and the foundation of liberty as defined in classical Republican theory. As Quentin Skinner explains in his summary of classical Republicanism,

...the *libertas* enjoyed by free-men consists in their being ‘in their own power’ as opposed to being ‘under the power of someone else’. By contrast, the loss of liberty suffered by slaves arises from living ‘under the power of a master’ and hence in subjection to his *arbitrium* or arbitrary will. The nerve of the republican theory is thus that freedom within civil associations is subverted by the mere presence of arbitrary power, the effect of which is to reduce the members of such associations from the status of freemen to that of slaves. (x)

By announcing that he will “atone” for his “past indifference,” Listwell rejects white supremacy’s hold on his conscience by practicing a form of self-awareness that effectively frees him and his actions from the disciplinary grasp of race. Having reformed and *freed* his interiority

of white supremacy's arbitrary and corruptive influence, Listwell can orient his actions toward the work of abolition and the reformation of the nation's nervous state. Listwell's individual reform gives us a glimpse of Douglass's attitude toward its collective, political potential.

The fact that Washington's virtuous example prompts Listwell's reform indicates that, at the time he was writing *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass had retained a measure of confidence in moral suasion despite having distanced himself from William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Moral suasion, popularized by Garrison and the AASS, held that virtuous black conduct could advertise virtuous black interiors and redeem the prospect of black citizenship. The principle's emphasis on individual betterment and virtuous conduct positioned 1820s and 30s abolitionism within a broader discourse of reform. As the discourse of reform expanded beyond the "focus on structural injustices such as slavery," it extended its grasp to "middle-class institutions" and surveilled "individual vices such as drinking, gambling, masturbation, eating spicy foods, smoking, reading trashy novels, and wearing tight corsets" (Castiglia 8). As a result of its transition from structural injustices to individual vices, the discourse of reform concealed "systematic injustices borne by slaves, the poor, or the disenfranchised." Instead, those populations could find "the cause of their suffering in individual flaws of character that everyone potentially shared" (Castiglia 8). In other words, by the 1840s, the discourse of reform was severely limited in its capacity to effect structural, institutional change, because it confined the 'flaws' it diagnosed to the private sphere. By the mid to late 1840s, Douglass harbored similar doubts about moral suasion's efficacy, which is partly why he left the Garrisonians and, I argue, why he began to use militant rhetoric in his speeches and writings beginning in the late 1840s, *The Heroic Slave* included. Although the novella portrays internal self-management as an important ingredient to "effective democratic action," it

advocates on behalf of self-management *if* it leads to physical acts of resistance. I suggest that Douglass did not restrict “effective democratic action” to the labor of self-scrutiny and self-management; those practices are essential, but *The Heroic Slave* portrays effective democratic action as an external, political action animated by internal self-management.

Listwell’s self-managed reformation determines his capacity to engage in effective democratic action in the form of physical acts of resistance. *The Heroic Slave* uses Listwell’s self-managed conversion to effect a reversal whereby universal moral values and virtuous conduct are organized in opposition to the normative, racialized interpretation of national ideals. For instance, before we meet Washington or Listwell, Douglass identifies the discourse of national belonging as a product of a corrupted, racialized history in need of revision. In the novella’s opening paragraphs, just before we meet Listwell and Washington in the forest, we are treated to a short history of Virginia’s proud heritage. The narrator, whose voice is indiscernible from Douglass’s, recalls Virginia’s “multitudinous array...of statesmen and heroes” before noting that “not all of the great ones of the Old Dominion have, by the fact of their birth-place, escaped undeserved obscurity” (3). The passage lays the groundwork for including Washington within the discourse of national belonging, a rhetorical flourish that would correct the “undeserved obscurity” imposed by the dominant historical record. He reminds his readers,

Let those who account for it who can, but there stands the fact, that a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry, - who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson, - and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led all the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence, lives now only in the chattel records of his native State. (4)

The “man” referenced is the slave Madison Washington, and the narrator’s language identifies him as a descendent of the founding fathers that Virginia’s chattel records have damned to “obscurity.” The passage recognizes the historical record as an internal feature of the state’s identity. Interpreted within the heuristic of Castiglia’s work, the passage implies that the corruptive influence of slavery and racism need to be exorcised if the reform of Virginia’s nervous state is to be accomplished. If the state’s reform succeeds, Washington’s deserved membership in America’s revolutionary heritage can no longer be denied and he acquires the right to revolutionary action. By establishing Washington’s right to revolutionary action in the novella’s introduction, Douglass authorizes Washington’s forthcoming insurrection as a moral and patriotic act. Moreover, once framed within the discourse of revolution, Washington’s violence can be understood as an effective form of democratic action undertaken to reform the nation and its ideals from the corruptive influence of slavery and white supremacy.

Following Listwell’s observation of Washington in Virginia, the newly minted abolitionist meets Washington on two separate occasions. In each instance, Listwell’s actions make it possible for Washington to secure his freedom. Their first meeting occurs “in the winter of 1840” when Listwell and his wife are at home. They hear a knock on the door, and Listwell opens it to find Washington, who has recently escaped the plantation in Virginia and is a fugitive trying to make his way north. Listwell recognizes him, invites him in, and organizes Washington’s passage to Canada. After this moment, the two consider each other friends. Washington eventually leaves Canada and returns to Virginia to attempt the rescue of his wife. The rescue attempt fails, and Washington is captured and re-enslaved. Listwell learns of these details while visiting Virginia, where he spots a man resembling Washington among a group of slaves being transported to Richmond. After confirming Washington’s identity, Listwell trails

him to Richmond, where the “thought struck him that...he might do his friend Madison one last service, and he stepped into a hardware store and purchased three strong *files*” (40). As Washington walks past Listwell on his way to board the *Creole*, Listwell slips “the files into his [Washington’s] pocket, and at once darted back among the crowd” (40). Later, with the *Creole* well on its way to the New Orleans market, Washington uses the files to escape his bonds, free 18 of his fellow slaves, and lead a successful though relatively peaceful revolt at sea. He ultimately forces the ship to reroute to Nassau, a space outside the reach of U.S. sovereignty where he and the other slaves are eventually freed at the hands of black soldiers.

Listwell’s actions in both instances are the product of his internal reform, but it is his management of his reformed interiority that highlights how Douglass imagines private self-management as a virtue when directed toward the rehabilitation of the civic sphere. Listwell manages his reformed interiority by deliberately assisting Washington escape on two occasions. His actions, galvanized by Washington’s virtuous appeal but carried out by virtue of his self-management, participate in the broader struggle to reform the nation’s civic space of slavery’s corruptive influence. Because he manages his private transformation towards the perfection of democratic values and the rehabilitation of the civic space, Listwell models “effective democratic action.” When he published *The Heroic Slave* in 1852, Douglass no longer subscribed to the Garrisonian principle of moral suasion, but he favored internal self-management as a means of effecting the immediate abolition of slavery.

Despite the revolt serving as the climax of Washington’s narrative, the novella does not include a first-hand description of it. After Listwell slips the files into Washington’s pocket, the novella’s plot leaps forward and begins again two months *after* the *Creole*’s departure for New Orleans. At the “Marine Coffee-house at Richmond,” we watch a company of sailors whose

conversation pivots to evaluate the “whole affair on board of the *Creole*” (42). Dominating the conversation is “a regular old salt” named Jack Williams, who we find taunting another man named Tom Grant, formerly the first mate of the *Creole*. With an audience of fellow-sailors looking on, Williams chastises Grant for allowing “[t]hose black rascals” to get “the upper hand” and tells him,

Ye made a mistake in yer manner of fighting ‘em. All that is needed in dealing with a set of rebellious *darkies*, is to show that yer not afraid of ‘em. For my own part, I would not honor a dozen niggers by pointing a gun at one on ‘em, - a good stout whip, or a stiff rope’s end, is better than all the guns at Old Point to quell a *nigger* insurrection. (43)

According to Williams, a “*nigger* insurrection” requires nothing more than a white man with a whip to restore order. Grant wastes no time in correcting Williams, telling him “all that you’ve now said sounds very well *here* on shore, where, perhaps, you have studied negro character. I do not profess to understand the subject as well as yourself; but it strikes me, you apply the same rule in dissimilar cases” (43). On the one hand, Grant’s admission of ignorance is a sarcastic remark meant to silence Williams’s boasting. On the other hand, Grant’s admission of ignorance about the “negro character” implicitly rejects William’s scientific brand of racism.

In the 19th century, the proliferation of scientific theories of race identified the black character as an object of knowledge. Theories of race were invoked in the effort to manage black interiorities and conform them to dominant racial and social norms. The discourse of scientific racism and the discourse of reform are both organized around the management of interiorities, and both functioned to domesticate the volatile potential of black interiorities by confining their threatening ambiguity to known categories. Scientific theories categorized the black body as a biological machine to be studied, known, and subjected to techniques of control. The interior

thrust of such theories was a novel development; in the past, differences of ethnicity and culture – *external*, structural characteristics - served as the foundation for prejudice and discrimination. Modeling scientific racism's bid to seize individual black interiorities and black populations, Williams diagnoses black cowardice as a racial trait in order to domesticate the threat of violence – and the limits of white control - the *Creole* revolt represents. He responds to Grant's charge that he is applying "the same rule in dissimilar cases" and says, "But a nigger's a nigger, on sea or land; and is a coward, find him where you will; a drop of blood from one on 'em will skeer a hundred" (44). For Williams, black cowardice is a known, universal quantity. It is neither the product of environment nor the expression of a strategic performance; for Williams, black cowardice is simply an internal feature of an inferior race incapable of self-management. To admit anything more would be to invite the destruction of his mode of being.

Grant's expressed ignorance about the "negro character" can be attributed to the fact that Washington's actions and conduct during the revolt completely undermine the scientific theories of race that formerly determined Grant's knowledge of black life. Responding to Williams charge that the success of the revolt must have been due to "great carelessness, or cowardice somewhere!", Grant says of Washington, "His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose. The only *feeling* with which we regarded him was, that he was a powerful, good-disposed negro. He seldom spoke to any one, and when he did speak, it was with the utmost propriety" (47 emphasis mine).

For instance, rather than diagnosing the whip as a tool used in defense of a natural, universal biological order, Grant identifies both the whip and white supremacy as arbitrary social constructs. In response to Williams' claim about black cowardice, Grant responds,

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. I say, in such circumstances, it's easy to talk of flogging negroes and of negro cowardice; but, sir, I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward, or that your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of *salt* water. (43)

Grant argues that it was possible for Washington's revolt to succeed because it took place in a liminal space external to the reach of U.S. sovereignty. This passage stands in contrast to *Benito Cereno*'s portrayal of state sovereignty as an international, global force. Grant has discerned that the relative absence of successful revolts on land is not an indication of black cowardice, nor a confirmation of racist theories of white supremacy. Rather, the potential success of black revolt at sea indicates that blacks are capable of managing their desires to resist violently even as they live in the shadow of the whip. Instead of acting by instinct, they wait until they are in what James Scott terms "nonstate spaces."²¹ The liminal "*salt* water" Grant references exposes the geographical and internal limits particular to dominant disciplinary and juridical expressions of power. The geography of the ocean introduces a friction between the state and the slaves it seeks to contain and control, thereby affording the slaves the opportunity to revolt and assert their status as persons. The strategic and restrained nature of the revolt also exposes the disciplinary limits of racial knowledge. As a witness to the revolt and Washington's impressive example, Grant recognizes the failure of racial knowledge; it offers a comforting but false diagnosis of black interiority, and the objective understanding it claims is an illusion. As the protected object of America's juridical apparatus, rights are enshrined within liberal discourse as

natural and universal, but their political origins are disguised. By exposing the limits of US sovereignty, the revolt and the liminal space that facilitates it indicates that slaveowner property rights are arbitrary manifestations of power; they are not a feature of a natural, universal order. Similarly, scientific racism produced knowledge about black interiors that was believed to be objective and absolute; its authority in diagnosing black interiors therefore knew no limits. When Washington disabuses Grant of the notion of black inferiority, he reveals racial knowledge to be an arbitrary product of power rather than a reflection of natural law. As a result of his experience, Grant has learned that black docility, on land assumed to be a sign of racial inferiority, is part of a self-managed strategy of survival and resistance; to “act cowardly on shore,” he says, “may be to act wisely.”

In her reading of Grant’s conversation with Williams, Ivy G. Wilson contends that “Douglass depicts Tom Grant in such a manner as to recall the earlier conversion of Listwell” (465). Unlike Listwell, who is “captivated by Washington’s rhetorical eloquence, Grant is captivated by Washington’s display of physical restraint” (365). During the revolt, “Grant is persuaded by Washington’s overwhelming presence”; but he does not possess Listwell’s “sense of moral indignation concerning slavery.” In other words, Listwell’s internal reformation inspires effective democratic action, but Grant’s respect for Washington only goes so far. Although he no longer believes in white supremacy, he still maintains a desire for white control; he remains attached to the status and authority whiteness provides him. When Wilson says that Washington exerted an “overwhelming presence,” she gamely identifies what it was like to be captive to Madison Washington in the aftermath of the revolt. When Washington takes control of the ship, he relieves Grant of his authority and status. In antebellum America, the idea of a black slave taking white captives would spark alarm; however, as Wilson explains, Douglass goes to great

pains to “mitigate the violence aboard the *Creole* by refusing to describe it. Instead, he underscores Washington’s benevolence” (465). Douglass accentuates Washington’s benevolence by making clear that he employs violence out of necessity and withholds it out of mercy.

When Grant’s narrative turns to describe the rebellion as it erupts aboard the *Creole*, the slaves and the ship’s officers engage in a brief struggle, and Grant is knocked unconscious. He wakes on the deck “completely weakened by the loss of blood” and spots “Captain Clarke and Mr. Jameson” dying on the quarterdeck while Madison stood “at the helm unhurt” (48). He then commits himself to fight to the death, saying that even though “it was a little too much for me...in my prostrate condition, to see our good brig commanded by a *black murderer*” (48). The phrase “black murderer” represents Grant’s attempt to deploy the racial stereotype of the black brute as a means of asserting his moral and racial authority. He gains his feet and rushes Washington, but Washington pushes him back with a “strong, black arm, as though I had been a boy of twelve” (48). Washington then speaks with an authority all his own;

‘Sir,’ said he, ‘your life is in my hands. I could have killed you a dozen times over during this last half hour, and could kill you now...I have done no more to those dead men yonder, then they would have done to me in like circumstances. We have struck for our freedom, and if a man’s heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing and if we are murderers, *so were they*. (48)

In this remarkable passage, it is Washington’s decision *not* to kill, even when he has the power to do so, that signifies the balanced nature of his nervous state and his capacity for internal self-management, at least in Grant’s eyes. “I felt little disposition to reply to this impudent speech,” Grant says. “By heaven, it disarmed me. The fellow loomed up before me. I forgot his

blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech” (49). Readings of this passage tend to give credit to Washington’s “dignity” and eloquence” for disarming Grant, but equally if not more important is his looming physicality and the threat of death it represents.

Immediately after being “disarmed,” Grant attempts a last show of resistance and shouts for his men to stay where they are rather than obey Washington’s commands. One of the slaves nearly attacks him with a handspike, but Washington interferes and saves his life. He then gives Grant a final warning. “Now I have saved your life twice within these last twenty minutes, - for, when you lay helpless on the deck, my men were about to kill you. I held them in check. And if you now (seeing I am your friend and not your enemy) persist in your resistance to my authority, I give you fair warning YOU SHALL DIE” (49). While Washington’s “dignity” and “eloquence” impress Grant, the threat of death subdues him.

The Heroic Slave repeatedly describes Washington’s impressive physique in close proximity to revolutionary language. The novella emphasizes his size and strength, but as Wilson explains, Washington’s physicality is “detailed but rarely exposed in action” (465). In passages where the text advertises Washington’s body, Douglass pre-emptively dispels fears of black violence by characterizing Washington as a man whose higher faculties are firmly in control of his body and the violence it could – but does not – commit. As Grant reflects on his first impression of Washington, he describes the slave’s intelligence and noble bearing. “The leader of the mutiny in question,” he says, “was just as shrewd a fellow as every I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand” (47). He continues, “His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose. The only feeling with which we regarded him was, that he was a powerful, good-disposed negro” (47). In this, the first meeting between the two men, Washington’s behavior as a “good-disposed negro”

mediates the perception of his physicality even as it volatile presence remains well within view. It is Washington's regal manners that Grant sees, but the potential for violence waits in the background. While Wilson's reading accentuates the persuasive power of Washington's character, as signified by his "benevolence," it diminishes the role that Washington's physicality and violence plays in subduing Grant and *forcing* him to see Washington as more than a slave.

Grant tells his audience of Washington that "It seems he brought three files with him on board, and must have gone to work upon his fetters the first night out; and he must have worked well at that; for on the day of the rising, he got the irons *off eighteen* besides himself" (47). Grant's use of "seems" communicates a sense of surprise upon discovering that this docile slave had been in rebellion all along, a reaction similar to that of Captain Delano in *Benito Cereno* upon discovering the slave Babo's deceit. In order to subdue Grant, Washington had to do more than exhibit virtuous behavior or exercise physical force – he had to wrest control of the ship away from Grant while demonstrating his capacity for self-management. He had to overthrow the ship's governing authority, highlight the limits of sovereign power and racial knowledge, and represent himself as a self-possessed individual with an ordered nervous state.

Washington's ordered interior is mirrored by his conduct during the voyage to Nassau, during which the *Creole* sails through a violent storm. Throughout the storm, Madison remains silent and calm, speaking only briefly to Grant. "Mr. Mate," he said, "you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free'" (50). Once again, Washington highlights the limits of U.S. sovereignty and the property rights it recognizes as natural and universal. Grant then tells his audience in Richmond,

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. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior (50-51).

Washington's demonstration of self-management proves limited in its ability to reform Grant's interiority to the extent that the man would engage in effective democratic action. As he says, he "would have followed [Washington] willingly and gladly" *except* that he considered him inferior by race. In contrast to Listwell, Washington's example does not align Grant's interiority with effective democratic action or a healthy nervous state divorced from the corruptive influence of slavery and racism. Therefore, Douglass uses Grant to signal the limits of internal reform as a means of achieving the abolition of slavery. Listwell's reform is therefore anecdotal; something more than moral persuasion may be needed if the immediate abolition of slavery is to be secured in a society whose subjects and institutions are so resistant to racial reform.

III. Conclusion

When the *Creole* reaches Nassau, the ship is greeted by "a company of *black* soldiers" whose orders are to take control of the ship and protect "the property" (51). Grant's ire at being shepherded by armed black soldiers is unmistakable. He describes the ensuing scene to the sailors who observed in argument with Williams. "These impudent rascals," he says, "when I called 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*" (51). The soldiers rebuke Grant's authority and that of the nation he represents, and they extend Great Britain's zone of protection to include the revolting slaves. Grant attempts to invoke, as he

says, “the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States” and claim that “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 footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity” (51). As Wilson notes, Grant’s frustration is informed by his belief that U.S. law would be respected abroad (464). Essentially, his efforts to retain possession of the slaves extends the domestic juridical authority of the Fugitive Slave Act into the international sphere.

When *The Heroic Slave* was published in 1853, the United States was still seeking restitution from Great Britain for the loss of property incurred by the British emancipation of the *Creole* slaves in 1841. As Hole explains, “Douglass’s and Melville’s fictions specifically intervene in a moment when the United States and Britain were attempting to resolve lingering disagreements over jurisdiction and extradition” (223). In the case of the *Creole* ordeal, the US government considered the British government to have collaborated with the slaves and “demanded extradition of and then indemnification for the fugitives” (Hole 223). To resolve the international dispute, “a joint commission charged a Boston banker and partner in the House of Baring, Joshua Bates, to act as arbiter” (Hole 223). “In the winter of 1854-55, Hole writes, nearly two years *after* Douglass published the *Heroic Slave* and just as Melville “returned to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to work in isolation on *Benito Cereno*,” Bates rendered his decision on the *Creole* case (223). He found that “Nassau officials had violated international law,” which meant that “the British government had to compensate” the original owners of the slaves a total of \$110,330 (qtd. Hole 223). This decision meant that, as Henry J. Richardson II argues, fugitive slaves in the 1850s could not escape US juridical authority “anywhere within the US national territory...nor, in principle, *anywhere in the world*” (qtd. Hole 223).

The international extension of the Fugitive Slave Act's juridical authority, as effected by the legal proceedings following the *Creole* revolt, signals the intensification and expansion of white supremacy's legal instrumentalities particular to mid-nineteenth-century America. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the intensification of white supremacy also entailed the emergence and normalization of internal techniques of control, including the production of racist scientific knowledge about natural black characteristics. These techniques had a productive dimension; they sought to secure the integrity of a dominant, racialized status quo. It is within this context that Melville and Douglass imagine the potential of resisting, escaping, and reforming this expansive (and expanding) regime of racist power. For Melville, too much damage had been done. The disciplinary effects of white supremacy exerted too much influence over white, liberal subjectivities; the logic of white supremacy was too deeply imbedded within legal institutions, particularly the institutions of colonial powers like the United States and Spain. Additionally, as Hole argues, Melville was doubtful about the productive potential of struggle; engaging in conflict over the excessive reach of violent state mechanisms would not produce historical change or progress (240). In essence, Melville envisions America as a site of violent stasis dependent on the containment and control of physical and intellectual expressions of black fugitivity.

By contrast, Douglass envisions struggle and "conflict," as Hole suggests, as exerting a "liberating potential" (240). Hole's use of "liberating" denotes the *political* act of emancipation or liberation, and his analysis of "conflict" prioritizes the political domain. Just as important to understanding *The Heroic Slave*, I argue, is Douglass's multidimensional conception of struggle as a process of internal and public action. The internal forms of liberation often represented in Douglass's writings and speeches appear as self-managed moral awakenings – internalized

actions, in other words. In Douglass's rhetoric and writing, active, self-managed reform generates the potential to engage in public action capable of rehabilitating the civic sphere. In *The Heroic Slave*, Listwell embodies the political potential of self-managed internal reform; Listwell and Washington's antislavery actions are possible because of the self-managed reform of Listwell's internal state. Therefore, *The Heroic Slave* adopts an optimistic outlook in its engagement with the intensification of white supremacy's legal and internal instrumentalities; it imagines the interplay between private and public reform as a multidimensional form of struggle capable of rehabilitating the civic sphere.

In *The Heroic Slave*, Grant experiences an internal reform that does not inspire immediate antislavery action, and his role in the narrative highlights Douglass's reservations about the political efficacy of internal reform alone. Madison Washington's character and restraint may have persuaded Grant to abandon some of his beliefs about white supremacy, but he still attempts to enforce the juridical power of the slave state upon landing in Nassau. His internal reform does not produce the antislavery action Douglass urgently pursues. Washington's capacity for violent action succeeds, however, in a context where reform is limited. To be sure, Douglass represents Washington's physicality in the patriotic language of revolution, partly in order to avoid triggering white terror of black violence; but, there is no doubt that Washington's body is *ready* for violent action. As with his militant rhetoric, Douglass deploys the prospect of Washington's physicality to warn the nation to abolish the institution of slavery or prepare for black violence

It is significant, however, that Washington's revolutionary energy or physical capabilities do not procure his freedom – or that of his fellow slaves - *in* the United States; only in Nassau, outside of America's jurisdiction, does he find freedom. The ending of the novella, by staging

the scene of emancipation *outside* US sovereign control, acknowledges the possibility that America's democratic ideals cannot be reformed of their attachment to race and slavery. More significantly, because Washington and the other slaves are effectively freed by black soldiers, the moment of emancipation coincides with a portrait of international black solidarity. In the narrative, Washington's right to revolutionary action is never recognized by the nation that enslaved him; the integrity of America's security depends upon excluding him from its sphere of protection and denying him civic recognition. He is a fugitive of the law no matter where he goes. Therefore, the ending anticipates a political reality in which moral reform *and* revolutionary action fail to secure equal standing in the United States. Nonetheless, by depicting a successful slave revolt as a revolutionary act, *The Heroic Slave* seems to suggest that struggle still retains the potential of generating a community of belonging in the form of the international black community. As Wilson argues, Washington's example and "rhetoric...fails to find a correlation with the United States; it must find roots elsewhere" (455). To realize the potential of black freedom and develop a community of belonging, in other words, it may be necessary to look beyond the United States and the racialized liberal sphere it maintains.²² My next chapter identifies the practice of marronage, as featured in Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America*, as a form of freedom that exceeds the instrumentalities of the racial state.

Notes

¹ For more on the relationship between the discourse of madness and race, see work by Benjamin D. Reiss, including *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* and “Madness and Mastery in Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno.’”

The association between madness and what Michel Foucault termed “the beast” preceded the stereotype of the black beast pervasive in 19th century American culture and society. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault explains that in the 17th century, “there was a certain image of animality that haunted the hospitals of the period. Madness borrowed its face from the mask of the beast. Those chained to the cell walls were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by a natural frenzy: as if madness, at its extreme point, freedom from that moral unreason in which its most attenuated forms are enclosed, managed to rejoin, by a paroxysm of strength, the immediate violence of animality” (72).

