

Ground Plans:

Conceptualizing Ecology in the Antebellum United States

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions,” writes Thoreau: “Let us spend our lives in conceiving then.” This dissertation depicts how Thoreau’s fellow antebellum antislavery writers discerned the power of concepts to shape “the universe.” Wishing for a new universe, one free of slavery, they spent their lives crafting new concepts. “Ground Plans” argues that antebellum antislavery writers confiscated the concept of nature from proslavery forces and fundamentally redefined it. Advocates of slavery routinely rationalized slave society by referencing a particular conception of nature—as static, transhistorical, and hierarchical—claiming that slavery simply mirrored the natural, permanent racial order. I demonstrate that to combat slavery’s claim to naturalness, antislavery writers reconceptualized nature as composed of dynamic species and races, evolving in relation to one another. In four chapters on David Walker, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, and Gerrit Smith, I show that this theory of nature enabled them to argue for the complete transformation of society to bring it into line with what they characterized as nature’s true principles. Thus I restore the concept of nature as a crucial intellectual battleground for abolitionism. Moreover, I show these politically-charged antebellum debates over nature’s meaning to be crucial to the story of natural science, showing that abolitionists speculated on the natural principles that would eventually constitute the founding insights of ecology.

When ecologists such as Frederic Clements and Henry Cowles set out to define their emergent discipline at the end of nineteenth century, they distinguished it from antebellum natural science on the basis that, rather than simply observe natural phenomena, ecology would peer into nature's underlying principles. Early ecologists thus framed ecology as a methodology as much as a physical science. My dissertation returns to their capacious, foundational definition, using "ecology" to designate an approach to nature, as well as a set of ideas about it. Using their own definition, however, I show that the hard break early ecologists made between antebellum ideas about nature and ecological science cannot be maintained. The debates over slavery spurred antislavery writers to peer into nature's principles—to approach nature as an ecologist would. Thus while I excavate ecological content *avant la lettre*, I also open a broad range of antebellum texts to ecology's historiography, revealing the political saturation of nature's conceptual history, and showing that the authors I study built their image of a racially just society upon an ecological conception of nature.

For my parents, Ed and Betsy Feeley

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Introduction

The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives conceiving then.

– Thoreau, *Walden*

Obviously, every concept has a history.

– Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*

In 1728, William Byrd and a team of surveyors set out to mark the border between colonial Virginia and North Carolina, an excursion Byrd recounts in his *History of the Dividing Line*. According to Byrd, the one great problem with this task was that it required the team to traverse the Great Dismal Swamp, a notoriously treacherous wetland extending two thousand acres from Norfolk, Virginia, to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Byrd describes the Great Dismal Swamp as a noxious wasteland, where dangerous wildlife—snakes, wolves, bears, even ferocious wild cattle—threaten human life, and where submerged cedar and a thick, dense underbrush make traversal nearly impossible. At its deepest interior, Byrd writes, “not even a turkey buzzard”—not even a low, scavenging animal—“would venture to fly over it,” so unsuited was the swamp to sustain animal life (22). Indeed, when Byrd’s men discover that their provisions have become nearly exhausted, they can find

nothing to eat in the “malignant” and “nasty” swamp and decide they must exit into Virginia to resupply before completing the final miles of their trek (24). Byrd’s *History* confirms the swamp’s reputedly dismal, dreadful nature, creating an image of the wetland as absolutely antithetical to life.

The popular accounts of the Great Dismal Swamp that proliferated in the century after Byrd’s *History* reinforced this image of the swamp as a menacing environment whose organic density made it almost impenetrable. In 1853, an anonymous writer for the *New York Daily Times* described the swamp as “scarcely passable in many parts, owing not only to the softness of the sponge, but to the obstruction caused by innumerable shrubs, vines, creepers, and briars which often take entire possession, forming a dense brake or jungle.” Mrs. Butler, writing for *New York Mirror* in 1842, enumerated the swamp’s “endless pools of black water” and the “globular roots” of “huge bulbous plants [whose] dark branches [have become] woven together with a hideous matting of giant creepers.” Both writers portray a confusing mesh of life, where gothic plants “take entire possession” and where branches weave themselves into a frightful net, and they both conjure the paradox that despite all this creeping life, “nothing lived or moved throughout the loathsome solitude.” Even the “sunbeams themselves [sicken] and grow pale as they glide like ghosts through these watery woods” (Butler 266). The multiple failed efforts—most famously by George Washington’s company the Adventurers to Drain the Great Dismal Swamp, later known as the Dismal Swamp Land Company—to develop the swamp

into farmland only compounded these writers' sense of its environment as simultaneously prolific and barren, a landscape whose untapped soils might stanch the Tidewater's agricultural recession but whose unnavigability put these soils (and the profits to be reaped from them) effectively out of reach.

As a result of these cultural representations and the failed attempts at development, the swamp became what the historical archaeologist Daniel Sayers calls a "node of remoteness." Located at the center of Old South plantation country, the Great Dismal Swamp nonetheless remained unassimilated into the surrounding cultivated landscape, coming to be seen as "economically useless from the colonialist perspective" and as a frightful blight from the perspective of elite writers (68). However, the unusual combination of geographic centrality with cultural remoteness rendered the swamp anything but useless from another perspective: the perspective of enslaved people living on some of the nation's oldest plantations, in its thriving commercial port towns of Norfolk, Hampton, Edenton, and Elizabeth City, and in the nearby cities of Richmond and Wilmington. As the literary critic Monique Allewaert has shown, the swamp's perceived and real impassability, its dense brakes and hideous mattings and weavings, and its capacity to rebuff even the most powerful developers made the swamp seem to enslaved people not a space of danger but a space of relative safety—indeed, a space of emancipation.

By the antebellum period, an untold number of legally unfree African American men and women had formed semi-permanent communities in the Great Dismal

Swamp. Sayers's archaeological investigations have uncovered a range of artifacts left by these self-emancipated people. These artifacts document transient communities living on the swamp's periphery, poaching resources from adjacent plantations, and permanent communities living at its interior, where supposedly "not even a turkey buzzard would venture." Effectively removed from the plantation economy, these interior communities created subsistence economies by cultivating gardens on the swamp's dry plateaus, hunting its abundant game—"bear, deer, otter, raccoons, possums, pheasants, partridges, and wild ducks," as listed by the journalist David H. Strother in his 1856 *Harper's* article "The Dismal Swamp"—and repurposing ceramics deposited by native people, the swamp's previous inhabitants (448). "Children were born, bred, lived and died" in these interior settlements, wrote one chronicler, who was astonished to learn from his "negro guide" that "there are people in the swamps [who are] the children of fugitives and fugitives themselves *all their lives*" ("The South," original emphasis). Reports of these settlements in newspapers and antislavery publications, such as Mrs. Pearson's "Plantation Pictures," published in an 1864 issue of the *Liberator*, which told the tale of an elaborate city of fugitives living in the Great Dismal Swamp, built an image of the swamp that was distinctly different from the one crafted by Byrd and other elite writers. Through these fugitives' experiences and representations, the swamp acquired meaning as a space of shelter for African American people escaping to the free states or searching for fellow self-emancipated people with whom they might remain for "all their lives."

How and why did the same physical environment come to appear as lifeless and malignant to Byrd but life-sustaining and liberatory to enslaved people? Whereas Byrd “look[s] with some appetite upon a dog that had been the faithful companion of their travels” before looking to the swamp’s abundant food sources, self-emancipated people, alternatively, perceived the swamp as an environment potentially full of food, one whose brakes and weavings signified protection, not danger (24). In his 1837 “Observations Made During an Excursion to the Dismal Swamp,” the Virginian Edmund Ruffin doubted there was a “motive [powerful enough] to have induced any man to penetrate a mile into the swamp before paths were cut and made solid enough, for the purpose of getting the timber” (513). This dissertation claims that the vastly different meanings that became attached to the Great Dismal Swamp during the antebellum period reveal not only a difference in motivation—for contrary to Ruffin’s shortsighted assertion, surely enslaved people had a powerful motive for penetrating into the swamp—but a decisive difference in how these groups conceptualized nature.

It is the fact of this epistemological difference, as well as the content of these different epistemologies, that this dissertation brings into focus. I call these epistemologies “ground plans” after Martin Heidegger, who in his 1938 essay “The Age of the World Picture” defines the concept of *Grundriss* as the set of metaphysical premises by which one interprets the world’s physical phenomena. As preconceived and deep-seated principles about the world, ground plans shape and organize appearances, infusing events of the

physical world with meaning. Heidegger's concept of ground plans implies the difficulty of accessing these events apart from the meaning reflexively supplied by a viewer. In shaping perception, then, ground plans silently constitute that which comes to be seen as the world's objective truth. My dissertation depicts dueling ground plans about the natural world, one, dominant through the early modern period, that conceived the organic world as static, transhistorical, and hierarchical, and another, emergent in the nineteenth century, that reconceived nature as dynamic and relational—in a word, evolving.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the emergent ground plan that held that species evolved according to what Darwin called their "conditions of life" had gained dominance (*Origin* 17). In 1866, Darwin's student Ernst Haeckel gave this new episteme a name: ecology. Haeckel argued that Darwin's evolutionary breakthrough inaugurated a new kind of scientific project. Eighteenth-century natural historians such as Linnaeus and Buffon had collected and compiled the world's data, aspiring to complete the picture of the Great Chain of Being by discovering and classifying all the world's species, but according to Haeckel, their static view of the universe stopped them from truly analyzing this data. The evolutionary episteme implied that instead of seeking complete taxonomic knowledge, scientists should try to understand the "total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact." Beginning from a different ground plan than eighteenth-century natural history, ecologists would study

relationships among organisms and their environments, seeking to apprehend the significance of these relationships for individuals and for the biotic community as a whole. As Stephen Forbes wrote in his 1887 essay “Lake as a Microcosm,” ecologists “see the impossibility of studying any form completely, out of relation to the other forms [and] the necessity for taking a comprehensive survey of the whole as a condition to a satisfactory understanding of any part” (77). It was for this reason that in 1913 the ecologist Victor Shelford deemed ecology the science of communities.

This new scientific project sought a different kind of knowledge, but according to the first generation of scientists to identify as ecologists (Forbes, Frederic Clements, and Henry Cowles, among others in the United States), it also employed a different approach to nature, a new methodology. Late nineteenth-century ecologists claimed that eighteenth-century and antebellum natural science merely observed and described natural phenomena. As the science of communities, ecology, alternatively, would peer into nature’s underlying principles. As Eugene Odum summarized in his influential 1953 *Fundamentals of Ecology*, the first generation of ecologists set out to “study the structure and function of nature,” not merely its physical appearances. These scientists thus framed their discipline as an approach to nature as much as a set of ideas about it. They distinguished their science from antebellum natural science on the basis that the ecologist would take a philosophical interest in nature, endeavoring to discern the internal workings and underlying structures that an observation-based and descriptive approach could never capture. Ecology, in other words,

would be a theoretical discipline, aimed at articulating concepts as well as recording scientific data.

The hard break this first generation of ecologists made between their science and antebellum natural science has shaped historical accounts of ecology since. Like the scientists they study, historians of ecology such as Frank Egerton and Robert McIntosh describe antebellum natural science as a pre-theoretical discourse preoccupied with observation, collection, and classification. Egerton argues that the key insights of ecology—the dynamic interrelation of species and organic change over a vast timescale—were “impossible” before Darwin. “Most of the early ecological observations were descriptive, [and] this system was not optimal for theoretical developments,” he writes (339). The historians who soften this break between the periods, such as Donald Worster, who writes in *Nature's Economy* that ecology had “indispensible trail-blazers [who were] active before Haeckel,” nonetheless locate ecology’s antecedents in figures who, if they were not members of their period’s scientific community, have since become staples of the nature writing canon: Arcadians like Gilbert White, Romantics like Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley, and Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau (193). In literary studies, early works of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and Glotfelty and Fromm’s landmark *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), for example, likewise question the hard break between periods, discerning ecological ideas in pre-Darwinian texts, but like Worster, they nonetheless focus on literature traditionally categorized as nature writing in order to

support these claims.

“Ground Plans” turns instead to antebellum antislavery literature to trace a set of ideas about nature, as well as an approach to its study, which would come to form the conceptual and methodological basis of ecology in the second half of the century. Returning to ecology’s capacious, foundational definition, I use “ecology” to designate an approach to nature that seeks to produce a theoretical discourse by peering into nature’s underlying principles. This definition—ecology’s own—removes the hard line between antebellum natural science and post-Darwinian ecology because, I argue, antebellum debates over slavery involved a fervent contest over nature’s principles. Advocates of slavery rationalized slave society by referencing the dominant conception of nature—as static, transhistorical, and hierarchical—claiming that slavery simply reflected the natural, permanent racial order. Proslavery forces enlisted this conception of nature to support the idea of essential African inferiority and eternal European dominance, claiming that human social hierarchies mirrored the natural ones. To combat this claim to slavery’s naturalness, antislavery writers confiscated the concept of nature and fundamentally redefined it. Spurred by proslavery’s constant recurrence to nature’s principles, they approached nature as an ecologist would, and they reconceptualized it as composed of dynamic species and races that evolved in relation to one another. Framing their reconceptualization as nature’s truth (and proslavery’s conception as purely ideological), they argued for the complete transformation of society to bring it into line with natural principles of

interrelation, dynamism, and reciprocity.

The abolitionist David Walker's critique of Thomas Jefferson encapsulates the sense that nature was a concept over which the antislavery cause had to struggle. Abolitionists commonly used Jefferson's identity as the author of the Declaration of Independence who also held slaves as emblematic of hypocrisy and metonymic for the nation's failure to fulfill its founding promises. Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, however, does not evoke Jefferson primarily as the author of the Declaration of Independence but, rather, as the author of *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), a work of natural philosophy whose Query XIV claimed that despite the fact that scientists had not yet determined "whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion," it was nonetheless an indisputable fact that "the difference [between the races] is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us" (*Notes* 230). For Walker, it was Jefferson's theory of fixed and eternal racial natures, not his political hypocrisy, that "injured [African Americans] more, and [was] as a great a barrier to our emancipation as any thing that has ever been advanced against us" (*Appeal* 27).

Chapter One elaborates Walker's condemnation and critique of Jefferson's theory that the difference between the races was "fixed in nature" and "real." When Walker composed his *Appeal* in 1829, race theory was being pulled in two disparate directions. On

the one hand, proto-evolutionists such as the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and the British geologist Charles Lyell were arguing that species changed over a vast, geologic timescale. On the other hand, ethnologists such as Samuel George Morton and Louis Agassiz were attempting to prove that race was a somatic, unchanging essence. Walker's *Appeal* brings these two contexts together as a means of demonstrating their basic incompatibility. Within an evolutionary perspective, ethnologists' notion of racial essence cannot obtain, Walker shows. His *Appeal*, as well as the writings of the black minister Hosea Easton and the abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass, whose ethnological texts Chapter One treats at length, articulates a theory of race governed not by biology but by environmental and, more specifically, social conditions. Walker thus returns to and renovates eighteenth-century climate theory by including human social factors within the definition of climate, claiming that the brutality inherent in the environment of slavery was the cause of racial differentiation. Walker's theory that racial difference evolves within and as a result of environmental and social factors undergirds his abolitionism, enabling him to argue that only upon the complete abolition of slavery and all its environments could the effects of what he calls racial "degradation" be undone.

Walker's *Appeal* shows the effect of slavery's brutality to cause racial differentiation and degrade racial character. Chapter Two examines how Harriet Jacobs likewise perceived the entanglement of organic life. Yet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* documents how enslaved men and women used these entanglements to advance their own

liberatory goals. Famously, *Incidents* depicts Jacobs's seven-year concealment in the impossibly small attic space of her grandmother's home next door to Jacobs's owner, Dr. Flint. While literary scholars most often call this space the "garret," Jacobs almost exclusively calls it her "den." Chapter Two traces the networks of care that enable Jacobs to flee from Dr. Flint and to remain concealed in this tiny, supposedly lifeless space. In its portrayal of these networks of care, *Incidents* articulates the idea that human beings depend on each other for their survival; indeed, *Incidents* suggests, they are ontologically, mutually dependent. The Great Dismal Swamp was located only a few miles from Jacobs's "den" in Edenton, North Carolina, and in a similar way to how the swamp's fugitives transformed its environment into a sustainably hospitable one, Jacobs mobilizes an extensive network of allies whose aid enables her to transform the barren attic into a life-giving den.

Jacobs takes great care to trace the networks, relationships, and environments that enable her concealment and emancipation. William Wells Brown, credited as the first African American novelist and the subject of Chapter Three, affirms their importance by examining the consequences of slavery's capacity to shatter these networks. Composed as the height of the domestic slave trade, Brown's 1847 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of William Wells Brown*, portrays the vast distances he traveled as an enslaved and then fugitive person along the trade's primary migratory channel, the Mississippi River. Brown presents these forced and fugitive movements as reconnaissance into slavery's geographic redistributions of people and cultures of violence. Brown synthesizes his empirical studies

into a cartographic panorama in his fictions. Brown was writing these fictions at the same time that European and American naturalists were debating the origin, movement, and diversification of plant and animal species, creating a literature now considered the founding documents of biogeography. A subdiscipline of ecology, biogeography maps species distributions, endeavoring to understand how and why species have moved from their homelands, called “areas of endemism.” Brown turns the founding questions of biogeography—how, why, and to what effect species came into their current spatial ranges—toward the African diaspora. While his fiction maps the expansions, dispersals, and diversifications of slavery, Brown’s narratives of mobility, as well as those of his contemporaries Henry Bibb and Martin Delany, whose narratives Chapter Three also studies, map the relentless counter-diasporic efforts by enslaved people to reconstitute family and community.

In 1846, the wealthy upstate New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith founded an agrarian community for freeborn and emancipated African Americans on Brown’s central point: that intact communities might reverse the centrifugal force of slavery. As Chapter Four argues, for Smith, healthy, intact communities not only reduced the human toll of slavery, but they reduced the toll it was taking on the land. Smith’s settlement in New York’s Adirondack Mountains, called Timbucto, correlated racially egalitarian communities with sustainably healthy and profitable land, positing that the latter was impossible without the former. Like many of the period’s agricultural commentators discussed in Chapter Four, Smith

responded to the well-known deterioration of Southern soils by claiming that it was the South's brutal and unhealthy system of slave labor that had destroyed its soils, its agricultural profits, and ultimately its economic stability. While Southern agricultural reformers such as Edmund Ruffin insisted on keeping questions of labor and questions of land-use separate, Smith saw these domains as fundamentally intertwined, proposing that unnatural labor arrangements could only destroy natural environments, as well as any profits they might yield. Along with Smith's textual archive of letters and land deeds, Chapter Four presents the Timbucto settlement as itself a text to be read, one that links the antebellum antislavery movement to the agricultural reform movement, showing that in combination, these movements created a theory of the best way to arrange land and labor, or ecology and economy.

Each of these four chapters depicts its central author as engaged in acts of speculation about nature, and together, the chapters depict the emergence of a new conception of nature's principles. Thoreau writes that "the universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions," and he beckons his readers to "spend [their] lives conceiving" (141). These chapters portray a group of writers and activists who, like Thoreau, discerned the power of concepts to shape "the universe," or the power of a ground plan to shape perception, interpretation, and politics. Wishing for a new universe, one free of slavery, they spent their lives reconceiving nature. Their intervention into the period's discourse of nature was motivated by their antislavery politics, for they endeavored to

short-circuit proslavery's constant reference to the "fixed" and "real" differences of nature that justified slave society's hierarchical social arrangements. Thus their engagement with natural discourses and their struggle to reconceptualize nature as changeable (Walker), connected (Jacobs and Brown), and reciprocal (Smith) was a crucial intellectual battleground for abolitionism.

Antislavery's engagement with natural discourses also figures crucially into the story of natural science. Deleuze and Guattari write that "obviously, every concept has a history," but the conceptual history of ecology, especially the important conceptual developments it underwent outside scientific communities and outside the genre of nature writing during the antebellum period, has not been obvious (17). "Ground Plans" restores antebellum debates over slavery—which were debates over nature—to the conceptual history of ecology not simply to argue for their inclusion in ecology's historiography or to locate ecology's conceptual origin in them. Rather, "Ground Plans" historicizes ecology to reveal how thoroughly political its antebellum conceptualization was. Antislavery writers understood that ideas of nature shaped the social and political world and saw that an ecological conception of nature could rationalize abolition and racial egalitarianism by revealing that the social subordination of African-descended people reflected no natural principle. A society built on the false natural principles perpetuated by proslavery forces, they claimed, in fact contradicted and infringed upon nature. They thus forged an alliance between ecology and the politics of racial justice, urging the two into line to argue that the

truth of the former necessitated social and economic transformation, and that their alignment would undo the unnatural society slavery had built.

Antislavery's reconceptualization of nature represents an important moment in the political history of ecology. It also represents an important moment in the intellectual history of current political discourses of nature, taking place under the rubric of the environmental humanities and Anthropocene theory. Recent scholarship by ecocritics such as Timothy Morton, philosophers such as Bruno Latour (as well as his fellow Actor Network and Object Oriented Ontology theorists like Jane Bennett and Graham Harman), and literary theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler has endeavored to install a new metaphysical paradigm founded on what these scholars characterize as the true nature of being—the interconnection of all human and nonhuman things. For these scholars, this truth about nature has been occluded by Enlightenment philosophy, particularly by its insistence on sovereignty. Their illumination and restoration of the truth of what Morton calls “the mesh” aims to erode anthropocentrism and Western-centrism, and thus this discourse has taken shape as a metaphysical one with wide-ranging political implications in the domains of animal liberation and environmental politics (Morton, Latour, Bennett) and the politics of peace (Berlant, Butler).

Like these contemporary scholars, antebellum antislavery writers were keenly interested in “the mesh,” or the interdependence of all beings. Harriet Jacobs expresses this idea when she writes that she felt her child to be a “little vine taking deep root in [her]

existence,” as does Frederick Douglass in his 1852 novella *The Heroic Slave* when he writes that his protagonist’s “own flesh creeps” as he watches another man being whipped (*Incidents* 96, *Heroic* 20). William Wells Brown’s reflections on the devastating bodily and psychological consequences of slavery’s forced dislocations and sundering of kinship bonds in his 1853 novel *Clotel* also presupposes a state of natural and harmonious relationality, which slavery disrupts. Contrary to the antebellum period’s prevailing conception of sympathy, which, deriving from Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), encouraged a temporary, imaginative leap into another’s pain but nonetheless retained the absolute distinction between self and other, these expressions by Jacobs, Douglass, and Brown convey a sense of indistinct boundaries among beings. In departing from Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and sovereignty, they imply the ontology of interconnection that, catalyzed by the way our current environmental crisis has exposed humanity’s fundamental enmeshment, has reappeared in contemporary metaphysical discourses.

Yet, antislavery writers speak of these bonds in a very different tone from contemporary scholars. In *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Morton writes that the dawning awareness of beings’ enmeshment feels “creepy” and may induce panic (30). The ecological thought “sucks,” writes Morton, because it challenges closely held and highly valued myths of individuality and self-sufficiency (33). In a similar vein, Lauren Berlant describes this state of dependency as “inconvenient,” a formulation that (sarcasm notwithstanding)

suggests that independence would be preferable to the unfortunate truth of interdependence. Although Jacobs does note the pain inherent in the bonds of love under slavery, writing that her child's "clinging fondness [excites] a mixture of love and pain," enslaved and emancipated authors whose texts reveal this ontology speak of it not as creepy or inconvenient but, rather, as key to making life under racial oppression livable and as a crucial element in their flights from slavery (96). William Still's 1872 voluminous compilation of fugitives' narratives, *The Underground Railroad*, testifies to the centrality of networks of relation, among strangers and friends, to enslaved people's flights from U.S. South. Still's text and Jacobs's tale of the care that made her long concealment possible bespeak their sense of the convenience of the mesh, as well as the great personal and political use to which they put it.

In addition to conceptualizing organic enmeshment, antislavery writers insisted that both human nature and the non-human organic world could and did change as a result of human interference—an insight on which the emergent concept of the Anthropocene has been founded. As a scientific concept, the Anthropocene describes the geological epoch of planetary change that has resulted from human activity. As a political concept, it has allied with climate change activism by putting human activity and institutions into new perspective: beyond having personal or historical significance, human activity can now be seen to have significance for geology, a domain that before seemed easily to eclipse human power and naturally to rectify human abuse and folly. It thus crystallizes humanity's

(destructive) power and responsibility. As Chapter One discusses, Walker, Easton, and Douglass proposed a similar concept of humanity's capacity to influence and destroy nature. They held that human decisions and human institutions—namely, slavery—could degrade human nature by causing acute physiological and intellectual deterioration. Likewise, for Gerrit Smith and his fellow agricultural reformers such as Frederick Law Olmsted, the man-made systems of labor that aimed to maximize profit at the expense of human flourishing led directly to the degradation of the natural environment, a degradation that the land returned cyclically to humanity: "Slave labor," writes Stowe in her 1856 novel *Dred*, "had exhausted the first vigor of the soil, and the proprietors gradually degenerated from those habits of energy which were called forth by the necessities of the first settlers" (37).

As the concept of the Anthropocene has been used to illuminate human responsibility for planetary destruction, antislavery writers used the idea of the plasticity of nature to illuminate humanity's responsibility for slavery's consequences. For antislavery writers such as Walker, Easton, and Lydia Maria Child, whose 1833 *Appeal on Behalf of that Class of Americans Called Africans* began from Walker's point that slavery caused (rather than reflected) racial differentiation, the plasticity of nature implied that humanity was responsible for the degradation of human and nonhuman nature. It also implied that humanity was responsible for the restoration of its health. In Hosea Easton's view, as he writes at the conclusion of his 1837 *Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political*

Condition of the Colored People of the U. States, while the human institution of slavery has disturbed biological nature and stunted human development, upon abolishing slavery, “the countenance which has been cast down, hitherto, would brighten up with joy, the narrow foreheads, which have been contracted for the want of mental exercise, would begin to broaden, their eye balls, hitherto strained out to prominence by a frenzy excited by the flourish of the whip, would fall back under a thick foliage of curly eyebrows, indicative of deep and penetrating thought” (53). Easton, Walker, and Child used their theory of nature’s profound changeability to call the nation to account for the present and the future state of human nature, casting slavery and its consequences as non-inevitable, fully historical phenomena perpetrated and undone by human effort.

“Ground Plans” gathers a heterogenous archive of antebellum literature, fiction, autobiography, newspaper articles, land deeds, and plantation records, and reads these seemingly non-scientific texts for their contributions to the period’s scientific debate over nature’s meaning. While these types of sources may seem unlikely places to trace the theoretical debate over nature, they represent the genres to which non-elite people had access and through which they were able to respond to ideas about race and nature being posed in the official publications of natural philosophy. My discussions in Chapters One and Three of Walker and Brown show that these writers engaged scientific discourses of race and nature directly. In the *Appeal*, for example, Walker engages the debate over the origin of species, vigorously defending monogenesis against the doctrine of multiple

creations (polygenesis), a doctrine he saw proslavery forces using as scientific proof that African-descended people were not of the human family and thus rightfully enslaved. Brown's concern with the implications of migration similarly resides on the surfaces of his 1847 autobiography and his 1853 novel *Clotel*. Place names and geographic markings pervade his writings to such an extent that they make Brown's continent-sweeping movements mappable. Chapter Three's supplemental digital maps of Brown's autobiography and Henry Bibb's 1849 *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, an autobiography that also conspicuously abounds in spatial and geographic detail, visualize the cartographic sensibility of these antislavery narratives, which used these cartographies to document and denounce the domestic slave trade's unnatural dislocations.

While these two chapters attend to Walker and Brown's explicit interventions into the period's discussions of the origin, movement, and diversification of species and races, Chapters Two and Four on Jacobs and Smith employ a different style of reading. They read *Incidents* and Smith's Adirondack farming settlement symptomatically, in the tradition of the literary theorist Louis Althusser. In *Reading Capital* (1965), Althusser explains the purpose of symptomatic reading as to elucidate the question a text answers without explicitly having posed—not, as has become conventional in literary studies, to uncover a text's concealed truth. While Jacobs does not present *Incidents* as a work of natural philosophy or as a theoretical meditation on the ontology of being, the text's images of networks and enmeshed communities of care answer the question that Jacobs does not pose

about the nature of human being. Similarly, in the case of Smith's farming settlement at Timbucto, in the context of manifestly decaying plantations in the U.S. South, Smith's vision of small-scale farms worked by free labor answers the question that Smith does not pose about the sustainable use of natural and human resources. Both sets of reading procedures—surface reading and symptomatic reading—allow me to treat antislavery literature as a theoretical discourse that contributed to the period's controversies over nature and thus to follow the literary scholar David Kazanjian's recent proposal to treat writing by non-elites as theory in its own right.

This motley assemblage of sources represents an insurrectionary epistemology that antislavery writers and activists wielded in their intellectual, political, and physical campaign against slavery. "Ground Plans" tells the story of this epistemology's antebellum formulation and the path it traveled from the crucible of antislavery politics to the scientific discipline of ecology, but it takes a special interest in the political and embodied effects of this epistemology for the enslaved and emancipated people whose experiences and reflections led to its emergence. In *Incidents*, when Jacobs learns that her family plans to conceal her at their home, a stone's throw from her owner's door, Jacobs writes that at first she "could not imagine how it was possible." Yet *Incidents* portrays a transformation to Jacobs's imagination, showing how her network of caretakers enable her to re-envision the tiny, cramped, supposedly lifeless attic as a place and source of life. This transformation of what she can imagine in turn transforms the possible. Jacobs's concealment and escape

represents but one of the embodied effects of antislavery's insurgent reconceptualization of nature.

Chapter One

Natural Historicity: David Walker, Race Theory, and Evolutionary Thought

In an 1829 pamphlet issued by the American Colonization Society (ACS), *African Colonization: An Enquiry into the Origin, Plan and Prospects of the American Colonization Society*, the pamphlet's author contradicts the "prevalent opinion" that Liberia's climate "must necessarily be unhealthy [for being] exceedingly warm." On the contrary, African American emigrants have "suffered little" by their relocation (17). The author's emphasis on the emigrants' smooth transition seems, at first glance, to correspond to the view that climate determined a people's physiological character, an explanation for human variety that prevailed into the eighteenth century. Climate-based explanations for human variety construed human bodies as malleable according to environmental factors like sun, elevation, wind, and diet. The porous and mutable human body anchoring these explanations for the diversity of human cultures enabled the popular eighteenth-century belief that Europeans' skin darkened under the fierce suns of their colonies and that the skin of Africans who lived long enough in Northern latitudes would eventually lighten. The pamphlet's author seems to summon climate theory when he rationalizes colonization by the fact that life in the U.S. South had "habituated" African American bodies to Africa's warmth, creating a simple transposition to the directionality of the common claim that African bodies were naturally

adapted to labor in the American plantation zone—a rationale for enslavement, as the historian Jennifer Morgan has shown, predicated on the interchangeability of torrid African and American environments, which natural history’s mapping of the globe along climatic lines made possible.

By the pamphlet’s 1829 imprint, however, explanations for human variety were undergoing dramatic and decisive conceptual reconfigurations, which this chapter devotes considerable space to tracing. Historians of “race”—a word that came to replace “variety” as the predominant signifier for difference during and because of this reconfiguration—have characterized the shift as one in which Euro-American scientific and cultural discourses reimagined difference as originating not in relation to external environments but as an interior, somatic essence, which expresses itself anatomically (particularly as the size and shape of the skull) and on the body’s surface (particularly as skin color). This new, profuse, heterogeneric story of the nature of human difference transformed the meaning of race by transforming its seat (inside the body) and the directionality of its expression (from interior to exterior). Whereas climate-based explanations conceived human difference as forged perpetually and reciprocally by contact between bodies and environments, soma-based explanations installed a human body detached from its surroundings and independent of their influence. It is this soma-based explanation for race, and not a climate-based one, that animates the ACS author’s rationale for colonization and his confidence in the scheme’s prospects. He explains that “neither Europeans nor (white) Americans have been able to

become acclimated” to Liberia because only Africa’s “original inhabitants and their descendents” can flourish there. It is not that the American plantation zone and Africa are interchangeable environments but that black bodies are universally interchangeable, regardless of where they have dwelled or for how long. African Americans can easily and successfully transition to Liberia because their bodies are constitutionally—biologically, racially—the same as Africa’s “original inhabitants” (20). In other words, the world’s races are already, permanently acclimated to their “original” environments.

Published the same year as the ACS’s *African Colonization*, David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* launched a powerful critique of colonization. “This country is as much ours as it is the whites,” Walker declares, asserting African Americans’ claim on the country whose economy their labor had built. Walker’s *Appeal* demystified “the colonizing trick” by arguing that profound dread over free black antislavery agitation motivated the scheme, not altruistic or emancipatory intentions, as the ACS pretended. Walker contended that colonization was nothing but “a plan got up by a gang of slaveholders to select [and remove] the free people of colour from among the slaves, [so] that our more miserable brethren may be better secured in ignorance and wretchedness, to work their farms and dig their mines, and thus go on enriching the Christians with their blood and groans” (55). Walker’s potent demystification of colonization’s politics has been treated by such scholars as Peter Hinks and David Kazanjian. This chapter supplements these analyses by showing that, in addition to revealing the “trick” of colonization, Walker’s

Appeal sets out a broad challenge to the somatic explanation for race evinced in the ACS pamphlet, contradicting this swiftly naturalizing view of race by returning agency to environments and malleability to racial form: an alternative theory of racial formation that I show to be the source of Walker's abolitionism.

Walker openly converses with antebellum debates about the nature of race when he denounces polygenesis, revealing the doctrine of multiple creations not as the scientific theory that the American School of Ethnography claimed it to be but, rather, as a blunt-edged tool to legitimate slavery. To Walker, polygenesis was simply racial prejudice masquerading as science, assiduously deployed as one cornerstone of slavery's ideological infrastructure. This chapter contextualizes Walker in the history of ideas about race to show that, beyond his direct denunciation of polygenesis, Walker recuperated a residual paradigm of racial formation as generated through a body's interactions with environmental elements. But Walker did not simply return to a climate-based model—he fundamentally retooled it. While retaining the idea that external elements influence human development and diversification, Walker replaced the traditional environmental factors of climate theory (sun, elevation, wind, diet) with the human factors of a body's social climate. Walker installed the human social world as the most powerful climatic factor in creating racial nature. His innovation was in conceiving race neither as a result of exposure to natural elements, as climate theorists from Hippocrates to Blumenbach had, nor as originating internally and expressing itself anatomically, as theorists of somatic race from Kant to

Morton had, but as the physiological and psychological result of experience within a fully historical human environment. Walker thus relocated race from the realm of the natural to the realm of the historical.

This chapter casts Walker's *Appeal* in two broad intellectual contexts because these are the contexts to which Walker himself was responding. Scholarly writing on Walker has not attended to his attunement toward these scientific contexts, and thus it has failed to notice and assess the deep imbrication of his theory of race and his abolitionist politics. The first context I present is the shifting racial discourse at the end of the eighteenth century in which "variety" hardened into "race" as explanations for human variegation shifted from being based in climate to being based in the body, a shift by which variety's quality of malleability was gradually erased. The second context I present is the pre-Darwinian debate about the origin of species and the capacity for species and races to change, debates in which nature was steadily infused with the quality of dynamism. The tension between these two contexts should be clear: while race theorists were telling a story about human racial nature as fixed, natural philosophers were telling a story about nature as radically unstable, in flux, and historical—that is, evolving. Walker wrote his *Appeal* at the conflicted moment at which the somatic theory of race was becoming truly entrenched and at which some geologists and biologists were casting doubt on the long-held conception of nature as unchanging. I argue that Walker brings these two contexts together in a way that reveals the implications of evolutionary theory for antebellum race theory, namely the unviability

of the idea of permanent racial natures within an evolutionary outlook. Writing at the same time Darwin was “discovering” evolution—thirty years before he published his discovery in *Origin of Species* in 1859—Walker recasts racial theory within this emergent paradigm to show that racial difference was produced over time and to conclude that, therefore, races, like species, mutate with respect to what Darwin later calls their “conditions of life” (*Origin* 17). Walker’s *Appeal* conjoins these two divergent sets of discussions to great effect, upsetting the somatic theory of race at its roots, while advancing the radical doctrine of nature’s historicity, which would take hold in the second half of the nineteenth century as a founding tenet of the discipline of ecology.

The central example Walker uses to argue that racial natures change as a consequence of being acted upon by environmental, particularly human, factors is the relationship between slavery and race. Slavery represents a social environment characterized by physical brutality and psychological manipulation. These oppressive social relations define the “conditions of life” under enslavement; they are what Frederick Douglass in his 1854 ethnological essay “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” calls slavery’s “circumstances,” and what Hosea Easton, whose 1837 *Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States* this chapter treats at length, calls a society’s “habits of life” and its “incidental circumstances” (Douglass 284, Easton 8). For Walker, as well as for these African American ethnologists, circumstances do not reflect “natural” racial character—they produce it.

“Originally there was no difference of intellect, either constitutional or casual,” writes Easton, and “therefore, we must look for a cause of difference of intellect elsewhere, for it cannot be found in nature” (6). Reversing the influential proslavery argument that enslavement of Africans simply reflected their inferior racial nature, Walker argues that slavery acts on African bodies to transform them into “the most wretched, degraded, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began” (*Appeal* 1). Since there is nothing natural about the circumstances of slavery, there can be nothing either natural or permanent about the physiological markers that proslavery forces point to in order to rationalize their continued domination. While Walker does not argue that these markers should be reinterpreted as positive, he does claim that signs of racial “degradation” arise from the circumstances of slavery and can be counteracted only by slavery’s abolition.

Hosea Easton worked more squarely within ethnological discourse than did Walker, and thus he emphasized the physical effects of slavery on African-descended bodies. While proslavery writers constructed “contracted and sloped foreheads; prominent eye-balls; projecting under-jaw; certain distended muscles about the mouth, or lower parts of the face; [and] thick lips and flat nose” as signs of natural inferiority, Easton claims that these anatomical characteristics resulted from slavery’s brutality being passed “lineally” from mother to child (23). Similarly, Walker wrote in his 1828 address “The Necessity of a General Union Among Us” that enslavement caused “hereditary degradation.” But unlike Easton, Walker was most concerned with the psychological imprints of enslavement,

developing the concept of “wretchedness” to understand these effects (81). Contextualizing wretchedness in Walker’s theory of race reveals his understanding of the internalization of racial prejudice not as an individual or collective failure but as the unnatural effect of the circumstances of enslavement. Indeed, he frames the psychic effects of slavery as its shrewdest and cruelest trick, its attempt to fabricate submission into racial nature and to disseminate the belief in the full success of this fabrication.

By interrogating the relationship between slavery and race, Walker develops a more general antiracist theory about the creative relationship between individuals and their circumstances that African American writers have since elaborated. The idea that circumstances bear on the formation of individual subjectivity is present, for example, in Walker’s fellow abolitionist Maria Stewart’s 1832 formulation that “continual hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind,” in Douglass’s claim that actions are “part of the system, rather than part of the man,” and in Richard Wright’s explanation in *12 Million Black Voices* “that human nature is malleable, that men possess the dignity and meaning of the environmental and institutional forms through which they are lucky or unlucky enough to express themselves” (Stewart 46, Douglass, *Bondage* 83, Wright 130). This chapter shows that Walker laid the groundwork for this argument as he developed his attack on somatic theories of race, which paradoxically held individuals both responsible for and powerless to change their circumstances. His profound influence on antiracist thought was to reconceptualize subjection as an historical

rather than a natural arrangement, to return it to the realm of human agency, and to focus antislavery efforts on the conditions of life responsible for producing racial wretchedness.

1.1 Climate to soma: shifting racial imaginaries

“In general, you will find the forms and dispositions of mankind to correspond with the nature of the country,” concludes Hippocrates in “On Airs, Waters, and Places,” a text commonly referenced by historians of race as the ancient origin of climate-based explanations for human variety. Hippocrates connected specific environmental elements to specific human characteristics, explaining, for example, that “such as dwell in places which are low-lying, abounding in meadows and ill ventilated, and who have a larger portion of hot than cold winds and who make use of warm waters—these are not likely to be of large stature nor well proportioned, but are of a broad make, fleshy, and have black hair; and they are rather of a dark than of a light complexion, and are less likely to be phlegmatic than bilious; courage and laborious enterprise are not naturally in them, but may be engendered in them by means of their institutions” (182). As this passage indicates, Hippocrates saw environmental elements as influencing bodily form (stature, hair, complexion), as well as disposition (cowardice and laziness). Although the specific correspondences between natural elements and human form and personality varied over the centuries after Hippocrates, his general claim that the “dispositions of mankind correspond to the nature of

the country” remained, in the words of the literary scholar Roxann Wheeler, the “linchpin” for explaining human variety in the eighteenth-century Euro-American imperial world (21). In Wheeler’s account, not only were markers of difference such as religion, civility, and rank more important to the colonial powers’ organization of human cultures than skin color, but the conception of the human body inherited from climate theory — “porous and thus easily affected by what went in it and on around it” — underpinned the period’s predominant view of human variety as created through interactions between bodies and powerful, surrounding environments (23).