² David Theo Goldberg writes that the “racial state,”

In its institutional sense, must be seen thus not as a static thing but as a *political force* fashioning and fashioned by *economic*, legal, and cultural forces (forces of production, of sociolegality, and of cultural representation). It is a player not just in productive, distributive, circulating, and consumptive patterns and tensions, and in their reproduction. It has been central to political contestations over control of the materialities of society but also (and especially) of its own instrumentalities, its means and modes of rule and representation, of social supervision and control, over the style and substance of social governmentality. In short, the state is a contestant in the markets of representation, of who speaks for whom and in and on what terms. (109)

³ Designed to prevent the kidnapping of free blacks, the 1826 law required slaveowners or their agents to consult a state judge and acquire a warrant before seizing their “property” and returning to their home state. States turned to personal liberty laws like this one to contest the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, a law that recognized and protected slaveowners as having the legal right to capture fugitive “property” across state lines. To draw a comparison, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 can be understood as *federal* regulations of *state* laws. Personal liberty laws of the antebellum era were often instituted for the opposite purpose; they were *state* regulations of *federal* power in that they recognized the liberty of individual black persons in order to limit the federal protection of slaveowners’ property rights.

⁴ Abolitionists fought against them, but active opposition to the federal expansion of slaveowners’ rights existed in an asymmetrical relation to those who agreed with or were indifferent to the laws and their consequences.

⁵ In an 1850 speech defending his proposed compromise plan, Senator Henry Clay argued that the Fugitive Slave clause placed an obligation on “every man” in the Union to obey it.” “In my humble opinion,” he said, “that [the Fugitive Slave clause] is a requirement by the Constitution of the United States which is not limited in its operation to the Congress of the United States, but which extends to every State in the Union. And I go one step further. It extends to every *man* in the Union, and devolves upon him the obligation to assist in the recovery of a fugitive slave from labor, who takes refuge in or escapes into one of the free States” (qtd. Campbell 17).

⁶ In his 1851 speech, “Resistance to Blood-Houndism,” Douglass explicitly characterizes the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law as an exercise of government power encompassing military institutions as well as the U.S. citizenry. “This law,” he said, speaking of the Fugitive

Slave Law, “has had pledged to its support the military and naval power of this Government. It is the only law which, for a long time, has been deemed necessary, that the Executive should openly pledge for its support the whole power of the army and navy – aye, even to collusion with our citizens, whom he might have to slaughter in its execution. This is the law. It is one about to be rigorously pressed” (273).

⁷ Charles Sumner spoke against the law on November 6, 1850 at Faneuil Hall but explicitly cautioned against violence. “I counsel no violence,” he said. “There is another power, stronger than any individual man, which I invoke; I mean that irresistible public opinion inspired by love of God and man which, without violence or noise, gently as the operation of nature, makes and unmakes laws. Let this public opinion be felt in its might, and the Fugitive Slave bill will become everywhere among us a dead letter” (qtd. Campbell 52).

⁸ At the time, pro-slavery apologists also invoked the memory of revolution. However, while Douglass’ quote above shows him using “revolution” to refer to America’s fight for freedom, pro-slavery apologists were more likely to invoke “revolution” in order to suppress the fight for black freedom. The reason being that the concept of revolution also signified the French and Haitian revolutions, both of which were widely regarded as chaotic, extremely violent, and destructive affairs.

⁹ The fugitive slave Thomas Sims was placed in custody on April 3, 1851. To prevent his rescue or escape, state officials locked him in the federal courthouse and “barricaded the door with chains” (Thomas 26). When Judge Shaw bowed beneath the chains to enter the courthouse, abolitionists were not blind to the scene’s symbolic importance (Thomas 27). Shaw’s ruling would uphold the Fugitive Slave Act and result in Sims being transported back to the South.

Proponents of Shaw's decision often cited their concern for the Union's integrity. Maintaining respect for the rule of law was necessary if the nation did not want to be fully exposed to "the violence threatening to tear the country apart" (Thomas 27).

¹⁰ Douglass joined the Society in August of 1841.

¹¹ It is safe to say that Douglass's speech did not go as planned. As Wallace reports, Douglass was to follow the speech of abolitionist Wendell Phillips. But, when Douglass "came to the podium, a near riot was underway" (44).

¹² The November 4 issue of the *Liberator* reprinted this quote.

¹³ My use of the term "racialized" is a nod toward the work of Charles W. Mills, in particular his analysis of "racial liberalism." The "racialized political system" cited above is synonymous with "racial liberalism," which Mills defines as the predominant form of liberalism in the United States. It is a political system "in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been *racialized*" (29). A racialized political system is one in which the exclusive category of race governs the conceptions Mills mentions as well as the social contract. As Mills writes, "the contract, correspondingly, has really been a *racial* one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit" (29).

¹⁴ Michael Rogin argues that "When Melville changed *The Tyral*'s name to the *San Dominick*, he was calling attention to the slave seizure of power on Santo Domingo, in the wake of the French Revolution. That slave uprising spread terror throughout the American South" (321).

¹⁵ Sale continues and contrasts *Benito Cereno* to *The Heroic Slave*. "Yet *Benito Cereno* gazes wide where the rebels' perspective might have spoken. Where Frederick Douglass used the

occasion of the *Creole* rebellion to imagine a life story and to create a subject-position for Madison Washington, Melville made no such attempt on behalf of Babo and the other rebels” (170).

¹⁷ Saidiya Hartman identifies the “dual status of the slave as property and person” as a product of the “slave mode of production.” She writes,

The law attempted to resolve the contradiction between the slave as property and the slave as person/laborer or, at the very least, to minimize this tension by attending to the slave as both a form of property and a person. This effort was instrumental in maintaining the dominance of the slave-owning class, particularly in a period of national crisis concerning the institution. (93)

¹⁹ It strikes me that modern, official reports of police violence function in much the same way.

²⁰ Babo’s silence frustrates the state’s efforts to identify him, both after his capture and execution, thereby retaining the threatening aspect of his “hive of subtlety.” The failure of identification disturbs the order of the racial state, because it calls attention to the limitations of state sovereignty and racial techniques of control; Babo represents a threat that cannot fully be accounted for or contained. In crafting the character of Babo, Melville surely relied on accounts of Denmark Vesey, the slave who “organized the most elaborate and well-planned slave insurrection in the history of the United States” (Robertson 4). David Robertson’s description of Vesey’s trial makes the connection clear:

No one thought to describe his [Vesey’s] face. For seven days during his trial and sentencing, he was kept under constant guard at the Work House, a frame building for the

punishment of slaves, located near the marshes that then marked the western limit of the city of Charleston, South Carolina. No black persons without a special authorization was allowed within two blocks of the building, while throughout that third week of June 1822, freemen and slaves under arrest came and gave testimony against him inside a small room on the upper story of the prison. Later that autumn, after his hanging, two of his judges published an official record of the proceedings. It totals 164 printed pages of evidence and testimony, complete with an 'Introduction and Narrative.' But at no point in this text did any of his judges think it necessary to describe his features. Throughout the trial and sentencing, he is officially depicted simply as a black man, and as a freeman.

(3)

²¹ Scott defines "nonstate spaces" as,

locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has a particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority...But swamps, marshes, mangrove coasts, deserts, volcanic margins, and even the open sea...all function in much the same way. Thus it is difficult or inaccessible terrain...that present great obstacles to state control...such places have often served as havens of refuge for peoples resisting or fleeing the state. (13)

²² See note #12 for more on my use of "racialized."

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~ Chapter 3 ~

The Potential for Light and Destruction: Marronage as Freedom in Martin
Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America*

“During marronage, agents struggle psychologically, socially, metaphysically, and politically to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing in a liminal position” (Roberts 10)

“Marronage is a flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the sphere of positive activity and human freedom. Flight is multidimensional, constant, and never static” (Roberts 15)

When it appeared in 1859 as a serial publication in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* did not attract a wide audience. That fact is unsurprising; a story about a heroic slave secretly organizing a slave revolution would have provoked white nightmares of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey born again. Public interest in the novel and its revolutionary politics emerged during the Civil Rights movement in the 20th century, but in the canon of African American literature, *Blake* is often overlooked. As Jerome McGann writes, “*Blake* was at once the most important and the least influential work of fiction published by a black writer in the nineteenth century” (ix). Despite its relative obscurity, Delany's novel thematizes a significant form of freedom central to the enslaved experience in the Americas: marronage.

Maroons were escaped slaves who fled plantations to form autonomous communities, oftentimes living in liminal geographies located between the plantation and the normative influence of free society. Enslaved Afro-descendant populations practiced marronage throughout the Americas, establishing themselves and their practice as a “constant plague” to those who would

enslave them (Bledsoe 45). Historians are responsible for most of the published research about maroons and marronage, and their scholarship has focused primarily on the Caribbean and South American contexts and the influential relation maroons share with the Haitian revolution. Recently, a collection of work examining the presence and influence of maroons in North America has been published. Publications by Sylviane A. Diouf (2014), Daniel Sayers (2014) and Marcus P. Nevius (2020)¹ among others have advanced this burgeoning field of research. Since its publication in 2015, Neil Roberts's theorization of marronage, *Marronage as Freedom*, has prompted the study of maroons and marronage in American literature. Roberts defines marronage as the "multidimensional, constant, and never static...flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the sphere of positive activity and human freedom" (15). As a "normative concept" of freedom, "marronage" identifies the performance of "processes of movement" that create "the possibility for actualizing revolution" and other forms of resistance (20). My project builds on these historical and theoretical developments and contributes to the study of maroons in North America and the theorization of marronage by examining its presence in African American literature and in *Blake* more specifically. Interpreted within the thematic framework Roberts' theorization provides, *Blake* reveals the productive relation between the liminality characteristic of marronage and the freedom slaves imagined, enacted, and maintained.

First published serially in 1859, *Blake* is divided into two sections. In the first, the fugitive slave Henry Holland - the novel's central character - flees from his master's plantation in Natchez, Mississippi and embarks on a clandestine quest throughout the antebellum South to organize a slave revolution and rescue his wife. At the beginning of the narrative, we learn that Henry was not born a slave, having grown up in the West Indies. When his master, Colonel Franks, sells his wife Maggie - who is also Frank's illegitimate daughter - to a plantation in Cuba, Holland

immediately acts. He leaves the plantation and travels in secret throughout the antebellum South to organize slaves to rise up against their masters. After a thwarted uprising in New Orleans and a successful flight to Canada, Holland's quest extends beyond U.S. borders, eventually taking him to Africa and then Cuba. In the novel's second half, Henry rejoins his wife and young son in Cuba and helps lead a revolutionary uprising under the name of Henry Blake. Readers never learn whether the Cuba uprising succeeds or fails, because the novel was never published in its entirety, nor do any complete copies exist.

If the previous two chapters were motivated by my interest in abolitionists who attempted to renovate liberal theory and institutions through the strategic deployment of liberal discourse and militant rhetoric, this chapter's analysis of *Blake* is motivated by a series of questions: What if the liberal ideal of freedom cannot be renovated? What if the logic of white supremacy is too deeply imbedded within the nation's institutions and consciousness? If that is the case, what does "freedom" mean when divorced from the racist architecture of American democracy? To find an answer, I turn to African American literature and Neil Roberts' theorization of "marronage."

Roberts describes marronage as a form of freedom born in the African diaspora and practiced on the geographical, legal, social periphery of the colonial state. The term "maroon" originally referred to fugitive slaves in Haiti who escaped plantations and formed communities in liminal geographies or what James C. Scott termed "nonstate spaces," "locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority" (13). Similarly, Franz Fanon uses the term "zone of nonbeing" to name the "sterile and arid region where an authentic upheaval can be born" (xii). Historically speaking, maroons were slaves who fled plantations, occupied geographically liminal spaces, and often engaged in armed resistance. Maroon communities could be found throughout the Caribbean, Central

America, Brazil, and in North America in rural and urban geographies as well as at sea. Within the liminal spaces where they lived, maroon communities were considered as “social, economic, cultural, and, oftentimes, military threats to the established order of slavery” (Bledsoe). The fertile liminal geography maroons occupied afforded them psychological and physical autonomy from racialized norms, laws, and violence. By introducing a friction between black life and the racial instrumentalities that would seize it, liminal geographies made room for maroons and maroon communities to contest oppressive power relations and pursue the forms of freedom they imagined. Although the historical study of marronage has primarily focused on those communities active in the Caribbean context, particularly during the Haitian revolution, Roberts proposes that marronage be understood as a distinct form of freedom “forged in a historical milieu” but equipped with “trans-historical utility” (4). In other words, while Roberts acknowledges “marronage” as a historical phenomenon with roots in the African diaspora, he also evaluates marronage as a practice of freedom with the potential to unsettle and reorganize political discourse, particularly where it concerns the ideal of freedom.

When referring to the *act* of marronage, “marronage” can simply be defined as a deliberate process of flight born in response to the experience of slavery. As a “multidimensional” and “constant” form of movement, flight locates an agent in the liminal space between the law of the plantation and the normative influence of free society. According to Roberts, flight also traverses different domains, including physical environments, embodied cognition, and the metaphysical (Roberts 10). An agent in the process of flight, irrespective of the domain, does not achieve transcendence from dominant power relations. As Roberts explains, struggle is a key component of flight; maroons struggle “psychologically, socially, metaphysically, and politically to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing in a liminal position” (10).

Within this liminal - as opposed to transcendent - position, agency is fluid rather than fixed, and by engaging in flight, maroons engage in a generative process of struggle against the norms and practices essential to the plantation and the institution of slavery.

With Roberts' work on marronage adopted as my theoretical heuristic, I turn to Martin Delany's *Blake* and, briefly, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Admittedly, *Incidents* and *Blake* are very different types of texts written for different purposes. Whereas Jacobs adopts and manipulates the conventions of sentimental literature in its semi-autobiographical narrative of Linda Brent and her struggle for freedom, *Blake*, as Robert S. Levine explains, is "a novel of black revolutionism" in which the fugitive slave Henry Blake travels throughout the South in secrecy in order to organize a revolution (178). Whereas *Incidents* was published as a novel, *Blake* is incomplete, its serial publication never completed. Whereas *Incidents* appeals to its readers, among other things, to regard black humanity with sympathy, *Blake* models the emancipatory potential of revolution in order to persuade its black audience to act and form their own nation outside of U.S. borders. Both texts, however, are narratives of flight in which slaves and slave communities practice marronage. This chapter focuses primarily on marronage in *Blake* before pivoting in the conclusion to discuss *Incidents*.

In the analysis that follows, I first discuss the etymological and historical dimensions of marronage before presenting Roberts' theorization of the term in more detail. With "marronage" contextualized, I then proceed with my analysis of *Blake*. I argue that the novel features marronage as a resistant practice central to the generation and occupation of liminal geographies and modes of being. The condition of liminality that marronage produces and maintains frustrates racial techniques of control and generates the potential for slaves and enslaved communities to pursue the forms of freedom they imagine. My analysis focuses primarily on the novel's central character,

Henry Blake, but it also considers marronage as a communal practice of resistance. Within the liminal space marronage creates, individual slaves and enslaved communities resist racial norms and institutions, thereby frustrating the logic of white supremacy, particularly its diagnosis of black skin as an external sign of an internal inferiority. This logic holds that slaves lack the mental capacity for self-dependence, a prerequisite for citizenship and the rights that come with it. This same logic denies blacks the very capacity to imagine freedom, a denial that acquired increasing scientific authority during the antebellum era. My analysis demonstrates the resistant potential of marronage at a time when the denial of their capacity for freedom intensified; ultimately, marronage was a practice slaves used to imagine their freedom, resist slavery, and undermine the logic of white supremacy.

Several other antebellum literary works besides *Blake* feature marronage. In this chapter's conclusion, I introduce a contrast to *Blake* by discussing marronage as featured Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. That being noted, other "maroon texts" not discussed in this chapter include Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* (1852), Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), all of which tell stories of slaves in flight. However, if marronage is grounded in the enslaved experience - something Roberts argues - then applying marronage as a heuristic to each of these texts presents challenges that need to be addressed in a future project. *The Heroic Slave* fictionalizes the story of Madison Washington, a fugitive slave who in reality led the historic revolt aboard the *Creole* in 1841. Although Washington's flight in Douglass' novella foregrounds the emancipatory potential of insurrection, the reader does not have direct access to Washington's internal experience of slavery. The reader only encounters him through the perspective of white characters. In Melville's *Benito Cereno*, the slave Babo performs the role of the dutiful servant to the Spanish captain Benito

Cereno. He does this in order to disguise the fact that he holds Cereno captive; his aim is to fool the naive American captain Amasa Delano and steal his ship. The story's tension revolves around the mystery of Babo's identity. Is he a slave or a master or something else entirely? By refuting easy categorization and, at the end, maintaining his silence, Babo occupies the liminal space between freedom and enslavement, and it is his skill in doing so that makes him so dangerous to the novella's white characters and their governing institutions. While we can certainly make the argument that Babo is a maroon figure, the novella does not give readers access to his internal experience. He is permanently and dangerously illegible. Stowe's *Dred*, authored after the infamous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), explores the potential of violent slave resistance through the narratives of Nina Gordon and the titular maroon, Dred. *The Heroic Slave*, *Dred*, and *Benito Cereno* all feature maroon figures but only from the perspective of white characters or authors, perspectives gazing at the enslaved experience from the outside. I am interested in exploring marronage as a theory of freedom based upon the experience of slavery, a focus that requires postponing the analysis of the other "maroon texts" just mentioned for another project.² Nonetheless, the presence of marronage in each of these texts demonstrate that antebellum culture and African American literature recognized flight as a meaningful and dynamic form of resistance central to the enslaved experience and the freedom slaves imagined.

I. Marronage: Disturbing Racial Liberalism

Marronage, as a form of freedom practiced in the liminal space between slavery and free society, highlights the extent to which those two poles complement each other. For instance, scholarship authored by Sadiya Hartman and others have explained how the discourses of liberalism and humanism complement the violent mechanisms of race. In her introduction to

Scenes of Subjection, Hartman takes up the question of whether the language of humanism functions as the “inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery...” (5). She argues that the “benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified the brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition” (5). In other words, the language of humanism and the discourse of rights facilitate racial oppression even as they are organized against it. Similarly, in advocating the development of a “political theory of race” capable of deracializing American democracy, Joel Olson identifies “race as something produced within the political realm rather than prior to it and therefore as a product of democracy rather than its antithesis. This requires,” he writes, “...breaking with the dominant theoretical approach toward the American racial order, which tends to bracket race from democracy” (xii). This chapter considers marronage as a form of freedom slaves practiced in opposition to the racialized liberal order of antebellum America, which at the time of *Blake’s* publication had nationalized the enforcement of slaveowner property rights. Defining freedom as a product of marronage disturbs the idea that freedom exists only as a protected feature of the liberal state. As a non-liberal form of freedom, marronage does not reinforce the dichotomy Olson warns against, a dichotomy that “tends to insulate democratic ideals from criticism” and render “liberty, equality, democracy, and citizenship as pure, unalloyed ideals to aspire to rather than essentially contested concepts” (xvi-xvii). Slaves practiced marronage in opposition to the oppressive influence of a racial, liberal state; therefore, freedom as marronage exposes democratic ideals as political constructs vulnerable to the influence of race.

Conceptualizing marronage as a non-liberal form of freedom requires us to defamiliarize the normative concepts of agency and resistance. Alexander G. Weheliye’s argument in *Habeas Viscus* proves helpful here. He explains, “As modes of analyzing and imagining the practices of

the oppressed in the face of extreme violence...resistance and agency assume full, self-present, and coherent subjects working against something or someone” (2). Resistance and agency “blind us,” Weheliye argues, “to the manifold occurrences of freedom in zones of indistinction” (2). In other words, “resistance” and “agency” perpetuate the myth of total self-possession foundational to dominant branches of liberal theory. Instead, as Weheliye argues, freedom exceeds the meticulously governed domain of the “coherent” liberal subject. This chapter explores how marronage opens up “zones of indistinction” even as it moves within them. These “zones of indistinction” are liminal spaces on the geographical and metaphysical periphery of state power. When I invoke “agency” and “resistance” in this chapter, I do not assume either to be willed products of a self-contained liberal subject. Rather, this chapter proceeds from the understanding that “agency” and “resistance” signify the capacity of enslaved agents and communities to imagine and act in their own interest.

In a context where the state’s social and economic security depended upon the enforcement of racial categories, individual slaves and enslaved communities imagined and generated the conditions of their own freedom through the practice of marronage. As discussed in my previous chapters, the years preceding the Civil War saw the complementary relation between democratic ideals and white supremacy intensify dramatically. While abolitionists argued on behalf of black resistance, humanity, and agency, “Jacksonian democracy was extending freedom more fully to ‘all white men’ (Sale 17). As of 1828, the legal requirement of property ownership was abolished as a criteria for suffrage in national elections - *for white men*. Additionally, state efforts to protect the dominant relation between the rights of citizenship and whiteness increasingly relied on violence as a security measure. For instance, Olson describes the Jacksonian era as a time when white supremacy embraced riots in the name of national security. Throughout the Jacksonian and

antebellum eras, white mobs rioted in the interest of protecting “American democracy from attempts to undermine it by abolitionists, Negroes, and Tory agents” (31). He explains that “In 1835 alone, seventy-one people died in 147 riots across the country. Between 1830 and 1865 over seventy percent of all cities with a population of 20,000 or more experienced some kind of major civil disorder,” and most riots “were in defense of slavery and Black subordination” (31).³ While white citizens were framing their violence as a form of virtue, the fear of black violence crescendoed. Events like the Haitian revolution, Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy, and Nat Turner’s revolt supplied the white imagination with an enduring source of terror as well as a pliable justification for securing white control through violence.

As a larger swath of the white male population acquired more political power and privileged access to economic opportunity, the exclusive boundaries of white identity expanded to include “a new coalition of Euro-American men- including urban artisans, the emergent working class, European immigrants, yeoman farmers, overseers, and slaveholders” (Sale 4). This racialized expansion of rights further entrenched whiteness as the dominant criteria of citizenship and personhood; by strategically deploying the language of resistance and agency, abolitionist rhetors and authors attacked the normative influence of whiteness in order to expand the inclusive boundaries of American democracy.

At the same time, the discourse of race was also undergoing a transition. Whereas the category of race once signified ethnic characteristics, in the early 19th century it began to acquire a biological connotation. Prior to the scientific revolution of the early 19th century, Anglo-Saxon culture was identified as the root of America’s exceptional institutions and ideals. Discourse invoking Anglo-Saxon culture prioritized, as Reginald Horsman explains, “institutions rather than...race,” and the idea of good government (an idea associated with “free” principles) was

intimately associated with Anglo-Saxon history, politics, and culture. The Anglo-Saxon myth certainly shaped the thinking of Revolutionary leaders and acted as a powerful influence on how freedom was imagined and mythologized.⁴ Horsman explains how Thomas Jefferson, near the end of his life in 1825, “contrasted the Saxon and the Norman conquests of England” (21). Whereas the former founded a nation upon “the rights of man,” “the latter [was] built on conquest and physical force” (qtd. Horsman 21). However, during the second half of the eighteenth century, a new Aryan myth was emerging in European thought; in early 19th century America, this new myth would transcend the emphasis on Anglo-Saxon culture and institutions to become dominant. Horsman writes, “in the nineteenth century the Americans were to share in the discovery that the secret of Saxon success lay not in the institutions but in the blood” (24). Whereas freedom was once credited to external features of public life such as culture and political institutions, the capacity for freedom came to be widely understood as a private and internal feature of Anglo-Saxon blood. Freedom’s origins moved inwards and outwards as the capacity for self-dependence was judged according to anatomical and biological criteria and applied to entire populations.

The antebellum entanglement of race and freedom I highlight functions as an expression what Charles W. Mills terms “racial liberalism,” the historically dominant form of liberalism in the United States “in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have been racialized” (29). Although Mills’ project is primarily focused on deracializing philosophical discourse in the present, “racial liberalism” provides a succinct label for the complementary relation between liberal ideals and institutional racism that intensified during the antebellum era. In order to dislocate the language of rights from the logic of white supremacy, the abolitionist movement attempted to renovate the country’s liberal discourse and institutions to increase the persuasive appeal of their movement, destabilize the dominant

relation between race and freedom, and define slavery as a cruel assault on black persons. Sadly, the racial turmoil of our present is but the most recent reminder that racial liberalism perseveres.