From their highest cartographic perch, eighteenth-century natural philosophers divided the globe into two basic climatic zones: temperate and torrid. Although they debated the proper way to grade these zones’ diverse inhabitants more finely, most agreed that temperate climes shared constitutional properties distinct from torrid climes. Natural philosophers strengthened the association already evident in Hippocrates between the heat of the torrid zone and black skin, on the one hand, and between the mild sun of the temperate zone and light skin, on the other. For example, the German geographer E.A.W. Zimmermann explained in *Geographical History of Human Being and the Universally Dispersed Quadrupeds* (1778-1783) that “the greater the heat of a land, the more deeply colored, or blacker, are the people who live there; and when heat is diminished, the color of the skin turns pale.” Observing that in Africa “the thermometer frequently stands at 112 or even 117,” Zimmerman reached the “striking conclusion” that “the temperature of the climate

seems to stand in the most exact connection with the color of the skin" (94). While the physiological mechanism responsible for this "exact connection" remained unclear—perhaps the sun pulled a blood-like substance ("phlogiston" or bile) from a layer just beneath the skin to its surface—in the context of a paradigm in which the human body was "easily affected" by its surroundings, the exact connection between heat and black skin engendered prolific worry over white bodies' capacity to darken in the colonies. The eighteenth-century traveler Janet Schaw indexed this anxiety when she described the mistresses of St. Kitts covering every inch of their skin to avoid it being darkened by the hot Caribbean sun, and the natural historian Georg Forster summarized this popular belief when he wrote that "the late descendants of whites who have been displaced into warm lands acquire a darker color and are, finally, after the course of centuries, almost fully black in the hot zone" (Schaw 114, Forster 152).

If malleable white bodies darkened in the torrid zone, many believed that the converse may also be true, that black bodies would lighten if removed to the temperate zone. "When blacks cross the boundaries of the tropics," wrote Forster, "they lose their black color among their descendants, who become black brown, olive colored, and perhaps—for who can here mark off with any agreed upon probability the *non plus ultra*—still a few degrees lighter depending on how far they have moved above the equator into milder zones" (152). Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* likewise proposed that because human varieties had been "produced by a train of external and accidental causes," it was "probable

that they will gradually disappear, or at least, that they will differ from what they are at present, if the cause which produced them should cease, or their operation be varied by other circumstances and combinations.” Buffon claimed that variety resulted from a process of degeneration from an original Caucasian pair, so when he spoke of the “disappearance” of variety, he meant that non-white people would revert to their original whiteness in the absence of the “external and accidental causes” of their blackness. He argued that there was no compelling example of the reversion of blackness into whiteness not because of his theory’s untenability but because the experiment that would be conclusive—of transplanting Africans to the temperate zone and restricting reproductive partners only to others within the segregated community—had not been conducted correctly, for long enough, or with the sole objective of confirming that new “circumstances and combinations” would reverse the racial degeneration caused by Africa’s torrid sun.

Climate-based explanations for human variety, with their attendant notions of malleability and “accidental” racial natures, may seem poised to lead to an antiracist point of view insofar as they infuse variety with contingency: human cultures are simply different according to the conditions of their historical constitutions within specific, non-chosen environments. They may also seem poised to rule out the doctrine of multiple creations: diversity did not precede geographical dispersal but, rather, as members of the single human species migrated to new climates, the species diversified in consequence. However, among eighteenth-century natural philosophers, climate-based explanations did not often

lead in these directions. While Buffon rejected polygenesis, as indicated above, he viewed non-white people as degenerate forms of the original race (a view shared by Blumenbach), and while Forster espoused profound mutability of the human form, he could “see not even a single difficulty [in assuming] that there are several original human lines of descent than when we assume the hypothesis of a single pair” (165). And although for Forster human bodies technically could mutate if placed in new climatic conditions, races were only truly “suitable” to their original climates: “Nature [has] given to each line of descent from the very beginning its character, its special organization in relation to its climate, as is suitable for it” —an argument that, under colonial expansion and slavery, was readily enlisted as support for forcible transplantation of Africans to the American torrid zone, which in another context might have been an argument against forced migration (163). Moreover, climate theory’s principle of reciprocity between bodies and environments offered no natural guard against the suturing of psychological traits to somatic features or against the ascription of these traits to whole nations, regions, or continents. During climate theory’s predominance in the eighteenth century, it in fact helped facilitate rather than contradict a set of reflexive associations between geographies, peoples, and dispositional traits, evinced when, for example, the torrid zone was thought not only to darken skin but to induce indolence and lasciviousness, traits naturalized as indissociable from and supposedly manifest in the zone’s inhabitants.

As the Atlantic slave trade peaked at the century's close, however, climate-based explanations for the diversity of human cultures began to recede and new explanations began to emerge, representing an important shift to Euro-American racial imaginaries. This shift is exceptionally visible in the debate between Forster, steadfast adherent to climate theory, and Kant, whose 1788 essay "On the Use of the Teleological Principle in Philosophy" the historian of philosophy Robert Bernasconi describes as having "invented" race in its biological conceptual instantiation. In this debate, Kant denounced Forster on methodological and conceptual grounds, claiming, indeed, that a fatal flaw in the former precipitated the mistakenness of the latter. Kant parsed Forster's "descriptions of nature" from true "natural history," which he defined as the effort to bring observable natural phenomena "under laws," to seek their underlying principles, and using these principles, to construct a history of the temporal unfolding of race. Kant thus aimed to find the principles whereby the species came to be observably differentiated, a goal he claimed impossible within a descriptive approach like Forster's, which could catalogue nature as it appeared but could not provide a theory or an historical narrative for how it had come to appear that way. For Kant, the climatic model was especially insufficient for explaining what he called "invariability," or the invariable transmission of somatic characteristics (particularly skin color) to offspring, regardless of climatic factors and in spite of migration from an original homeland. To explain invariability, Kant turned to the body's interior, conceiving an original Caucasian pair—the "common human lineal stock"—who contained within their

bodies a diversity of racial “germs” (*Keime*). When the original pair’s descendants migrated to new climates, they awakened the particular germs that made their bodies most suited to their new homelands. Thus climate did play a part in the history of racial development according to Kant, but its influence on bodies, as well as the ability of bodies to change according to it, had long since ended: this formative reciprocity occurred “in the earliest time” (“Determination” 141). Once the racial germ of a people was awakened by the demands of its environment, the original multiplicity of racial possibilities was nullified and their racial character was determined.

In his 1777 “On the Different Human Races,” Kant clarified that while “the first human lineal stem stock might well have had the greatest similarity [with the] race of whites,” this fact neither reflected nor permitted “prejudice on behalf of the presumptuously greater perfection of one color when compared to another,” and as the scholar Jon Mikkelsen explains, Kant mostly avoided the overtly racist language that infused many of his contemporaries’ writings on race (54). Mikkelsen juxtaposes Kant with Christopher Meiners, whose 1790 “Of the Varieties and Deviate Forms of Negroes” describes Africans as “ugly, stupid, and unruly” (198). Yet, in highlighting the rhetorical differences between Kant and his contemporaries, Mikkelsen obscures Kant’s contribution to the biological view of race that undergirded antebellum scientific racism. Kant’s turn away from “descriptions of nature” toward “natural history” oriented his theory toward invisible and determining structures, interiority and teleology. In his theory of racial germs, Kant posited an internal

essence whose capacity for change had long since expired. Kant thus made permanence— invariability and irreversibility— fundamental qualities of racial nature. When Bernasconi states that Kant “invented” race, then, he does not mean that before Kant Europeans did not make meaning around human difference, that they did not subordinate non-European people based on these meanings, or that they did not produce theories to explain the mechanism that caused human variety, for, contrary to Kant’s claim, the climatic model *had* a theory for this mechanism, as well as an historical view of racial differentiation and development. Rather, Kant “invented” a new image of race insofar as over the course of his four essays on race published between 1775 and 1788, a body of work scholars have recently begun to call his *Rassenkraft*, he honed a concept of race with the defining qualities of interiority, legibility on and as skin color, and unchangeability.

Soma-based theories of race thrived in the antebellum South, becoming, with Bible-based explanations, the bedrock of proslavery argumentation. They were credentialed by being framed as thoroughly scientific: Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, for example, argued in their 1854 treatise on polygenesis, *Types of Mankind*, that science would correct Christian theology’s misleading myth of an original pair. In their view, data collection and experimentation, the standard bearers of an ascendant profession, would confirm beyond dispute that racial difference was essentially somatic and that these invariably transmitted somatic features both determined and represented the mental and emotional “endowments” of a people. In 1839, Nott and Gliddon’s teacher Samuel George Morton had, like Kant,

attested that “the physical characteristics which distinguish the different Races, are independent of external causes,” thus dismissing climatic explanations, and had hypothesized that “a knowledge of the size of the brain, and the proportions of its different parts,” which his extensive collection of skulls was meant to provide, would prove that differences in “natural mental endowments on which external circumstances act only as modifying influences” inhere in anatomy (3, 274). By reading skull size and shape, scientists could establish not only the mental endowments of a people, but also their “natural national character” (275). Both resided inside their bodies, thus both were available to be read by scientists who could access inner anatomies. Through such readings, Morton’s *Crania Americana* concluded that indigenous Americans, “in their mental character were averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful, and fond of war,” and that Africans were “joyous, flexible, and indolent” (6, 7). Morton recognized that “the many nations [in Africa] which compose this race present a singular diversity of intellectual character,” but concluded nonetheless that at “the far extreme [of the race] is the lowest grade of humanity” (7). Writers working within the climate model made similar evaluations, ranking human populations on the Great Chain of Being, just as they ranked non-human animals. But biological racial theory installed a fundamentally different seat to race (in the body’s deepest interior) and a new idea about the kind and degree of its physiological and psychological determinations. It replaced the changeable body of climate theory with an unchanging essence whose qualities of inevitability and permanence not

only seemed impeccably to explain the racial order in the United States, but also to make the case for its naturalness.

1.2 Hosea Easton and black ethnology's theory of change

A Methodist minister from North Bridgewater, Massachusetts, Hosea Easton published only one monograph during his lifetime, *A Treatise on the Intellectual, Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States*, in 1837. He died soon after its publication, mere weeks before a second text, *Lectures on Civil, Social and Moral Economy*, for which he advertised in the end pages of the *Treatise*, was set to appear. Easton's *Treatise* responded to Morton and his many admirers, a group that came to be known as the American School of Ethnography. He vociferously opposed the American School's two chief axioms: polygenesis and the immutability (or ahistoricity) of racial essence. In challenging these axioms, Easton's text aligned with black-authored ethnological texts that also attacked polygenesis and the effort to divorce racial formation from the history of slavery, including Douglass's "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered" (1854), Martin Delany's *Principia of Ethnology* (1879), and, as I argue below, Walker's *Appeal*. Easton's *Treatise* has received the least scholarly attention of these texts, and while his limited scholarly treatment provides helpful biography and situates him within the history of abolitionism, it does not attend to Easton's dialogue with ideas of geological and biological change that historians of science tend to

label “proto-evolutionary.” Easton’s *Treatise* painstakingly explicates racial formation within the context of slavery, but more broadly, it exemplifies abolitionists’ keen interest in the capacity for species and races to evolve in response to their conditions of life, and it demonstrates the use of this evolutionary point of view toward combating the view of race as ahistorical, on which proslavery ideology reflexively drew.

For a text ostensibly devoted to understanding how the human species became “variegated,” Easton’s *Treatise* perhaps surprisingly begins with a long exposition of the respective, and very different, histories of Europe and Africa (5). Easton explains that, by delving into the comparative history of Europe and Africa, he has found European history replete with war, savagery, and corruption. He delineates a chronology of European “rapacity” from 49 A.D., when “London [was] founded by the Romans,” through settlement in the American colonies, a chronology in which every point makes reference to an act of violence (14). In contrast, Africa’s chronology displays lavish achievements of culture and peacemaking. “At no age [did Africans] cultivate the art of war to any great extent,” Easton writes, nor can in their annals be found “an aggressive way with any nation.” While Europeans were “continually robbing and destroying each other,” Africans were “cultivating internal improvement, [and] virtually [becoming] a storehouse of every thing conducive to the happiness of mankind” (19). Easton’s decision to dwell with these histories at the beginning of his ethnological treatise may seem misplaced, but he proposes that these histories are, in fact, crucial to understanding racial variegation as it appears in

the present. "Since no constitutional difference exists in the children of men, which can be said to be established by hereditary laws," ethnologists must "consult the history of nations" to explain racial differentiation (5). And as war and conquest defines European history, so it continues to define European racial character. "It must be admitted that almost every nation in Europe, and especially in the Americas, retains, in principle, if not in manners, all the characteristics of their barbarous and avaricious ancestors," Easton writes, parsing "principles" from "manners" to contend that although the refinements of culture may conceal it, the history of European barbarism resides deep within its people's constitutions (19).

Easton's reason for narrating these histories becomes even clearer in light of his general view of the relationship between history and nature. "Originally there [were] no differences of intellect, either constitutional or casual, [and] man was perfect," he writes (6). Members of the species remain "perfect" until the "casual laws" of history and the "incidental circumstances" of life act upon humans' minds, differentiating them with respect to the contingencies of historical experience and the accident of birth into a set of "habits of life and general maxims of a country" (8). While Easton's language—"casual laws" where one might expect "causal laws"—underscores the unpredictability and contingency of history, Easton nonetheless endows historical experience with profound power to reshape nature beyond recognition of its originary "perfection." History acts, moreover, on the soma, creating the physical features—"contracted and sloped foreheads;

prominent eye-balls; projecting under-jaw; certain distended muscles” — the American School (“the moderns who philosophize on the negro character”) interprets as key signs of racial essence and as prior to history (23). Whereas Morton’s study was used to argue that Africans’ smaller skull size destined them for their role as slaves, Easton argues that slavery’s history of brutality, performed by the barbarous race of men that the European history of war has produced, acted upon Africans’ somatic features and transformed them. The history of slavery has caused “unnatural effects, as displayed in the deformity of two and a half millions of beings, who have been under its soul-and-body-destroying influence, lineally, for near three hundred years,” and it has undone the positive physical and intellectual imprint made by the long and laudable history of African peace (24).

Historical experience not only transforms nature, but these experiences eventually become nature because, according to Easton, experience’s somatic imprints are transmissible “lineally” from parent to child. Easton believes that use and disuse of muscles and organs, diet and exercise — anything “which affect[s] the frame of [the] body and mind” — influence the “corporeal system,” its “form” and “size,” as well as intellectual development. Because these influences make their way into the body, Easton believes that they “communicate an important, a lasting, perhaps indelible impression, to the mind or body of [the] offspring” (22). Although Easton does not reference Lamarck directly, his belief in the transmissibility of acquired characteristics closely resembles Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s theory of what we now call “soft inheritance.” In his 1809 *Philosophie Zoologique*, the French naturalist Lamarck

argues that somatic features developed through processes of use and disuse: "The continued use of any organ leads to its development, strengthens it and even enlarges it, while permanent disuse of any organ is injurious to its development, causes it to deteriorate and ultimately to disappear if the disuse continues for a long period through successive generations" (2). In Lamarck's view, animals' observable bodily features and behaviors derive from the "action of the environment in which [they have] long been placed" (35). Over time, these environmentally advantageous habits, these patterns of use and disuse, become "fixed in the animal itself" and are, therefore, transmitted to offspring (11). Where Lamarck speaks of "patterns of behavior" becoming "fixed" in animals' bodies, Easton speaks of "lasting, perhaps indelible impressions," and where Lamarck speaks of the inheritability of these acquired characteristics, Easton speaks of their "communication" and "lineal transmission." But both thinkers conceive of nature as highly mutable according to environmental need and historical experience, and they both conceive the bodily effects of these experiences as heritable.

Easton's theory of the biological transmission of historical experience frames his explication of slavery's destructive effect on Africans. Enslavement "exposes" African mothers to "despotism and barbarity" and "proscribe[s]" their minds to the "narrow bounds of servile obedience, subject[ing] them to irritation from every quarter; to great disappointment, and [to] physical suffering" (22). Moreover, violence permeates the environment of slavery such that mothers continually bear "witness to maiming and

flagellation [and] shrieks of woe, borne to their ears on every wind," and these overseen and overheard experiences of others' suffering imprint themselves on mothers' "limbs and minds," just as their first-hand experiences create "indelible impressions" on their bodies and minds (22-3). Because Easton's Lamarckian framework views historical experience as heritable, slavery brings "into the world beings whose limbs and minds [are] lineally fashioned for the yoke and fetter, long before their own immortal mind was clothed in materiality" (23). It shapes the "constitutional principles of the child" and thwarts nature from acting "up to her perfect laws" (41, 23). Yet, as Lamarck argues that environmental changes cause constitutional ones, Easton similarly argues that the abolition of slavery, the destruction of its violent environments, would reshape African Americans' "limbs and minds." Immediately upon abolition, Easton hypothesizes, "the countenance which has been cast down, hitherto, would brighten up with joy[;] the narrow foreheads, which have been contracted for the want of mental exercise, would begin to broaden[;] their eye balls, hitherto strained out to prominence by a frenzy excited by the flourish of the whip, would fall back under a thick foliage of curly eyebrows, indicative of deep and penetrating thought" (53).

As his focus on the somatic dimensions of racial character indicates, Easton agreed with the prevailing conception of race as a bodily phenomenon that expressed itself anatomically, in skin color, nose and head shape, hair texture, and gait—the same somatic features designated by the American School as the transparently legible signs of race.

Easton also linked these features to mental and emotional “endowments,” as was conventional, associating narrow foreheads, for example, with a lack of intellectual capacity. In other words, Easton did not argue that the American School misread the signs of race: he did not argue that narrow foreheads or strained eyeballs should not be read as negative traits, nor did he argue that these bodily features give no indication of non-physical characteristics like intelligence and range or depth of emotion. But he did argue that “the moderns who philosophize on the negro character,” by misunderstanding the mechanism of racial “variegation,” had misconstrued the cause of what he agreed were negative racial traits. While for Easton race was firmly biological in the sense that it was somatic, like eighteenth-century climate theorists, he viewed bodies as radically changeable according to their experiences, and he viewed these interactions between bodies and the particularities of their environments over a temporal span as the mechanism of racialization. Racial nature resided in these interactions, not within singular bodies, as the American School contended. Thus Easton decoupled the concept of the biological from the quality of permanence reflexively assigned to it, exposing the non-inevitability and artificiality of this linkage. In other words, the concept of the biological was not the same concept for Easton as it was for Morton. For Easton, rather than a static and prior given, biology was continually shaped and reshaped by environmental conditions and historical experience. This framework poised Easton to argue that in misconstruing the cause of African American “deformity,” race theorists had also greatly misconstrued the solution. For Easton, in light of his theory,

the only solution could be the radical transformation of the interactions among the people and environments responsible for reproducing race.

Yet, to say that Easton believed that white ethnologists had simply “misconstrued” the process of racial formation threatens to understate his potent ideological critique of ethnological science. Easton shows that this supposedly objective scientific discourse is in fact motivated by the slave powers’ goal to maintain the racial order, doing so by demonstrating the “accord” between the “objects of this nation in reference to blacks” — perpetual slavery — and ethnology’s effort to teach the nation’s “little ones that a negro is part monkey” (42). Douglass sharpens Easton’s sense of “accord” between ethnology and the “objects of this nation” in his “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” writing that ethnology has “construct[ed] a theory of race” that turns the “crimes of slavery” — the physical and psychological “deformity” suffered by the enslaved — into “slavery’s best defense” (288, 287). According to Easton and Douglass, apologists for slavery strategically reverse cause and effect in order to assert that white dominance simply reflects the natural racial order determined by biology. On the contrary, Easton and Douglass claim the racial order reflects the effects of white violence. Ethnology has played a large role in creating the “enslaved character,” Douglass writes, invoking the double meaning of “character”: as it was used in ethnological discourse to describe an internal or overall disposition and as it was used in narratological discourses, thus implicating ethnology in turning African Americans into fictional personas, stereotypes, or caricatures who are made to seem “fit

only for slavery.” Easton and Douglass recast ethnology’s ahistorical view of race as a shrewd and powerful ideological edifice, a theory that positioned itself beyond dispute in order to “excuse [the nation] for refusing to make the slave a freeman” (287).

1.3 David Walker, nature’s historicity, and racial wretchedness

Like Easton’s *Treatise*, David Walker’s *Appeal* directly contravenes the American School’s doctrine of polygenesis and its implication that Africans “are not of the human family” (10). Taking up a mocking tone, Walker also decries ethnology’s use of “*improminent noses and woolly heads*” as evidence that African-descended people do not “feel for our fathers, mothers, wives, and children, as well as the whites do for theirs” (4-5 original emphasis). His typography (italics) builds an air of absurdity around ethnology’s use of the shape of the nose and the texture of the hair to measure emotional capacity, uprooting any transparently legible union between somatic features and interior states. Yet unlike Easton, Walker’s *Appeal* does not initially appear deeply informed by or invested in ethnology. Indeed, Walker subtly but explicitly frames his text as a history when he references Josephus, the first-century Roman-Jewish historian, and Plutarch in his Preamble (1). He uses the rhetorical maneuver so common in African American texts of affiliating himself with these famous historians by placing himself below their great genius. “I believe that the pen only of Josephus and Plutarch, can well enumerate and explain” the causes of the

current state of the African race, he writes (1-2). This formulation should give us pause: how is it that these ancient historians can explain the causes of present-day racial phenomena before they have come to pass? Walker's appeal to history does not separate him from ethnology; rather, it brings him closer to it. Only history can tell the story of racial formation because race for Walker is fundamentally historical, developing relationally over time. Hence the historians Josephus and Plutarch, because they peer into human behavior and have a concept of change over time, can indeed "enumerate" the processes of racial formation that have led to the abysmal state of race and race relations in the antebellum United States. And hence the *Appeal*, a history after Josephus and Plutarch, functions at the same time as an ethnology.

To some degree, Walker takes up the observation-based methodology of ethnology. He explains that he has arrived at his "full and unshaken conviction" that African Americans are "the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived" —his assessment of the current state of racial nature—by having "travelled a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of [these] travels, taken the most accurate observations" (1). He emphasizes that he has gathered his knowledge first-hand so that "no man may think that [his] book is made up of conjecture" (76). Walker's claim to have researched race and slavery through "observation" and "travel" fits with the little that is known about his life. Walker was born free in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1796, lived in Charleston, South Carolina, in the years immediately preceding Denmark Vesey's 1822

conspiracy, and then moved to Boston, where he lived until his untimely death in 1830. His mobility along the eastern seaboard and the chance it gave him to observe slavery was clearly an important means of study for Walker. By insisting on his first-hand experience, Walker also places himself in the tradition of black authors who argue that it was only through first-hand experience that one could truly understand slavery, an argument used to authorize the narratives of enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the face of prejudice against their lack of formal education and conventional literacy.

Yet in addition to this credentialing empiricism, Walker asserts that evidence for his “unshaken conviction” can also be found in the “pages of history” — a phrase or variation thereof that he goes on to use nine times over the course of the *Appeal*. One need only take “the trouble to read histories” to confirm that slaveholders in the United States treat their enslaved people “more cruel” than any “heathen nation [had] any people whom it had reduced to [the] condition” of slavery (7, 69). While urging his readers to consult history, Walker himself devotes Article I of the *Appeal* to studying three historical systems of slavery — Egyptian, classical, and in much less detail, early modern Spanish and Portuguese — and comparing these systems to the American one. Beginning with an exegesis of Genesis, Walker dissects the Egyptian Pharaoh’s communications with Joseph, “the son of Israel.” He differentiates Egyptian from American slavery on the three bases that Egyptians did not prohibit cross-racial marriage (“And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphnathpaaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Potipherah”), that they

did not prohibit property ownership and in fact gave the Israelites the most fertile lands (“The land of Egypt is before thee: in the best of the land make thy father and brethren dwell”), and most importantly to Walker, that they did not heap “the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel [that they were] not of the human family” (8, 9, 10). Walker proceeds to explore slavery “as it existed among the Romans,” which, “comparatively speaking, [was] no more than a cypher, when compared with ours under the Americans” (14). Walker differentiates classical from American slavery on the bases that “as soon as a slave among the Romans obtained his freedom, he could rise to the greatest eminence in the State, and there was no law instituted to hinder a slave from buying his freedom,” whereas in the Americas, racial prejudice prevents emancipated slaves from rising socially and laws “hinder [enslaved people] from obtaining [their] freedom” (16). Walker furthermore cites the classical custom of condemning to death the enslaved people of a deceased master—instead of separating and selling them upon a master’s death, as was often the case in the U.S. South—as another example of the latter system’s greater cruelty: “I therefore ask the whole American people, had I not rather die, or be put to death, than to be a slave to any tyrant, who takes not only my own, but my wife and children’s lives by the inches?” (14).

Within this comparative historical analysis, Walker anticipates the apology for American slavery based in the reference to Africans’ enslavement of other Africans. He does not deny this history but argues that while African slavery produced its own “wretchedness and massacre,” in all the “years [he spent] troubling the pages of historians,”

he found that Africans were “never so avaricious, deceitful and unmerciful as the whites” — a claim redoubled by Easton. Indeed, switching the comparative frame from one based in nations to one based in religion, Walker writes that no “heathen” people have acted more cruelly than white Christians, for only Christians have been so “audacious as to go and take vessel loads of men, women and children, and in cold blood, and through devilishness, thrown them into the sea, and murder them in all kinds of ways.” Only “enlightened and sensible” Christians have inflicted “such hellish cruelties” (17). The pages of history testify that “white [Christians] have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings” — an analysis that reappears in Easton’s chronology of European war and rapacity — while “the blacks of Africa, and the mulattoes of Asia” have never been so barbarous and never acted “more like devils than accountable men” (16, 17).

In his *Treatise*, Easton also turns to comparative historical analysis as the logical extension of his theory of racial nature as a production of human history, a narrative strategy and an underlying rationale that should now seem resonant with Walker’s similar turn to history in his discussion in Article I of slavery’s various historical instantiations. It is only through comparative historical analysis, Walker suggests, that race as it appears in the present can be understood — hence his provocative claim that Josephus and Plutarch can better explain the cause of African American “wretchedness” than can a contemporary observer — for it was in and by history the phenomena of racial character and the antebellum racial order, both supposedly natural, have become manifest. Historical analysis, with its

focus on process, tells the story of the evolution of race, a story that an ahistorical and static glance at contemporary racial form cannot provide, not least because it fundamentally misunderstands the malleability of race according to environmental and social factors. Thus like Easton, Walker uses a narrative strategy—the comparative history that begins his text—that reflects the theory of race his *Appeal* sets out. Historical analysis is, in other words, the only route through which present racial forms can be understood, for history has been their crucible. And while historical analysis suits his theory of the historicity of race, it is also through his comparative survey that he can reach his conclusion that antebellum American slavery is “ten thousand times more intolerable” than biblical, classical, or early modern slavery (19).

For Walker, what finally distinguishes American slavery from these other historical instantiations is not its prohibitions against marriage and property, its social discrimination against emancipated and freeborn African Americans, or its infliction of physical harm and cold-blooded murders, but its teaching that African people are “an *inferior* and *distinct race* of beings” (19 original emphasis). It is the ideological dimension of American slavery, especially its view of African racial nature, that makes it the most cruel system in history: “After having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, [they have] held us up as descending originally from the tribes of *Monkeys* or *Orang-Outangs*” (10 original emphasis). On no other page of history can the “insupportable insult” that African-descended people are not human beings be found. As the ideological groundwork for and

distinguishing feature of American slavery, this insupportable insult “emanate[s]” from natural philosophy, especially, for Walker, in the scientific writings of Thomas Jefferson. Whereas most antislavery writers targeted Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence who nonetheless supported the perpetuation of slavery and, as such, as the symbol of the profound gap between the nation’s founding values and its historical realities, Walker targets him first and foremost as the author not of the Declaration but of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, who “declared to the world, that we are inferior to the whites, both in endowments of our bodies and our minds” (10). In Walker’s view, Jefferson’s great crime was not that he, as a politician, failed to recognize and implement equality among all people, but that he, as a natural philosopher, expounded the doctrine of natural African inferiority from a position of great scientific stature: “Mr. Jefferson, a much greater philosopher the world never afforded, has in truth injured us more, and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as any thing that has ever been advanced against us” (27).

Walker thus positions the history of slavery in the United States not only as a history of legal and social oppression and physical harm, but also as a history of ideas, specifically a history of ideas about nature. While Easton emphasizes the indelible impressions physical suffering makes on the “corporeal system,” Walker attends more closely to the indelible psychological impressions created by ideas about race. The name Walker gives the psychic form produced by the unique ideological campaign of American slavery is “wretchedness,” a word that operates in the *Appeal* as a precise concept to delineate the psychological effects

of slavery. During Walker's period, "wretchedness" was a staple of the romance novel, in which characters who broke sexual norms were punished with social ruin, insanity, or death, fates these texts tended to describe as falls into wretchedness. These different fates are united in that they all deliver misery and despair to their sufferers, but they all also involve a degree of exclusion from society: a fall into wretchedness was also a fall into the margins of society. As this double signification indicates, in the antebellum period, the word "wretched" carried residual meanings of its early modern usage to mean "banished" or "exiled." The noun "wretch" described a person who had been driven out of her native country, before becoming more commonly used as an adjective ("wretched") and associated with the emotional state of misery and the economic state of poverty. In her 1791 novel *Charlotte Temple*, Susanna Rowson captures the compacted doubleness of the word when she connects Charlotte's emotional wretchedness to her exile from America: "Deprived of honor, friends, and all that was valuable in life, [Charlotte was] doomed to linger out a wretched existence in a strange land and sink broken-hearted into an untimely grave" (77).

When Walker uses the term "wretchedness," he summons its residual meaning as exile, but he distinctly does not conceive exile as colonizationists did when they framed colonization as the undoing of African Americans' exile from their native African homeland. For Walker, the wretchedness of exile does not describe the distance between continents and thus cannot be undone by forcible migration in reverse. Rather, wretchedness describes the distance between the "natural elements" of African character and, in Easton's words, the

“unnatural effects” of slavery. On one level of signification, Walker uses “wretchedness” to describe the day-to-day miseries experienced by enslaved people. But on another level of signification, positing, like Easton, an original nature that slavery has profoundly transformed, Walker uses the word to measure African Americans’ collective estrangement from their “very vitals” (21). This estrangement has its “source” in the “inhuman system of slavery,” a point Walker reinforces through his iterative chapter titles—“Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery,” “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance,” “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of the Religion of Jesus Christ” (3). These titles conspicuously reverse the notion of cause and effect in proslavery discourse—slavery in consequence of African wretchedness, slavery in consequence of African ignorance—and they succinctly capture Walker’s theory that slavery creates, rather than reflects, racial character. But Walker nonetheless argues that the historical experience of slavery has created a “set of beings” who, alienated by slavery from their “natural elements,” manifest “ignorance and treachery one against the other—[and] a groveling servile and abject submission” (21).

Walker’s concept of alienation from nature takes shape in two controversial anecdotes, one of the contented boot-black and the other of the “deceitful” enslaved woman who stymies a rebellion attempt. Walker describes meeting a man “in the street with a string of boots on his shoulder,” to whom he exclaims, “What a miserable set of people we are!” The boot-black responds with attestations of his contentment, telling a befuddled and

disappointed Walker that he “never want[s] to live any better or happier than when [he] can get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean.” Walker clarifies that he does not object to this man taking up any “occupation to render [himself] and [his family] comfortable through life,” but he does object to his “*glorying* and being *happy* in such low employments” (29 original emphasis). Contentment in “wielding the razor and cleaning boots” not only prevents the boot-black from “aspiring” to “higher attainments,” but according to Walker, it prevents him from perceiving how racial prejudice forecloses these attainments, even these aspirations, to him (29). Contentment precludes the critical perspective on race-based economic stratification necessary, in Walker’s view, for individual striving toward class elevation and for collective agitation for economic justice and full political liberation. Walker uses the boot-black to illustrate the specific psychological effect he calls “ignorance,” a word that, as the anecdote suggests, designates less a lack of conventional education (although Walker does criticize free blacks’ literacy) and more a lack of critique of the way wage labor reproduces racial injustice, a lack encapsulated for Walker in the boot-black’s apparent contentment.

To illustrate another psychological effect of racial oppression that he names “servile deceit,” Walker incorporates a newspaper article from Portsmouth, Ohio, called “Affray and Murder,” which describes the nearly successful rebellion of sixty enslaved people being transported by a slave trader named Gordon. The shackled men use a file to “separat[e] the iron which bound their hands, in such a way as to be able to throw them off at any

moment.” The rebels kill two of their captors and then attack Gordon, firing two shots that graze “his head, but not proving effectual, [they beat him] with clubs, and [leave] him for dead” (23). Here Walker calls his readers’ attention to a detail in the Portsmouth newspaper article: “Gordon, in the mean time, not being materially injured, was enabled by the assistance of the woman, to mount his horse and flee.” Walker treats this passage in the article pedagogically, retraining his readers’ eye “to notice particularly in the above article, the “*ignorant and deceitful actions* of this coloured woman” who aided Gordon’s flight and his subsequent rallying of the local villagers, which “resulted in the capture of the whole gang and recovery of the greatest part of the money” (24 original emphasis). While the word “murder” in the article’s title originally referred to the rebels’ murder of two white men, Walker uses it to describe the enslaved woman’s act of providing aid to Gordon. By helping Gordon, she betrayed her fellow enslaved people, a betrayal that for Walker amounts to their murder.

In leading his readers through an analysis of her actions, however, Walker asserts that her loyalty to Gordon does not reflect “the natural fine feelings” of this woman (24 emphasis removed). Walker’s use of the word “natural” in this formulation recalls his phrase “the natural elements of the blacks,” and when he positions the woman’s response as “unnatural,” he reinforces his sense of African Americans’ alienation from these “natural elements.” Walker clarifies that it is not at all unnatural for African Americans to act benevolently. “The blacks, taken them half enlightened and ignorant, are more humane and

merciful than the most enlightened and refined European that can be found on all the earth," he writes, reversing, like Easton, the normative savage-civilized binary, and claiming that "there is a solemn awe in the hearts of the blacks, as it respects murdering men." But he maintains the woman's loyalty to a "notorious wretch" — her personal oppressor but also a representative of the "set of wretches" who perpetrate slavery — represents alienation from her "natural fine feelings" toward justice and solidarity. "Humanity, kindness, and fear of the Lord" — some of the "natural elements of the blacks," in Walker's view — "does not consist in protecting devils," he writes (24). Walker calls this particular expression of alienation "servile deceit," or the misdirection of mercy toward one's captors, which results in "treachery, wickedness and deceit, [and] working against ourselves and our children — helping [our enemies], and the enemies of God, to keep us and our dear little children in the chains of slavery" (27).

These examples of the specific manifestations of psychological wretchedness are controversial because they seem to place personal blame on the boot-black and the Portsmouth woman for complying with racial prejudice. The anecdotal form, with its apparent concentration on a single individual, encourages the interpretation that Walker makes a cruel category mistake when he criticizes individuals' responses to slavery instead of the system itself. Indeed, Walker does argue that African American individuals would either "contradict or confirm" racist opinions "by [their] own actions," a formulation that also seems to suggest personal responsibility for "abject submission" insofar it seems to

make one's "own actions" the key either to interrupting or to perpetuating oppression (27). Yet, an interpretation of this kind overlooks the broader context in and purpose for which Walker discusses the boot-black and the Portsmouth woman: precisely as manifesting the psychic forms produced "in consequence of oppression" (26). As he uses them, the boot-black and the Portsmouth woman are less individuals than they are embodiments of psychological effects. He uses the anecdotal form as the narrative embodiment of these effects, to highlight not their singularity but their exemplarity. Moreover, both examples capture what for Walker constitutes the most potent maneuver of American slavery: to create a "set of beings" who have "nearly lost the spirit of man," having been constituted by racial oppression to lack a political critique (the boot-black) and to be "disunited" from one other (the "deceitful" Portsmouth woman) (26, 20).

To read Walker as criticizing these individuals misconstrues his figuration of them as exemplars and neglects the overarching allegation of his text of the history of slavery as the "source" of these alienating effects. But it also obscures his emphasis on collective action to combat these effects. "It is the will of the Lord that our greatest happiness shall consist in working for the salvation of our whole body," Walker writes (29). It is for this reason that Walker so harshly denounces servile deceit: it fractures alliances within the enslaved community, and in so doing, acts as a strong force against racial solidarity. As he writes in his 1828 address to the Massachusetts General Colored Association, disunity is a "powerful auxiliary in keeping us from rising to the scale of reasonable and thinking beings." Hence

he praises the Association for its “primary object” to “unite the colored population, so far, through the United States of America, as may be practicable and expedient; [by] forming societies, [and by] opening, extending, and keeping up correspondences,” for its effort to foster collectivity wherever and however it can (80). Walker’s hope that “correspondences” will advance the cause of unification underlies his participation in the nation’s earliest African American newspaper, Cornish and Russwurm’s *Freedom’s Journal*, and his continued support for its successor, *Rights of All*, and it also adds a layer to Walker’s own intention that his *Appeal* should be circulated and read aloud to those for whom he “more particularly” designed it. These formulations indicate that Walker saw a large role for print media to gather disparate people and foster the kind of revolutionary consciousness his analysis of the boot-black figures as necessary. Such “correspondences” promise especially to build unity among free blacks in the industrial North, where racial prejudice and the socioeconomic stratification of wage-labor exclude them from the “higher attainments.”

Walker conceives the unification of enslaved people in the U.S. South differently, however, and it is not incidental that he sets his example of servile deceit in the context of a rebellion. Walker’s open call for and justification of rebellion—“they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition[;] therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed” —stunned and threatened white Southerners (25). The *Appeal* first appeared in port cities, in North Carolina’s Wilmington, New Bern, and Elizabeth City, cities in a region already well known

for rebellious activity. Slaveowners in North Carolina petitioned their governor, John Owen, to suppress the *Appeal*, believing that it had made their enslaved people “almost uncontrollable,” and in 1830, the legislature swiftly passed a series of laws further restricting literacy, manumission, and mobility, culminating in a law that required black sailors to be “quarantined” —jailed— on land while their ships were at port. Georgia’s governor put a \$10,000 bounty on Walker’s capture, and to “write, print, publish, or distribute any thing having a tendency to create discontent among the free coloured population of this state, or insubordination among the slaves therein” became a crime punishable by death or life imprisonment. Hence the sailor Edward Smith was convicted of seditious libel and sentenced to a year in prison for simply having the *Appeal* in his possession, and hence the enslaved man Jacob Cowan from Wilmington, North Carolina, found distributing the text, was jailed and eventually sold into Alabama, where it was hoped he would be “deprived of the opportunity afforded by a Sea port town to receive and distribute such books.” These acts of suppression on the part of state governments, as well as the rash of white militia violence against Southern blacks, which adumbrated the indiscriminate violence that would follow Nat Turner’s rebellion the proceeding year, responded to Walker’s loud call for enslaved people to unify in rebellion against their “natural enemies” (60). If “correspondences” and societies would foster revolutionary consciousness among free blacks in the North, then rebellion would enact it in the South, and for rebellion to succeed, enslaved people would have to be unified in their intent and stalwart in their purpose: “If

you commence, make sure work—do not trifle, for they will not trifle with you” (25).

Walker identifies and harshly denounces servile deceit, then, because of its potential to rend the rebellious community.

The *Appeal* thus speaks openly and hopefully about rebellion, yet for Walker, rebellion depends on a fundamental reversal of the effect of slavery to make the enslaved “believe that God made [them] and [their] children to be slaves,” a belief about the essentiality and permanence of racial nature and the racial order that it is Walker’s purpose to expose and purge (33). Walker’s theory of the power of historical experience to reshape human nature helps him explain what he frames as African Americans’ alienation from “the natural elements of the blacks,” but it also enables his faith in its undoing. Both transformations—from the “natural element” into wretchedness and from wretchedness into revolution—he conceives from within a view of nature as mutable under history’s powerful agency. Hence Walker’s theory of nature’s historicity and changeability had immediate and broad political implications in its antebellum context because it restored a sense of agency to historical actors by revoking agency from nature. It made nature an impossible reference to explain things as they appeared, and in this restoration of agency to history, it placed the source of wretchedness squarely on the institution and responsibility for it squarely on the perpetrators of the institution. By the same measure, it provoked enslaved people to conceive of themselves not as natural but as historical persons whose fates were anything but inevitable.