For a concrete expression of racial liberalism in antebellum America, we can look to Dr. John H. Van Evrie, a proslavery apologist famous for publishing the 1861 book *Negroes and Negro Slavery*.⁵ In the book, Van Evrie credits white “contact with the radically inferior Negro, a creature of another species” for freeing the white race from the divisive effect of class distinctions. Knowledge of racial difference between white and black, according to Van Evrie, made it possible for “the Virginia ‘democrats’ of the Revolutionary era” to lay the “foundation of egalitarian ideas and practices in the United States” (qtd. Frederickson 94). Representing slavery as a virtuous foundation for egalitarianism, Van Evrie’s argument organizes blackness and whiteness into separate but conjoined spheres; Slavery’s exclusion of the “Negro” from the white liberal sphere is justifiable given the racial inferiority internal to black bodies. At the same time, Van Evrie credits the enslavement of blacks for making possible “the foundation of egalitarian ideas and practices in the United States.” He then continues, celebrating the Negro’s arrival in America as “the happiest conjunction that ever occurred in human affairs,” the result of which was the creation of “a new civilization based on foundations of everlasting truth - the legal and political equality of race, or of all those whom the almighty creator has himself made equal” (qtd. Frederickson 94). Van Evrie’s egalitarian America is the happy, harmonious product of slavery. His racial egalitarianism, itself a manifestation of racial liberalism, is but one example of how democratic values and institutions were cast as white possessions, tokens of a white heritage, and proof of white racial superiority.⁵

II: Marronage: The History of a Transnational Practice

Attending to the difference between marronage and fugitivity grants us a better understanding of the relation between marronage and freedom. As Sean Gerrity puts it, “Fugitives run *away* from slavery while maroons run *toward* freedom, opening up along the way possibilities for alternative formations of freedom that can be foreclosed by the language of state-sanctioned criminalization of black bodies, including terms such as *fugitive* or *outlaw*” (7). Whereas the “state-sanctioned” use of “fugitive” and “outlaw” criminalize unauthorized black movement or action, “marronage” represents an enslaved individual’s or community’s deliberate break from state laws and norms. In contrast to “fugitivity,” “marronage” recognizes the slave’s capacity to imagine and pursue their own conception of freedom. Understood as an imagined, strategic flight toward freedom, marronage qualifies as an expression of slave agency, which Roberts defines in two ways. First, slave agency entails “The capacity of slaves themselves individually and collectively to *imagine* their conception of freedom” (42). Secondly, slave agency entails “The ability of slaves individually and collectively to enact their imagined ideal of freedom into practice” (42). If fugitivity involves fleeing *from*, the term does not necessarily invite the presence of an enslaved agent or community imagining and enacting “their imagined ideal of freedom into practice.” On the other hand, “marronage,” as a flight *to* freedom, requires an imagined ideal of freedom as well as the individual and communal capacity to realize it in practice.

The etymology of “marroonage” references the historical relationship between oppression and flight. In the 16th century, the Spanish used the word “cimarrón” as a name for feral cattle who escaped to the hills on the island of Hispaniola, but the term was also used to identify “enslaved Armenians seeking refuge” in the same area (Roberts 5). By the 1530s, enslaved Armenians were not the only oppressed people burdened with the term. Predictably, “enslaved Africans seeking escape” from “plantation boundaries” soon bore the same title. Shortly thereafter,

“cimarrón” began circulating in written language: “marron” in French and Dutch, and “maroon” in English (Roberts 5). By signifying the flight of enslaved peoples, “maroon” invokes a tradition of resistance that undermines the idea - central to the logic of white supremacy - that slaves were inherently predisposed to live contently within the paternal enclosure of the plantation.

The many names for marronage indicate the transnational scope of the practice. Names for maroon settlements include “*palenques, rancherias, ladeiras, iambuses, quilombos, mocambos, magotes, cumes, manieles, and so on*” (Thompson 13). This expansive list of names is matched by the term’s diverse social, ethnic, and cultural heritage. Alvin O. Thompson explains, “Maroon communities included Indians, Africans, Europeans and Creoles; young, middle-aged and elderly people; enslaved and free people; field workers, domestics, drivers, artisans, messengers and soldiers; adherents to African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam” (13). The flight from slavery marked them all as practitioners of a transnational resistant practice, a practice particularly pronounced in the Caribbean and South American contexts, where larger maroon communities organized and engaged in armed resistance against their enslavers. Wherever there was slavery, there were slaves who fled to find freedom, and maroons “fled from the highly developed plantation societies of Brazil, Jamaica, Suriname, Haiti, the United States and Mexico, and from less developed plantation or trading economies such as Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, the Bahamas, St. Eustatius and Bermuda” (Thompson 13). In most cases, armed resistance or desertion led to the formation of maroon communities, and in the 19th century, the number of runaways increased considerably. According to Thompson, the “contributing circumstances” for the increase included:

...the example of actual revolution in Haiti; agitation by abolitionists; the enslaved persons’ conviction that the imperial authorities had abolished slavery and the enslavers

were maintaining the system illegally; a rising incidence of armed servile unrest in many parts of the Americas (closely linked to desertion); the increasing reluctance of the state authorities to sanction Maroon-hunting expeditions; and the spur that abolition in one territory gave to enslaved persons in other territories to agitate for freedom.

(Thompson 92)

Thompson's explanation clarifies the transnational nature of marronage. Given the scope of its practice - as well as the networks of communication that spread the word about the success of that practice - it is no wonder that marronage posed a serious threat to slavery and the logic of white supremacy. It challenged the idea - spread throughout the colonial world - that slaves were naturally barbaric and docile beings in need of the whip and chains. Wherever there was slavery, slaves fled, but they did not *just* flee. They fled to seize control of their lives and to create communities free from the states that denied them, among other things, the capacity for self-determination.

In North America, the criminalization of maroons is nearly as old as the practice itself, and maroons and fugitives who fled life on the plantation were often associated with the threat of insurrection. The Haitian revolution certainly stoked those fears in the 19th century, but those fears had been burning for some time. In 1680, the British colony passed an act with two parts. The first was concerned with "the rebellious behavior of slaves" and the second held that "any negroe or other slave [who] shall absent himselfe from his masters service and lye hid and lurking in obscure places, committing injuries to the inhabitants" (19). Sylviane Diouf writes of how the phrase "obscure places" was common to the legal lexicon in the South before and during the nineteenth century. White landowners employed a discourse of injury to frame these "obscure places," when occupied by escaped slaves, as a threat to their own economic wellbeing and to public safety. On

April 16, 1691, “An act for suppressing outlying Slaves” was passed that authorized the use of force to capture runaway slaves. The law instructed justices of the peace to issue warrants against maroons who “hid and lurk[ed] in obscure places killing hogs and committing other injuries” (qtd. Diouf 19). Not only did maroons steal food and resources from surrounding plantations, but their flight from the plantation also qualified as theft. David J. Watkins writes that even on plantations, slaves who engaged in “short-termed unlicensed movement” to attend “clandestine religious meetings” or “meetings with family and loved ones from nearby plantations” were often said to be “stealing away” or “stealing the meeting” (855). As these examples demonstrate, not only were maroons criminalized because they stole goods and supplies from nearby plantations, but also because any unauthorized slave movement undermined the slaveowner’s authority and violated their legal property rights.

Newspaper records from the antebellum era indicate that the American public was well aware of maroons. As an example, we can consider “Slaves in the Dismal Swamp,” an article originally published in the Boston weekly magazine *Zion’s Herald* in the early 1820s before being republished in Frederick Douglass’s *North Star* in 1848 (Nevius 89). The report frames the enslaved flight to Virginia’s Dismal Swamp as an act of resistance and highlights the extent to which the institution of slavery, in Virginia and elsewhere, deployed violence as a means of securing its authority. According to the report, Virginian slaves who fled to the Dismal Swamp found a “city of refuge” in which they could hide from their oppressors. The report refers to the swamp as an extensive “asylum....inaccessible to the population,” where fugitive slaves sustained themselves by performing tasks for other slaves forced to labor in the swamp. The swamp’s treacherous terrain shielded fugitive individuals and small communities from the state’s reach, but any separation afforded by the swamp’s geography was permeable. According to the *North Star*

report and others, liminal geographies like the swamp also served as a site of exchange between slaves and maroons. Slaves often provided rations and other materials to the maroons in exchange for tasks or other labor performed. Maroons also stole supplies from laboring communities and surrounding plantations in order to sustain themselves. In the *North Star* report, we are told that “recently, parties of young men, with dogs, have hunted out these poor creatures; and, to use the expression of my informant, have ‘shot them down like partridges’” (qtd. Nevius 89). In response to the threat of recapture, many maroons armed themselves, another reason why slaveowners were quick to characterize maroon resistance as a violent threat to the public order.

“Slaves in a Dismal Swamp” showcases how the white fear associated with fugitivity and marronage persisted as a prominent feature of life in America from the colonial to the antebellum era. In the antebellum era, figures such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were feared, in part, because they epitomized the existential threat black fugitivity posed, thereby prompting the installation of violent security measures to guard against white injury. This practice was common before the antebellum era, however. On February 7, 1691, the South Carolina legislature adopted the “Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves” and authorized sheriffs with knowledge of a “haunt” to “raise a convenient party of men, not exceeding twenty, and with them to pursue, apprehend and take the said runaways, either live or dead” (Diouf 27). Similar laws were passed in 1693 and 1695. In 1696, a second “Act for the Better Ordering of Slaves” was passed and mandated that fugitives be captured and punished for having “too much liberty” (qtd. Diouf 28). Furthermore, the Act defined “escaping with intent to leave the colony” as an offense “punishable by death.” However, slaves could appeal to the state’s mercy and instead submit themselves to “the cutting off of the Achilles ’tendon,” an injury that would severely limit the illicit movement slaveowners sought to control. Moreover, male fugitives “were to receive forty lashes and face branding for the

first offense and be castrated if they were over sixteen and repeat offenders; females were to be whipped, branded, and have their ears cut off” (27-28). Each of these gruesome penalties target the subversive potential of illicit enslaved movement by “marking” slaves in order to make them easily recognizable and more vulnerable to capture in the event of a future escape. Whatever the intention, the violent exercise of state power repeatedly found its object in the black body and soul; any movement - physical, social, intellectual, or otherwise - was to be subject to techniques of containment and control. Summarizing W.E.B. Dubois’s depiction of enslaved fugitives as “the Safety Valve of Slavery,” Roberts writes that “fugitives, real and potential, are catalysts for the reinforcement of the brutal codes and mores of mastery” (46). For these reasons, there is “heightened monitoring of the sites and bodies of slavery” (Roberts 46). With black mobility framed as the gateway to criminality and violence, the discourse of white supremacy justified racial violence in the name of securing property rights, protecting the integrity of the natural order, and ensuring the public’s safety.

III. Marronage in Martin Delany’s *Blake*

Interest in North American models of marronage has recently increased, and literary scholars have begun looking to African American literature for examples.⁶ In “Freedom on the Move: Marronage in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, the Huts of America*,” Sean Gerrity argues that *Blake* is a “work about marronage and the dialectics of black freedom, of which it is a part” (2). More specifically, Gerrity argues that *Blake* disarticulates “marronage from insurrection and direct resistance” and reveals marronage to be “an ever-changing, multidimensional project and process of individual and collective resistance existing in the liminal space between the codified poles of ‘freedom’ and ‘enslavement’” (4).⁷ Gerrity’s essay expands the critical discourse, and this chapter

follows his example while directing more attention to how the liminality characteristic of marronage generates the potential for future resistance, including revolutionary action.

At the time of its serial publication in 1859, *Blake* received little press. Frances Rollins was the first to write a biography of Delany in 1868, but he never mentions *Blake*. According to Jerome McGann, editor of the novel's most recent and authoritative version, *Blake* seems to have been "referred to in print only four times" between 1862 and the "early 1940s" (xv). However, during the Civil Rights movement, interest in *Blake* blossomed, and it was "especially influential within the Black Power and Pan-African movements" (Delany xiv-xv). That influence can be traced to the narrative's revolutionary ethos and its nationalist politics. As McGann explains, the novel operates as a polemic that voices Delany's concern with the "living and terrible present" of America after the 1857 Dred Scott case, a decision that cemented Delany's long-held belief that America would never welcome a free black population. After the Scott decision, Delany joined other black activists, including Frederick Douglass, in calling for violent black resistance against slavery. For instance, Robert Levine describes how Delany chaired an 1858 "convention in Chatham that enthusiastically supported John Brown's mission to organize the slaves' resistance" (178). Responding to the intractable nature of America's relationship with slavery and white supremacy, *Blake* offers a revolutionary blueprint for blacks to secure their freedom on their own terms.

The mission to elevate black consciousness anchored Delany's career and his nationalistic vision of black freedom. Delany's politics were informed by his interest in the Black Free Mason movement, specifically in its core ideals: enlightenment, liberty, and individual enterprise (McGann xiv). In *Blake*, Henry's quest embodies the generative link between those ideals and revolutionary action, and his heroic example as a self-dependent slave educates the other slaves he

meets - as well as Delany's audience - about the feasibility of engaging in revolutionary action and of forming a black nation outside the United States. The latter goal found its real-life object in Africa, where Delany dreamed of a regenerated African nation built upon enlightened, Christian values. Such a nation, he believed, would portend the end of the slave trade, because it could produce enough cotton, as Levine explains, "to undercut the Southern slaveholders' market share in Europe" (185). According to Delany's worldview, the best hope for black freedom could be found in self-dependent economic enterprise. An enlightened black population would be primed to seize economic power, and with enough economic power, blacks could "enrich themselves, and regenerate their race" (qtd. Levine 185). Black economic mobility, in other words, is essential to Delany's personal understanding of black agency and freedom, because it opens up the potential for a regenerated black nation.

Contemplating the future of blacks in America, Delany considers the possibility of flight. "What can we do? - What shall we do?...Shall we fly, or shall we resist?" (qtd. Levine 156). Levine explains that Delany understood,

flight, or emigration...[as] a voluntary form of black resistance having a typological analogue in the flight of the biblical Jews from Egypt (and the Puritan emigration from England). The goal of such a movement would be to destroy slavery by giving rise to a powerful black nation, a city upon a hill, as it were, whose existence would testify to both the immorality and the economic misguidances of U.S. slave culture. (66)

The biblical analogue framing Delany's understanding of flight recognizes the potential for resistance that flight creates, because slaves who fled America would do so *in order* to realize an imagined form of freedom via the founding of a black nation.

In the narrative of *Blake*, Henry's self-proclaimed mission involves persuading the enslaved community to accept the feasibility of revolutionary action and the formation of a black nation. Both goals are possibilities contingent upon slaves achieving the enlightenment and self-dependence Henry represents. In other words, when Henry and the other slaves deliberately progress towards a state of enlightenment, they are engaging in cognitive and spiritual forms of movement, in dimensions of flight. Although their flight does not deliver them into a transcendent space of freedom where they are free from the influence of race and slavery, it does allow them to occupy a liminal cognitive and spiritual space conducive to imagining and practicing future acts of resistance, including revolutionary action.

Delany signals Henry's enlightenment and capacity for revolutionary action by contrasting him with Mama Judy, whose religious scruples lead her to wait for salvation rather than to seize it herself. Near the beginning of the narrative, Henry returns to the Natchez plantation in Mississippi and learns from Mama Judy that his wife, Maggie, has been sold and shipped to Cuba. Responding to Henry's anger upon learning the news, an anxious Mama Judy tells him she hopes "yeh ain' wine lose yeh 'legion." Henry immediately questions the use of religion in such a situation, but Mama Judy is insistent that Henry be patient, wait, and keep the faith. "Come, home, Henry, yeh mus'n talk so; we is po' weak an' blin creters, an' can't see de way ob de Laud. He move' in a mystus way, his wonders to pufaum" (17). Mama Judy's language depicts slaves as helpless; the fact of their weakness and blindness means they should wait for the Lord to act on their behalf. It is the Lord who moves, not slaves. Henry rejects Mama Judy's insistence to wait and trust the Lord to "move." "Well mammy," he says, "it is useless for me to stand here and have the same gospel preached into my ears by you, that I have all my life time heard from my enslavers. My mind is made up, my course is laid out, and if life last, I'll carry it out" (18). Henry's proclamation

accentuates his self-possession (“My mind...my course...I’ll carry it out”) as well as his autonomy from the slaveholders’ Christianity. More to the point, Henry’s argument assumes movement (or flight) as an effective form of resistance. Rather than “stand here” listening to the religion of slaveholders, Henry decides to act and “carry it [his plan] out.” In addition, the question of who can and should move against slavery lies at the center of his argument. Mama Judy insists slaves should *wait* for God to work; Henry regards her argument as pro-slavery propaganda designed to limit black intellectual and physical mobility. Rejecting the dependent relationship on God that Mama Judy prescribes, Henry decides to deliver justice on his own. “I and my wife have been both robbed of our liberty,” he tells her, “and you want me to be satisfied with a hope of heaven. I won’t do any such thing; I have waited long enough on heavenly promises. I’ll wait no longer” (18). The conversation with Mama Judy shows how Henry’s decision to *move* beyond the plantation and the disciplinary effect of the slaveholder’s religion creates the potential for further acts of resistance. Once outside the plantation and the domesticating effect of religion, Henry can sow the seeds of future resistance.

After his conversation with Mama Judy, Henry begins his quest to organize a slave rebellion, effectively trading the static consequences of Mama Judy’s Christianity for the dynamic prospect of revolutionary action. The form of action central to Henry’s revolutionary goals is movement itself or “flight.” Sean Gerrity explains, “Movement - along with the ability to slip in and out of legibility, to exist in liminal psychic and material spaces, and to stand still only as part of his movement-based maneuvering — becomes the cornerstone of Henry’s tractors as a maroon” (7). Henry’s refusal of Mama Judy’s Christianity locates him within the psychologically liminal - but productive - space between Christian slaves and Christian owners. This is not to say that Henry has transcended disciplinary discourses; his characterization as an exceptionally rational

individual implies, at the very least, Delany's internalization of certain Western principles. Nonetheless, the psychological and spiritual liminality Henry achieves affords him the capacity to refuse the immobilizing consequences of Mama Judy's Christianity. Likewise, Henry's physical flight from the plantation is grounded by his refusal to accept the legal title of chattel; he refuses to be a "slave," but he is not a free citizen. He exists as a maroon figure, moving within the fertile liminality between freedom and slavery. Nonetheless, whether the liminal dimension of his flight is cognitive or physical, Henry does not transcend the laws and norms of slavery and enter into an uncontested space of total freedom. Instead, as discussed above, Henry's flight is a form of struggle that generates and occupies a fertile liminal space. By virtue of its relation to this generative liminality, Henry's flight introduces a friction between Henry and the norms and laws that would seize his life. In the wake of that friction, the potentiality for future acts of resistance emerges.

Not only does Henry's flight generate the potential for future acts of resistance, but it also dislocates the assumed universality of freedom characteristic of liberal discourse. If we follow Roberts' argument that marronage is a form of freedom, and if marronage is a resistant practice anchored firmly within the African diaspora, then the fact of Henry's marronage dislocates freedom as a concept original to Western thought. This is to say that Henry's marronage - as a form of freedom perpetually enacted via the process of struggle and flight - challenges the Western conception of freedom as a static, individual possession. Native to the African diaspora, marronage encompasses a constellation of resistant practices born in opposition to slavery and the racial norms and institutions central to Western societies. These practices are individual *and* communal, and their performance exercises a dynamic potential for unsettling racial norms and institutions as well as generating some degree of autonomy from them.

Delany challenges Western ownership of universal concepts further when he frames Henry's physical and intellectual characteristics as markers of a "pure" blackness. Following the argument with Mama Judy, Delany writes,

"Henry was a black - a pure negro," we are told, "handsome, manly and intelligent...A man of good literary attainments...having been educated in the West Indies, and decoyed away when young. His affection for wife and child was not excelled by Colonel Franks for his. He was bold, determined and courageous, but always mild, gentle and courteous, though impulsive when an occasion demanded his opposition" (18).

Based on this description, the "pure negro" is physically and intellectually impressive, educated, and dedicated to his family. While these qualities might sound like universal signifiers, Delany organizes them under the umbrella of blackness, thereby decentering their association with white, Western societies. Henry's manliness, intelligence, and familial affection are framed as extensions of his blackness; these are not borrowed artifacts. He is the model of the "pure negro" *because* he is "handsome, manly, and intelligent." On the one hand, Henry's characteristics offer an implicit argument on behalf of black equality in America, but on the other hand, Henry's exceptionality - and its origin in blackness - identifies him as an outsider to America *and* to the slave community. In the novel, we learn that Henry was born free in Cuba, not as a slave in the United States. He received an education in the West Indies that left him "a man of good literary attainments." Although labeled a slave, his roots lie elsewhere, and that is partly what gives him the capacity to imagine a life beyond the plantation. In order to free themselves, *Blake* suggests, slaves too must find their roots and acquire the enlightenment particular to the "pure negro."

Delany's call for the elevation of black consciousness can also be found in his famous 1852 work, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United*

States. Writing about blacks living in the United States, he says “There appears to be, a want of sense of propriety or *self-respect*” (197). This “want,” according to Delany, normalizes the acceptance of lowly occupations “when they [blacks] can gain a livelihood at something more respectable, or elevating in character. And the worse part of the whole matter is, that they have become so accustomed to it, it has become so ‘fashionable,’ that it seems to have become second nature...” (198). For Delany, living as black in America too often means internalizing norms that restrict black social mobility and impose a servile black consciousness. In *Blake*, the practice of marronage is significant, because it generates a liminal space within which slaves can develop an enlightened, black conscience.

At first glance, Delany’s emphasis on the elevation of black consciousness might bring to mind the abolitionist doctrine of moral suasion, which held that blacks in America should adhere to universal standards of virtue in order to demonstrate their aptitude as citizens. However, when Delany wrote *Blake* in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision, he did not see black equality in America as possible. *Blake* imagines Cuba - not the United States - as a potential home for escaped slaves. Delany’s championing of emigration was motivated by a desire to see the black community in America carve out a nation of their own. His was not a worldview interested in championing obedience in order to gain public acceptance. As a maroon figure and a transnational subject, Henry disobeys dominant norms and signals his membership in a tradition of resistance with deep roots in the African diaspora. That being said, the dimension of autonomy he acquires cannot be credited to the force of his individual will. Rather, Henry can stand as the self-dependent model of “pure” blackness because his marronage - a modality of blackness born in the African diaspora - affords him an experience external to the norms constitutive of America’s racialized liberal sphere. As a diasporic modality of blackness, marronage sponsors forms of black

experience, agency, and autonomy that exceed the disciplinary effect of dominant racial liberal norms in the U.S., norms that would fix blackness as a sign of racial inferiority and as justification for enslavement or discrimination.

At the moment, Sean Gerrity's "Freedom on the Move: Marronage in Martin Delany's *Blake; or, the Huts of America*" is the most extensive literary analysis of marronage as featured in *Blake*. Like me, Gerrity defines Henry's "quest for freedom" as a form of marronage, "arguing for Henry Blake as a maroon figure and suggesting that his peregrinations throughout the U.S. South can be generative understood as acts of marronage" (2). Gerrity's analysis is helpful, because it clearly explains the relation I discuss between marronage and the "African diasporic world of resistant practices" (5). Perhaps more importantly, Gerrity's analysis allows us to understand how Henry, despite being a heroic individual, should not be read as a liberal agent or a universal subject of history with the right to revolution. "Instead, maroons [like Henry] and marronage are distinctly African diasporic in nature, figuring throughout the hemisphere (even in western Africa) and the entire duration of the transatlantic slave trade as forces of multidimensional resistance, survival, self-determination, and autonomy" (5). As Delany's mouthpiece and as a model of "pure" blackness, Henry connects his readers to a tradition of transhistorical struggle operating in excess of the revolutionary modality particular to the liberal subject.

While the rights befitting the liberal subject require the legibility afforded by state recognition, Gerrity points out that maroons have a need for illegibility if they are to acquire political autonomy (10). In order to maintain the illegibility that prevents his actions and plans from being "deciphered...known or understood," Henry makes use of liminal landscapes and practices "survival strategies" identified in historical works about U.S. maroon communities (Gerrity 11). As Gerrity notes,

He conceals himself inside fallen logs, sleeps out of sight in high tree branches, dexterously fends off wild creatures and slave catchers' dogs alike, and uses the inhospitable landscapes of swamps and marshes all in service of his project of heading further south and in horizontal movements from plantation to plantation, from slave quarters to woodland seclusions, extending the networks of his plan and elucidating alternate versions of freedom in the slaveholding South. (11-12)

Henry's travels activate a secret network of black agents comprising what Rebecca Ginsburg terms "the black landscape," "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" (qtd. Gerrity 54). That being said, the fact that Henry has such a network to activate in the first place means that the "paths, places, and rhythms" are not simply objects of his individual flight; rather, they are the communal practices and features that make his flight possible. For example, upon leaving Mississippi, Henry equips himself with "a rider, halter, blanket, girt, and horsewhip, the emblems of a faithful servant in discharge of his master's business" (69). At this point in the narrative, Henry has rejected his status as a slave, but he adorns these emblems in order to disguise his flight as a legally sanctioned act, because he has to pass by several plantations. Wearing what is essentially a slave uniform, Henry masquerades as an obedient slave on an errand for his master. To maintain his disguise, he also keeps a record of the plantations he passes so that, if stopped by "an overseer or patrol," he can pretend to "belong to a back estate, in search of his master's racehorse" (70). These tactics - the disguise and the list of plantations - allow Henry to move within liminal circuits whose traffic is concealed from state surveillance. Henry's mimicry of slavery's social codes and discourse allows him to move within these liminal circuits and occupy the psychological and physical space between slavery and freedom.