1.4 Geologic time, prophetic time, and Walker's (r)evolutionary thought

When Charles Darwin embarked on the *Beagle* in 1831, he carried with him the first volume of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, and the mail Darwin collected in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1832 included Lyell's newly published second volume. In *Principles*, Lyell outlined his theory of uniformitarianism, or the theory that the "forces now operating upon and beneath the earth's surface may be the same, both in kind and degree, as those which at remote epochs have worked out geological changes." Lyell argued that current geologic forms should be seen as the "enduring monuments" and "lasting signs of [the earth's] partial destruction and renovation" under the influence of these continual and uniform processes. In order for these geologic processes to have enough time to destruct and renovate the earth, Lyell's theory required a timescale ("geologic time") that drastically revised Christian theology's dating of the earth at 6,000 years. According to Lyell, many "epochs" had elapsed, and during this time, geologic processes had gradually written an "autobiography" on and within the earth, inscribing a "symbolic language" that geologists can read to reconstruct the history of these changes (xi). Thus not only did Lyell provide a new concept of time that would be essential to the conceptualization of evolution—"The belief that species were immutable productions was almost unavoidable as long as the history of the world was thought to be of short duration; but now [we] have acquired some

idea of the lapse of time,” wrote Darwin—but he proposed a method of reading that inferred the past through a study of the present (*Origin* 418).

Lyell’s hermeneutical method reverses the analytical starting point that Walker proposes in the *Appeal*. Walker references Josephus and Plutarch, urges his readers to consult the “pages of history,” and performs comparative historical analysis because he believes the past to be the archive of the causes of present-day racial forms, which are these causes’ effects. Lyell, on the other hand, proposed to begin by studying effects in order to derive their causes. For Lyell, investigating the present yields the historical narrative of geology; for Walker, investigating human history yields an understanding of present racial and social phenomena. Yet Walker and Lyell are united in their shared belief that the present is “the result of a long succession of events,” and both the *Appeal* and *Principles* set out to identify the underlying causes and narrative trajectory of the current condition of their respective objects of analysis (Lyell 2). In this sense, Walker posits a kind of uniformitarianism with respect to racial formation in the antebellum United States. The causes of the effect called “race,” he shows, have been continuously underway. Walker assumes the “lapse of time” that Darwin, after Lyell, saw as the crucial concept that had to be put in place in order for natural scientists to be able to perceive species as involved in an “ever-varying state” of composition and as subject to influences that, for geologists, modify the “structure of our planet,” while for race theorists like Walker and Easton, modify the structure of racial nature (Lyell x, 1).

Unlike Lyell's geologic processes, however, for Easton and Walker, the "long succession of events" leading to present-day racial forms—the history of enslavement—are not natural processes. It was commonplace among abolitionists to use the word "unnatural" to describe social, familial, and sexual arrangements under slavery, and often abolitionists used this word to disparage cross-racial sexual liaisons as particularly compromising to whites' sexual purity, or to label the way slavery sundered "natural" family ties by separating families upon sale. In these contexts of the word's usage, "natural" named the normative family form (non-interracial, heterosexual, monogamous), and arrangements that departed from this norm were classified as unnatural. When Walker and Easton deem slavery's succession of events "unnatural," their use of this word aligns less with the moral discourse of abolition and more with the natural scientific discourses toward which both of their texts are oriented. When Easton writes that "the slave system is an unnatural cause, and has produced its unnatural effects, as displayed in the deformity of two and a half millions of beings," he depicts slavery as an economic and social arrangement that has been superimposed upon and interrupted the "natural" processes of human biological and psychological development (24). Walker calls these interruptive processes "inhuman" rather than "unnatural," as "inhuman" accords with and remains within the idiom of his claim that slavery dehumanizes African Americans by using them as "beasts of burden" and by attempting to instill in them the self-conception that they are "brutes" and not men (2). Yet both see slavery as an artificial system overlaid onto and

fundamentally disruptive of natural developmental process.

Nature nonetheless resurges in the *Appeal*, for Walker argues that slavery's attempt to transform African Americans from men into brutes never succeeds: "Man, in all ages and all nations of the earth, is the same," he writes, "and though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth, yet the spirit and feeling which constitute the creature, man, can never be entirely erased from his breast" (61). Inasmuch as Walker wishes to raise African Americans' awareness about the position into which slavery has put and kept them by piercing through racial ideology, the fact that slavery has in fact failed in its effort to vanquish their humanity is the first object of his effort. The "spirit and feeling which constitute the creature" cannot be "[got] rid of," and Walker implores his readers to be "determined to act like men," to "arise from this death-like apathy" and by "exert[ing] [themselves] to the full," become the "respectable men" that nature has made them (61, 62). Walker rallies his readers to take hold of the essential humanity that racial oppression has endeavored to abuse and manipulate out of them, and he conjectures that the moment they do will be the moment of decision. Moreover, he speculates that white Americans already know that their campaign to stamp humanity out of African Americans has failed, and knowing that "they have done [them] so much injury," they fear that because black Americans are "men, and not brutes, [they] will retaliate" (61).

Nature resurges in the *Appeal* in the form of this essential humanity that even slavery can never fully repress, a humanity that, when tapped and awakened (as the text itself

means to do), will begin to undo the unnatural processes of racial formation. But nature resurges in yet another way. Under Lyell's theory of uniformitarianism, present geologic forms capture the past, which has carved its life story in the earth's layers. Geologists can read the "symbolic language" that the past has inscribed because the processes whereby it has been written are still in operation. It is the continuity (or uniformity) of natural processes that justifies this backward glance, but uniformitarianism's continuity also justifies a forward one. As these natural processes have always been in operation, uniformitarianism gives no reason why they would not remain in operation into the future. While much of Walker's *Appeal* concerns historicizing race, his text similarly contains a forward glance. Articles III and IV repeat Walker's ambiguous prophecy that white Americans' "cup is nearly full" because slavery has "carried their country to the brink of a precipice" (11, 20, 49, 39). He warns that unless "something is speedily done," the nation's "destruction may be sure" (47). In the climactic conclusion to Article III, Walker warns white Americans that their "DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless they REPENT" (43 original emphasis). This repentance must consist of white Americans "throw[ing] away [their] fears and prejudices" and finally treating black Americans "like men." Walker writes, "Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together" (70).

When Walker makes these forward-looking pronouncements, he again raises the specter of insurrection that incited the violent, reactionary stir in the Southern states and set

slaveholders on their paranoid edge, but Walker also positions white Americans' near-future destruction as inevitable, even if enslaved people do not revolt. "The will of God must however, in spite of us, *be done*," he repeats (41, 47). In the context of his claim that slavery represents an unnatural social arrangement that has disrupted and falsely modified racial forms, when Walker states that slavery will be destroyed "in spite of us," he implies that nature, under God's hand, will inexorably correct itself. This formulation suggests that, throughout the *Appeal*, Walker envisions two "long succession[s] of events," the course of events under a true nature, and the artificial course of events under the unnatural system of slavery. Although the latter has repressed the former and climaxed in the American system of slavery, Walker prophesies that the former will finally overpower the latter. His uniformitarianism applies to this first true nature: while the natural processes of human racial development have been repressed by slavery, they have nonetheless always been in operation, and they will continue to operate into the future—even if they have to throw off slavery's tenacious grip. Walker gives white Americans three options for their future: they can repent, choosing to return to nature, or they can continue down their false course, but there they will be met either with the violence of insurrection or the violence of God's nature, resurging "in spite of" human intention.

This conception of history and futurity shares features with dialecticism, particularly its teleology, but it also partakes of evolutionary time. Christian theology undoubtedly informs Walker's forward glance, as his two most direct formulations of his prophesy frame

America's undoing as "God's will," and Walker clearly understands Americans' destruction as "the vengeance of God" being put upon them. Walker likely shared Christianity's biblical dating of the earth, and he also explicitly objects to what would become one of evolutionary theory's central and most startling claims, that humans "descend[ed] originally from the tribes of *Monkeys* or *Orang-Outangs*," albeit he objects on political, not scientific, grounds (10). Nonetheless, Walker imagines humanity as involved in a great and long process of change according to its social environment, a process that slavery has falsely but only temporarily disrupted. If option three comes to pass, Walker leaves it unclear exactly how nature will correct this imposition on human development, but he is clear that it will be bloody and that it will transpire soon. Importantly, in Walker's evolved future, the racial and social hierarchies that, at the end of the century, Social Darwinists will renarrate as the natural product of evolution's struggle for existence, have disappeared. The evolved future does away with racial hierarchy as an artificial effect whose constitution must therefore be understood as a culturally chosen and imposed arrangement, not a reflection of nature.

Against the period's ascendant conceptualization of racial nature as rooted inside an unchanging body, Walker's *Appeal* proposed that race was formed by and within the history of relations, and his text delineates the negative somatic and psychological effects of the history of slavery on racial formation. Six years after Walker's 1829 publication of the *Appeal*, in his birth state of North Carolina, Harriet Jacobs would also discover the

formative quality of these bonds of relation. In 1835, Jacobs fled her owner, Dr. John Norcom, in an effort to escape his threats of sexual exploitation and to help emancipate her two enslaved children. Historians of slavery call Jacobs's initial escape "intra-limital" because her flight did not bring her outside the boundaries of slave territory. Rather, Jacobs concealed herself in the crawlspace above her grandmother's storeroom, which she narrates in her 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Like Walker's *Appeal*, Jacobs's autobiography reveals that she perceived a fundamental enmeshment among human and nonhuman beings. The following chapter details how Jacobs both explicitly limns and subtly implies the extensive network of people responsible for her concealment and flight, as well as the way she and her allies relied on nonhuman elements of their environments to protect and heal themselves. *Incidents* not only depicts Jacobs's process of becoming increasingly aware of these interrelations, but her autobiography presents the other side of Walker's theory of human and environmental impingement. Whereas Walker aims to reveal the wretched psychology damage caused by false, brutal relations, Jacobs shows her allies in Edenton appropriating these relations for the purposes of eluding white authority and advancing their liberatory goals. *Incidents* thus responds to Walker's *Appeal* by portraying the insurgent power of a community reorganized around relations of mutual aid.

Chapter Two

Den Life:

Ontologies of Care in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

In her 1861 autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes her son Joseph as a “little vine” who comes to take “deep root in [her] existence” (96). In this formulation, Jacobs uses a metaphor instead of a simile—she does not write that Joseph was *like* a little vine or that she came to feel *as though* he were taking root—a literary choice that more thoroughly transforms Joseph into a little vine whose existence has become braided into her own. Moreover, Jacobs’s choice to use the word “existence” where she might have used “life” or “body” summons the language of metaphysics and evinces the sense that Jacobs feels their deep weaving to lie at an abstract but basic level: the level of existence. In her image of the little vine, Jacobs captures an idea about the nature of human being that her narrative more generally develops and whose articulation is the object of this chapter, a conception of beings as existentially enmeshed and essentially dependent on each other for their survival. This conception of being boldly contradicted discourses of subjectivity that idealized autonomy and independence, ideals that not only prevailed during Jacobs’s lifetime but were also used to rationalize slavery by negatively casting African-descended people as incomplete and dependent subjects who therefore required management by fully-formed whites. Jacobs’s conception of being as constituted by and

dependent on others not only challenges this ideal, but it reinfuses dependence with positive value and political efficacy. *Incidents* portrays the nourishment of these existential entanglements, as well as the material and spiritual aid they give her in her extraordinary flight from slavery.

As the discipline of ecology began to take shape at the end of the nineteenth century, the conception of beings as interdependent came to play a large role in its reconceptualization of the natural world. Natural scientists responded to evolutionary theory's ascendancy by installing a picture of nature as dynamic, changing, and relational at the center of its investigations, and following Ernst Haeckel's 1866 definition of ecology, late nineteenth-century natural scientists set out to study the "relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact" —to study, in other words, the mechanics, dynamics, patterns, and effects of enmeshment and dependency. In 1895, the influential ecologist Eugenius Warming proposed a term—"factors"—to describe these relations and urged ecologists to research the precise ways in which plants were factors in each others' lives. At the same time, Frederic Clements, sometimes labeled the "father" of American ecology, began to describe a process he called "succession," which named the series of changes organisms undergo in response to the organic factors of their surrounding environments. Informed by evolutionary theory, Clements's idea of succession shifted ecological discourse toward the notion of ecosystems,

a word defined for the first time by Arthur Tansley in his 1935 *Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms*, by conceiving of environments as bounded zones of interactive factors that gradually cause organic change. In its post-Darwin instantiation, then, ecology instated interdependence as axiomatic to the natural world and set out to explore these relationships.

Late nineteenth-century ecologists like Haeckel, Warming, and Clements did not conceive of their work as simply naming or recording these relationships, however. Rather, as the influential ecologist Eugene Odum wrote in his 1953 *Fundamentals of Ecology*, the first generation of ecologists endeavored to “study the structure and function of nature.”

Odum’s intellectual forebears separated their “mature” science from the natural history that had come before it on the basis that ecologists went beyond simply enumerating species; they peered into nature’s underlying structures. Historians of ecology have corroborated this discipline-defining pronouncement by claiming that the shift from natural history to ecology was indeed a shift from description to theory. According to the first ecologists and to later historians of ecology, pre-Darwinian natural history was “not optimal for theoretical developments” (in the historian Frank Egerton’s terms) because its methods and goals consisted largely of discovering and classifying species (339). On the contrary, ecology began from and developed theoretical principles about nature. Since the discipline’s inception, in the story ecology has told of itself, natural science matured into its modern and truly scientific form when it combined investigations into physical phenomena with metaphysical propositions about the structures that underlie and cause them.

If ecology defines itself as a metaphysical as much as physical science, then its practitioners extend far beyond the bounds of those who tend to appear in its historiography. Harriet Jacobs was a student of ecology in Odum's sense, an investigator into the structures and functions of nature. Calling Jacobs a "student" reflects recent efforts by the scholars Stefano Harvey and Frederick Moten to redefine "study" as the "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, [the] irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice" (110). But it also reflects Jacobs's own effort to portray enslaved people's empirical, speculative, and practical researches as highly valuable sources of knowledge. Although slavery has "afforded [her] little opportunity" for the "kinds of knowledge" derived from conventional education, literacy, and a childhood unexposed to the violences of slavery, Jacobs writes that it nonetheless "brought her much of the knowledge that comes from experience," and this knowledge has given her the ability to "read the characters, and question the motives of those around [her]" (28, 31). Similarly, Hannah Crafts, whose autobiographical novel *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (c. 1855) this chapter treats at some length, explains that "in the absence of books and teachers and schools [she] determined to learn if not in a regular, approved, scientific way." Crafts's protagonist Hannah hones a "silent unobtrusive way of observing things and events, wishing to understand them better" (58). Her researches, like Jacobs's, are observation-based, for, she writes, "no one could prevent us making good use of our eyes" (63). As Hannah's new mistress "survey[s] with haughty eyes" the Lindendale

plantation, Hannah “stud[ies] her, [making] out a mental inventory of her foibles, and weaknesses, and caprices, and whether or not she was likely to prove an indulgent mistress” (70). Hannah combines these empirical researches with her “intuition” to solve the novel’s central mystery—the “truth” of her mistress’s racial identity—before the other characters and in enough time to aid and accompany her mistress in flight.

As Hannah’s “irregular” method of research makes her an incisive and potent detective, Jacobs’s makes her a credible author: “You may believe what I say, for I write only that whereof I know, [as] I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds, [and] only by experience can one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations,” she writes (6). This claim that narrative authority derives from experience reflects the effort among black abolitionists to affirm and encourage black authorship in the face of prejudice against it on the part of both proslavery forces and white abolitionists, but it also reflects William Wells Brown’s statement in an 1847 speech that “slavery as it is”—the phrase made famous by Theodore Dwight Weld’s use of it as the title of his 1839 treatise—may well be unrepresentable. “I may try to represent to you Slavery as it is; and another may follow me and try to represent the condition of the Slave; we may all represent it as we think it is; and yet we shall all fail to represent the real condition of the slave,” Brown explains. Brown imagines that the only way he could communicate the “real condition of the slave” would be to take each listener “one at a time, and whisper it to you”—an act of intimate narration that the fugitive’s written text, read silently, privately, in a one-to-one transmission, more

closely simulates. Not only would this style of narration weary his audience, but Brown suggests that it would also offend their “fastidiousness,” a word he uses to capture the intimacy and potential impropriety both of life under slavery and of the only true method for its representation. And even were these whispered acts of individualized narration to occur, Brown nonetheless asserts that “Slavery has never been represented; Slavery can never be represented.” Because authentic knowledge of slavery comes from experience alone, Jacobs provokes her white readers to undertake an experiment: “If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment” (58).

Crafts and Jacobs boldly assert the effectiveness of what the chairman of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee and author of the 1872 compendium *The Underground Railroad* William Still termed “the schooling,” which, “in connection with the most fearful looking-for of the threatened wrath of the trader,” made enslaved people powerful readers of their natural surroundings, their social environments, and the habits, motives, and secrets of their owners (238). This experiential “schooling” made enslaved people “cunning,” as Jacobs puts it. “Slaves, being surrounded by mysteries, deceptions, and dangers early learn suspicious and watchful, and prematurely cautious and cunning,” Jacobs muses, and she titles the chapter in which she uses the postal system to deceive Flint as to her whereabouts “Competition in Cunning,” a competition that she incontestably wins (234). In the long eighteenth century, this word, “cunning,” was used not only to denote quick-wittedness

and the capacity to gain power through cleverness rather than physical strength but, in the context of maritime activity, it was also used to describe the duties of a helmsman: the eighteenth-century helmsman “minded the cunning” of the ship, its direction, progress, and safe passage. When Jacobs describes enslaved people’s education as productive of cunning, she suggests that their schooling occasioned instances of outwitting that eroded white authority.

This experiential mode of study places Jacobs, Crafts, and many other self-emancipated narrators in a tradition of empirical research that transpired beyond and presented a considerable challenge to conventional institutions of scientific learning—the “regular, approved, scientific way[s]” and places that have been the focus of ecological historiography. As *Incidents* documents, over the course and as a result of her studies, Jacobs develops what the theorist and historian of ecology Jurek Kolasa calls a “notion” of the mutuality of being—a distinctly ecological notion captured poignantly by Jacobs’s image of the little vine. While Kolasa disparages “notions” as “pretheoretical” and as “imprecise or incompletely articulated concepts, metaphors, or analogies” that “do not have explicit assumptions or form consistent conceptual structure, [and cannot be] considered parts of theory *per se*,” *Incidents* both rigorously theorizes the notion of mutuality and portrays the role it played in helping enslaved people elude their masters and thus accomplish their personal and political goals (Kolasa 26). Jacobs’s *Incidents* shows that the conceptual gap between Flint’s non-ecological notion of being and Jacobs’s ecological notion of mutual

dependence enable spaces of refuge, concealment, and flight to emerge for enslaved people while remaining unperceived to their enemies. This chapter treats *Incidents* as both a work of ecological theory whose multiple and complex portrayals of enslaved ontologies of care contributed to the emergent paradigm of biological mutuality and as an antislavery text that positions these networks as the tactical basis of escape, as well as the tenet on which to build the post-slavery society.

2.1 Den life

When William Still published the first edition of *The Underground Railroad* seven years after the end of the Civil war, he had three aims. Using a turn of phrase from one of the earliest antislavery narratives written by the formerly enslaved, African-descended Oludah Equiano, Still's first aim was to record the "interesting narratives of the escapes of many men, women, and children, from the prison-house of bondage; from cities and plantations; from rice swamps and cotton fields; from kitchens and mechanic shops; from Border States and Gulf States; from cruel masters and mild masters." As Still's catalogue of the diverse manifestations of slavery and of the many different kinds of flight implies, his second aim was to create a broad picture of the systematic and relentless pursuit of freedom on the part of enslaved people and the bravery they displayed. This motive aligns with William Wells Brown's effort in *The Rising Son, or the Antecedents and Advancements of the Colored Race*,

published one year after Still's compendium in 1873, to display to the post-war nation African Americans' long history of courage and fortitude within a society that oppressed them. Finally, at a period when many formerly enslaved people who had been forcibly separated from their families were still searching for their loved ones, Still hoped his volume would help families reunite by publishing the names, paths, and final destinations of those who had fled slavery. Distinctly informed by the imperatives of Reconstruction, then, *The Underground Railroad*, as a vast compilation of the multiform methods of escape and abolitionist aid, proves its assessment of Henry Box Brown's famous escape: "In point of interest, his case [was] no more remarkable than many others" —not because his case was not remarkable, for surely twenty-seven hours in a three by two foot box on a freight from Richmond to Philadelphia deserved to be remarked upon, but because all escapes were innovative, daring, and dangerous (81).