As a maroon, Henry's flight throughout the South's liminal circuits exposes the dependent relation between racism and freedom dominant in the United States. For instance, upon arriving in New Orleans, Henry is struck by the cosmopolitan scene he encounters, where "fancy stores and toy shops in this occasion were crowded seemingly to their greatest capacity" (100). The storefronts are filled with commodities, but not the human variety typical of his experience as a slave. This romantic vision of the market seems almost like a dream of what the country might be if liberated from its racial entanglements. "Here," we are told:

...might be seen the fashionable young white lady of French or American extraction, and there the handsome and frequently beautiful maiden of African origin, mulatto, quadroon, or sterling black, all fondly interchanging civilities, and receiving some memento or keepsake from the hand of an acquaintance...Freedom seemed as though for once unshielded by her sacred robes and crowned with cap and wand in hand, to go forth untrammelled through the highways of the town. (100)

Henry observes a space where race no longer governs the possibility of social mobility or freedom. Black movement does not take place in the liminal geographies characteristic of the maroon's domain but in the public space of the market, where displays of wealth commingle with a mirage of virtue. Indeed, Freedom herself moves "untrammelled through the highways of the town," passing her blessing upon the square's scene of social and monetary exchange. Does the New Orleans market embody the space of freedom Henry seeks? In short, no. Delany's use of "seemed" in the quote above foreshadows the exception living on the scene's periphery. Once the exception comes into view, it becomes clear that the shadow of slavery is essential to the town's advertisement of freedom.

“In the distance” can be heard the songs of the black slave-boatmen who work on the Mississippi River. Delany’s admiring description of the songs’ beauty mingles with his recognition of the slaves’ depraved condition. “Every few hours landing, loading and unloading, the glee of these men of sorrow was touchingly appropriate and impressive...Placed in positions the most favorable to witness the pleasures enjoyed by others, the tendency is only to augment their own wretchedness” (101). Delany continues to describe the scene from Henry’s perspective, writing that the boatmen:

...are seemingly contented by soothing their sorrows with songs and sentiments of apparently cheerful, but in reality wailing lamentations. The most attracting lament of the evening was sung to words, a stanza of which is presented in pathos of delicate tenderness, which is but a spray from the stream which gushed out in insuppressible jets from the agitated foundations of their souls, as if in unison with the restless current of the great river upon which they were compelled to toil, their troubled waters could not be quieted. (101)

The boatmen’s songs subvert their status as docile slaves by demonstrating their capacity for resistance; the songs are evidence of the cognitive and spiritual mobility that racial institutions, practices, and knowledge deny. Legally speaking, the boatmen are slaves; but their singing is a generative force that grants them a degree of autonomy from the oppressive forces that would dominate them.

Although they are “seemingly content to sooth “their sorrows with songs and sentiments of apparently cheerful,” the boatmen sing in order to express their pain, not in order to efface it. The song would only be “apparently cheerful” to those who unwilling or unable to hear their pain. In an 1841 letter to Mary Speed, Abraham Lincoln gives voice to such a perspective.⁸ In that letter,

Lincoln describes his encounter with a slave coffle⁹ when riding as a passenger on the steamboat *Lebanon* on the way to St. Louis. As Hartman notes, Lincoln reflects upon the effect of human happiness rather than “the crime of the trade or the distress of the slaves” (Hartman 34). Lincoln writes,

A gentleman had purchased twelve negroes in different parts of Kentucky and was taking them to a farm in the South. They were chained six and six together. A small iron clevis was around the left wrist of each, and this fastened to the main chain by a shorter one at a convenient distance from the others; so that the negroes were strung together precisely like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where; and yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think of them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board. One whose offense for which he had been sold was an over-fondness for his wife, played the fiddle almost continually; and others danced, sung, cracked jokes, and played various games with cards from day to day. How true is it that ‘God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,’ or in other words, that He renders the worst of the human condition tolerable, while He permits the best, to be nothing but tolerable. (qtd. Hartman 34)

Lincoln’s rhetoric acknowledges the slaves’ suffering only to erase it, effectively transmuting the visceral pain of separation into a religious vision, a fantasy of peace. Hartman writes that Lincoln’s “reflection acts to normalize the scene and deny the presence of violence by characterizing it as within the context of the socially endurable...” (34). Indeed, the physical

suffering Lincoln witnesses merely supplements an abstracted reality in which intolerable suffering becomes “tolerable.” His rhetoric achieves this effect by organizing his witness of suffering and his belief in divine providence into consecutive points on a teleological trajectory. The movement from one point (suffering) to the other (transcendence) effectively converts the object of his witness from intolerable pain to divine grace. This conversion erases the slaves’ experience of suffering *and* the violence responsible for it.

In contrast, Delany’s description of the boatmen in *Blake* frustrates any attempt to normalize the suffering they express. As the boatmen sing, “their pathos of delicate tenderness” sounds a dissonant note, because it exists in relation with the “agitated foundations of their souls.” Whereas Lincoln’s rhetoric frustrates the reality of enslaved suffering, Delany’s frustrates any assumption of happiness or contentment. The sentimental language Delany employs (“pathos of delicate tenderness”) does not abstract or absolve the boatmen’s suffering into a more tolerable condition. In fact, Delany’s language makes clear that the boatmen’s experience of suffering *repels* any fantasies of a “tolerable condition.” The boatmen are “*apparently* cheerful,” a phrasing that construes their cheer as a mask that cannot quite hide what lies beneath. Their songs are the tangential “spray” of the larger “stream” gushing out in “insuppressible jets from the agitated foundations of their souls.” Unlike Lincoln, who perceives the slaves as “happy creatures,” Henry perceives them as united in the deliberate expression of their suffering and in the resistance of its cause.

The boatmen’s singing functions as a cognitive and spiritual form of flight that contests the physical, cognitive, spiritual, and social immobility their station and forced “toil” would impose. When Delany compares the boatmen’s “lament” to “the restless current of the great river,” he associates the act of singing with the “restless” interiority the songs obscure and nourish. This

“restless” interiority moves against the chains that would arrest the slaves’ internal and external movements. The act of singing also unifies the boatmen’s restless spirits, thereby increasing the force of their resistance and amplifying its capacity to effect a measure of cognitive and spiritual mobility and autonomy. When placed in contrast to the passage describing the New Orleans market, the boatmen’s singing enacts a different form of freedom than the one afforded by the market and liberal society. While the latter revolves around the protection of individual rights and the absence of oppression, the former is a cultural practice deployed in order to resist oppression. When the boatmen sing, they demonstrate their agency by virtue of their capacity to generate and occupy a liminal space between slavery and freedom - they do not need to transcend the condition of slavery in order to exercise their agency. Within the liminal space flight generates, slaves maintain the potential for future acts of resistance, whether they be cognitive, spiritual, or physical. Delany implies as much in the final line: “their troubled waters could not be quieted.” Their singing will continue to “trouble” the water where they labor, and just as the river can never be stilled, neither can the “restless” spirits of the singing boatmen.

The “restless” spirits of the boatmen trouble the harmonious scene of freedom Henry observes in the New Orleans market. The social and economic life of New Orleans is dependent upon the river as a source of wealth, and the relation the city shares with the river is illustrative of the dependent relation antebellum free society shares with slavery. Just as the New Orleans’ market depends upon the river for its economic wellbeing, so too does the nation’s economy and “well-being” depend upon slavery. Delany’s depiction of the boatmen counters the market’s erasure of the slave labor sustaining it. The language he uses introduces a dissonant note that disrupts the market’s harmonious staging of freedom. As discussed above, Delany’s description of the singing models the dissonance the songs generate; the songs are “apparently cheerful...wailing

lamentations.” When the boatmen resist the commodified erasure the market would impose, they disrupt the market’s siren call, thereby empowering Henry to continue his quest with his revolutionary ambitions intact.

Just as the news of Haitian marronage inspired other acts of marronage and resistance, the boatmen’s song inspires Henry to continue his mission. “Standing in the midst of and contemplating such scenes as these, it was that Henry determined to finish his mission in the city and leave it by the earliest conveyance...Swiftly as the current of the fleeting Mississippi was time passing by, and many states lie in expanse before him, all of which, by the admonishing impulses of the dearest relations, he was compelled to pass over as a messenger of light and destruction” (102). In this remarkable passage, Henry’s flight becomes untethered from his individual will; it becomes a feature of the “scenes” he observed, scenes animated by the boatmen’s singing. Because he stood in the “midst” of the singing, he is “compelled” “to pass over as a messenger of light and destruction.” The “light and destruction” are not manifestations of his will; they are the consequences of his movement and that of the boatmen’s song. Wherever Henry moves, there will be “light and destruction,” and the “restless” spirit of the boatmen lives on and grows. Henry’s individual will disappears only briefly, but its momentary absence makes room for Delany’s voice in the next paragraph where he extends the metaphor of light and destruction, aligning the former with liberty and the latter with the end of “oppression and ignorance” (102).

Light, of necessity, had to be imported to the darkened region of the obscure intellects of the slaves, to arouse them from their benighted condition to one of moral responsibility, to make them sensible that liberty was legitimately and essentially theirs, without which there was no distinction between them and the brute. Following as a necessary consequence, would be the destruction of oppression and ignorance. (102)

Delany shelters the “light” Henry carries within the abstract register of prophetic language. But the light Henry carries is the torch he shares with the boatmen; their restlessness is his restlessness, and it is Henry’s movement that carries the knowledge of the “light” to other slaves so that they too can see themselves as capable of resistance. We are told that the light “had to be imported to the darkened region” of the slaves’ intellects. Their intellects have been “darkened,” but the example of Henry’s restless movement demonstrates their capacity to dissolve the ignorance engendered by their oppression, ultimately demonstrating their capacity for self-dependence and resistance. Therefore, it is not necessarily Henry who elevates slaves “from their benighted condition to one of moral responsibility,” but the emancipatory potential of self-determined flight that he embodies. If he can imagine and seize a life of freedom via flight, so can they. When practiced by slaves like the boatmen and Henry, flight dislocates “Freedom” as a protected feature of the racial state and locates it within the experience of slave resistance.

After leaving New Orleans, Henry makes his way East, traveling through Alabama and Georgia before reaching the “dreaded” and “haughty South Carolina” where “intelligence and virtue are discarded and ignored” (110). In the absence of intelligence and virtue, whiteness governs South Carolina’s dominant social, political, and cultural hierarchies. As the dominant normative criteria, whiteness determines who has social standing and who does not. Delany recognizes mastery as synonymous with whiteness when he writes, “To be a ‘master’ in South Carolina is to hold a position of rank and title, and he who approaches this the nearest is heightened at least in his own estimation” (110). The parting jab supplied by “in his own estimation” undercuts the assumed facticity of whiteness as a visual sign of superiority, creating space for the reader to observe the normativity of whiteness without *feeling* its authority. Delany’s jab notwithstanding, *Blake’s* South Carolina remains a space where the “feelings engendered by the whites” govern

every level of society, leaving little room for the interstitial spaces maroons occupy and maintain under the cover of illegibility (14).¹⁰

For instance, we are told that these “feelings” gave “rise to the ‘Brown Society,’ an organized association of mulattos created by the influence of the whites, for the purpose of preventing pure blooded negroes from entering the social circle, or holding intercourse with them” (110). In this space, Henry’s movement and blackness becomes subject to increased surveillance, amplifying his risk of recapture. “The transit of the runaway through this state,” Delany writes, “was exceedingly difficult, as no fabrication of which he was capable could save him from the penalties of arrest” (111). Henry’s transit becomes more difficult because his blackness, as the antithesis of whiteness, has been thoroughly objectified as a sign of criminality and enslavement. When he first began his transit as a maroon, Henry was able to pass as a docile slave on an errand for his master, but “no fabrication” is available to him now. Here, the intense gaze of whiteness limits the potentiality of resistance that flight creates, but not to the point of erasure. Henry’s “only course of safety,” we are told, “was to sleep through the day and travel by night, always keeping to the woods” (111). Liminality is still available, in other words, in a geographical space that frustrates the white gaze. Therefore, in tracking his flight from the white gaze of South Carolinian society, the passage illustrates the relation between the governing power of whiteness and the illegibility slaves (and maroons) occupied and maintained in order to survive.

As Henry travels through the woods, the dynamic tension between the governing power of whiteness and the illegibility of slave resistance increases. Still in South Carolina, meeting with slaves on plantations becomes impossible for Henry due to the surveillance of patrols and “mulatto and black overseers” (111). To avoid capture, Henry instead holds clandestine meetings - referred to as “seclusions” - in the forest, where attendees included “the much-dreaded runaways of the

woods, a class of outlawed slaves, who continually seek the lives of their masters” (111). This is the first time in the novel where the slaves Henry meets are explicitly characterized as a violent threat to slavery. If Henry’s flight creates the potential for resistance, the liminal “seclusions” make explicit that this potential includes violent resistance.

Discursive, psychological, spiritual, cultural, and material configurations of marronage all emerge when Henry reaches North Carolina and the Dismal Swamp. When he enters the Swamp, he encounters a maroon community populated by “a number of old confederates of the noted Nat Turner...who hailed the daring young runaway as the harbinger of better days” (113). These “confederates” are maroons in function and form, and the revolutionary energy of Turner’s sacred legacy survives by virtue of their occupation of the Dismal Swamp’s liminal, black landscape, a geography that facilitates, Gerrity explains, their “creation and sustenance of networks of affective, material, and familial support among the enslaved across varying geographical distances” (5). The leaders of the maroon community are the High Conjurers, and as Gerrity indicates, they “have a significant role to play in expanding Henry’s plan, propagating his ideas, and enlarging the scope of maroon consciousness” (13). This illicit discursivity, organized in opposition to the order of the plantation, makes possible future acts of resistance. While Henry is talking with one of the maroon leaders, the High Conjurer Maudy Gharnus, about the maroonos’ revolutionary legacy, Henry makes clear that the maroons “were the kind of fighting men they then needed among the blacks” (114). Maudy Ghamus,

to this assented, stating that the Swamp contained them in sufficient number to take the whole United States; the only difficulty being that the slaves in the different states could not be convinced of their strength. He had himself for years been an emissary; also,

Gamby Gholar, who had gone out among them with sufficient charms to accomplish all they desired but could not induce the slaves to a general rising. (114-115)

The passage illustrates how maroon communities-maintained contact with enslaved communities, and the channels they established allowed for the exchange of information and material goods, the latter being vital to many maroon communities living in space inhospitable to sustainable agricultural activity. The creation of these channels demonstrated self-sufficiency, thereby “breaking entirely with the master-slave dichotomy and establishing alternative ways of life.” In other words, “the free maroon existed as a negation of the stars quo” (Bledsoe 45). However, the realization of the maroon community’s imagined revolutionary freedom depends upon the slave populations living on plantations. They do not *possess* the potential for freedom; rather, that potential exists as the product of a dynamic and subterranean network of exchange.

We learn that Gamby Gholar and other High Conjurors are regarded as “ambassadors from the Swamp,” and they regularly travel outside the swamp “to create new conjurers, lay charms, take off ‘spells’ that could not be reached by Low Conjurors, and renew the art of all conjurers of seven years existence...Through this means the revenue is obtained for keeping up an organized existence in this much-dreaded morass - the Dismal Swamp” (115). Delany’s use of “revenue” is curious and ambiguous. There is no explicit qualification or explanation of the lonely term, but it’s illegibility allows it to exercise a double-meaning. On the one hand, given the fact that many maroon communities maintained networks of material and economic exchanged with enslaved populations, the use of “revenue” could refer to payment received for creating “new conjurers, lay charms,” and spells. On the other hand, “revenue” could also refer to a psychological or spiritual commodity whose value is not determined by the capitalist market. Namely, the term “revenue” also connotes the exchange of subterranean cultural practices and history constitutive of the

psychological and spiritual life of the maroon community. The liminal exchange of these immaterial revenues is foundational to generating the potential for future acts of resistance, inside and outside the Swamp. Without those cultural practices and the liminal cover of the Swamp, the “organized existence” of the autonomous black community would likely dissolve. For “maroons and marronage,” as Gerrity writes, “existence is resistance, but it is also solidarity and survival, psychic and material. Marronage thus troubles totalizing conceptions of both freedom and unfreedom, drawing attention to the ambiguous realm of what lies between” (13).

Throughout the first half of the novel, Henry meets with fellow slaves in order to organize a black revolution in the United States. Because my project focuses on black practices of freedom in the United States, this chapter’s analysis does not discuss the novel’s second section, although it too demonstrates the generative potential of marronage. Henry’s clandestine quest seems him travel to Africa and Cuba, and his movements preserve the potential for revolutionary action that erupts in the book’s final, albeit incomplete, section. In both sections, Henry’s flight generates liminal networks of communication and exchange that function as existential threats to the institutions of slavery. Referencing Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death,” Rebecca Biggio argues that *Blake* presents the black community as an object of white fear, “because community among blacks, both locally and on a national scale, fundamentally undermined the system of slavery by creating a place, albeit unsteady, where slaves could see themselves as something more than ‘socially dead’...and with capital and resources for the struggle ahead” (440). When Henry meets the maroons, he finds himself connected to a black community whose culture and revolutionary heritage equips them with the “revenue” needed to assert and maintain, as Roberts writes, “a lived social space while living in a liminal position” (10). The space the maroons assert is “unsteady”; resources are limited and they do not live completely beyond the reach of slave

catchers or the state. However, their liminal existence manufactures an illegible cover under which their cognitive, spiritual, and physical acts of flight have more room to operate.

Considered within the theoretical frame Roberts provides, the acts of flight performed by the Swamp's maroons are not examples of fugitivity, because they are directed toward a future of revolution and the freedom it would deliver. Although the maroons' devotion to black revolutionaries provides the most obvious link between their flight and revolution, Delany describes the swamp as a generative space of destruction, as a revolutionary space. He writes that the seeds of the future will "grow" in "devastation"; they will be "reaped" in a violent "whirlwind of ruin." The juxtaposition of "grow" and "devastation," as well as that of "reaped" and "ruin" identify violence as a future-oriented, generative force. In a passage exploring the relation between marronage and revolutionary action, Roberts relies on Hannah Arendt's work to present a useful etymology of "revolution" that clarifies the revolutionary symbolism of the Swamp. The term "revolution" originally referred to the "revolving motion of the stars." Its meaning was nonpolitical, and it "carried the backward-looking connotation of restoration, the exact opposite of the word's current usages" (Roberts 32). The 17th century saw the term acquire a "political designation," but it retained its relation to restoration. The American Revolution, for instance, embodies the sense of revolution as restoration; but the term's meaning shifted again with the French Revolution, transitioning from a "backward-looking" concept "to a forward-looking concept" (Roberts 32). Arendt writes, "It was the French and not the American Revolution that set the world on fire, and it was consequently from the course of the French Revolution, and not from the course of events in America or from the acts of the Founding Fathers, that our present use of the word 'revolution' received its connotations and overtones everywhere, the United States not excluded" (qtd. Roberts 32). Interpreted through the lens Arendt's work provides, Delany's portrait

of the Swamp and the maroon community illustrates the generative link between liminality, flight, and revolutionary action. The relation between marronage and revolution is no surprise in *Blake*, particularly given the novel's progression towards a slave revolution in Cuba; however, that link can also be found in another and more surprising work of antebellum African American fiction: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Conclusion: Marronage, Harriet Jacobs, and the Potential for Revolutionary Action

In her autobiographical 1861 novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs adopts the pseudonym "Linda Brent" and narrates her experience as a slave in the South and a fugitive in the North. Jacobs adopting the pseudonym "Linda Brent" and relaying her experience. Like Henry Blake, Brent is a maroon figure whose flight to freedom depends upon illegible forms of movement and liminal spaces, both of which collaborate to generate the potential for future acts of resistance. Importantly, those future acts of resistance include the possibility of revolutionary action.

In what is perhaps the narrative's most memorable scene, Brent hides in her grandmother's attic for seven years to escape the violent sexual advances of Dr. Flint, her master, and to wait for her chance to flee North. Her flight to the attic contests the gendered and racial norms pressuring her cognitive and physical movements, and it creates a fertile liminal space where the potential of achieving the freedom she imagines can be preserved. That being said, the attic is not a space devoid of struggle; she terms the attic a "little dismal hole" (124). Reflecting upon her experience, Jacobs describes how "day and night were all the same" in the "den." "I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow" (98). In the attic, it is neither day nor night, and there is a scarcity of light and air, though not a complete absence. The attic cloaks her physical,

cognitive, and emotional movements; they are illegible and hidden from the view of her master, Dr. Flint. That illegibility persists because Flint cannot imagine her doing anything else than fleeing from the plantation, an unthinking form of escape befitting a creature lacking the capability for self-dependence. Instead, she flees *to* the attic and the potential of realizing the freedom she has long imagined. Although her flight moves her to occupy the physical liminality of the attic, it also locates her within the metaphysical dimension bridging slavery and freedom. She refuses her chattel condition, but she does not transcend that condition. Instead, her flight to the contested but fertile liminal space between slavery and freedom preserves the potential of attaining her liberty.

Upon reaching the attic, Linda's flight continues, because she continues to struggle - emotionally, spiritually, and physically - to maintain her occupation of the attic and the contested dimension between slavery and freedom. The sounds of her children's voices inspire joy *and* sadness; they act as a source of comfort *and* pain. She wants to go to them without risking re-enslavement. Hearing her children, she says, "made my tears flow," a phrase carrying an emotional ambiguity. Her tears express joy *and* sadness, because she knows her children are slaves but understands her flight as a potential means of securing their freedom. Importantly, her flight to the attic and her multidimensional movement within it are demonstrative of the enslaved community's agency as well as her own. Her relatives, uncle Phillip, aunt Nancy, and her grandmother sustain her in secret so that she may continue her struggle. Their actions reveal the presence of a clandestine network of communication and movement, similar to the networks featured in *Blake*. Linda explains that her "food was passed up to me through the trap-door my uncle had contrived; and my grandmother, my uncle Phillip, and aunt Nancy would seize such opportunities as they could, to mount up there and chat with me at the opening. But of course this was not safe in the daytime. It must all be done in darkness" (98). As this quote shows, acts of resistance and

demonstrations of enslaved agency like Linda's often depended upon communal support. In order to avoid registering suspicion that they were anything but chattel, slaves disguised their emotional, cognitive, religious, and physical activity. The same is true for Linda, and the "darkness" in which she moves amplifies the emancipatory potential of her struggle.

Henry Blake and Linda Brent are both maroon figures because their struggle toward freedom encompasses multiple dimensions of flight. Their flight(s) take place within liminal spaces on the periphery of slavery's reach. Henry's marronage moves toward an imagined freedom via revolution, a resistant act that would potentially destroy the law's power to seize black life. As discussed above, revolution functions as a generative form of destruction, and Delany's revolutionary ambitions were guided by a desire to found an independent black nation. At first glance, the theme of revolution seems absent from Jacobs' novel. Linda eventually escapes to the North, secures her children's freedom, and in the end becomes a free woman herself. However, Jacobs' relation to revolutionary resistance exists on the periphery of the text, and it becomes more evident since Linda's flight never ends, even after reaching the North and attaining her freedom.

Linda leaves the attic upon learning that Dr. Flint might be aware of her hiding place. Her Uncle Phillip and friend Peter secure her passage aboard a ship, and Linda begins her long-awaited journey to the North. As the ship is en route, the ship's captain welcomes Linda on deck and explains that "he had recently lost a brother who traded in slaves" (133). He acknowledges the shame he feels about his brother's occupation, identifying himself as an ally to Linda's struggle. As the ship passes the "Snaky Swamp" where Linda had hidden herself in the days immediately following her escape, the captain points to it and says, "There is a slave territory that defies all the laws" (133). As the North Star article discussed earlier shows, citizens and enslaved blacks were well aware of the existence of maroon communities and the general area in which they lived. When

Linda gazes at the swamp upon the captain's direction, she recognizes her own struggle for survival in that "slave territory that defies all the law." She says, "I thought of the terrible days I had spent there, and though it was not called the Dismal Swamp, it made me feel very dismal as I looked at it" (133). Linda's language frames her struggle as a feature of her past, a framing reinforced by the retrospective nature of the narrative itself. In the very next sentence, Linda describes how in that moment, with her past struggle and suffering in view, she begins to entertain hopes for a free life beyond the reach of slavery. "I shall never forget that night," she explains. "The balmy air of spring was so refreshing! And how shall I describe my sensations when we were fairly sailing on Chesapeake Bay? O, the beautiful sunshine! the exhilarating breeze! and I could enjoy them without fear or restraint. I had never realized what grand things air and sunlight are till I had been deprived of them" (41). Sailing outside the reach of the plantation, Linda experiences the imagined freedom she has sought for so long, but that experience is still tethered to her struggle within slave territory. In the quote above, Linda describes enjoying the nature around her "without fear or restraint," but it is precisely her experience as a slave that informs her experience on board the ship. "I had never realized what grand things air and sunlight are till I had been deprived of them." Her exhilaration upon experiencing nature without "restraint" is magnified by its relation to the her memory of past oppression. Therefore, in this passage, Linda engages in a cognitive dimension of flight as she transitions from her life of "restraint" to a life seemingly free of "restraint." With the plantation behind her and freedom before her, she occupies a transitional moment and mode of being. She experiences an imagined form of freedom. Roberts reminds us, "Flight can be both real and imagined...Freedom is not a place; it is a state of being" (11).