As Still's compilation shows, along with being "no more remarkable than many others," Henry Box Brown's method of stowing himself inside a shipping crate and mailing himself North was also not unique, at least not insofar as many fugitives found escape from bondage by inhabiting spaces that seemed uninhabitable. In 1859, William Box Peel Jones, "prefer[ing] the box to the auction block," wrapped himself in straw and boxed himself up, arriving in Philadelphia on the Ericson Line only after he "suffered indescribable misery, and had his faith taxed to the utmost" (46). Similarly, in an entry titled, "Blood Flowed Freely," Still describes the miserable escape of Abram Galloway and his friend Richard, who

secreted themselves on a North Carolina merchant ship that was transporting turpentine. Although they escaped being “smoked,” a fate they had expected and for which they had prepared by creating “silk oil cloth shrouds” and “a bladder of water and towels [to] be wet and held to their nostrils,” the turpentine “literally [drew blood] from them at every pore in frightful quantities” (152). But it is Charles Gilbert who becomes Still’s study in how to elude slave catchers by occupying inhospitable spaces, Gilbert’s mastery of which Still captures in his preposition-laden subtitle: “Fleeing from Davis, a Negro Trader, Secreted Under a Hotel, Up a Tree, Under a Floor, In a Thicket, On a Steamer.” Gilbert seeks out “dark and gloomy” spots where life seems impossible, converting interstitial space—the “three or four feet” under the Hige Hotel and underneath the floorboards of his friend Isabella’s home—into habitable space and turning waste into useful resources, as when he “received his food from the ‘slop tub,’ securing this diet in the darkness of night after all was still and quiet around the hotel” (237).

Composed between 1853 and 1858, Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* revolves around the escape and concealment of Linda Brent (the name Jacobs gives to herself in the autobiographical memoir) in a similarly tiny and seemingly uninhabitable space (nine feet long, seven feet wide, three feet high). In 1835, Jacobs fled from her owner Dr. James Norcom, named Dr. Flint in *Incidents*. The narrative details Flint’s unrelenting physical, sexual, and emotional assaults on Linda, as well as her consistent maneuvers to thwart his effort to coerce her into concubinage. When Flint finally threatens to send Linda’s young

children from his urban estate to his rural plantation for “breaking,” Linda decides to abscond, believing her flight will stymie his plan (which it does). Thus 1835 commenced a concealment that would last seven years, until 1842 when Jacobs fled North, first to Philadelphia then to New York City. A persistent theme in the reception history of *Incidents* has been incredulity at Linda’s long concealment in the attic space above the storeroom belonging to Jacobs’s grandmother, Molly Horniblow (called Aunt Marthy in *Incidents*), a building adjacent to her owner’s home. The narrative’s nineteenth-century readers combined this incredulity with racist assumptions about black literacy and authorship, deeming the narrative fictional and attributing it to its white editor, Lydia Maria Child, despite Jacobs’s testimony that her “narrative [was] no fiction” and Child’s testimony she had “not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks” (5, 7). These assumptions—that Jacobs did not or could not have authored *Incidents* or that it was fictional rather than autobiographical—continued through much of the twentieth century, exemplified by John Blassingame’s now-notorious assertion in his 1972 *The Slave Community* that *Incidents* was most likely authored by Child and that it was “not credible.” It was not until Jean Yellin Fagan authenticated Jacobs’s authorship in 1987 that Jacobs’s claim to have written a work of autobiography “by herself” was generally accepted.

Strikingly, when Linda learns that her family has found a place to conceal her in Marthy’s home, even she “could not imagine how it was possible to hide me in her house,

every nook and corner of which was known to the Flint family.” Like Still’s *Underground Railroad*, Jacobs’s *Incidents* is a study in how such a concealment shifts from seeming to be impossible to becoming a sustained and successful mode of escape—how, in other words, fugitives transformed evidently dead zones like boxes, attics, the “three or four feet” beneath hotels, caves, hollows, and swamps into life-giving ones. As *Incidents* documents, even before Linda begins her long inhabitation in her attic refuge, she has already moved through several precarious environments. Her chapter “The Flight,” which begins the narrative sequence of her escape, demonstrates both the extreme hardship of these environments and the extensive network of Edenton community members whose aid enables Linda to survive them. After an arduous and solitary trek from Flint’s plantation back to Edenton, Linda first receives shelter from an unnamed white woman whom Fagan has identified as Martha Blount, the wife of a slaveholding Edenton elite. Jacobs describes Martha Blount as “unlike the majority of slaveholders’ wives” in the fact that she “treated [enslaved people] kindly [and] never allowed them to be sold,” qualities that, through juxtaposition, deepen Jacobs’s critique of the narrative’s other slaveholding mistress, Mrs. Flint, whose astonishing cruelty Jacobs repeatedly dramatizes to show her readers the corrupting effect of slavery on white womanhood (152).

In a moment of what *Incidents* stages as cross-racial alliance based on unspoken, shared maternal sympathies, Martha Blount assures Aunt Marthy that she will shelter her fugitive granddaughter, but it is Martha’s enslaved cook Betty who coordinates Linda’s

concealment. Most literally, Betty determines the coordinates of Linda's body, stowing her in the attic until the perilous moment when Flint comes to search the Blounts' home for his missing slave. In this urgent moment, Betty hurries Linda "down stairs, across the yard, into the kitchen," where she locks the door and "lift[s] a plank in the floor" to reveal a "buffalo skin and a bit of carpet [spread] for [her] to lie on, and a quilt [to throw] over her" (158). This set-up recalls many of the subterranean hiding spots along the Underground Railroad that Still memorializes in his compendium. Unlike the attic in which Betty originally stows Linda, this more secretive and less detectable hiding spot resides within a social space, the kitchen, where African American women like Betty found relative authority and dominion. It also resides in an outbuilding (they run "across the lawn"), as was typical for plantation kitchens, and, moreover, that the space has been prepared with a buffalo skin, carpet, and quilt suggests prior or anticipated future use. Indeed, in this passage, Jacobs deftly implies Betty's hand in sheltering perhaps many fugitives outside of the good slave mistress Martha Blount's range of vision. Thus Jacobs's seeming diminishment of Betty as believing that "eating was the most important thing in life" acquires new, multivalent meaning (153). If, as Jacobs implies, Betty clandestinely serves as an agent on the underground railroad, then what appears to be an apolitical absorption in cooking comes to seem like part and parcel of dissembling her activities, on the one hand, while on the other, her "vocation" as a cook—which in this context evokes its second meaning as a "calling"—

also comes to seem crucial to providing an outbuilding and access to food, on which fugitives' survival in no small part depends.

When Linda's concealment at the Blounts' becomes irreparably compromised, her friend Peter, the next link in Linda's network of allies, arrives to shepherd her to a new location. Linda has known Peter since his apprenticeship to her father, Elijah Knox. Her father's accreditation of Peter and their longstanding relationship, as well as the fact that he "had always borne a good character," makes Peter trustworthy in Jacobs's eyes (170). Peter improvises Linda's temporary concealment in Snaky Swamp, the fictional name Jacobs gives to a small swamp on the outskirts of Edenton. To reach the swamp, Peter, "the kind-hearted, noble fellow, who never turned his back upon any body in distress, white or black," cuts a "path through bamboos and briers of all descriptions," and takes Jacobs "in his arms, and carries [her] to a seat made among the bamboos" — another structure that, like the buffalo-skin-lined hiding space under the Betty's floorboards, suggests ongoing use (229, 171). Jacobs's descriptions of Snaky Swamp emphasize its environmental threats and, hence, Peter's selfless intrepidity. The two become "covered with hundreds of mosquitoes," and they see "snake after snake crawling around" such that by evening "the number of snakes increase[s] so much that [they are] continually obliged to thrash them with sticks to keep them from crawling over [them]" (171). Yet Peter remains with Jacobs during this nightmarish experience before guiding her to what will become her semi-permanent space of concealment in her grandmother's attic. This space, too, has been created through

collective effort: while she and Peter have been waiting in the swamp, Linda's uncle Phillip (Mark Horniblow) has been transforming the attic into a space of concealment by cutting a trapdoor in the ceiling, building a bookcase that doubles as a ladder, and creating a bed in the space.

The three spaces that Linda has inhabited thus far in her escape—the Blounts' attic, Betty's floorboard hideaway, and the "seat" in Snaky Swamp—have been carved out of unsafe environments and transformed into zones of refuge by Linda's community. Jacobs signals that a similar but even more profound transformation takes place in Marthy's attic by the descriptive language she uses for the space. Scholars and readers of *Incidents* most often call this attic space the "garret," and indeed Jacobs uses the word "garret" in her first two references to the space. However, Jacobs then abruptly switches to the word "den," which she proceeds to use a dozen times, never returning to the word "garret." In this switch from "garret" to "den," Jacobs shifts from a military word—"garret" derives from "garrison," meaning a barricaded area designed to thwart invasion—to an ecological one, as dens, most commonly associated with bears, evoke hibernation and child-bearing. Jacobs further casts the space as a maternal den by depicting Linda's movements as bear-like: unable to stand erect in the three-foot-high space, Linda crawls around it on hands and knees, and when she decides to confront her children's father, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, called Mr. Sands in *Incidents*, to encourage him to buy them from Flint, she crawls from out of the den, across the storeroom floor, and to the window—in part, it should be noted,

because in her long concealment she has lost the strength to walk. By naming her space of concealment a “den” and portraying Linda thus, Jacobs infuses the space with a sense of rest and rebirth not only for Linda but, more dearly to the character and the writer, for her children, whose freedom, Jacobs takes great pains to insist, is the central object of her escape.

Jacobs’s use of the word “den,” her bear imagery, and her insistence that, however counterintuitive it may seem to her white female readership, her concealment does not reflect a relinquishment of her maternal duties but an assurance of her children’s authentic rebirth into freedom all begin to suggest the social and nourishing character of the space. The shift from military to ecological language effects both an affective and a spatial recalibration: the space shifts from one meant to keep enemies out (although that it also has this effect should not be underestimated) to one meant to nurture those inside. However, the clarity with which Jacobs describes Betty and Peter’s caretaking during the early phases of her escape notably diminishes once she settles into the den. While Jacobs does supply some details about her grandmother’s caretaking—she brings Linda “herbs and cooling medicines” when red ants attack her, and as the years pass, Marthy comes “oftener than she had done,” partially because the family enacts less caution and partially because Marthy grows lonelier after the “slow murder” of her beloved daughter, Nancy—she remains mostly silent about the everyday labors that sustain her (175, 220). She does not, for instance, speak of food, of who cooks and transports it and how often (as she does when

under Betty's care), who collects plates and disposes of scraps, or how her family disassembles the extra provisions coming into the Horniblow household. Nor does she speak of the indelicate details of secretly discarding human waste or bathing—who, how, where? Nor does she elaborate who supplied her clothing, or how, or who furtively washed and mended it. If Linda's time in the den is the narrative's center, then it is an empty center, as Jacobs leaves the collective labors entailed in keeping her physical body alive largely to the imagination.

Why this occlusion? Had Jacobs included the details of her caretaking during her seven-year concealment in a space that offered no apparent resources for survival, they would have transformed her narrative's genre from the distinctly antebellum antislavery autobiography to an immense catalogue of the clandestine tactics and intimate acts necessary for keeping a body alive while concealed. Jacobs may also have suppressed them for fear that they would offend not only her audience's sense of genre but also their "delicate" senses of propriety. Jacobs's decision to absent these labors makes more than literary sense, however. Twice in *Incidents* Jacobs explicitly withholds the details of escape. When her uncle Joseph (called Benjamin) flees North before being captured and jailed by Norcom, Jacobs abruptly pronounces, "It was not necessary to state how he made his escape" (34). And when Jacobs finally leaves the den for the North, she writes, "I was to escape in a vessel; but I forbear to mention any further particulars" (229). Jacobs's withholding of the specific acts or paths of escape recalls Frederick Douglass's widely-

known claim that narrating these details spoils others' chances for escape by the same means because it informs inquisitive slave catchers of routes and tactics. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass writes, "The practice of publishing every new invention by which a slave is known to have escaped from slavery, has neither wisdom nor necessity to sustain it. Had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand *Box Browns* per annum" (188).

It is not incidental that in this 1855 revision of a similar formulation from his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*—"I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad* but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the *upperground railroad*"—Douglass includes the example of Henry Box Brown (90). Brown made the particulars of his escape known in two published narratives, one in 1849 and the other in 1851. Brown provided such detail as to the means of his safe transport that his narratives read like instruction manuals, yet according to Douglass, Brown's instruction was devastatingly misplaced: his publicity and transparency did "much toward enlightening the master" and thus worked against the abolitionist cause (91). And indeed, when Brown's co-conspirator, Samuel A. Smith, attempted the same feat with two other enslaved people, "the undertaking proved a failure," as Still reported. The men, "after having been duly expressed and some distance on the road, were, through the agency of the telegraph, betrayed, and the heroic, young fugitives were captured in their boxes and dragged back to

hopeless bondage." Smith was arrested and "called upon to suffer severely" for seven years in the Richmond prison (84). Allied with Douglass against publicizing the details of her concealment, Jacobs, then, remains largely silent about the methods used by her community to conceal and care for her during her time in the den. Their very absence from *Incidents* signals that Jacobs perceives the collective labor of caretaking as the dimensions and coordinates of her flight; they *are* her Henry Box Brown. As *Incidents* (can only safely) imply, the tactical distribution of Linda's bodily health among community and family members enables her to live in what would otherwise be an uninhabitable space. This networking of existence, moreover, guards the space from detection by Flint, for whom the space never enters into his field of vision. These collective labors effectively transform the space into a livable and invisible den of refuge.

The ontology of mutuality implied by den life contrasts with and challenges the effort by slaveholders to atomize enslaved people, efforts widely documented and denounced by black antislavery writers. Scenes of severe punishment and "breaking" ritually begin by extracting the enslaved person from her community, as when in Elizabeth Keckley's 1868 *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley's owner enlists his neighbor to break Elizabeth by locking her in a shed and beating her repeatedly, or when in his 1847 *Narrative*, William Wells Brown describes the breaking of Randall by shooting him and taking him to the barn, where the overseer Cook gives "him over one hundred lashes with a heavy cowhide, [and has] him washed with salt and water, and left him tied during the day" (20). Jacobs writes

that Flint also wishes to break Linda by sending her to his rural plantation, away from her family and friends: "I shall see her broke in yet," he states (157). Examples of the attempt to isolate enslaved people during their most vulnerable moments abound, revealing a significant component of breaking to be the forced severance of what Jacobs calls one's "ties to life," or the network of allies that stall slavery's drive to atomization, a drive replayed each time "husbands were torn from wives, parents from children, never to look upon each other again this side of the grave" (*Incidents* 120, 162).

Jacobs's perception of the importance of her network to combat slavery's attempt at atomization also manifests in Linda's forceful refusal of Flint's plan to install her as his concubine in a specially built house miles outside Edenton. "In the blandest tones," writes Jacobs, Flint declares his intent "to build a small house for [her], in a secluded place, four miles away from the town." Linda "shudder[s]" upon hearing this plan because she believes that she has thus far "escaped [her] dreaded fate (of rape by and concubinage to Flint), by being in the midst of people" (82). Linda understands that not only does her physical proximity to her community offer her some measure of protection from Flint's sexual assaults, but *his* nearness to social mores and public opinion puts a check, however minor, on his behavior: "The old sinner was politic. The application of the lash might have led to remarks that would have exposed him in the eyes of his children and grandchildren. How often did I rejoice that I lived in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other! If I had been on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city, I should

not be a living woman at this day" (55). Indeed, when Jacobs arrives in the "crowded city" of Philadelphia, she immediately begins to rebuild her network. She tells her first contact in Philadelphia, Reverend Jeremiah Durham, that she "should like to hunt up some people" from North Carolina whom she knew to be in the city, and that she would like his help "in finding [her] friends," explaining that she feels "alone in the world," having "left dear ties behind" in the South (285).

Composed at approximately the same time as *Incidents* but not published until it was rediscovered in 2002, Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* affirms the importance Jacobs ascribes to the networks of care at the (empty) center of her narrative and of Linda's escape, but Crafts does so through counterpoint. In her narration of the flight of Hannah and Hannah's former mistress (who goes unnamed in the novel), Crafts portrays the devastating effects of being "alone in the world," focusing particularly on the psychological effects of isolation during fugitivity. Although the two women flee together, the mistress suffers from severe nervousness, depression, and mania caused by her long, cold war with her allegorically-named tormentor Mr. Trappe and his threat to reveal her "true" racial identity to her new husband. The mistress's fluctuating mental and emotional states puts Hannah in a position to carry their expedition, often literally carrying her mistress when the latter's strength gives out. Like *Incidents*, Crafts places a small, unforgiving, and threatening dwelling at the center of her characters' flight: an abandoned cabin that Hannah discovers after many days of wandering through a "deep, dark wood." At first, the fact that "a more

lonely and desolate place could not well be imagined” is precisely what recommends it as perhaps the perfect space of concealment: “loneliness was what we sought; in that was our security” (95). But loneliness eventually causes a “superstitious horror [to take] possession of [her] dear companion’s mind” (96). Hannah believes that her own “overtaxed brain” also “became bewildered at times like that of my dear poor mistress,” and when their captors arrive, Crafts describes Hannah’s mental state as dissociated: “I am sure that they talked of us, though I failed to comprehend their words. I heard them. I understood their meaning, but could attach to them no sense in any other connection” (99). Dissociated and discovered, Crafts writes that the women “lost all resemblance to human beings,” particularly the will to resist enslavement, which originally spurred their flight: “We were led away as sheep are led to the slaughter, unresisting, uncomplaining and uncertain of our fate” (97, 99).

Once imprisoned, a “superstitious horror” like the one that had taken “possession” of her mistress overcomes Hannah. When a rat bites her cheek, her “terrified imagination [begins] to conjure strange fancies” of rats “banqueting hideously on the dead, [or] assailing even living men and women” — fancies whose referents would have been very real to enslaved people, whose dead bodies, as Jacobs writes in “Sketches from Neighboring Plantations,” were sometimes discovered to have been eaten by rats (104). As Hannah and her mistress deteriorate psychologically, Crafts introduces a character, an unnamed white woman jailed for abolitionist activity, who displays extreme effects of isolation. “For two

long weary years [this woman] beheld [only] one human face, and that one the jailer's," and in her isolation, she has slipped into a permanent state of hallucination in which she perceives the space of her imprisonment as a beautiful palace and herself as a powerful queen. As a figure who has imaginatively transformed a space of unfreedom into one of freedom and riches, Crafts begs the reader to question how this woman's mental state, detached from "reality," compares to physical or legal ("real") freedom and to consider the status of psychological disassociation from conditions of unfreedom in the context of slavery. Although Crafts may have been suggesting that this woman achieves a measure of power over her captors and her captivity, Hannah describes her as an "idiot" whose mind has "failed," as a sad case of the effects of extreme isolation. While for Crafts, this woman's permanent hallucinatory state may embody a potential route of escape from unfreedom, for her character, it represents a cautionary tale of the effects of isolation. Hannah does not perceive the political possibility of this woman's hallucinations but, having seen her mistress approach a similar mental state, having approached it herself, and having been prevented from reaching free soil because of the psychological effects of isolation, Hannah condemns it as a failure. After years of isolation of the sort that she has recently experienced in the cabin, Hannah declares it no "wonder that her mind failed [or] that premature age and imbecility stultified her faculties, and she became little more than an idiot" (107).

Through different narrative strategies—Crafts through negative example and Jacobs through occlusion—both writers demonstrate the centrality of mutual aid to the fugitive body and mind. These practices of mutuality reflect a notion (in Kolasa’s sense of the word) of life and the responsibilities for its persistence as distributed across a community, not borne by an individual alone. *Incidents* shows Linda’s den life to be supported by the deployment of this notion, and though the chronology of Jacobs’s narrative ends in 1858, her autobiography-in-letters from the Civil War reveals her continuation of these practices. In 1862, Jacobs traveled to Alexandria, Virginia, to nurse refugees from slavery. Writing to William Lloyd Garrison, she poignantly described the scene in Alexandria: “I found men, women and children all huddled together, without any distinction or regard to age or sex. Some of them were in the most pitiable condition. Many were sick with measles, diphtheria, scarlet and typhoid fever. Some had a few filthy rags to lie on; others had nothing but the bare floor or couch.” In the Alexandria camp, Jacobs administered food, water, medicine, and blankets—an image that evokes some of the unnamed labors in *Incidents*. Jacobs also helped orphaned children (orphaned by slavery and by the war) find foster parents among refugee women who not “in any one instance, refuse[d] shelter to an orphan” (Jacobs to Child, 18 March 1863). In *Incidents* and in her Civil War-era letters, Jacobs constructs an ontology of mutuality as the ballast of her antislavery activities.