The variant of freedom Linda experiences on the ship seems to fall in the category of "negative" freedom, or the freedom *from* domination particular to the dominant branch of liberal

thought. Subjects who experience negative freedom exist in a static state of non-interference or non-domination. As Roberts writes, “negative theories of freedom refer to static ideals that construe freedom as an absence of a condition encroaching upon an agent” (13). Because it defines “freedom” as the absence of domination, negative freedom cannot account for the fluid process by which slaves and slave communities exercised agency while struggling within a state of domination. It cannot account for the dimensions of flight through which slaves moved in order to resist their oppressors and achieve the freedom they imagined. Blind to the process of flight, the various dimensions of flight, as well as fluid expressions of agency, negative freedom also obscures, as Roberts writes “the importance of a slave’s capacity for revolutionary action” (28).¹¹

A concept of freedom that does not recognize a subjects’ capacity for struggle and revolutionary resistance construes that subject as helpless, without agency, and bound to follow or flee from the dictates of dominant regimes of power. A concept of freedom which promises a life wholly secured from encroachment is a fantasy, the internalization of which leaves the liberal subject vulnerable to the influence of disciplinary techniques. As Roberts asserts, however, struggle and flight are features of freedom, not signs of its absence. Moreover, the capacity for struggle, for agency, for freedom, *is* the capacity for revolutionary action. In *Marronage as Freedom*, Roberts uses a quote from Frederick Douglass *Bondage* to illustrate the centrality of struggle to his theory. Douglass writes,

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did, and it never will. (qtd. Roberts 74).

The forms of struggle Douglass names, “physical” and “moral,” operate as analogues to the dimensions of flight Roberts identifies: cognitive, metaphysical, emotional, physical. More importantly, by anchoring the concept of freedom to the practice and process of struggle, Douglass and Roberts propose an alternative form of freedom distinct from the liberal notion of freedom as a fixed state of non-domination. In contrast to liberal forms of freedom, they imagine freedom as a process of struggle practiced *within* and *against* oppressive power relations, a position located in the liminal space between the total freedom indicative of liberal thought and the slavery upon which America depended. Occupying that liminal space affords a clearer view of how the liberal regime and the natural rights it recognizes are the arbitrary products of political institutions. However, recognizing liberal rights and institutions as contingent upon relations of power highlights their vulnerability to revision and revolution.

Linda’s hope of moving beyond her past as a slave, of experiencing the air and sunlight beyond the threat of the whip and her master’s sexual advances, is in part expressive of the fantasy of freedom liberal discourse fabricates. Linda never experiences life free from oppression or restraint. Even upon attaining her “freedom,” she is still subject to racial abuse, prejudice, and the threat of capture and re-enslavement. She struggles on behalf of her freedom in the North - she spends much of her time worrying about the freedom of her children and the slavecatchers Dr. Flint dispatches to Boston and New York. Her struggle still encompasses the multi-dimensionality of flight, because she continues to struggle emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and physically towards the life she imagines for herself and her children. Moreover, she still struggles against the threat of enslavement; she still struggles and moves within the liminal space between slavery and freedom in order to resist her source of oppression, whether that threat be re-enslavement in the South or discrimination in the North. Even while “free” in the North, she remains a maroon figure.

As Linda's narrative focuses on her ongoing struggle in the North, we witness her encouraging and engaging in overt forms of resistance unavailable to her in the South. I suggest that in this moment, through the actions of Brent, we can see Jacobs' gravitating towards to possibility of engaging in more forceful forms of resistance. As a nanny for the Bruce family, Linda travels with them to the summer resort town of Rockaway, New York where she is to care for the young Mary Bruce. Upon arriving at the Pavilion hotel, her mobility is quickly placed under restraint. The hotel staff informs her that she cannot eat at the table with Mary; she is to stand while feeding her, and she is to eat her dinner in the kitchen after Mary has finished. In response, Linda takes Mary back to their room, and refuses to return to the dining table. Having food delivered to the room reveals further layers of prejudice, because white servants protest delivering food to a black servant, and the black servants were unhappy "because all were not treated alike." Linda's refusal of the dining room's racialized codes of conduct function as a public expression of individual agency she would not have performed so openly in the South. Furthermore, her initial refusal informs her willingness to speak against the racial inequities she and fellow "colored servants" face. When told of the dissatisfaction of hotel's "colored servants," Mary is quick to respond. "My answer was that the colored servants ought to be dissatisfied with *themselves*, for not having too much self-respect to submit to such treatment" (147). With her emphasis on self-respect echoing Delany's emphasis on an enlightened black consciousness, Linda continues, arguing "that there was no difference in the price of board for colored and white servants, and there was no justification for difference of treatment. I staid a month after this, and finding I was resolved to stand up for my rights, they concluded to treat me well. Let every colored man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled under foot by our oppressors" (147). This passage illustrates a few points relevant to this chapter's analysis of marronage. First, Jacobs' use

of first-person expresses Linda's perception of herself as an individual with agency - "I staid," "I was resolved." Her confident expression of individual resistance then expands to a prophetic call for collective resistance: "We shall cease to be trampled." The syntactical movement from first-person to third-person maps the dynamic link between individual and collective resistance, character and author. In each case, the former inspires the latter and vice versa. Where the potential for individual resistance emerges, so too does the potential for collective resistance. Therefore, Jacobs' syntax engages in a form of flight. The syntactical progression affirms black individual and collective agency, thereby resisting the racial norms and laws that would deny black persons the capacity for resistance and disqualify their equal standing. Brenda's resistance generates a position from which those norms and laws can be contested through future, communal acts of resistance.

Secondly, the fight the text performs is multidimensional. When Linda defines herself as a person deserving of self-respect, she engages in a cognitive movement *against* racial norms *in pursuit of* her imagined self-worth. She also contests the metaphysical assumption of blackness as a sign of inferiority. In addition, by moving from the dining room to her private room, Linda engages in the physical dimension of flight. She moves from a public space where she has little control to a private space where she has more control. As a consequence of her physical flight, she affords herself a liminal space in which she can organize a direct response to the hotel's racism, which she does by calling for collective black resistance. "We shall cease to be trampled." Every dimension of Linda's flight is centered around the struggle to achieve a self-respect she must imagine and generate for herself in a free society.

In the scene just analyzed, Linda's character affords Jacobs the illegibility she needs to speak plainly but covertly. This is to say that Jacobs uses Linda as a mouthpiece to voice overt

calls for black resistance; Linda's call for collective resistance is Jacobs' call for collective resistance. "Let every colored man and woman do this [stand up for their rights]," she says, "and eventually we shall cease to be trampled under foot by our oppressors." With this sentence, Jacobs seems to break the fourth-wall while retaining the illegibility her narrative and character provide. From this liminal position between character and person, fiction and non-fiction, Jacobs can contest the gendered and racial constraints imposed upon her and the narrative she publishes. From this perspective, she steps outside the text's thematic emphasis on womanhood and domesticity in order to address the importance of overt struggle if black freedom is to be achieved.

In order to concretize the relation between *Incidents* and revolutionary action, Jacobs' personal connections to militant abolitionism need to be considered. Following the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, Jacobs's brother John S. Jacobs attended a "convention of fugitive slaves and their supporters" organized by the "New York State Vigilance Committee in Cazanovia, Madison County" (Yellin 107). According to Jean Fagan Yellin, "it is likely that he and his sister were among the group of 'close to 50 fugitives' who joined the 2,000 demonstrators at Cazanovia" (107). The second day of the conference was highlighted by the "Letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery." Echoing similar appeals issued by Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker, the letter was considered a "radical document." It instructed slaves to remember they were "prisoners of war, in an enemy's country - of a war, too, that is unrivaled for its injustice, cruelty, meanness - and therefore, by all the rules of war, you have the fullest liberty to plunder, burn, kill, as you may have occasion to do to promote your escape" (qtd. Yellin 107-108). Only one month after the convention, Jacobs' brother was "preaching the same militant message at a protest rally in New York City" (107-108).

On September 18, 1850, President Fillmore signed the new Fugitive Slave Act into law. In response, John S. moved west to California and participated in demonstrations protesting “the seizure of James Hamelt, the law’s first New York victim” (108). John delivered a speech during a meeting at Zion Chapel, and attending abolitionists applauded his efforts, with the antislavery press reporting John’s speech “word for word” (Yellin 108). “My colored brethren,” he said, “if you have not swords, I say to you, sell your garments and buy one...They said they cannot take us back to the South, but I say, under the present law they can.” Pivoting to issue a forceful call for resistance, he continues. “[A]nd now I say unto you, let them take only your dead bodies...I would, my friends, advise you to show a front to our tyrants, and arm yourselves; aye, and I would advise the women to have their knives too. But I don’t advise you to trample on the laws of this State, but I advise you to trample on this bill, and I further advise you to let us go on immediately, and act like men” (qtd. Yellin 108). Jacobs’ brother had read Walker’s famous appeal while at sea, and although it is not clear whether Jacobs sympathized with her brothers’ militant appeals, she undoubtedly would have been familiar with them and the abolitionist movement’s increasing militancy in the 1850s.

Jacobs’ openness to the potential for revolutionary action becomes more concrete when we consider her interest in John Brown. In her biography of Jacobs, Yellin describes how, in 1859, Jacobs was struggling to find a patron and publisher for her book and was on the verge of admitting failure. Then, on October 16, 1859, John Brown and his band of men “seized the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry” and “Jacobs was shaken out of her melancholy” (140). “African Americans and militant abolitionists hailed Brown for firing the first shot in the fight for freedom,” and Jacobs searched for a way she could show her support for Brown. She could not, as Yellin explains, follow abolitionist Lydia Maria Child in writing “a public letter to Governor Henry Wise of Virginia,

offering to go south during the trials to nurse the wounded Brown” (140). Instead, she went to her desk and drafted “a tribute to Brown.” It was to be the “new conclusion for her book” (140).

Her first manuscript submission to the Boston house of Phillips and Samson was rejected, so she turned for help to the publishers responsible for distributing “James Redpath’s best-seller, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown*” (Yellin 140). They agreed to publish the manuscript as long as Jacobs could secure a preface from Lydia Maria Child. The famous abolitionist agreed to supply the preface and also offered to edit the manuscript. Jacobs accepted the offer, and during the editing process, Child kept her informed as to the book’s progress, writing that she was “copying a great deal of it [the manuscript], for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous *order*, and the remarks into *appropriate* places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining” (qtd. Yellin 141). Child advised Jacobs to remove the tribute to Brown, explaining “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” (qtd. Yellin 141). Following Child’s advice, Jacobs cut the chapter in the name preserving the story’s “natural” order, thereby disassociating the book “from Brown’s militancy and align[ing] it with the Garrisonian circle’s program of ‘nonviolent reform’” (Smith 744).

No known copies of Jacobs’ tribute to Brown have survived, and we will likely never know the precise extent of Jacobs’ sympathy for Brown’s actions. However, the fact that she planned to use the tribute as the book’s conclusion is significant. It shows us, at the very least, that Jacobs entertained the possibility of revolutionary action as a valid form of resistance. The tribute also tells us that Jacobs wanted to align herself with Brown’s cause, perhaps to the point of endorsing his violent actions. Additionally Child’s advice to cut the conclusion locates Jacobs (and her willingness to endorse Brown’s actions) outside the boundaries of dominant gendered and racial

norms. Including Brown would disrupt the novels' *appropriate* order as well as Child's editorial emphasis on womanhood and domesticity as the natural ends of the narrative. This is not to say that Child alone is responsible for the text's emphasis on those themes, and my analysis is not meant as an entry into the longstanding debate about the text's authorship. Rather, I contend that the Brown tribute functions as a fugitive conclusion, one that unsettles the book's published form and disrupts its association with the rhetoric and values of moral reform. When the published form of *Incidents* concludes with the death of Linda's grandmother, it directs the reader's gaze to the private emancipation effected by universal values such as family, womanhood, and domesticity. The Brown tribute, on the other hand, is a liminal text. Its circulation within the text's field of interpretation generates the potential of reading Brent's journey as a progression towards accepting the need for violent anti-slavery action. The Brown tribute also demonstrates that Jacobs was still in pursuit of an imagined form of freedom; she was not simply trying to move beyond the reach of her past; rather, the act of writing about her experience represents an active engagement with her present condition. Her flight from slavery includes, in other words, authoring *Incidents*, because by writing *Incidents*, she demonstrates her agency as an authorial subject. Perhaps in considering Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, Jacobs sought to assert her authority and imagine the freedom that may yet emerge. Whatever her intentions were, the tribute to Brown expands the interpretive boundaries of the text and forces us to acknowledge the potential for revolutionary action waiting unseen in the novel's periphery.

Notes

¹ See Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons*; Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp*; Nevius, *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1765-1856*.

² Although Martin Delany never lived as a slave, *Blake* does afford us a view of Henry's felt and lived experience as a slave. Harriet Jacobs' experience as a slave is well-documented.

³ Olson also makes clear that these riots were not simply spontaneous and unorganized. Rather, the "majority were organized, disciplined, and under the leadership of the city's most prominent gentlemen. Mayors, congressmen, attorneys general, physicians, lawyers and newspaper editors directed the mobs' activities at night and defended them in the morning, often citing them as expressions of the 'will of the majority'" (31).

⁴The writings of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams provide evidence in support of this claim. In 1825, nearing the end of his life, Jefferson contrasted the Saxon and Norman conquests of England. He described the former as "exhibiting the genuine form and political principles of the people constituting the nation," having "founded [the nation] in the rights of man; the latter built on conquest and physical force, not at all affecting moral rights, nor even assented to by the free will of the vanquished" (qtd. Horsman 21). In August of 1776, Jefferson was active in working with the committee responsible for developing the inscriptions for the United States seal. In the process of laying out his vision for the project, Jefferson wrote, "Has not every restitution of the ancient Saxon laws had happy effects? Is it not better now that we return at once into that happy

system of our ancestors, the wisest and most perfect ever yet devised by the wit of man, as it stood before the 8th century?" (qtd. Horsman 22). John Adams described the committee's work to his wife the following day, writing that Jefferson wanted "the Saxon chiefs" included on the seal, "from whom we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed" (qtd. Horsman 22).

⁵ America's racial heritage is also bound to core liberal principles such as property ownership and self-dependence. Katherine Henry documents how an important shift took place in the antebellum era in regards to the government's relation to the rights-bearing individual and their property rights. Prior to the antebellum era, citizenship was largely understood as a sign of mastery and self-dependence. The shift Henry describes reconceptualized citizenship - and the rights it commanded - as located in:

...a zone of protection, with the state functioning paternalistically as the protector of its citizens. Concurrently, liberty was more and more commonly being figured negatively, as freedom *from* tyranny, as a precious and endangered article that had to be protected from the powers that were always threatening to encroach. (Henry 2)

As a result of this shift, the very notion of good government became increasingly aligned with the protection of (white) citizens' liberties and rights.

⁶ Other recent works focusing on marronage include Adam Bledsoe's "The Present Imperative of Marronage," Sarah Jessica Johnson's dissertation *Outliers: Maroons and Marronage in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Kathryn Elise Benjamin Golden's dissertation *Through the Muck and Mire: Marronage, Representation, and Memory in the Great Dismal Swamp*."

⁷ Gerrity defines marronage “as a constellation of resistant flight and freedom-seeking practices” prevalently featured in African American literature (3).

⁸ “Letter to Mary Speed, September 27, 1841,” in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, New York, Library of America, 1989, pp. 74-75.

⁹ Webster’s dictionary defines “coffle” as “a group of prisoners, enslaved people, or animals chained or tied together in a line.

¹⁰ Interstitial spaces are home to “interstitial subject positions,” a term Sean Gerrity uses in “Freedom on the Move: Marronage in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, the Huts of America*” (14).

¹¹ Roberts conceptualizes marronage as a form of freedom bridging the gap between the two dominant branches of liberal theory - negative freedom *and* positive freedom. I focus on negative freedom here, because Linda’s experience better fits the concept of negative freedom. However, Roberts spends a considerable amount of time discussing both forms, their historical context and development, as well as their current relevance in *Freedom as Marronage*.

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~ Chapter 4 ~

Rupturing the Narrative of Progress in the Afterlife of Slavery: Struggle, Flight and
Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

"To accept one's past - one's history - is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" - James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time"

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* fits the definition of what A. Timothy Spaulding terms a "postmodern slave narrative." According to Spaulding, postmodern slave narratives "reject the boundaries of narrative realism in their retelling of slavery" and use "fantastic genres like science fiction, the gothic novel, postmodern metafiction, and the vampire tale to claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record" (1-2). Postmodern slave narratives critique "traditional history" and engage "in the dismantling of Enlightenment conceptions of history and identity and the totalizing grand narrative of Western cultural superiority" (2). Additionally, postmodern slave narratives subvert the realistic narrative approach common to the slave narrative genre, favoring instead an "overtly oppositional, highly fictionalized form of history" (2) and the deployment of fantastical elements "designed to intrude upon [traditional] history as a means to reform it" (4). Although *Underground* pays its respects to the original slave narrative genre in its dramatization of a slave's quest for freedom in antebellum America, Whitehead uses discontinuous historic elements - what I also refer to as "anachronisms" - to defamiliarize the trajectory of American history, rupture the national narrative of progress, and recognize the potentiality of flight as a vehicle for black freedom and agency.

At the beginning of the novel we meet Cora, *Underground's* central character, living on the Randall plantation in Georgia. Shortly thereafter, much like in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she becomes the object of her master's desire. She agrees to escape with Caesar, a fellow slave with a contact in the fabled underground railroad. Aided by a few white railroad agents, Cora and Caesar flee Georgia. Cora's journey afterwards takes on an episodic structure, with the book's major sections each set in a particular location in the United States, including Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and the idyllic Valentine Farm in Indiana. However, in this slave narrative the underground railroad is not a metaphor; it is a literal underground train system, one of many anachronisms and fantastical elements Whitehead introduces into the text. When Cora and Caesar reach the railroad in Georgia, its entrance hidden underground beneath a rural barn filled with thousands of chains and "a morbid inventory of manacles and fetters," they see "Two steel rails" in a "gigantic tunnel," the walls of which are "lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern" (67). The rails span "the visible length of the tunnel" and are "pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus" (67). Directing her gaze northward, Cora boards the train in the hopes of reaching its "miraculous terminus," only to learn by degrees that a place beyond the reach of slavery does not exist, at least not in America.

Whitehead's use of fantastic elements and historical anachronisms constructs, as Madhu Dubey explains, "a continuum between past and present, extending enslavement and the quest for freedom into post-Emancipation phases of US history" (112). By transforming the railroad from the metaphorical to the literal, Whitehead performs a "literalizing move" that at once intensifies and warps "the reality effects of his novels" and "offers Whitehead a perfect vehicle

for defamiliarizing public narratives about race and national history at the turn of the twenty-first century” (Dubey 111). Derek C. Maus “extends” Dubey’s reading and identifies *Underground* as a “metafictional neo-slave narrative that satirically dismantles a range of both individual and societal narratives that have allowed the White supremacist mindset - and corresponding suppression of African American rights - to outlive legalized slavery by over a century and a half” (124). In order to contribute to their discussion of *Underground* and its critique of national narratives and - more specifically - post-Emancipation narratives about race, I explore the novel’s juxtaposition of discontinuous historical elements, reliance on prosaic language, and performance of what I term “discursive flight.” Together, these elements defamiliarize the norms constitutive of the slave narrative genre and destabilize America’s national mythology by framing antiblackness as a mundane, unsentimental feature of life in America, a reality performed and highlighted by the physical and thematic trajectory of Cora’s narrative. Cora’s narrative, which takes place in a fictionalized, ahistorical antebellum America, historicizes the longstanding relation between the national narrative of progress and the logic of white supremacy while proposing a generative model of black freedom and agency grounded in the practice and struggle of flight. The novel spotlights the complementary relation between national narratives and white supremacy through its narration of Cora’s flight, a resistant practice she deploys against the systematic and violent forces arrayed against her. In its movement through space *and* time, Cora’s quest for freedom can be read as a struggle for a futurity of black freedom in America, a futurity national narratives of progress deny and defer in order to secure the integrity of a white social order. *Underground* is not, however, a slave narrative in which black freedom triumphantly transcends the violent infrastructure of American racism. Despite escaping the Randall plantation and ultimately eluding her pursuers, Cora never fully escapes her

legal status as a slave, nor does she escape the racial violence her legal status invites. She finds no safe harbor, no “miraculous terminus”; but she does gain agency and a sense of communal belonging. As Maus argues, Cora progresses “from being [an] authored object to becoming an authorial subject,” a reading this chapter’s analysis supports. Although Cora’s narrative dramatizes the development of her agency, the novel does not resolve the conflict between Cora’s personal progression and the racial mechanisms she endures. By portraying that conflict as a central feature of black life in America, the novel - and Cora’s narrative - ruptures a mythologizing national discourse and narrative of progress in which racial violence and the logic of white supremacy are incidental or secondary to America’s democratic values, history, and identity. By performing that rupture, the novel opens up a contested space in which black freedom and agency can emerge.

The slavecatcher Ridgway provides the novel’s most explicit embodiment of racial violence. His quest to capture and return Cora to the South fulfills the juridical dictates of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which nationalized the enforcement of slaveowner property rights. He is a representative, in other words, of a racial security mechanism dedicated to securing property rights and the integrity of the social order. Provoked by his failure to capture Cora’s mother, Mabel, when she ran from the Randall plantation, Ridgeway is an Ahab-like character who pursues Cora relentlessly across multiple state borders. He sees himself and the violence he practices as the destructive lifeblood of a divine and rational order, an ideological framework in which he represents what he refers to as “the American imperative.” This imperative, according to Ridgeway, was “the divine thread connecting all human endeavor - if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent” (80). Essentially, the right of possession and the power

to dispossess are definitive of Ridgeway's American imperative.⁵¹ Licensed by the discourse of white supremacy, they fuel the brutal engine of manifest destiny.

In a particularly telling scene, Ridgeway observes European immigrants disembarking from a ship in New Jersey and regards them as "this dirty white flood with nowhere to go but out." Although Ridgeway's classist prejudice is unmistakable, he exhibits a paternalistic pride in this "white flood," seeing it as an inevitable force that will consume and vitalize the land, as a population whose expansion "out" to the frontier will conquer and progress the nation.⁵²

Ridgeway watches as the immigrants,

stagger down the gangplanks, rheumy and bewildered, overcome by the city. The possibilities lay before these pilgrims like a banquet, and they'd been so hungry their whole lives. They'd never seen the likes of this, but they'd leave their mark on this new land, as surely as those famous souls at Jamestown, making it theirs through unstoppable racial logic. If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn't be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it'd still be his. If the white man wasn't destined to take this new world, he wouldn't own it now. (80)

The language used to describe the scene illustrates how, for Ridgeway, the imperative of white possession knows no limits, because it is a divinely and rationally authorized feature of national progress. Ridgeway's ideological framework organizes historical subjects into the possessed and the dispossessed, with whiteness functioning as the governing criteria that determines one's membership in one category or the other, as well as one's place in or outside of History. The quote above offers an abbreviated national narrative, for instance, that invokes the ideal of progress as an inevitable process of white possession and non-white dispossession. The description of the disembarking immigrants functions as a reimagining of "America's story."

The “dirty white flood” Ridgeway observes might as well be the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” The mention of “pilgrims” and “Jamestown” further cements the connection joining Ridgeway’s “white flood” to the mythology surrounding American history, specifically the romanticized account of a friendly feast shared between colonists and natives.

Presented alongside the reference to the original Thanksgiving feast, Ridgeway’s description of the disembarking immigrants sounds a dissonant echo of Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus.” Lazarus penned the poem in 1883, and in 1903 it was emblazoned on a bronze plaque and placed within the Statue of Liberty. Since that time, it has been incorporated into the national narrative of progress, where it invokes America’s benevolent and inclusive spirit. The discontinuous relation between Ridgeway’s antebellum setting and the poem’s origins in the late 19th / early 20th century introduces a friction between the poem’s rhetoric and the historical erasure that rhetoric performs. By linking the poem (albeit implicitly) to the racism Ridgeway exemplifies, Whitehead defamiliarizes the poem’s inclusive and patriotic spirit, thereby disturbing the assumed objectivity of the national narrative as well as the assumed universality of the liberal values it signifies.

As an expression of Ridgeway’s inner thoughts, the passage reveals the relation between a romantic national mythology and the racial logic underpinning it; the former constitutes the passage’s first half, and the latter the second half. Additionally, by weaving into the passage implicit references to anachronistic artifacts of American mythology, Whitehead identifies Ridgeway’s racism as an ahistorical feature of the nation’s mythology.⁵³ Not only does romantic or sentimental rhetoric shape the national historical narrative, but it is also particular to the

discourse of manifest destiny, which represents the dispossession of non-white peoples as incidental to Progress and necessary for the spread of democratic values and institutions. The closing sentences of Ridgeway's quote exhibit a proof-like syntax that frames the American imperative - and the future guarantee of white possession it disseminates - as the logical fusion of divine will and universal reason. As a whole, the scene makes clear that Ridgeway understands the immigrants' whiteness as the key that unlocks the power of the nation's mythology and places the nation's glorious futurity in their possession. Because their whiteness commands the right and universal power of the American imperative - possession and/or ownership - the immigrants are free to "mark" the land and make "it theirs through unstoppable racial logic."⁵⁴ If Ridgeway sees whiteness as the lynchpin of the American imperative, then he is also unapologetic about the violence he uses to enforce its authority.

The novel's central conflict lies between Ridgeway and Cora, between his efforts to enforce the American imperative and her struggle to escape it. At stake are the competing futurities to which their actions are directed. Unlike the "white flood" destined to own and mark the land, Cora's future - and the potential of progressing beyond the reach of Ridgeway's imperative - is always framed as precarious. Her journey consists of a series of hazardous escapes, from South Carolina to North Carolina, from captivity in Tennessee to the idyllic black community at the Valentine farm in Indiana. Ridgeway pursues her throughout the book, but he is merely the figurehead for the landscape of systematized terror through which Cora moves. Therefore, Cora's movements - the physical, cognitive, and metaphysical dimensions of her flight⁵⁵ - challenge the systematized enforcement of the American imperative and the violent erasures - past, present and future - it authorizes in service of the nation's mythology of progress.

Ultimately, *Underground* uses Cora's journey across space *and* time to identify flight - in all its dimensions - as an enduring feature of black life in America capable of rupturing the nation's [white] manifest destiny. This is not to say that Cora or her struggle are representative of all black peoples; rather, I identify Cora's primary method of resistance - flight - as a recurring practice identifiable in African American literature, history, and culture. In *Underground*, Cora's flight illuminates the racial logic intrinsic to dominant versions of American history and identity, as well as the racial violence people of color survive (and more). In order to equip Cora's antebellum flight with broader historical significance, Whitehead populates her journey with anachronistic examples of American racism. After escaping Georgia, Cora arrives at a technologically advanced South Carolinian city featuring a skyscraper as well as black men and women - many of whom are fugitive slaves - with access to progressive welfare programs including public housing, jobs, and personal medical care. In this fantastical setting, nowhere to be found in the real antebellum South Carolina, the ideology of racial uplift informs benevolent programs designed to deliver a middle-class lifestyle, all of which seems to emerge naturally in the absence of the overseer's whip. However, the progressive programs and modern amenities Cora finds merely veil a pernicious system of scientific surveillance and control emblematic of future racial techniques. The medical care for black men operates as a front for syphilis research in the mold of the 20th century Tuskegee experiments, and many of the black women in the town are subjected to a sterilization program in the interest of public health. Those who are sterilized by force include, Cora's doctor explains, "Colored women who have already birthed more than two children," "Imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit," as well as "habitual criminals." Those black women like Cora who are not forcibly sterilized still have, in his words, the "chance...to take control over [their] own destiny" (113). Ultimately, the progressive system in

South Carolina advertises black self-determination in order to disguise its disciplinary and regulatory techniques, both of which are typical of America post-emancipation.⁵⁶ *Underground's* South Carolina bears a resemblance to the real (antebellum) thing, but Whitehead's use of anachronisms disturbs the sense of mimesis and locates South Carolina in a fictional historical space. Within this disturbed and disturbing space, the erasures and dispossessions that national narratives of progress justify are plainly recognizable as central components of democratic life in America.

As the South Carolina section illustrates, *Underground's* mixture of anachronistic elements defamiliarizes Cora's journey and frustrates the totalizing grasp of national narratives of progress. This pattern comprises one of the book's most central features. Later in North Carolina, where no black people are allowed whatsoever, we witness the genocidal deployment of lynching as a legal instrument of terror. The gruesome display of lynched black bodies in the trees lining the "Freedom Trail" acts as a distorted mirror to the extralegal racial violence pervasive throughout Reconstruction, the end of the 19th century, and much of the 20th century. In Indiana, white supremacists - including Ridgeway - attack and destroy the idyllic black community at Valentine Farm, presaging the fate of self-determined black communities in places like Wilmington, North Carolina and Tulsa, Oklahoma, among others. Throughout the entirety of Whitehead's novel, Cora's flight never delivers her beyond these temporal echoes of anti-black violence, but it does function as a powerful mode of struggle necessary to her survival, the development of her personal agency, and her sense of belonging within the African American community. With Cora's journey anchoring the plot, the novel reveals the history of American anti-Blackness (and the narrative of national progress it underwrites) as a history dedicated to controlling black flight and the future potentialities of freedom it creates. In *The Underground*

Railroad, freedom is not a possession that Cora can find or secure within a state organized in opposition to black freedom; instead, black freedom exists as a potentiality of her “flight.” In *Underground*, black flight preserves the potentiality of freedom that the “American imperative” would control and contain.

Neil Roberts defines “flight” as the “directional movement in the domain of physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical.” For Roberts, the constant, multidimensional act of flight encompasses the act of “marronage.” A term derived from individual slaves or enslaved communities who fled plantations in order to make a life beyond their borders and the norms of free society, “marronage” involves the psychological, social, metaphysical, and political struggle “to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing in a liminal position” (10). Although focused primarily on Cora’s physical, cognitive, and emotional acts of flight, *The Underground Railroad* also portrays flight as a communal practice necessary to maintaining the potentiality of freedom and the liminality it requires. Throughout the novel, black characters and communities engage in different forms of flight in order to resist the violent techniques deployed to control them and limit the disruptive potential of their freedom. More importantly, *The Underground Railroad* thematizes flight in opposition to the violent history of American anti-blackness, framing it as a central component of African American history and the ongoing struggle for a futurity of black freedom.

With flight defined as a self-directed and multidimensional form of movement that animates modes of black struggle, this chapter argues that the *Underground Railroad* performs the flight it portrays as an essential component of black resistance within what Saidiya Hartman terms “the afterlife of slavery.” In the afterlife that is our present, “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago”

(6). The afterlife exposes black life to “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (6). The technologies and institutions responsible for this exposure are designed to arrest multiple domains of black movement, including the physical, economic, and social. In the struggle against a system designed to surveil and regulate the disruptive potentiality of black movement, flight generates the potentiality of freedom. As discussed in chapter three and its analysis of marronage in Martin Delany’s *Blake*, black slaves and enslaved communities have historically engaged in different modalities of flight (physical, cognitive, metaphysical) and occupied fertile liminal spaces between slavery and freedom within which the potential for future acts of resistance and lines of flight could emerge. My argument relies on *The Underground Railroad* to extend chapter three’s analysis into the present and explore how flight, as a black mode of resistance, contests the “entrenched” “racial calculus and political arithmetic” of anti-Blackness that has persisted and evolved in the wake of emancipation. I argue that *The Underground Railroad* performs a discursive form of flight - via Cora’s narrative - that resists and ruptures the futurity white supremacy is designed to secure. Cora’s narrative identifies flight as an essential form of black resistance and a potential source of historical rupture essential to maintaining the potentiality for black freedom within an oppressive and racialized political system. My analysis is organized into three sections. In the first, I conduct a close reading of the novel’s introductory section in order to establish how the textual architecture of *The Underground Railroad* contests the violent effects of the national narrative of progress. In the second, I transition to Cora’s journey in order to examine how the dimensions of her flight complement the textual architecture. In the chapter’s conclusion, I summarize my analysis of Whitehead’s novel and discuss the relation

between *Underground*'s portrayal of flight, its critique of national narratives of progress, and its engagement with the aftermath of slavery.

I. The Discursive Performance of Flight - Rupturing the National Narrative

The first sentence of *The Underground Railroad* positions Cora's narrative in opposition to the concept of progress, thereby foreshadowing the novel's larger critical concerns with national narratives. The novel begins with Cora's response to Caesar, a fellow slave who has asked her to join him in fleeing the Randall plantation in Georgia. "The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north," we are told, "she said no" (3). The use of "first" gestures towards a future request and a future escape waiting to emerge, but Cora's "no" interrupts the text's movement towards this expected future, disrupting the unfolding of a unilateral sequence of events that would see Cora transition from "slave" to "fugitive" to freedom.⁵⁷ Additionally, the dependent clause initiating the first sentence ("the first time Caesar approached Cora about running north") establishes a retrospective point of view that occupies a future vantage point, intimating the unfolding of a narrative in which Caesar repeats his initial request and receives a different response. Indeed, Cora eventually reconsiders Caesar's request and escapes with him to the underground railroad. In the moment of her refusal, however, Cora ruptures the narrative's expected unilateral trajectory. Befitting the novel's postmodern personality, Whitehead uses the first sentence to indicate his intention to stray from the linear architecture typical of traditional slave narratives, a subversive move Cora's story and the novel's succeeding paragraphs repeat.

The next paragraph complicates the divergent trajectory Cora's refusal produces, and it does so by subverting certain temporal and geographical features traditional slave narratives share with America's triumphant national narrative. First, instead of moving forward in time

towards the telos of freedom and social inclusivity, the text moves into a past where slavery - not freedom - waits on the horizon. Instead of moving forward with Cora's story, the text backtracks to narrate the natal alienation and suffering Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, endured upon her kidnapping in Africa and enslavement in America. Second, when the narrative relocates to Africa, it fractures the symbolic national geography into which slave narratives and stories about the underground railroad are often incorporated. As Sean Gerrity explains, the slave narrative genre often aligns the slaves' "quest for freedom" with "the Underground Railroad, attached to which is a particular unilateral geography that positions the South as a place of unfreedom and the North as a place of freedom, with movement almost always occurring along this South-to-North directional axis" (2). Kathryn Schulz echoes this line of thought, writing that "On the Underground Railroad, geography is plot: the South represents iniquity and bondage, the North enlightenment and freedom." This geography is problematic, particularly because most slaves who escaped the plantation did not flee to the North, much less rely on the underground railroad to do so.⁵⁸ Moreover, the discourse of racism was dominant in the North as well as the South, and the principle of freedom was often invoked to justify racial oppression and violence. In other words, the ideal of freedom and the institution of slavery were never mutually exclusive. For instance, an 1858 editorial published in a Vermont newspaper argued that "a log must be laid across the track of the underground railroad" to halt "the illegal introduction of colored persons in the free states" to "prevent a large yearly increase of that class population which is hanging like a millstone around the neck of our industrial progress" (qtd. Schulz). In order to justify the exclusion of fugitive slaves, the editorial identifies them as a threat to "economic progress." Moreover, the argument holds that fugitive slaves should not be allowed in *any* free states, a

framework that aligns the protection of slaveowner property rights with national progress and stability.

Stories about the underground railroad have always lived on the threshold between myth and fact. In antebellum America, as David Blight explains, “it was common by the mid-1840s to speak and write of the Underground Railroad as a clandestine system of runaway slaves. It was already in part a legend, a construction of historical *memory*, as much as it was *historical*, by the time of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850” (3). Stories about the underground railroad trend towards the romantic, often emphasizing the bravery and moral virtue exhibited by its white attendants. Blight quotes an Iowa correspondent who in 1896 proclaimed that stories about the railroad would “thrill the heart and quicken the pulse of the eager student of the grand progressive movement of human liberty.” These stories would relay “hairbreadth escapes, perilous journeys by land and water, incredible human suffering for a wide readership” (qtd. Blight 239). A similar register can be found in more recent language describing the underground railroad, demonstrating that the South-to-North directional axis still exerts a formidable pressure upon national narratives. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, which opened in 2002 in downtown Cincinnati, worked with Smithsonian Books to publish a collection of essays in 2004 entitled *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. This collection features the essay by David Blight quoted above, and Blight’s essay asks critical questions about why stories about the underground railroad are so prevalent in the public imagination. Despite the critical inquiry Blight applies to the railroad’s romanticized reputation, the book’s forward - authored by Spencer Crew - explains the Center’s objectives using sentimental language and frames the railroad as a model of racial reconciliation. He writes,

The mission of the Freedom Center is to highlight the courage, cooperation, and perseverance that characterized the efforts of the individuals involved in the Underground Railroad. They risked their lives and their futures to oppose laws that favored the rights of slaveholders. Their personal sacrifice for a larger good still sends a powerful and inspirational message. Their actions illustrate the impact dedicated people can exert upon a society and how they can influence that society to live up to its principles. Instances of interracial cooperation and collaboration represented a countervailing force to the institution of slavery and eventually helped bring about the destruction of the peculiar institution. (x)

The quote credits “interracial cooperation” for helping society “live up to its principles,” a phrasing that brackets the nation’s democratic principles from the institution of slavery and the logic of white supremacy. By representing the nation’s identity and values as distinct from its history of racial oppression, the passage preserves the South-to-North directional axis. Essentially, the sanctification of the South-to-North directional axis relies upon the romantic devices and sentimental language that stories about the underground railroad - and slave narratives - deploy. As a consequence of their sentimental affect, these stories privilege the theme of racial reconciliation, often construing abolitionist benevolence as representative of national ideals. However, by aligning national identity with “good” feeling, slave narratives and narratives about the railroad participate in a discourse that frames the uncomfortable reality of racial violence within a digestible mythology. In this mythology, the North’s championing of universal freedom affirms the moral standing of the nation and its [white] citizens. Ultimately, this formulation of a virtuous national identity erases from the historical record the nation’s ideological and material links to racial violence, dispossession, and discrimination.⁵⁹ When

Underground relocates to Africa after Cora's refusal, it disassembles the South-to-North directional axis by collapsing it into a single cardinal body: the West. When the narrative transitions from Cora's perspective to Ajarry's, from Cora's present to her family's past, Caesar's request to escape to the North disappears from view and along with it the equivocation of the North with universal freedom.

Immediately following Cora's refusal, Ajarry's story in Africa begins and she briefly assumes the narrative's central position. This shift sees Cora transferred from Caesar's orbit to Ajarry's, and from America's orbit to Africa's. Ajarry's story begins with a reference to Cora's refusal. "This [the refusal] was her grandmother talking" (3). Of course, this sentence constructs a familial link between Cora and Ajarry, between Cora's refusal and her grandmother's voice. However, and more importantly, the story that follows also decenters the "South-to-North directional axis" signified by the text's presentation of Cora's impending flight north. When the story transitions - or returns - to Africa, both the South and North are subsumed into the broader category of the West, their reputed differences on the matter of slavery and freedom erased. Once recognized as a member of the West, the North joins a network of nations whose economies and cultures are thoroughly intertwined with the Atlantic Slave trade. This fact, which Whitehead stations in plain view but does not explicitly evaluate, also undermines the North's capacity to signify universal freedom. A close reading of Ajarry's story offers further support for this argument.

"Cora's grandmother," we are told, "had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah and the water dazzled after her time in the fort's dungeon" (3). This is a strange and dissonant sentence, the romantic portrait of the ocean in the "bright afternoon" clashing with the foreboding image of "the fort's dungeon." Whereas the initial pastoral view of

the ocean connotes the state of nature and the sphere of freedom, the final phrase of the sentence pulls the narrative, the reader, and Ajarry toward the sphere of slavery. No amount of romantic rhetoric can hide what comes next. The following sentence completes the transition; “The dungeon stored them until the ships arrived” (3). The “fort’s dungeon,” and “ships” are emissaries of the Atlantic slave trade and Western civilization, of which the South and the North are both members and beneficiaries. The transition from the South-to-North directional axis to the contested space of Africa travels the oceanic space of the Atlantic slave trade and establishes an implicit link between the violence and dispossession characteristic of the slave trade and America’s financial, social, and cultural investments in it. Therefore, the narrative’s relocation to Africa erases the convenient difference between the slaveholding South and the free North; when the narrative moves back - or returns - to Africa and Ajarry, America’s two poles coalesce, merging with the body of the West to form a network of capital thoroughly invested in the slave trade and its horrors.

Throughout Ajarry’s story, Whitehead repeatedly links Western colonialism to slavery, leaving no room for a moral, free North to assert itself. Ajarry was a part of a “bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English.” The English language drives the exchange and its objectifying calculus. The ship that transports Ajarry across the Atlantic is named the *Nanny*, its home port being Liverpool. Ajarry is transported to the *Nanny* by “Two yellow-haired soldiers,” and the ship sets sail for America. Her family “was purchased by Portuguese traders from the frigate *Vivilia*” (4). As these examples demonstrate, the narrative presents the slave market as a global feature of Western economies. Moreover, the narrator’s voice relaying this information is detached from any single character; it occupies an objective point of view and describes the slave

market and its violent effects as a matter of historical record. The blunt presentation of the slave market's global reach provides an unembellished view of the West's racial entanglements, a stark contrast to the romantic and sentimental rhetoric that would construe universal freedom as the West's - and the North's - most valuable export. The fact is that the *Nanny* is no caretaker; there is no amount of rebranding that could erase the ship's - and the West's - complicity. With Africa silhouetted behind the slave fort *and* Georgia *and* the global activity of the slave trade, the unspeakable fact of Western responsibility becomes spoken and ruptures the symbolic geography of the "South-to-North directional axis." The distinction between racial violence, dispossession, and national narratives of progress collapses with it.

By engaging in these structural and syntactical movements, the text practices what I term the discursive performance of flight. The novel operates on the shared periphery of the slave narrative genre and America's national symbolic landscape, meaning that *Underground* is at once internally and externally situated in relation to them. Therefore, the novel occupies a liminal space conducive to contesting dominant discursive matrices. To that end, *Underground* trades the security of a linear, future-oriented narrative for an ongoing process of flight and rupture. Its discursive performance of flight extends Roberts' definition of "flight," which involves "directional movement in the domain of physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical." However, although the novel is not an agent moving in the physical, cognitive, or metaphysical domains, it *does* move in discursive domains. Whitehead directs the text's flight toward an end, namely the conceptualization of a dynamic counter-history designed to bankrupt the relation between the logic of white supremacy and dominant historical narratives. The discursive process essential to producing this counter-history generates a space in which black agency and freedom can emerge and assume authorial control over the national mythology.

Underground also meets another key criteria of Roberts' definition of flight; namely, by moving within and against normative discursive constraints, *Underground* "excavates common submerged discursive knowledges" (28). In this case, the knowledges being excavated include the historic relation between America's democratic ideals, slavery, and racial violence, a knowledge the national mythology of progress suppresses in order to preserve the nation's epitomization of a progressive modernity.

As the close readings above suggest, *Underground*'s discontinuous structure is foundational to its discursive performance of flight, because it generates a fertile liminal space within which it can more freely contest genre norms and national narratives. Thus far, this chapter has focused primarily on how the beginning of the novel disturbs the South-to-North directional axis via the movement from Cora to Ajarry and from America to Africa. However, as mentioned above, *Underground* engages in an ongoing process of flight and rupture throughout its entirety, and that engagement applies especially to the text's structure and style. In regard to the former, Whitehead implements an irregular episodic structure that disrupts the unilateral progression of Cora's narrative. Each of the book's major episodes relays Cora's experience in a particular place. For example, the first major section takes place on the Randall plantation in Georgia. The next major section takes place in the anachronistic version of South Carolina already discussed. Between these major episodes, Whitehead interjects secondary narratives dramatizing the experiences of other characters. These characters include Ajarry, Dr. Stephens in South Carolina, Ethel in North Carolina, Caesar, Ridgeway, and Mabel, Cora's mother. Importantly, these secondary narratives do not fit within the linear timeline of Cora's journey. Ajarry's story, for instance, occurs years before Cora was even born. Dr. Stephens, who advised Cora to enroll in the South Carolinian town's sterilization program and moonlights as a grave

robber, is featured in a narrative that takes place well before Cora's arrival in South Carolina, even though the story itself is introduced *after* Cora escapes Ridgeway in the same location. Additionally, on the page preceding the beginning of each major section, Whitehead includes a real fugitive slave advertisement gathered from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's digitized collection of newspapers (Friedman 123). Five real ads appear in the novel, in addition to a sixth that Whitehead drafts for Cora. The inclusion of the ads within an already discontinuous structure further impedes the imposition of a linear frame onto the novel's contents. Taken as a whole, the novel's discontinuous elements compose a narrative structure that defamiliarizes literary norms in order to illuminate the nation's historical relation to the systemic and collective effects of slavery. Essentially, the novel's anachronisms and dissonant structure inhibits the reader's ability to confine the effects of slavery to the frame of Cora's individual experience, to the antebellum setting, or to the South-to-North directional axis in which slave-narratives often operate. These elements produce a fictionalized historical narrative in which the systemic and collective effects of slavery are not excluded or dismissed as exceptions to national ideals and history. To put it another way, the novel's discontinuous structure, by defamiliarizing the individualizing character of traditional slave narratives and decentering America's symbolic geography, preserves the fact that racial violence and dispossession are features of American democracy and history. As a result, the novel opens up a space wherein new forms of black agency and freedom can be imagined and practiced.

Whitehead amplifies the disturbing effect of the novel's structural discontinuities by intentionally avoiding the use of sentimental or lyrical conventions, opting instead for a prosaic style. After narrowly escaping Ridgeway in South Carolina, Cora rides the underground railroad to a station in North Carolina, at which point a reluctant station agent named Martin agrees to

sneak her to his house and hide her there until an escape can be arranged. At one point during the trip, Martin slows the horses to a stop and says, "...I wanted you to see this" (152). Upon looking around at the quiet country road, "crowded on both sides by the forest canopy," Cora "saw one shape, then another." (152). The narrator continues,

The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where their bowls emptied when their necks snapped. Gross wounds and injuries marked the flesh of those closest to her, the two caught by the station agent's lantern. One had been castrated, an ugly mouth gaping where his manhood had been. The other was a woman. Her belly curved. Cora had never been good at knowing if a body was with a child...'They call this road the Freedom Trail now,' Martin said...'The bodies go all the way to town. (152)

Whitehead's description of the hanging bodies facilitates a detached perspective - a stylistic feature present throughout the novel - that inhibits affective identification on the part of the reader, thereby subverting a traditional feature of the slave narrative genre.⁶⁰ As Friedman deftly notes, Whitehead adopts a prosaic style that hides "the interiority of its characters, and unsettles the reader's desire to feel with or for the humanity of the enslaved" (115). For instance, the first sentence of the passage above compares the "corpses" to "rotting ornaments." This unsettling juxtaposition inhibits the reader's ability to humanize the corpses via the process of sympathetic identification. Indeed, the language throughout the section actively inhibits identification altogether. Words like "them," "others," "one," and "her" withhold intimate knowledge about the victims, and the injuries marking the flesh on display provide one of the few means of distinguishing one corpse from the next. Cora's perspective also circumvents sentimental affect, even though the lack thereof connotes personal trauma as well as the absence

of sentimental identification. The language describing Cora's reaction to the hanging corpses performs that absence. "Cora had never been good at knowing if a body was with a child." This matter-of-fact description of what Cora knew (and didn't know) upon seeing one particular body gives little indication as to her interior state. In its reliance on a prosaic style, the passage extends the inhibition of sentimental identification from the corpses to Cora herself.

Slave narratives have often filtered scenes of brutal violence through the lens of sentimentality, although recent neo-slave narratives have subverted this practice and expanded the genre's defining norms.⁶¹ Abolitionists relied on sentimental language to generate sympathy for their cause and the suffering slaves endured. As Friedman explains, the genres of historical fiction and the neo-slave narrative "both have long-standing links with Harriet Beecher Stowe's injunction to 'feel right'" (115). Stowe believed that writers had a responsibility to move the readers' feelings and sympathies in order to effect political change. Although she admits that sentimental fiction has achieved considerable "political gains," Friedman identifies this "affect-laden" writing style as laden with "serious pitfalls" (115).

At worst, it [sentimental fiction] it partakes of what Laurent Berlant (1998: 664) calls the 'sentimental bargain,' which replaces tangible action with feeling, offering 'putatively supra political affects or affect-saturated institutions (like the nation or the family)' as 'universalist solutions to structural racial, sexual, or intercultural antagonism. (115-116)

Sentimental fictions prompt readers to "engage" in what Friedman refers to as "*sentimental historicizing*: interpreting and relating to the past through affective vicarious experience" (117). "This mode of historicizing," she argues, "rests on the assumption that *feeling* the weight of history and entering shared states of feeling with historical actors necessarily

inspires ethical action in the service of social justice” (117, emphasis mine). Sentimental historicizing’s importance to national narratives can be understood when we consider its “domesticating function,” in that it “forces unruly subjects to fit into the infrastructure of the nation-state - keeping them ‘on track,’ to invoke *Underground*’s central metaphor” (117). Sentimentality ultimately “encourages affiliation premised on capturing the interior experiences of Black subjects, who must become knowable and sympathetic to readers in order to gain contingent access to liberal citizenship. *Thus, sentimental historicizing results, often inadvertently, in preserving rather than disrupting a violent national infrastructure* (117, emphasis mine).

At their core, sentimental historicization and sentimental slave narratives use an affective lyrical style in order to encourage the reader to “feel right” about blackness. Lyrical examples of slave narratives elevate the bodily experience of black pain in order to generate sympathy and demonstrate black humanity. As Friedman explains, they deploy lyrical language whose “representations of suffering...take on an almost otherworldly quality. As a result, Black pain can appear to reside in a sublime realm distinct from the quotidian reality in which the reader lives” (120). Whitehead’s eschewal of a sentimental, lyrical writing style in favor of a prosaic one refuses to exclude “Black pain” to a “sublime realm” separate from the reality in which his readers live. His use of prosaic language, in presenting Black pain without sentimental ornamentation or appeal to identification, reveals black pain to be “the stuff of everyday existence in the United States” (Friedman 121). Whitehead’s adoption of a prosaic style responds to - and anticipates - the application of sentimentality to scenes of black suffering. Such applications often decontextualize or individualize Black pain in order to categorize it as an

exceptional experience divorced from history, systemic causes, and the transcendent virtue of democratic values.