2.2 *Vibrant materia medica*

The man who owned Harriet Jacobs and after whom she modeled Dr. Flint in *Incidents*, James Norcom, attended the Medical College at the University of Pennsylvania. He trained under the esteemed physician and statesman Benjamin Rush, whom he revered (he even named one of his sons Benjamin Rush Norcom) and whose theory of illness—that most illness was caused by excessive heat, irritation, or blood inside the body—he followed closely when he returned to Edenton to establish his medical practice. Like most “regular” physicians of the antebellum period (a designation that separated college-trained physicians from self-taught medical practitioners), Norcom bled and purged his patients, as these techniques were thought to reduce the body’s illness-causing heat. In treating cholera, for example, Norcom believed that the only “remedies in which any reliance can be placed [were] calomel and the lancet, [the] first to excite prostrate energies of the stomach [and] the last to reduce the quantity of blood” (James Norcom to John Norcom, 26 October 1843). In 1843, Norcom became fascinated with the French physician François Joseph Victor Broussais, whose 1832 *Treatise on Physiology Applied to Pathology* detailed and extended Rush’s theory of heat and dramatically intensified the depletive techniques used to treat illness (Broussais’s method of choice was leeching, and between 1823 and 1833, during Broussais’s tenure at the Paris Clinic, France increased its importation of leeches by a hundred times). For his theory that healthy bodies moderated their own cycles of irritation and relief, while bodies that had become ill through overstimulation or insufficient relief

required medical intervention to restore them to balance, Norcom deemed Broussais a “Philosophical visionary” (James Norcom to John Norcom, 6 October 1843).

In the medical thought of Norcom’s pedagogues, Rush and Broussais, the human body existed in a contentious relationship to the environments that surrounded it and the “external bodies” (Broussais’s term) with which it interacted. Although Broussais used the word “irritant” in a technical sense to describe the external stimuli that acted on the body’s delicate inner systems, in his *Treatise*, the word signifies in its colloquial sense as well. External bodies, like food, sexual partners, and even books and art inherently held the capacity to destabilize the body’s carefully-calibrated balance by overstimulating its sensitive organs, which it had labored to moderate. Moreover, the effects of overstimulation (or, on the other end of the spectrum, of deprivation, which was equally perilous to health) were not contained within the single, targeted organ but spread throughout the entire, interconnected system. Because the presence of “external bodies destined to gratify [the body’s] wants” caused desires to become “more clear and urgent,” the first step to health, according to Broussais, was the rigorous exercising of one’s will to minimize contact with known objects of desire (*Physiology* 248). Following Broussais, Norcom, for example, urged his wife “not to eat too freely” or she would find her stomach “injured by too full a diet” — a lack of restraint for which she would be “admonished” by “swelling in [her] feet and ankles, or by uneasy, uncomfortable breathing” (Norcom to Maria Norcom, 6 September 1846). Norcom himself suffered from chronic digestive ailments and likewise believed that he

would be cured when he could keep “the animal [from getting] the better of [his] rational nature” and become “less the slave of appetite and passion than [he had] been,” words he wrote in 1841, six years into his obsessive hunt for his missing slave Harriet (Norcom to John Norcom, 7 April 1841). In Broussais’s medical theory and in Norcom’s adaptation of it, then, the safest environment for maintaining bodily health was one of muted stimuli that encouraged the kind of moderate consumption which could satisfy the body’s naturally occurring and reasonable desires (for food, sex, thought and aesthetic pleasure) without tipping it into a state of urgent, animalistic desire. This framework required that patients be wary of their environmental surroundings as constant temptations whose overconsumption could easily lead to chronic ill health.

As Jacobs notes in *Incidents*, and as her brother John S. Jacobs notes in his own autobiographical narrative “A True Tale of Slavery,” Norcom forcibly apprenticed John to his medical practice, teaching him “to put up medicines, to leech, cup, and bleed” — the treatments Norcom had learned from Rush at the University of Pennsylvania and whose “philosophical” basis he had solidified through his avid reading of Broussais (94). Nonetheless, when in *Incidents* Linda’s “limbs [become] benumbed by inaction” and a “very painful sensation of coldness [overtakes] her head” during her second winter in the den, William (the pseudonym Jacobs gives her brother) consults a Thomsonian doctor, a type of doctor despised by Norcom and his colleagues, as John Jacobs surely would have known (185). Samuel Thomson was a well known and, by Norcom’s set, much-maligned

alternative healer. As Thomson recalled in his 1822 *Narrative of the Life and Medical Discoveries of Samuel Thomson*, in his rural New Hampshire community, “there was no such thing as a doctor known amongst [them],” and his family was attended by an “old lady by the name of Benton,” whose “whole practice was with roots and herbs applied to the patient, or given in hot drinks, to produce sweating; which always answered the purpose” (58). As Rush and Broussais were to Norcom, this woman became Thomson’s mentor: “When she used to go out to collect roots and herbs, she would take me with her, and learn me their names, and what they were good for; and I used to be very curious in my inquiries, and in tasting everything I found” (58-9).

This education “was afterwards very useful” to Thomson, who in his young adulthood nursed his wife back from the brink of death with botanicals alone, and who, having watched his neighbors succumb to illnesses being treated with the bleeding and purging of regular medicine, began to wonder if these treatments were more responsible for mortality rates than the illnesses themselves (59). Piecing together his empirical studies with old lady Benton and his suspicion of depletive treatments, Thomson issued a theory of illness that reversed regulars’ theory of heat and devised a set of treatments that corresponded to his new theory while contradicting theirs. Thomson claimed that coldness, not fever, indicated a lack of vitality and was the underlying cause of ill health, and thus he reasoned that patients, instead of being depleted of heat, should be warmed. Since according to Thomson, fever was the body’s sign that it was endeavoring to restore its

vitality, he believed that fever should be encouraged, so he treated patients by “steaming” them (a procedure that involved dripping water over a hot brick placed under the patient’s sick bed) and administering spicy herbs thought to warm the body and stimulate circulation. It is for this reason that the Thomsonian doctor William consults in *Incidents* prescribes “herbs, roots, and ointments” to aid Linda’s “benumbed” limbs and urges William to “rub the ointments on by a fire”: this doctor’s botanical prescription aims to restore Linda’s vital energy by warming her body, which has become ill with coldness.

Regular physicians abhorred Thomson (and his followers, like the doctor William consults) not only because his theory of the body and illness directly contradicted theirs or because of his highly public, scathing critique of their practices—“It is true, that much of what is at this day called medicine, is deadly poison; and were people to know what is offered them of this kind, they would absolutely refuse to receive it as medicine”—but because of his empirical methodology and its implication that training in a medical college was unnecessary, even harmful, and that anyone could practice medicine (16). They labeled Thomson and his followers “empiriks,” a term meant to denigrate their research method, epitomized by old lady Benton’s foraging for roots in the New Hampshire woods and transmitting this knowledge to young Thomson, and to set them apart from “rationalists,” who, instead of gathering knowledge through experience and trial, were supposed to have an overall theory of the body that could easily explain symptoms (of course, Thomson was a rationalist in the sense that he did have an overall theory of the body, but his methodology

and self-education disqualified him from the category). In the words of Dr. Edmund Strudwick in his 1850 inaugural address to the Medical Society of North Carolina (of which Norcom was a founding member), empiriks like Thomson were “sordid hucksters, who violate[d] every principle of humanity” and “mountebanks, who [had] stolen the garb of medicine,” which rightfully belonged to those who had been properly trained and credentialed. Missing the irony of his statement, Strudwick concluded that empiriks “traffick[ed] in human life” by administering false treatments and further undermining professional physicians’ already dubious status in the public eye (6).

As Norcom’s memoirist Solomon S. Satchwell explained, Norcom was among those who spoke out against empiricism with the “most decided condemnation and open denunciation” (10). Satchwell wrote that Norcom “had no parlance with empiricism in any form, and a keen antipathy to quackery, however robed, or from whatever quarter it came” (9). However unintentional, Satchwell’s choice of the word “quarter” was well-placed because it evoked the word that, in the context of the antebellum South, most commonly modified it—“slave quarters”—recalling, in turn, John S. Jacobs’s decision to seek a Thomsonian doctor instead of treating his sister’s illness with the methods Norcom had taught him, “to leech, cup, and bleed.” John’s decision evinces his alignment with Thomson’s alternative tradition against Norcom’s, and as historians of enslaved people’s medicine Todd Savitt, Katherine Bankole, and Herbert Covey have argued, enslaved people, who had limited access to health care and who (like Thomson) distrusted regular medicine’s

harsh, invasive treatments, embodied the medical empiricism Norcom decidedly condemned and openly denounced. Because slaveowners provided only enough medical care to keep enslaved people healthy enough to withstand extreme labor conditions and to reap the full return on their financial investment (which a slave's premature death from illness or injury would curtail), enslaved people, in the words of the formerly enslaved Charity Austin, "just had to do their own doctoring." Covey's encyclopedia of the medicinal botanicals that enslaved people used—from garlic to fennel to asafetida—suggests the vast storehouse of medical knowledge they developed, and it confirms the formerly enslaved Sarah Grudger's statement that "when people wanted medicine, they went to the woods and gathered [it]."

Contrary to Broussais's sense of "external bodies" and surrounding environments as threats to health, enslaved people's sourcing of plantations, woods, and gardens for *materia medica* suggests that they viewed their natural surroundings as highly useful. If Broussais instructed his patients to minimize and mute stimuli, plantation empiricism proposed that health and medical aid potentially resided outside of the body and in these very stimuli, and it encouraged education through experimentation and the informal transmission of remedies from one healer to another. While certain enslaved people identified as and were known in their communities to be healers, particularly midwives and conjurers (as the historian Karol A. Weaver has shown), plantation empiricism enacted the democratic possibility inherent in Thomson's methodology—that potentially anyone could gather, test,

and administer remedies—that so disturbed Norcom’s cohort. From the empirik’s perspective, plantation spaces were repositories of what the political scientist Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter,” or nonhuman materials whose existence, behaviors, and actions contribute to a situation’s outcome. If Broussais wished to close the body off from dangerous stimuli, enslaved empiricists capitalized on their environments’ vibrancy by placing their bodies in a relational network with its resources.

Beyond its shrewd reference to Samuel Thomson, *Incidents* reconstructs the role that these networks among human and nonhuman actors played in Jacobs’s escape and concealment. In the midst of her initial flight from Flint, “a reptile of some kind” seizes Linda’s leg. In the context of Linda’s flight from Flint’s sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and his attempts to coerce her to betray her sense of morality and consent to concubinage, this reptile functions as a symbol of Flint’s unceasing violence (and vileness), and like the snakes and mosquitoes in Snaky Swamp, this reptile also highlights the hazards of natural environments that could (and did often) impede fugitives’ attempts at escape. Nonetheless, the scene of the snake bite reveals the network of healing and healers that enable Linda to continue her escape. Coming under the Blounts’ enslaved cook Betty’s care soon after being bitten, Linda asks her to “prepare a poultice of warm ashes and vinegar” to counteract the poison (150). But when the swelling does not subside, Linda requests Betty to ask “an old woman, who doctored among the slaves, what was good for the bite of a snake or a lizard” (151). Narratively, this “old woman” functions much like “old lady

Benton" in Samuel Thomson's *Narrative of the Life*, as the key source of medical knowledge, and both writers use the modifier "old" to signal that these healers have been credentialed by a lifetime of experience, a credential that a medical college could never give and one that makes them eminently trustworthy sources of medical knowledge.

"The old woman who doctored among the slaves" instructs Betty and Linda to "steep a dozen coppers in vinegar, over night, and apply the cankered vinegar to the inflamed part" of Linda's leg, a formula that successfully counteracts the poisonous bite. In the only editor's note in *Incidents* (aside from the Editor's Preface), Child explicates this remedy and translates it into the scientific terms she evidently believes to be more accessible or palatable to the narrative's audience: "The poison of a snake is a powerful acid, and is counteracted by powerful alkalines, such as potash, ammonia, &c. The Indians are accustomed to apply west ashes, or plunge the limb into strong lye. White men, employed to lay out railroads in snaky places often carry ammonia with them as an antidote," Child explains (151). Regardless of her intention (perhaps to rescue the remedy from the category of "folk"), Child's note outlines a network among subordinated groups of people (enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and laboring white men). These groups are united by the fact that they encounter similar environmental hazards, indeed (in the case of African Americans and white laborers) that their class status shuttles them into hazardous laboring environments, from the swampy, plantation South to the desert, railroad West. In their common environmental experiences, all three groups have developed similar remedies for

snake bites. Thus not only does Jacobs's depiction of Linda's snake bite and cure dramatize the way enslaved people used resources outside of the purview of their owners, but *Incidents* shows how the processes of discovering these remedies and how the remedies themselves link people (Linda, Betty, the old woman who doctored among the slaves, Child, Indians, white men employed along the railroad, the narrative's readers) together in a dispersed network of knowledge and healing.

2.3 Swamp ecologies

In 1830, Jacobs's hometown newspaper, the *Edenton Gazette*, published an advertisement offering a fifteen dollar reward for the apprehension of "a negro man HENRY" (2 January 1830). Conventionally, fugitive slave advertisements included detailed physical descriptions, commonly beginning with general metrics (age, height, stature, shade of skin) before citing unique features, markings, or (most often) scars. The advertisement that Norcom published in the *Gazette* in an attempt to recover Jacobs, for example, described her as "a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight." Instead of using a unique physical mark to further differentiate her, Norcom instructed his readers to watch for a woman of this description who could also "speak easily and fluently, and who [had] an agreeable carriage and address" (30 June

1835). In the advertisement for Henry, however, his owner, William B. Roberts, believed him to be “so well-known in [Edenton] and its neighborhood” that a “description [was] deemed unnecessary.” Roberts’s decision not to print a description of Henry implies his confidence that Henry was close at hand. Unlike Norcom, who thought it “probable that [Harriet] design[ed] to transport herself North,” and who therefore composed his advertisement for strangers who might spot her en route to the free states, Roberts wrote for Edenton residents only. Indeed, Roberts suspected Henry to be “lurking in the neighborhood” (a phrase that appears repeatedly in the newspaper’s fugitive slave advertisements), either near General Richard Brownrigg’s plantation, where Henry’s sister lived, or in Bear Swamp.

Roberts’s confidence in Henry’s proximity had much to do with the natural environment surrounding Edenton. Bear Swamp was one in chain of small marshes that led to the Great Dismal Swamp, the border of which was merely eight miles from Edenton. Roberts’s certainty that his advertisement did not need to circulate any further than Edenton because his missing slave was most likely “lurking” in a nearby swamp stemmed from the fact that these small swamps and the vast marshland just beyond them had become, by the antebellum period, well-known havens for fugitive slaves. As Linda’s friend describes them in *Incidents*, these swamps were a “slave territory that defie[d] all the laws” (240). They were a “slave territory” in two, paradoxical senses: geographically, they existed within the slave states of Virginia and North Carolina, but despite their location within slave territory,

enslaved people fled to them in great numbers and lived within their borders in relative freedom and security. By self-emancipating to these swamps, African Americans created what the historical archaeologist Daniel Sayers calls a “node of remoteness”: a territory that, while at the geographic center of plantation slavery, was nonetheless remote from its racial order (68). The gradual transformation of the Great Dismal Swamp into a node of remoteness is relevant to *Incidents* not simply because of the author’s physical proximity to it or because of the implication that she may have known Henry and the many other fugitives “lurking” around Edenton (although the biographical, geographical, and cultural fact that she lived in the heart of the nation’s most vibrant zone of fugitive activity does seem to be an important context for understanding her political consciousness and has not yet been explored in Jacobs scholarship). Its deeper relevance lies in the structural parallels between Linda’s den, rendered hospitable and impenetrable by the (human and nonhuman) networks of care that this chapter has examined, and the Great Dismal Swamp’s grand experiment in transforming a supposedly uninhabitable landscape into a life-giving one. These two parallel spaces—Linda’s den and the Great Dismal Swamp—index a conceptual transformation about the nature of human life as constituted by vast networks of dependency and caretaking.

The Great Dismal Swamp inspired a prolific literature across nonfictional and fictional genres. In accounts from William Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (1728) and Edmund Ruffin’s “Observations Made During an Excursion to

the Dismal Swamp" (1837) to Stowe's *Dred* (1859) and Delany's *Blake* (1859-62), two very different swamps emerge, one that forbid life and one that sheltered it. In his *History of the Dividing Line*, for example, Byrd documents his traversal of the Great Dismal Swamp for the purposes of settling the border between the two colonies. Byrd's *History* reinforced the already-active perception that the swamp was noxious, treacherous, and highly unsuited to life. "Not even a turkey buzzard [would] venture to fly over it," Byrd reported (22).

Paradoxically, for Byrd, the swamp was both overrun with unruly and dangerous animal and plant life and, at the same time, barren, unable to sustain even low, parasitic creatures like vultures. Popular accounts reiterated this paradox, as when Mrs. Butler, writing for the *New York Mirror* in 1842, described its "endless pools of black water, where the melancholy juniper trees alone overshadowed the thick-looking surface, their roots all globular, like huge bulbous plants, and their dark branches woven together with a hideous matting of giant creepers," but concluded that "nothing lived or moved throughout the loathsome solitude, and the sunbeams themselves seemed to sicken and grow pale as they glided like ghosts through these watery woods."

Accounts of the swamp's impenetrability (such as Byrd's and Butler's) were compounded and reinforced by a series of unsuccessful attempts by developers to convert the swamp into arable farmland by draining it. In 1763, George Washington helped found the Adventurers for Draining the Dismal Swamp, which was later renamed the Dismal Swamp Land Company. These companies were motivated to drain the swamp by the

prospect of fertile soils underneath its marsh and by early signs of overfarming becoming evident on surrounding Tidewater plantations and the desire to locate fresh, nutrient-rich soils. However, the Adventurers and the Land Company were unsuccessful in their effort to drain the swamp. Not only was it difficult to navigate people and equipment through the thicket—“The swamp is scarcely passable in many parts, owing not only to the softness of the sponge, but to the obstruction caused by innumerable shrubs, vines, creepers, and briars which often take entire possession, forming a dense brake or jungle,” wrote a correspondent to the *New York Daily Times* in 1853—but Lake Drummond, the body of water at its center, sat at a higher elevation than the rest of the swamp, and thus its waters continually resupplied the marsh below. Moreover, as Edmund Ruffin explained in his 1837 “Observations,” exposure of its soils through natural processes or through draining caused the swamp to catch fire, a phenomenon that Frederick Douglass fictionalized in his 1852 *Heroic Slave*.

Cultural and literary representations of its impenetrability and lifelessness, as well as these foiled development attempts, contributed to the swamp’s “remoteness,” in Sayers’s sense of the word. It came to seem—and in fact became—an unassimilable lacunae in the plantation landscapes surrounding it. As Monique Allewaert has shown, the extreme difficulty it caused white slaveowners, slave catchers, and their slave-hunting dogs also rendered it a lacunae in white dominance. Although the Great Dismal Swamp sat in the center of the Tidewater plantation region and abutted some of the region’s most active port

cities (Norfolk, Hampton, Elizabeth City, and of course Edenton), as well as being a short distance from Richmond and Wilmington, over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the swamp came to seem frustratingly useless from an economic point of view and disruptive to planters' control of their enslaved people from a social and political point of view. As Allewaert writes, African Americans who were forced to labor in swamps (particularly, as she notes, on rice plantations but also as "shingle getters," which was the one industry that gained any traction) developed a knowledge of which "swamps could be made into motile, invisible infrastructures, [of which] plants offered up poisons and which offered food, and [of which] hollows and dark spots [provided] shelter and concealment" (353). In its inaccessibility to whites, this experientially-derived knowledge helped transfigure the swamp into a "revolutionary" space (in Allewaert's terms), or a "defiant" territory (in the words of Linda's unnamed friend), where African American fugitives repurposed the very environmental features that threatened white interlopers—creeping vines and innumerable shrubs and briars—into a key part of the swamp's security apparatus.

The history and literature of the Great Dismal Swamp indexes not only an uneven accrual of botanical and geographic knowledge in favor of African Americans, but it also highlights a conceptual difference between those who approached the swamp as an unruly environment to be marked, divided, and subdued, like Byrd, the Adventurers, and slave-owning Southerners, and those who approached it as a territory of suspended laws and norms. For example, in the *History of the Dividing Line*, Byrd, wishing to stress the extreme

difficulty of navigating the swamp's aqueous environment, narrates the dramatic moment when his team realizes that they are nearly "exhausted" of provisions, despite being only halfway through their trek. The team considers eating the "companion of [their] travels," a dog, a telling detail that Byrd includes to suggest that the swamp's "savage" environment has corroded the team's civility (24). They ultimately decide to take a northern exit into Virginia, where they resupply their provisions before returning to the swamp and finishing the final ten miles of their traversal. Yet, by all accounts, the Great Dismal Swamp was a landscape brimming with potential food sources. Ruffin wrote that bears, weighing as much as five hundred pounds, roamed the swamp in great numbers, and that there were "but few men who resided near the margin of the swamp who had not killed one or more," and in his 1856 *Harper's* article "The Great Dismal," David H. Strother enumerated that "bear, deer, otter, raccoons, possums, etc., pheasants, partridges, and wild ducks," as well as abundant "fresh-water fish," were all available for eating in the swamp (448). While Byrd's description of his team's close encounter with starvation functions in the narrative to underscore the swamp's deadness and deadliness, the passage reveals much about Byrd's (mis)perception of the swamp as void of any live-giving resources.