By performing the quotidian nature of black suffering, *Underground* engages in flight from sentimental conventions and sentimental historicization, both of which are foundational components of the national narrative of progress. The novel rejects the stability those elements might provide, both to the narrative and to the fictionalized history it constructs. Whether published or dramatized for visual mediums, stories that invite us to sympathize with episodes of brutal racial violence are familiar. These stories appeal to our sympathies so that we may “feel” right to act right. Whitehead is familiar with our familiarity. By defamiliarizing Cora’s narrative via the use of discontinuous structural and stylistic devices, he defamiliarizes the readers’ relation to the violence of slavery and its place in American history. All this being said, Whitehead is not simply attempting to memorialize slavery or America’s history of racial violence. *Underground’s* critique of the national narrative of progress damns it past the point of renewal. In its place, *Underground* proposes the adoption of a process of freedom generated via the ongoing struggle against the national narrative of progress and its racial effects.

II. Flight and the American Imperative: Cora’s Struggle for a Futurity of Black Freedom

As mentioned in the introduction, *Underground’s* primary source of conflict can be found in the contest between Cora’s flight and Ridgeway’s efforts to enforce what he terms the “American imperative.” For Ridgeway, the “American imperative” refers to the divine and rational mandate of white ownership and sovereignty. The mandate extends the category “property” so that it applies to land, resources, and people, and its universal reach transmutes each into potential (and perhaps inevitable) objects of possession. Cora’s flight contests the

imperative's ideological foundations, because it challenges the racial logic authorizing the imperative's universal reach as well as its legal and extralegal enforcement. By fleeing the plantation and eluding Ridgeway for much of the novel, Cora demonstrates her capacity for self-dependence, an internal prerequisite for liberal definitions of freedom that scientific theories of race denied black persons in the early-mid 19th century. As a self-dependent subject, Cora troubles her status as property, thereby destabilizing the universal reach of the imperative's right of possession.

After narrowly failing to seize Cora in South Carolina, Ridgeway captures her in North Carolina. In a nod to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Cora had been hiding in the attic belonging to a white couple, Martin and Ethel. Martin is a reluctant underground railroad agent, having inherited the role from his abolitionist father, Donald. Ethel is a self-fashioned missionary who treats Cora as an inferior being in need of the civilizing influence that only her maternal, Christian, white benevolence can provide. As with the novel's portrait of a progressive South Carolina, *Underground's* North Carolina is a fictionalized and anachronistic space designed to draw attention to the historical ubiquity of antiblackness in the United States. The difference between the novel's two Carolinas can be summarized as a difference between "soft" and "hard" expressions of a racist state sovereignty. Whereas *Underground's* South Carolina cloaks its racial violence under the cover of progressive programs and the discourse of racial uplift, the novel's North Carolina openly and vigorously uses violence in the service of white supremacy, making it a fitting place for Ridgeway, as the novel's chief embodiment of racial violence, to capture Cora.

Upon arriving in North Carolina and assuming her hiding place in the attic, Cora learns that the state government - out of fear of black insurrection and miscegenation - has enacted laws

forbidding “colored men and women from setting foot on North Carolina soil” (165). The consequences for transgressing the laws are severe:

Freemen who refused to leave their land were run off or massacred. Veterans of the Indian campaigns earned generous mercenary coin for their expertise. Once the soldiers finished their work, the former patrollers took on the mantle of night riders, rounding up strays - slaves who tried to outrun the new order, dispossessed freemen without the means to make it north, luckless colored men and women lost in the land for any number of reasons. (165)

In contrast to the progressive disciplinary and regulatory techniques of South Carolina, we witness in North Carolina the emergence of an extralegal and legal apparatus designed to criminalize, police, and kill black bodies. The “former patrollers” turned “night riders” presage the rise of the Klu Klux Klan after emancipation as well as the organization of the modern police state; both institutions have historically treated blackness as a threat to law and order and social order, whether explicitly or implicitly. Within this context, suffused with anachronistic echoes of future racial techniques and institutions, working on behalf of the underground railroad means risking death. To work on behalf of the white social order, on the other hand, commands respect and social belonging, which is why Fiona, the Irish servant working for Martin and Fiona, spreads the word about Cora’s presence in the attic. Speaking to a group of “girls from Irishtown,” Fiona remarks “A girl’s got to look after her interests if she’s going to get ahead in this country” (187). Ridgeway happens to be in the area, and upon hearing Fiona’s gossip, he secures Cora before the townspeople and their authorities can execute her.

With Cora in shackles, Ridgeway takes her South through Tennessee, their ultimate destination being the Randall plantation in Georgia from which Cora escaped in the novel’s first

major section. Tennessee appears in the novel as an apocalyptic wasteland ravaged by fire and disease.⁶² They pass the scorched remains of a small settlement where “the stumps of the houses that had once contained the dreams of pioneers” dot the landscape. A larger town farther down the road, “where ravaged avenues converged in enterprise,” lay in ruins. “A baker’s oven in the ruins of the shop like a grim totem, human remains bent behind the steel of a jail cell” (213).

“Tennessee was cursed,” we are told. At first, Cora is tempted to interpret her surroundings as a sign of divine justice. Investing emotionally or psychologically in such an interpretation of the ruined “dreams of pioneers” and the broken machinery of commerce would be understandable given her experience. The more Cora thinks about the scene of destruction before her, the more she reflects upon her own suffering, leading her to the conclusion that the idea of justice is illusory. “The whites got what they deserved,” she thinks. “For enslaving her people, for massacring another race, for stealing the very land itself. Let them burn by flame or fever, let the destruction started here rove acre by acre until the dead have been avenged. But if people received their just portion of misfortune, what had she done to bring her troubles on herself” (215)? As if filling out a ledger, Cora then itemizes her wrongs, weighing their worth one by one. Ultimately, she concludes that there is no causal link between one’s wrongs and one’s suffering. “Tennessee’s disasters were the fruit of indifferent nature, without connection to the crimes of the homesteaders. To how the Cherokee had lived their lives” (216). The fire was “Just a spark that got away” (216). In this quote, Cora rejects a divine framework in which suffering serves some larger purpose. She rejects the idea of providence and any conception of history dependent upon the transmutation of violence and suffering into the refuse of progress. Based on the evidence around her, there is no moral framework guiding the world forward; history’s architecture has no design, no designer. The fires, “the crimes of the homesteaders,” and “how

the Cherokee had lived their lives” are not conjoined via their relation to the end or purpose of history. They are not cohesive elements of a single, progressive telos; they are discontinuous, though related, incidents. Whitehead’s sentence structure performs the discontinuity Cora observes. Following the sentence in which she comes to the conclusion that “Tennessee’s disasters” were “without connection to the crimes of the homesteaders,” sentence structures begin to break down. The sentence, “To how the Cherokee had lived their lives” lacks the connective tissue a subject provides, leaving it stranded in the midst of the surrounding text. Next, a fragment appears, isolated on the line below; “Just a spark that got away.” The fragment punctuates Cora’s evaluation of the discontinuous miseries she has experienced and observes. They seem like mindless occurrences, emerging without purpose or connection to divine justice.

Absent Cora’s evaluation is any notion of human culpability or agency. The passage’s language presents misery as the product of an indifferent world rather than a manufactured order. Her conclusion could indicate the lack of hope she holds for her own situation. She is in chains once again, and her flight has been arrested, as have her hopes for the future. Flight generates hope because it generates the potential for freedom, and the road back to Georgia almost signals the end of both. Cora accepts the lack of justice in the world, and although her acceptance could imply a lack of hope, it does not amount to a surrender. Rather than robbing her actions of purpose, her acceptance of her situation leaves her with nothing to do *but* act and continue her flight, albeit in a limited, more cognitive fashion. The same cannot be said for Ridgeway, who is driven to violence by his dogmatic refusal to acknowledge the flaw in the American Imperative, the same flaw Cora accepts.

Tennessee’s scorched landscape clears the ground for a pivotal confrontation between Cora and Ridgeway, between the potential of freedom Cora’s struggle and flight generate and the

possessive force of his American Imperative. At one point during their journey through the state, Ridgeway stops in a small town and takes Cora to a saloon for dinner, an opportunity he uses to taunt her and pontificate about his views on America.⁶³ Cora is not passive during this conversation; despite her bleak evaluation of the suffering she witnesses and experiences, she asserts herself in order to resist Ridgeway's dominating presence. As their verbal exchange intensifies, it comes to center upon how society - and Ridgeway - justifies the use of violence. Responding to Cora's charge that, to justify his actions, he "Call[s] things by other names as if it changes what they are," Ridgeway distances himself from "the smart men talking about Manifest Destiny" (221). "It's true, though, your complaint," he says. "We come up with all sorts of fancy talk to hide things. Like in the newspapers nowadays, all the smart men talking about Manifest Destiny. Like it's a new idea. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" Cora retorts, "More words to pretty things up" (221). As Cora is likely aware, Ridgeway's criticism of "the smart men" is self-serving; what she does not know is that his rhetoric performs his self-importance by aligning his identity with that of his father. Ridgeway fancies himself as a rugged individual unafraid to get his hands dirty, a disposition he believes he shares with his father, a blacksmith whose respect he never could win. In one of the novel's secondary sections, we follow Ridgeway as he comes of age. His father's "forge was a window into the primitive energies of the world," and he believed that "If you weren't a little dirty at the end of the day, you weren't much of a man" (74). As a boy, Ridgeway searched for a way to distinguish himself from his father and earn his respect. At the age of 14 he found his calling as a slave patroller. In this new profession, of which his father disapproved, Ridgeway embraced the physicality his father exhibited and used it to distinguish himself from other patrollers who "carried guns and eagerly cut down any rascal dumb enough to flee." By contrast, "Nature had equipped him

[Ridgeway] with weapons enough.” Instead of using a gun to hunt fugitive slaves, Ridgeway “ran them down as if they were rabbits and then his fists subdued them. Beat them for being out, beat them for running, even though the chase was the only remedy for his restlessness” (76). The “smart men” talking about “Manifest Destiny” lack the masculine physicality Ridgeway uses to hide his self-loathing, the same physicality he believes to be the core of the American Imperative. “He [Ridgeway] was not the smith, rendering order. Not the hammer. Not the anvil. He was the heat” (80). Ridgeway embraces the violence of Manifest Destiny, the effeminate, overly-sentimental term for the American Imperative, because to dismiss it would be to deny his own identity and violent mode of being. He sees himself as superior to the “smart men” who talk about Manifest Destiny because he is unashamed to supply the violence needed to power the nation’s universal reach and progress.

Ridgeway’s rugged worldview provides a convenient justification for his own actions, because it equips his violence with a divine purpose. Ignoring Cora’s “More words to pretty things up,” Ridgeway proceeds to explain Manifest Destiny to her, identifying it as the American Imperative he enforces. “It [the American Imperative] means taking what is yours,” he says, “your property, whatever you deem it to be. And everyone else taking their assigned places to allow you to take it. Whether it’s red men or Africans, giving up themselves, giving of themselves, so that we can have what’s rightfully ours. The French setting aside their territorial claims. The British and the Spanish slinking away” (221). Remembering his father, who “liked his Indian talk about the Great Spirit,” Ridgeway continues,

All these years later, I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy what needs to be

destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription - the American imperative. (221-222)

Ironically, Ridgeway is prone to the same abstractions as the “smart men” who enjoy hearing themselves talk about Manifest Destiny. His rhetoric, like those of the men he echoes and disparages, lays claim to abstract national values while conferring the burden of embodiment to black persons. His rhetoric erases Cora and “the lesser races” by casting them as the disposable fuel of the nation’s inevitable progress. For her part, Cora uses the burden of her embodiment to assert her agency and counter the erasure Ridgeway’s rhetoric performs. This is to say that Cora interjects her body into the conversation, effectively rupturing the veil of white control that Ridgeway’s nationalistic abstractions generate. “‘I need to visit the outhouse,’ Cora said” (222). Ridgeway’s reaction - “The corners of his mouth sank” and “He gestured for her to walk in front” - convey the novel’s occasional display of dark humor. More importantly, Cora confronts the American Imperative with the fleshy presence of her black body. In doing so, she effects a reversal; whereas Ridgeway had directed a conversation about abstract national ideals so as to hold her captive in it, Cora uses her body to rewrite the terms of the engagement and assume control of the situation. The fact of her taking possession of the conversation ruptures the Imperative’s championing of white superiority and ownership, thereby fracturing the narrative of progress Ridgeway attempts to tell. After all, she leads *him* to the outhouse - “He gestured for her to walk in front” (222). Because her response contests and moves beyond the metaphysical boundaries of Ridgeway’s rhetoric, it qualifies as an act of flight. It opens up a fertile liminal space that nurtures the potential for additional acts of resistance and the assertion of her individual agency. “Closing the outhouse door, shutting him out, was the purest pleasure she’d had in a long while” (222).

Embodying the white backlash that has countered the assertion of black agency throughout American history, Ridgeway wastes little time in trying to recoup his authority. From just outside the outhouse, “Ridgeway continued his address undeterred” (222). The proceeding dialogue crystalizes his symbolic role as the embodiment of a violent regime whose security depends upon controlling the disruptive threat of black fugitivity. Years prior, Cora’s mother Mabel had escaped the Randall plantation and was one of the few slaves who had eluded Ridgeway entirely. Both Cora and Ridgeway resented Mabel, although for different reasons: Cora for being abandoned by her mother and Ridgeway for the shame of being bested by a slave. “She’s up in Canada,” he said, referring to Mabel, “laughing at the Randalls and me. I take it as a personal injury” (222). Like Herman Melville’s Ahab, Ridgeway wants little more than to destroy the source of his injury, and with Mabel disappeared, Cora is the next best thing. “You and your mother are a line that needs to be extinguished,” he says. “A week together, chained up, and you sass me without end, on your way to a bloody homecoming” (222). The memory of Mabel’s escape provokes Ridgeway because its presence punctures the notion of white supremacy integral to his sense of self and worldview. If Ridgeway, the enforcer of a divine and racially-superior order, can be bested by a slave, then the integrity of his life’s purpose - the American Imperative - becomes suspect. In the effort to stabilize his identity and the integrity of the American Imperative, Ridgeway dedicates himself to the elimination of all black flight. His dedication is at once a personal characteristic, motivated in part by his troubled relationship with his father, but it is also foundational to his symbolic role in the novel. Namely, Ridgeway embodies the violent security mechanism the racist state requires in order to keep the disruptive potential of black life in its place. As a slave catcher, his literal job involves arresting black

bodies in flight. Just as the violent arrest of black life is essential to his identity, so too is it essential to the American Imperative and the national narrative of progress it underpins.

Like the racist systems of terror he represents, Ridgeway cannot tolerate the prospect of black flight, and he is not ignorant to the existential threat it poses to him. In the same scene as discussed above, Ridgeway continues his soliloquy outside the outhouse:

You heard my name when you were a pickaninny. The name of punishment,
dogging every fugitive step and every thought of running away. For every slave I bring
home, twenty others abandon their full-moon schemes. I'm a notion of order. The slave
that disappears - it's a notion too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next
plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the
imperative. And I refuse. (223)

As “a notion of order,” Ridgeway has elevated himself into the abstract sphere of national ideals, and his words indicate that his personal security is indissociable from the security of the imperative and the nation itself. Capturing Cora and seeing her punished addresses the psychological injury that Mabel’s escape inflicted upon him. Punishing Cora reaffirms his masculinity and sense of racial superiority, two internalized traits Mabel’s escape puts into doubt. Black flight also places the authority of the American Imperative into doubt, because it provokes the hope that the imperative - the absolute white right to possess and dispossess ad infinitum - is not absolute and can be resisted, escaped, or overthrown. Black flight accomplishes this by rupturing the logic of white supremacy; slaves who engage in flight demonstrate their capacity for self-dependence, thereby fulfilling a core criteria of liberal citizenship and fracturing the myth that slaves were content to live within the paternal confines of the plantation. “If we allow that,” Ridgeway says, speaking of the hope black flight inspires, “we accept the flaw in the

imperative, and I refuse” (223). As his refusal indicates, the integrity of Ridgeway’s worldview and that of the Imperative requires constant surveillance of black bodies that may, at any moment, engage in deviant modes of flight and imperil the entire social order. His worldview expresses the racial logic necessary to maintaining what David Theo Goldberg describes as “the myth of state permanence” (40). The myth of permanence is filled with tension between the idea of the state’s permanence - or status as ‘natural’ - and with the need to label, categorize, and enforce the idea of stateless people as faceless or without identity. Within this myth, “race appears...as a mode of crisis management and containment, as a mode of mediating that tension, of managing manufactured threats, and of curtailing while alienating the challenge of the unknown...race stands for that which the modern state is not, what the state avoids, what it is to keep at bay” (40). Ironically, in other words, the naturalized permanence the American Imperative requires Ridgeway’s protection to endure. To protect that naturalized permanence and mitigate any awareness he has about the Imperative’s impermanence, Ridgeway relies on the category of race to give his violence a natural sense of purpose. However, despite his refusal to “allow” for hope or flight, Ridgeway cannot eliminate their potential emergence.

The scene discussed above models how Whitehead often juxtaposes discontinuous elements in order to defamiliarize national symbols, values and mythology. As a consequence of these juxtapositions, Whitehead reorients the national mythology around the fact of the nation’s historic dependence upon dispossession, violence, and white supremacy. On the Randall plantation in Georgia, the brothers Terrance and James Randall make a rare joint appearance at a party where their slaves are celebrating the birthday of an elder slave named Jockey. Terrance expresses curiosity about a particular slave James had described to him earlier. James claimed that the slave, a young boy named Michael, could recite the Declaration of Independence by

memory, and Terrance was skeptical as to the truth of his claim. ““We’ll settle it,” James said. ‘Where is that boy? Michael?’” (31). While waiting for Michael to appear, the Randalls are informed that Michael is dead, having recently been beaten to death by their overseer, Connelly. The novel then shifts back in time to relate the story about Michael’s education, explaining that his former master, having been “fascinated by the abilities of South American parrots,” first taught Michael to recite “simple rhymes and short passages from popular British versifiers” (31). His education continued from there, and even though his master “only half understood” many of the words Michael learned, “They made miracles, the tobacco farmer and the coachman’s son. The Declaration of Independence was their masterpiece” (32). “Michael’s ability,” we learn, “never amounted to more than a parlor trick” trotted out to impress “visitors” and pad his master’s ego.

Michael’s education reveals the Declaration to be a dead letter; the document’s utterance of equality misfires in the presence of slavery. Additionally, Michael’s repetitious recitals of the Declaration brings to mind how the universal ideals invoked in the document have always been uttered within a national context suffuse with racial inequality and deadly forms of oppression. Michael may have died, but the document’s utterance of liberal ideals is still compromised. The juxtaposition of universal liberal ideals and racial inequities has proven a constant feature of American life, an incongruity so common that it has become routine. Michael’s episode therefore portrays what Goldberg refers to as the routinization of race, a process whereby the “racial state sets limits on social possibilities, or enacts them, not just formally through law but through *routinization*” (117). The routinization of the Declaration’s utterance reproduces and normalizes the incongruous relation between democratic ideals and race, effectively harmonizing the conflict by silencing their source of tension. As a living source of that incongruity, Cora is not

free to silence her experience of slavery. Because of her personal suffering and remembrance of victims like Michael, Cora preserves the dissonance that the Declaration's incongruity produces. She does not resolve the conflict between the document's universal ideals and the material reality of slavery. For her, their relation will never be natural or harmonious, despite their ongoing routinization.

While in South Carolina, Cora reflects upon her memory of Michael and the significance of his recitation. She imagines Michael's voice sounding "like an angry phantom. She didn't understand the words, most of them at any rate, but *created equal* was not lost on her. The white men who wrote it didn't understand it either, if *all men* did not truly mean all men" (117). If the words "created equal" are void of their true meaning, as Cora believes, then the document and its attending narratives merely perpetuate the dispossessions it routinizes. As the routinization continues, dispossession - whether of land, body, spirit, etc... - becomes a feature of the future as well as the present.

In Tennessee, when Cora is recounting her misfortunes, we encounter a telling description of two different texts. One is a "crowded" ledger produced by the slave trade, and the other is an inventory Cora keeps for herself. The contrast between the two illustrates the manner by which routinization operates on the material and discursive planes to objectify black bodies as the objects of national and economic progress. As Cora reflects upon the first text, the "crowded...ledger of slavery," she imagines,

The names gathered first on the African coast in tens of thousands of manifests.

That human cargo. The names of the dead were as important as the names of the living, as every loss from disease and suicide - and the other mishaps labeled as such for accounting purposes - needed to be justified to employers. At the auction block they

tallied the souls purchased at each auction, and on the plantations the overseers preserved the names of workers in rows of tight cursive. Every name was an asset, breathing capital, profit made flesh. (215)

Whitehead's language mingles mentions of black suffering and death with the abstract register of capital. The phrase "human cargo" captures the manner in which slaves were routinely objectified in order to make their dispossession more digestible. Although grammatically speaking, "human" modifies "cargo," the effect is just the opposite, with "cargo" modifying the "human." The phrase creates a permanent abstraction in the form of a living commodity. The term's utterance functions like a speech act, whereby its repetition generates its facticity. Moreover, the term's objectifying effect is a part of an organized and intricate routine spanning the globe. The recording of every "asset," whether alive or dead, whether on the African coast or the auction block, powers the routinization of dispossession particular to the Atlantic slave trade, because it reinforces that dispossession as a normal, naturalized, and profitable occurrence.

The second text Cora contemplates is an inventory she keeps on her own. In contrast to the slave ledger and the Declaration of Independence, the inventory is designed to counter the routinization of dispossession. "The peculiar institution made Cora into a maker of lists as well. In her inventory of loss people were not reduced to sums but multiplied by their kindnesses. People she had loved, people who had helped her. The Hob women, Lovey, Martin and Ethel, Fletcher. The ones who had disappeared: Caesar and Sam and Lumbly" (215). Although she has her place on the ledger of slavery, Cora is an authorial subject, capable of contesting the ideological grounds of her enslavement. The description of her inventory is absent of capital's abstract language, and it replaces the detached portrayal of black suffering and death with a

personal memorialization. By authoring this inventory and contesting the routinized objectification of the ledger of slavery and the Declaration, Cora engages in a powerful act of flight. She identifies herself as more than “human cargo,” thereby occupying a liminal space between slavery and freedom. Within this liminal space, she generates the freedom to write her own history and maintains a degree of separation between her being and the categories of “cargo” and “asset.”

Cora’s flight creates the potential for freedom, because it opens up the future as a dynamic site of possibility. Flight - whether metaphysical, cognitive, physical, or discursive - can be understood as the act of straying, of engaging in a deviant movement away from proper courses of action, ways of life, or futures. Deviant movements of flight, in challenging dominant norms, laws, and modes of being, generate the potential for different futures to emerge. Cora’s resistance allows her to continue her struggle in the future; it allows her to endure and preserve a futurity of freedom. Her flight’s trajectory, and its capacity to generate a futurity of freedom, challenges and exceeds the limits placed upon her by a racial system whose integrity depends upon routinizing dispossession in the name of democracy and progress.

III. Conclusion

Cora escapes Ridgeway in Tennessee and travels the underground railroad to Indiana, where she joins an agricultural black community called Valentine Farm. It is here where she comes closest to the freedom and happiness she desires. She falls in love and finds herself imagining a future life free from the specter of her enslavement. The farm is equipped with a library, where she spends much of her time. The library is filled with books about “African empires and the miracles of the Egyptian slaves who had erected pyramids.” The library bears

the touch of that proud heritage. We are told “The farm’s carpenters were true artisans – they had to keep all those books from jumping off the shelves, so many wonders did they contain” (273-274). At Valentine Farm, she finds a place of belonging, a space united by a proud history as well as a shared commitment to labor and the purpose it provides. At Valentine Farm, she discovers a new form of freedom, distinct from the conception she dreamed about in Georgia. “In her Georgia misery she had pictured freedom, and it had not looked like this. Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare” (272). Valentine is a vision of a community working to realize a better world, an eye in the storm of American racism. It is a liminal haven, but it is not a utopia beyond the reach of the violence outside its borders. Cora is aware of this; she has not forgotten the lessons her enslavement and journey have taught her about the lack of justice in the world. One night while lying in bed with Royal, she relays to him the whole of her experience and suffering. At one point, crying, she apologizes, and he told her that “she was due an apology for all her hurts...He told her that every one of her enemies, all the masters and overseers of her suffering, would be punished, if not in this world then the next, for justice may be slow and invisible, but it always renders its true verdict in the end” (280). Cora’s experience does not allow her to believe in Royal’s vision of divine justice, “but it was nice to hear him say it” (280).

Just as she is getting comfortable with her new life, a posse of white supremacists, including a disheveled Ridgeway, attack the farm. They shoot and kill many members of the community, including Cora’s lover, Royal, and burn the Valentine Farm to the ground. At the end of the Valentine section, Whitehead once again links the display of racist violence to the whole of American history, rupturing the linear stability Valentine had once signified and provided. He describes a young girl named Amanda, who “shook on her knees, her family

absent. Desolate in the dirt” (288). The imagery that follows thematizes the destruction of Cora’s communal dream of freedom as well as the profound and painful sense of loss it incurs:

Her [Amanda’s] bouquet had shed its petals. She gripped the naked stems, the iron wires the blacksmith had drawn out on the anvil last week, just for her. The wires cut her palms, she gripped them so tight. More blood in the dirt. As an old woman she would read about the Great War in Europe and recall this night. She lived on Long Island then, after roaming all over the country...She’d spent time in Louisiana and Virginia, where her father opened colored institutions of learning, and California. A spell in Oklahoma, where the Valentines resettled...The conflict in Europe was terrible and violent...but she took exception to the name. The Great War had always been between the white and the black. It always would be.

The passage’s dissonant fusion of the beautiful with the terrible connects the idealism of Valentine Farm to the violent history that would come, but its representation of the war that “always would be” also recognizes black suffering as the fertile ground for a community of struggle. If this passage communicates Whitehead’s belief that America’s racial war has never ended – and perhaps never will – then it also maintains the vision of freedom Cora experienced on Valentine, albeit in a tempered form. Black dreams of utopia may never materialize or endure in America, but the struggle on its behalf will endure, as will the community who struggles. Additionally, the passage above breaks from Cora’s perspective; her control and place at the center of her narrative has been fractured and subsumed by the “Great War...between the white and the black.” However, when the passage performs the dissolution of Cora’s individual narrative, it functions as a generative act of destruction. Cora’s individual narrative is replaced by the theme of struggle, and a vision of the community that would endure.

During the slaughter at Valentine, Ridgeway captures Cora once again, and her dreams of a life beyond the reach of racial violence never resurface. Likewise, the tragedy of Valentine Farm undercuts any hope the reader might have in a happy ending with a “miraculous terminus.” As the structural analysis at the beginning of the chapter indicates, this is not a slave narrative where struggle transports the enslaved subject beyond the field of oppression. Struggle does not purchase that kind of freedom; it is a productive mode of being that generates the potential for agency and freedom *within* dominant power relations. In *Underground*, Cora’s struggle is a constant, liminal process; it may not procure her absolute freedom from racial instrumentalities or the trauma of her enslaved experience, but it does allow her to survive and find a community to which she belongs.

When Ridgeway captures Cora in Indiana, he forces her to lead him to the secret entrance to the Underground Railroad located nearby. On the way, he boasts that he will return her to Georgia and make good on his promise to capture and return the daughter of the only slave who ever escaped him. “You’re going home, Cora,” he says. “At last. Once I get a look-see at the famous underground railroad” (300). Cora directs him to a “mournful old house” where there is a cellar door leading underground. “Most people,” he says, “think it’s a figure of speech...The underground. I always knew better. The secret beneath us, the entire time. We’ll uncover them all after tonight. Every line, every one” (301). Grabbing hold of the ladder, Cora begins her way down with Ridgeway following just above her, and she decides to act. “She waited until the slave catcher was on the third step. She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron. The candle dropped. He attempted to keep his footing with her weight on him...but she held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness” (302). We are told that Ridgeway “took the brunt” of the fall. When Cora gets to her feet, she sees him lying on the

ground, bleeding from a gash in the head and hobbled by a gruesomely broken leg. Cora spies a handcar on some nearby tracks and leaves Ridgeway behind, his final words composed of mutterings about the American Imperative.

Upon reaching the handcar, Cora struggles to pump the lever until the car begins to move. “She pumped and pumped and rolled out of the light. Into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere” (303). This journey on the railroad is significant, because as an authorial subject, Cora is in control of her own journey. *She* moves herself along the track; she may be in darkness, but she is no longer Ridgeway’s captive. Despite being alone and lost, her self-managed movement and physical labor connects her to a community of struggle. Thinking of Royal as she works the car, she remembers he never had the chance to teach her “about the men and women who made the underground railroad.” The description that follows indicates that in discovering the answer for herself, she has discovered her membership within an inclusive, subterranean community of struggle, a marked contrast to the free nation from which she fled:

She never got Royal to tell her about the men and women who made the underground railroad. The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers. Who are you after you finish something this magnificent - in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart. (304).

In this moment, Cora identifies with “all those other souls” whose struggle made her flight possible. The struggle to construct the underground, the struggle involved in caring and dying for runaways, produce “the miracle beneath.” Additionally, the passage represents movement itself as a generative form of struggle. The act of construction, excavation, deliverance, taking “runaways into their homes,” carrying “them north - each of these acts of struggle entails a different form of flight, and the communal practice of flight forms the foundation of a new conception of freedom. The “up-top world” from which Cora fled - a space of violence, “bondage, and unfreedom,” pales in comparison to the “miracle” of the “sphere of positive activity and human freedom” coursing “beneath.” The “human freedom” Cora finds is a community struggling together across time and space; This is the miracle Cora finds as she struggles and moves in the dark.

The fact that such a miracle exists is, the text reads, a “secret triumph you keep in your heart.” The use of the second person here - “*your* heart” - addresses the reader, asking them to identify with the miracle Cora experiences. There is room for debate as to whether *Underground’s* depictions of brutal violence encourage an identification, as Hartman notes, of “the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible” a fetishization of black suffering that exacerbates “the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle” (4). However, in this moment, it seems clear that Whitehead is asking the reader to identify with the “secret triumph” of black struggle and its historical ability to retain a sense of autonomy in the shadow of the violent architecture definitive of the “up-top world.” The act of identification involves finding an affective connection to someone else’s feelings, or their interior motivations. Here, the reader is asked to identify with the “secret triumph,” the interior experience of black struggle, the contested, mobile, and dynamic process of resistance coursing

beneath national narratives and a “free” world governed by race. Essentially, the reader is being asked to identify with a new nation and the struggle essential to its creation and maintenance; a new nation is exactly what Cora identifies as she finds her way to the tunnel’s end.

Exhausted from working the handcar, Cora falls asleep, uncertain as to whether the tunnel has an opening or “a dead end...The last bitter joke” (304). Upon waking, she decides to walk the rest of the way:

Limping, tripping over crossties. Cora ran her hand along the wall of the tunnel, the ridges and pockets. Her fingers danced over valleys, rivers, the peaks of mountains, the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old...She feared she’d gotten turned around in her sleep. Was she going deeper or back from where she came? She trusted the slave’s choice to guide her - anywhere, anywhere but where you are escaping from. It had gotten her this far. She’d find the terminus or die on the tracks. (304)

The “slave’s choice” is flight. It is the mode of struggle that “had gotten her this far,” and it is the mode of struggle that has connected her to “a new nation hidden beneath the old.” The physical dimension of her flight is even depicted as a struggle. Cora moves forward “limping, tripping over crossties” (304). “She’d find the terminus,” we are told, “or die on the tracks” (304). Eventually, Cora reaches the tunnel’s “terminus,” but it is not the “miraculous terminus” she hoped for upon first boarding the underground railroad in Georgia. As a slave, she envisioned the North and the freedom it represented as a safe haven from the reach of slavery. Her journey has taught her that no such “miraculous terminus” exists in America; struggle is a fact of her life, and it has ruptured not only her connection to the plantation and her status as a slave, but also to the narrative that locates the “miraculous terminus” in the free North. However, she has found a terminus, albeit in a form distinct from the freedom definitive of the “up-top

world.” She has found a community and a heritage of struggle, a new nation animated by the “miracle beneath,” by the enduring practice of flight and the ruptures it makes possible.

Cora emerges from the tunnel and finds herself in unfamiliar territory. “She didn’t know what Michigan or Illinois or Canada looked like. Perhaps she wasn’t in America anymore but had pushed beyond it” (305). Just as its about to turn dark, she finds a trail. Three wagons pass her, but she only accepts a ride from the final one. The driver is an “older negro man...thickset and grilled, dressed in a heavy rancher’s coat that had seen its share of labor. His eyes were kind, she decided. Familiar though she couldn’t place it” (306). Just as she identifies with “all the other souls” whose labor made her flight possible, so too does she identify with the black driver, whose race and dress identifies him as someone who had seen his “share of labor.” They ride into the veritable sunset, heading West to St. Louis. Yet, the narrative ends with a note of uncertainty, frustrating the closure that the scene’s optics seem to promise. Cora finds herself thinking about the driver, Ollie. “She wondered where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him” (306). This is the final sentence in the novel. Her curiosity, expressed in that sentence, inhibits an unctontested resolution to her narrative. Her flight continues to the West, to the contested space of the American frontier, itself a host to America’s imperial ambitions. She has progressed and found a community, but her personal progress, and that of her community, still runs underneath the normative narrative of American history and does still.

Underground is a novel of struggle that performs the rupture of a violent national narrative essential to the ongoing dispossession of black life. When Cora experiences various temporalities of American anti-blackness and white supremacy in her present, *The Underground Railroad* questions what it means to live within a free nation hostile to the past, present, and

future narratives of black life. This is what it means to live in what Christina Sharpe refers to as “the wake.” As the central metaphor of Sharpe’s 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the “wake” encompasses a variety of interconnected meanings particular to black life in the afterlife of slavery: “the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness” (17-18). The “wake” expresses the experience of living in the wake or afterlife (of slavery), a life in which the *after* never comes. As the novel’s final scene suggests, Cora’s movement, her flight, never ends; her struggle is never resolved, despite the community she has found. On the one hand, the wake is that which follows “The overriding engine of US racism” as it “cut[s] through...ambitions and desires” (3). Sharpe also uses the term to signal a “*state of wakefulness; consciousness*” demonstrated by a black consciousness that experiences, recognizes and lives subjection, the point being that a “wake” consciousness does not “*simply or only live in subjection and as the subjected*” (4). “Wake” also signifies an act of witness, “*a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking*” (10). In her journey through time and space, Cora has witnessed the long history of racial oppression in America. The anachronisms Whitehead employs are a part of her experience. Moreover, the book itself bears witness to this history and organizes it in opposition to a national narrative that would prefer to keep it underground.

Sharpe’s project theorizes black consciousness in relation to the wake, and her theory addresses how black people have “experienced, recognized, and lived subjection” after slavery as well as how “we did not *simply or only live in subjection and as the subjected*” (4).⁶⁴ She writes, “And while the wake produces Black death and trauma - ‘violence...precedes and exceeds Blacks’ (Wilderson 2010, 76) - we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce

in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake” (11). The wake’s institutional, affective, and historical architectures - all extensions of a racial logic and calculus that have exceeded slavery - necessitate and normalize black life’s exposure to violence and death. Nevertheless, Sharpe argues, black people struggle within and against the wake’s violent architecture to survive (and more). That struggle continues, and Whitehead’s novel suggests that the community formed in the wake of that struggle is America’s true miraculous terminus.

I suggest that *The Underground Railroad* is a book of “the wake,” because it bears witness to the predictability of black death throughout American history as well as to generative potential of black flight and endurance. Although *Underground*’s plot takes place in antebellum America, Cora’s journey transports her through different temporalities of American history, thereby broadening the scope of Cora’s struggle against slavery to encompass the ongoing struggle against racial oppression. Published in 2015 in the final years of the Obama presidency, Whitehead’s narrative exhibits his concern with the assumption of America’s post-racial status. The novel’s ambivalent ending - with Cora traveling West but not escaping America - seems to endorse the idea that the struggle will never end, because the nation’s commitment to the mythology of progress is too deeply ingrained. The frontier does not represent an outside to America’s oppressive instrumentalities of power; it is simply the next field of action. As a novel positioned squarely against the dominant narrative of national progress, *Underground* is appropriate for a historical moment where the trumpeting of democratic values and national narratives of progress has only intensified in response to protests about racial injustice and the need for a more honest national history.

On July 30, 2020, little more than a month after Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, the *New York Times* published “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of our Nation,” a posthumous editorial written by the late Senator and civil rights activist John Lewis during the final days of his life. The essay’s title and argument imagines unified, non-violent action as vital to the redemption of the nation’s “Soul,” which he refers to as a “Beloved Community” powered by “the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love.” When I read Lewis’s definition, I cannot help but think of the community Cora discovers underground. As with Cora’s struggle, mobile dimensions of action and struggle are central to the conception of freedom animating Lewis’s vision of an America-in-progress. Importantly, however, Lewis’s hopeful rhetoric does not sacrifice an understanding of the past in order to paint an unvarnished dream of a better future. Rather, his imagined future is grounded by a desire to act and reveal the experience of racial oppression common to black life in America.

Lewis also distinguishes actions from mere words. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King Jr’s thoughts on the “philosophy and discipline of nonviolence,” Lewis writes: “He said it is not enough to *say* it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must *do* something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.”

Lewis frames the struggle for the nation’s “Soul” as a conflict between two traditions: non-violent action on behalf of “human dignity” and the “Unchecked, unrestrained violence and government-sanctioned terror.” Whereas the former conceptualizes freedom as the “movement” of the black process of struggle, the latter mobilizes to arrest that movement and restrain its

disruptive power. As an example, we can consider the gruesome symbolism of Michael Brown's corpse lying on the pavement in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown was killed on August 9, 2014 by Officer Darren Wilson, "who had encountered Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson while responding to a call about two young men, matching their description, who had just been involved in the robbery of a nearby liquor store" (Lowry 22). The exact details of the struggle between Brown and Wilson are contested and murky, but the end result was all too familiar. Wesley Lowry, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, describes the spectacle of Brown's body in his book *They Can't Kill Us All*. "Mike Brown's body," he writes, "remained on the hot August ground for four and a half hours...For some, first in Ferguson and later around the nation, the spectacle of Brown's body cooling on the asphalt conjured images of the historic horrors of lynchings - the black body of a man robbed of his rights to due process and placed on display as a warning to other black residents" (25). Brown's body rests uneasily at the core of the struggle against racial liberalism and its institutionalized suppression. However, Brown's assigned resting place on the Ferguson pavement was part of an institutionalized process designed to maintain state control over the narrative of black death. Although the police later admitted making a mistake in leaving Brown's body on display for such an extended period of time, the state's display of Brown's corpse reduces the public's understanding of Brown as a living human being, because it fixes Brown's identity to a specific, criminalized moment. Whatever sympathy Brown's humanity might generate is countered by the criminalization of his body, a narrative many in the media quickly reproduced. On the other hand, the protests in Ferguson and across the United States used Brown's death and body as catalysts for action and *movement* against the state which had killed him and the narratives which criminalized him. They countered state efforts to render Brown's death as a static event, as an expected consequence of attacking a police officer. Instead, by organizing around the spectacle

of Brown's death - and the death of others - the protest movement struggled to realize the dynamic potential of Brown's life and death, to witness his tragedy in the interest of continuing the struggle for civil rights and equal standing.

In Lewis' framework, the struggle against oppression - a struggle embedded within African American consciousness and culture - is commensurate with the struggle for democracy itself. Continuing the black struggle for an imagined future, in other words, is at the very core of the country's commitment to a free system of government. This struggle and the world it hopes to generate are both ongoing processes; they have never been realized or completed, and the power relations they resist remain intact, albeit in different forms than in the past. Within the periphery of Floyd's murder, Lewis' words function as a discursive act of flight from racial oppression; they struggle to craft and imagine a futurity of black freedom. This dissertation does not offer a comprehensive catalogue of modes of black struggle. However, it does identify struggle as a key component of the fugitive modes being particular to the black experience in America. In the context of racialized liberalism, in antebellum America and now, black modes of struggle generate liminal spaces that make possible future acts of resistance and the formation of a community whose agency is rooted in struggle.

Throughout American history, the fugitive modes of being that black struggle generates have made possible the "miracle beneath," a dynamic form of life resistant to the violent instrumentalities of race. This dissertation has discussed four different modes of black struggle: refusal, militancy, marronage, and rupture. Although my analysis is not all-encompassing, it does highlight how past modes of struggle continue to contest and shape the history follows. In chapter one, I explored how Henry Highland Garnet instructed slaves to refuse to labor for their masters, a feasible tactic that frustrated the logic of white supremacy and its denial of the black capacity for

self-management. In the fourth chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Dubois would nominate the labor strike as a viable form of black resistance at a time when the value of the black body was still determined by their labor. Analogues to Garnet's "refusal" can be found throughout American history, before and after his 1842 address.⁶⁵ The same holds true for Frederick Douglass's gradual acceptance of the need for militant rhetoric and action. In 1964, Malcolm X would echo Franz Fanon and call for "freedom by any means necessary... We declare our right to be on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, on this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary." The third chapter explores marronage as a liminal form of freedom particular to the African diaspora. Technically speaking, maroon communities in America no longer exist given that they organized in liminal geographies outside the plantation and free society. However, the practice of flight they developed continues to generate and maintain liminal communities and expressions of black culture that are disruptive of normative institutions, ideals, and practices. Flight's influence is particularly evident in black culture and music, where genres like the blues, jazz, and rap move within and outside of established genre norms, resisting them even as they rupture and remake them in order to give voice to black experience. As Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* illustrates, black history still struggles to assert itself in relation to the dominant national mythology, but it is that struggle that has generated and continues to maintain a sense of community and belonging that moves beneath, through, and against the racialized architecture of America. The debate about how American history should be told and narrated is particularly evident in the pseudo-debate about critical race theory and its place in K-12 curriculum. The modes of struggle and freedom discussed in this dissertation are not meant to be comprehensive, and the connections I make between past and present modes of black struggle are

broad and deserving of more study and critical inquiry. Nonetheless, the interplay between the intensification of white supremacy in antebellum America and the four interconnected modes of black struggle discussed in this project reveal black freedom to be a contested but generative state of individual and communal struggle that endures. In its capacity to resist racialized techniques of control and generate the potential for future acts of resistance and future political change, black struggle maintains a fugitive mode of being – a form of thinking, feeling, acting, *being* - elusive to the norms and techniques of white supremacy.

Notes

⁵¹Dubey explains out how the novel's structure exhibits and/or bears the influence of Ridgeway's imperative. "What stands out most sharply," he writes, "in the novel's structuring design is the logic of historical sameness conjoining the distinct sites - the 'unstoppable racial logic' of the American Imperative, which Ridgeway explains to Cora as the logic of owning property, whether 'slave or continent' (82). This imperative renders all dissimilarities among sites superficial," in large part because it assumes a universal and natural essence.

⁵²The pairing of "conquer" and "progress" gestures towards how liberty, internalized as an essential and natural value, works hand-in-hand with imperial ambitions to conquer and control. The following quote from the journalist Charles Dana's *The Garden of the World; Or, the Great West* epitomizes this logic. He writes:

The *Land of Promise*, and the *Canaan* of our time, is the region which, commencing on the slope of the Alleghenies, broadens grandly over the vast prairies and mighty rivers, over queenly lakes and lofty mountains, until the ebb and flow of the Pacific tide kisses the golden shores of the El Dorado...O, the soul kindles at the thought of what a magnificent empire the West is but the germ, which, blessed with liberty and guaranteeing equal rights to all, shall go on conquering and to conquer, until the whole earth shall resound with its fame and glory. (qtd. Sundquist 31)

⁵³ Presented alongside the reference to the original Thanksgiving feast, Ridgeway's description of the disembarking immigrants sounds a dissonant echo of Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus." Lazarus penned the poem in 1883, and in 1903 it was emblazoned on a bronze plaque and placed within the Statue of Liberty. Since that time, it has been incorporated into the national

narrative of progress, where it invokes America's benevolent and inclusive spirit. The discontinuous relation between Ridgeway's antebellum setting and the poem's origins in the late 19th / early 20th century introduces a friction between the poem's rhetoric and the historical erasure that rhetoric performs. By linking the poem (albeit implicitly) to the racism Ridgeway exemplifies, Whitehead defamiliarizes the poem's inclusive and patriotic spirit, thereby disturbing the assumed objectivity of the national narrative as well as the assumed universality of the liberal values it signifies.

⁵⁴ The abstract language cloaks the violence essential to the possession of land and flesh within the capitalist system. By contrast, Ridgeway sees himself as distinct from manifest destiny's violent abstractions, believing that getting his hands dirty, so to speak, validates his identity as a man. "If you weren't a little dirty at the end of the day," he believed, "you weren't much of a man" (74). Besides connoting Ridgeway's rugged individualism, the quote demonstrates his racial logic. For Ridgeway, *white* labor signifies the virtue of self-determined masculinity, whereas *black* labor bears the mark of racial inferiority.

⁵⁵ As in my previous chapter, the use of "flight" references Neil Roberts definition, as featured in *Freedom as Marronage* (2015). "Flight...", he writes, "is directional movement in the domain of physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical" (9-10).

⁵⁶ By veiling racial control under the guise of self-determination, the system generates what Saidiya Hartman terms the "burdened individuality of freedom" characteristic of black experience in post-emancipation America. Hartman invokes the term in her exploration of the "contending articulations of freedom and the forms of subjection they beget" (116). In her description of the freedom former slaves enjoyed after emancipation, Hartman argues,

The nascent individualism of the freedom designates a precarious autonomy since exploitation, domination, and subjection inhabit the vehicle of rights. The divisive and individuating power of discipline, operating in conjunction with the sequestering and segregating control of black bodies as a species body, permitted under the guise of social rights and facilitated by the regulatory power of the state, resulted in the paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy and the preservation of a racial order on which the white republic was founded. Lest ‘the white republic’ seem like an inflated or unwarranted rhetorical flourish, we must remember that the transformation of the national government and the citizenship wrought by the Reconstruction Amendments were commonly lamented as representing the loss of the ‘white man’s government. (117)

⁵⁷ For example, at the opening of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writes, “Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage.”

⁵⁸ Eric Foner writes that estimates about the number of slaves who escaped plantations are, in reality, “guesses.” He estimates that “somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 [slaves escaped] per year between 1830 and 1860” (4). These numbers were not enough “to affect the growth of the slave population (which approached 4 million in 1860) but sufficient to become a cause of alarm in the slave states and of contention between North and South, not to mention significant monetary loss for affected slaveholders” (4). It was in this context that stories about the underground railroad spread. Foner writes that in New York, from 1835-1860, “between 3,000

and 4,000 fugitive slaves may have received assistance while passing through the city.”

However, he qualifies these estimates, writing that the numbers are “based largely on public claims” often invoked by the Vigilance Committee when fundraising - meaning, the numbers “may be exaggerated” (10).

⁵⁹ To convey the present scope and effect of the underground railroad’s mythology, Kathryn Schultz provides a detailed record of recent efforts to memorialize the railroad. For example, after citing the recent publication of histories about the underground railroad by writers such as David Blight, Fergus Bordewich, and Eric Foner, Schultz turns her attention to the recent spark of interest in Harriet Tubman. “Between 1869 and 2002,” she writes,

there were two adult biographies of Harriet Tubman, the Railroad’s most famous ‘conductor’; more than four times as many have been published since then, together with a growing number of books about her for children and young adults - five in the nineteen-seventies, six in the nineteen eighties, twenty-one in the nineteen nineties, and more than thirty since the turn of this century. An HBO biopic about Tubman is in development, and earlier this year (2016) the U.S. Treasury announced that, beginning in the next decade, she will appear on the twenty-dollar bill.

Tubman’s accelerating memorialization runs parallel to similar efforts by “Other public and private entities,” including the National Park Service, the 2004 dedication of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park in Cambridge, Maryland. Schultz concisely sums up the import of the railroad’s expanding memorialization by pointing out what the country does *not* memorialize, “the millions of people whom we, as a nation, kept in bondage.” Stories about the railroad, besides connecting

us to “the best parts of ourselves” and helping us “articulate our finest vision of the nation,” also “assuage our conscience, distract us from tragedy with thrilling adventures, give us a comparatively comfortable place to rest in a profoundly uncomfortable past.”

⁶⁰ The slave narrative genre has typically encourages identification in order to generate sympathy for the humanity of slaves. As a Boston editor wrote in 1840, “Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry; but narratives of slaves go right to the heart of men” (qtd. Yogita 2).

⁶¹ In a 2011 interview with Alexis Madrigal, Whitehead describes his entry into the horror genre in *Zone One* (2011) that indicates his interest in expanding normative boundaries of established literary genres. He says, “You take what you want from a genre, deform it, steal from it, pay homage, and at the same time, if you’re doing it right, you are extending the possibilities of that genre, reinvigorating it.”

⁶² One of the railroad’s attendants describes Tennessee as follows. “Every state is different, Lumbly said. If Tennessee had a temperament, it took after the dark personality of the world, with a taste for arbitrary punishment. No one was spared, regardless of the shape of their dreams or the color of their skin” (216).

⁶³ It is here that Cora learns of Caesar’s fate. Having to flee South Carolina due to Ridgeway’s appearance in town, Caesar and Cora were separated, and he disappears from the narrative. Until the dinner with Ridgeway, Caesar’s fate was unknown to Cora and the reader, but Ridgeway proudly describes his role in Caesar’s death. Upon being captured, Caesar was placed in jail. However, he was suspected for murdering a white boy, and a white mob stormed the jail and “ripped its [Caesar’s] body to pieces. The decent people of South Carolina with their schoolhouses and Friday credit” (219).

⁶⁴ Throughout her first chapter, Sharpe provides italicized definitions of different instantiations of the wake, which I've provided below in order to clarify how Sharpe conceptualizes "the everyday [reality] of Black immanent and imminent death...the ways we [black people] resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially" (13).

"Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow" (3).

"Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness" (4).

"Wake; in the line of recoil of (a gun)" (8).

"Wake: a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking" (10).

"Wake: grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this" (11).

⁶⁵ As an example, we can consider Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest as an act of refusal. He refused to behave according to norms dictating that his actions should not exceed the field of his labor. Around the same time, a Fox commentator would tell LeBron James, to "shut up and dribble." The logic is the same, and the white outrage that followed Kaepernick's protest was predictable; his peaceful protest was construed as an assault on the nation and its democratic principles.

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