Sayers's archaeological research in the Great Dismal Swamp has added an evidentiary face to the swamp's antebellum representations by documenting the different types of maroon communities that made homes in it. On the outskirts, transient communities developed an economy based on poaching resources from nearby plantations,

while in the swamp's "deepest interior," maroons constructed more permanent settlements and, much like the more well-known mountain maroon communities in the Caribbean, built a sustenance economy by hunting the swamp's abundant game and gardening on its dry plateaus. These self-sustaining communities transformed what Byrd and Butler read as a total incapacity to sustain life into a protective and productive environment. As Mrs. Pearson, a contributor to the *Liberator*, wrote in her 1864 short story about a thriving city of forty thousand self-emancipated African Americans in the Great Dismal Swamp, "what [was] one man's meat [was] another man's poison." *Incidents* encapsulates this conversion from poison to meat by portraying the dramatic change in Linda's opinion about the idea of being hidden on her grandmother's property. Where once it seemed impossible, she came to believe there was "no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded [her] so good a place of concealment." In both the cases of the Great Dismal Swamp and Linda's den, enslaved people seeking freedom assembled human and nonhuman allies that enabled them to revise the meanings of these spaces and successfully inhabit them as spaces of liberation. While "no living man [could] get in unless he [had] the key," wrote Pearson, "runaways [got] in" because "one way or another they [had] the secret of walking on the mire."

2.4 Jacobs, John Brown, and ecologies of resistance

One month after John Brown's October 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, while Brown was awaiting execution, *Liberator* columnist Edmund Wheelock conjectured that the fatal flaw in Brown's plan was, by and large, a geographic one. According to Wheelock, Brown was not wrong to believe that he could "plant a permanent armed insurrection in Virginia" by establishing maroon communities, like the Jamaican communities Brown admired, which would rupture Southern society and make slavery economically unviable. Where he went wrong was in plotting the location of the prototype for these communities in the Allegheny Mountains. "Within a few days' march of Harper's Ferry lies the Great Dismal Swamp, whose interior depths are for ever untrodden save by the feet of fugitive slaves," wrote Wheelock: "A few resolute white men, harbored in its deep recesses, raising the flag of slave revolt, would gather thousands to their standard, would convulse the whole State with panic, and make servile war one of the inseparable felicities of slavery" (184). Although historians of the raid have argued that Brown's failure was in his timing—he waited too long in the armory for the thousands of enslaved people he misguidedly believed would gather to his standard, historians have argued—Wheelock, rather, blamed Brown's spatial orientation toward the west and his failure to perceive the revolutionary potential of the Great Dismal Swamp. Here, where maroons had already "trodden," Brown could have formed the racially egalitarian community he outlined in his "Provisional Constitution" in which "all persons of mature age, whether proscribed, oppressed, and enslaved citizens, or of the proscribed and oppressed races of the United States" would be full, rights-bearing

members. Had Brown made it to the centrally located but politically and socially remote territory of the swamp, Wheelock argued, his expedition, his new society, and his plan to topple slavery may very well have succeeded.

When Jacobs submitted the manuscript of *Incidents* to Lydia Maria Child in 1859, after having felt the affront of Harriet Beecher Stowe's offer not to help her publish it but to use material from Jacobs's narrative in her own antislavery works, the manuscript included a final chapter on John Brown. Jacobs had begun (unsuccessfully) to seek a publisher in 1858, a year before Brown's raid, a fact in the publication history of *Incidents* that suggests Jacobs reopened her manuscript to add her reflections on Brown. Child, however, removed the chapter, explaining to Jacobs that it did "not come naturally into [her] story," and that "nothing could be so appropriate to end with, as the death of [her] grandmother" (Child to Jacobs, 13 August 1860). Literary scholars such as Albert Tricomi and Anna Stewart have examined the influence of Child's commitment to antislavery sentimentalism (exemplified by Stowe and practiced by Child herself in "The Quadroon") on her editing of *Incidents*, and they have shown that she shaped Jacobs's narrative toward the conventions of his popular abolitionist genre. As Stewart has argued, Child wished to foreground the character of Aunt Marthy, Linda's grandmother, because she seemed to embody the middle-class respectability that Northern female audiences would find familiar, thus offering an identificatory locus and a corrective to what this audience may have perceived as Linda's sexual or moral deviance. Child's opinion that concluding *Incidents* with the death of

Jacobs's grandmother was more "appropriate" reflects her political commitment to sentimentalism as a vehicle for changing hearts and minds through the exercise of identificatory sympathy. Yet, as Caleb Smith has argued, the manuscript Child received may have promoted an abolitionist program quite different from sentimentalism, one with which a final chapter on John Brown may indeed have fit more "naturally" than Child was willing to perceive or abide.

Smith convincingly uncovers Jacobs's militancy by contextualizing *Incidents* in the diverse streams of abolitionist thought in the years leading up to the Civil War. He notes that the one positive review of *Incidents* in the United States, where, unlike in Britain, the book was generally received with neglect, appeared in the militant black periodical the *Weekly Anglo-African*. According to Smith, the anonymous reviewer was most likely the journalist and abolitionist James Redpath, who, one year before *Incidents* was published, authored the first (hagiographic) biography of his hallowed friend John Brown. The review praised *Incidents* for provoking a "feeling of horror, and a stronger determination [in its readers] to tear down the cursed system which makes such records possible" and for igniting a "new fuel for the fire, and new force for the storm which shall overthrow and sweep from existence American slavery" (qtd. Smith 761). These words reflected the position of the periodical on the political spectrum of abolitionism, which Smith describes as a "forum for extreme antislavery opinion" that did not "shy away from the prospect of intervention in the South," but they also reflect its interpretation of Jacobs's intention in

Incidents as not to change hearts and minds in the fashion of Stowe but to “overthrow” and “sweep from existence American slavery” in the fashion of Brown (761).

Although the contents of Jacobs’s chapter on Brown are irrecoverable, her connections to him are manifold and encompass the political militancy that Smith extrapolates. In Smith’s account, Redpath and the *Weekly Anglo-African* responded with approval to Brown and Jacobs, which consequently grouped the two under the banner of the “extreme antislavery opinion” that characterized the periodical and included the thought that direct intervention in the South might be necessary. Wheelock’s mention of the Great Dismal Swamp, however, ties Jacobs and Brown together less on the basis of strategy—the sweeping overthrow of American slavery—and more on the basis of the nature of the new society. As Smith compellingly argues, Jacobs, in connection with Brown, wished to topple the institution, and to that end, her narrative inspires “wrath” (in the reviewer’s words), not sympathy. But it also provides a history and an allegory of what historians of slavery call “intra-limital marronage,” or escaping from slavery without leaving the boundaries of the plantation zone. Intra-limital marronage describes the activity in the Great Dismal Swamp; indeed, the swamp stands as one of the most spectacular examples of this style of self-emancipation in the U.S. South. Brown’s abolitionist vision was also firmly based in this style, as he imagined that his maroon community in the Alleghenies, organized by his “Provisional Constitution,” would spark similar communities in mountains and swamps across the South. Finally, *Incidents*, in its tactical representation of Linda’s den,

presents this style of self-emancipation in microcosmic and allegorical form. As a history and allegory of intralimital marronage, *Incidents* not only documents some of the mechanisms of this style of self-emancipation (while obscuring and implying others), but it can be read as a testimony of the conceptual orientation—toward being, toward community, and toward being *as* community—necessary for its implementation and success.

It is precisely these bonds of community that William Wells Brown's protagonist Clotel wishes to restore when she embarks on her fatal return into slave territory in the final scenes of Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel*. Like *Incidents*, Brown's narratives, including his 1847 *Narrative of the Life of William Wells Brown* and *Clotel*, address the importance of kinship and community bonds for life under slavery and for self-emancipatory efforts. Yet, whereas *Incidents* emphasizes the insurgent power of what Jacobs depicts as a fundamental truth about nature—the ontological interrelationality that the ecologist Haeckel will call the "total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment"—Brown, like Walker, focuses on the effects of the capacity for slavery to interfere with this natural principle. The chapter that follows places Brown in the discourse of biogeography, which was beginning to develop in the natural sciences during Brown's period. Biogeographers of the antebellum period were making maps of the world's plant and animal species, attempting to demarcate their spatial ranges, and they were using these maps to piece together species' histories of migration. Their purpose was to ask why species had moved and to determine how these movements affected species' development. Brown shifts

Jacobs's attention to powerful, fugitive communities onto the devastation of shattered black communities, turning the emergent paradigm of biogeography toward the forced migration of African and African-descended people. His earliest narratives explore the personal, cultural, and national significance of the forced redistribution of people under the diasporic force of slavery.

Chapter Three

The Writingest Explorers:

William Wells Brown's Literary Geographia

In his 1853 novel *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*, William Wells Brown explains the birth and growth of slavery on the North American continent by telling a tale of two "parent" ships, each carrying "embryo elements" of the political institutions and social character it would spawn. The *Mayflower* arrived at Plymouth carrying the embryonic "goodness and wisdom" that engendered the "prosperous, labour-honoring, law-sustaining institutions of the North." Not only was the *Mayflower* the nation's "good genius" according to Brown, but it was its good genus, parenting "all that is useful, good, and grand." On a parallel but slightly more southern course, the second ship arrived in Virginia carrying embryonic "elements of unmixed evil," delivering the continent's first cargo of enslaved Africans. This "mother of slavery" birthed "idleness, lynch-law, ignorance, unpaid labor, poverty and dueling, despotism, the ceaseless swing of the whip, and the peculiar institutions of the South" (184). Composed at the height of what Ira Berlin has called the "second middle passage" — the forced migration of millions of enslaved people from the Old and Upper South to the Lower South — Brown's novel, as well as his 1847 *Narrative of the Life of William Wells Brown*, explores the geographic expansion of slavery from these inauspicious beginnings on the James River, its redistribution of populations, first across the Atlantic and

then across the continent by way of the great waterways on which Brown spent much of his young life, and the diversification of its cultures of violence. These narratives assume a cartographic sensibility toward slavery's movements, creating a series of overlapping maps of its interconnected distributions—of people, of modes of violence and resistance, of differential freedom and unfreedom, and of uneven humanitarian sympathies.

At the same time that Brown was reflecting on the causes and effects of slavery's literal and figural distributions, European and American naturalists were debating the origin, movement, and diversification of plant and animal species, creating a literature now considered to be the founding documents of biogeography. A subdiscipline of ecology, biogeography maps species distributions, endeavoring to understand how and why species have moved from their homelands, called "areas of endemism." The biogeographer Mark Lomolino describes these distributions as the "geographic signature of nature," and their histories reveal not only how species have moved (what biogeographers call "dispersal") but also how geologic changes have impacted movement and evolution (what they call "vicariance"). Linnaeus tends to anchor histories of biogeography, and these accounts reveal that biogeography's founding concerns of how and why species came to inhabit their present-day spatial ranges co-emerged with the so-called Age of Exploration, whose voyages made it possible to perceive species' ranges and boundaries on a global scale. Thus according to its historiography, the founders of biogeography include the great traveling naturalists of the period, Forster, Buffon, Humboldt, de Candolle, and Darwin. When

Thomas Jefferson instructed Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to “notice” the “soil & face of the country” of Louisiana, “its growth and vegetable productions, especially those not of the U.S., the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U.S., the remains & accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct,” he inaugurated, according to Lomolino, “one of the most ambitious biogeographic surveys ever conducted.” And at Jefferson’s request that they record their observations “with great pains & accuracy,” that they write “distinctly, & intelligibly for others as well as [for themselves],” and that they make several copies of their writings “to guard by multiplying them against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed,” Lewis and Clark produced nearly five thousand pages of writing, making them, in the words of the historian Donald Jackson, “the writingest explorers of their time” (vii).

The expedition embarked from a small village across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, a point slightly southeast of the river’s confluence with its longest tributary, the Missouri River. Clark and his regiment followed the Missouri to the city of St. Charles, where they met Lewis and began their mission “to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course & communication with the water of the Pacific ocean may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across the continent” — to chart a northwest passage to Asia, as well as to study the floral and faunal resources of the newly acquired territory and to survey its Native American inhabitants. Brown arrived at the expedition’s point of departure thirteen years later when his owner, John Young,

migrated first to St. Charles and then to St. Louis from Brown's birthplace near Lexington, Kentucky. Young was one of a quarter of a million farmers from the Upper South states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina to relocate to Missouri during the antebellum period. In the words of the frontier minister John Mason Peck, small-slaveholding farmers from the Upper South "came like an avalanche" into the territory, shifting its demographics, economy, and culture toward the slave state it would become with the Missouri Compromise of 1820. "It seemed as though Kentucky and Tennessee were breaking up and moving to the Far West," wrote Peck: "Caravan after caravan passed over the prairies of Illinois, crossing the 'great river' at St. Louis, all bound to the Boone's Lick" (146). These migrants clustered along the banks of the Missouri in a district known as Little Dixie, whose soil proved highly suited for growing hemp, a crop that came into unprecedented demand on account of its use as baling for cotton. Missouri farmers thus found themselves in "direct & practicable water communication" with the booming cotton market at their river's southernmost end, the geographic epicenter of the other, concurrent migration of large-scale planters and millions of enslaved men and women from Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama to the southwestern frontier.

Much of Brown's writing concerns the consequences for enslaved people of this larger, southwesterly migration. Brown was a keen observer of the cotton boom's effect to stimulate the domestic slave trade, which he argued newly divided the South into "slave-raising states" and "slave-consuming states" and reinvented the social figure that connected

the two, the slave trader (*Clotel* 86). The abolitionist Edward Quincy considered Brown exceptionally suited to “present [this] different phase of slavery,” a phase characterized by the economic, cultural, and demographic changes that accompanied the cotton boom, because Brown had worked not only “in the Field [and] in the House” but also “on the River” (v). Hired out by Young to the notorious trader John Walker, Brown spent “the longest year [he] ever lived” serving the “soul driver” as he assembled groups of enslaved men and women to be sold in the Vicksburg, Natchez, and New Orleans markets (*Narrative* 61, 38). To Quincy, Brown’s uniqueness as an author stemmed from his first-hand views of the trade’s movement of people, experiences that uniquely authorized Brown because, as Quincy wrote, “such few individuals [had] had [them]” (v). However, Quincy’s assertion of Brown’s exceptionality not only loses sight of the millions who underwent the “endless deportations [and] expulsions” that, according to Berlin, informed “every aspect of black life during the middle years of the nineteenth century,” but it obscures the fact that for many fugitive, emancipated, and legally free writers, these movements were absolutely central to their representations of slavery and freedom (*Generations* 18). If Lewis and Clark were the period’s “writingest explorers,” Brown and his contemporaries, including Henry Bibb and Martin Delany, whose narratives, like Brown’s, depict characters’ continent-sweeping travels, were some of its “movingest” writers. Their narratives not only witness the vast distances covered by their authors and protagonists, but they demonstrate the importance of

these travels to their educations, their aspirations toward freedom, and their processes of self-emancipation.

Brown, Bibb, and Delany present geographic movement as a method of research into the local forms of slavery. Stephen Lucasi has observed that Brown's *Narrative* departs from generic convention by beginning with scenes of travel rather than the story of how Brown learned to read. This striking departure from convention suggests that for Brown, movement constitutes a form of literacy. Harriet Jacobs and Hannah Crafts also speak of their experiences in slavery as a particular type of schooling, one that, though cruel, sharpened their powers of observation and trained them to read their environments, including the intentions of their owners. As Crafts writes, "No one could stop [them] from using [their] eyes" (63). Similarly, Brown's, Bibb's, and Delany's narratives present movement, even forced movement, as an opportunity to study slavery's economic and social components. "Experience and observation have been my principal teachers," explains Bibb (xi). Delany's peripatetic protagonist Henry Blake embodies this form of self-education when he travels from plantation to plantation conducting oral surveys to determine slavery's local character, soliciting information about masters' treatment of their slaves—"Now please tell me, what kind of masters are there generally in the Red River country," Blake asks an elderly "aunty," who replies, "Haud 'nough, chile, haud 'nough, God on'y knows!"—and discerning the local feeling toward rebellion and liberation (73). "Being a scholar," Blake "carefully [keeps] a record of the plantations he had passe[s]," amassing a

body of cartographic and sociological knowledge as a result of his perambulations (68). For Brown, slavery represents a “school in which its victims learn much shrewdness,” whose “apt scholar[s]” use this education to advance their liberatory goals (*Clotel* 172).

Brown lived and wrote at a time of dramatic change to the way human bodies were being distributed over the American geography. Replete with geographic data, Brown’s earliest autobiography maps the tremendous distances Brown traveled as an enslaved and then fugitive person whose movements were directly or indirectly governed by these redistributions, and his fiction examines these distributions’ personal, cultural, and national significance. In light of his European travel writings, *Three Years In Europe* (1852) and *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855), literary scholars such as Martha Schoolman and Charles Baraw have characterized Brown as a traveler, but Brown was also an explorer—indeed, a writingest explorer—whose movements across the length and breadth of the United States raised for him the same types of questions that fueled early biogeographic endeavors in the natural sciences. Yet, as nineteenth-century explorers and naturalists focused on determining the homelands and dispersals of plant and animal species, Brown, witness to the deracinating and diasporic force of transatlantic slavery, turned these concerns to the human domain. Not only did he study the dispersal of human bodies across the Atlantic and onto the American frontier, but he perceived that in the human realm, a forced migration such as this could not be separated from the economic and political institutions that undergirded and motivated it. Thus Brown found it necessary to demarcate humans’

domains (as a demographer would) and also to study the institutional histories that shaped them (as a sociologist would). Indeed, in applying biogeography's concerns to the human species and considering the political and economic institutions underlying human distribution, Brown anticipated the impulse of sociology, a discipline that would begin to form at the end of the century and with whose idiom Brown would experiment in his final work, *My Southern Home* (1880).

3.1 Narratives of movement, geographies of suffering

Born the year after Brown in a neighboring Kentucky county, Henry Bibb spent most of his life in motion. Bibb's 1849 *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* narrates a series of forced removals, from Bedford, Kentucky, a small tobacco town situated on the southern bank of the Ohio River, to Louisiana and then outside the borders of the nation, into Texas before its 1845 admission to the union and through the territory onto which the Cherokee had been displaced, land that would become the state of Oklahoma. Bibb writes that these forced removals from the Upper to the Lower South were, in fact, a result of his unsanctioned mobility: each of Bibb's owners decides to sell him on account of his chronic and costly attempts to run away. From Bedford, Bibb escapes twice across the Ohio River, a waterway he represents as both a powerful symbol of freedom — "I have stood upon the lofty banks of the river Ohio, gazing upon the splendid steamboats, wafted with all their

magnificence up and down the river, and I thought of the fishes of the water, the fowls of the air, the wild beasts of the forest, all appeared to be free” — and as a highly contested geography of flights and hunts, escapes and recaptures (29-30). These chronic escape attempts provoke William Gatewood to sell Bibb down the river into Louisiana, where Francis Whitfield, purveyor of an industrial-scale sugar plantation in Claiborn parish and the narrative’s true antagonist, purchases him. After a rash of escapes that torturous punishments fail to curb, Whitfield again sells Bibb. In his final forced removal, Bibb’s gambling owners transport him to Texas and Fayetteville, Arkansas, where they wager and nearly lose him in a bet, ultimately selling him to a Cherokee slaveholder, whose death inaugurates Bibb’s fugitive movements northward.

Bibb reaches free soil by following the same waterways Brown spent his young years plying. To escape through the slave state of Missouri, Bibb navigates the environmental and social hazards of the river by secreting himself on a steamboat from Jefferson City (a river town where Brown’s employer Walker often purchased “droves” of enslaved men and women) to St. Louis and finally to Cincinnati, a beacon for many fugitives, including Brown and Bibb. Lucasi argues that mobility constituted an “essential transgression of and emancipation from the laws of bondage” because slavery could not achieve its economic and social goals without first controlling the movements of enslaved people, stilling them on plantations, forcibly channeling them through relocation or sale, and capturing and returning fugitives to the South (Bibb was recaptured multiple times trying to rescue his

family from Gatewood and Whitfield, rescue attempts that constituted an “essential transgression” of the laws of fugitivity by requiring Bibb to travel southward from free into slave territory) (521). Bibb’s *Life and Adventures* shows that he defied restrictions on his movement while he was enslaved and that, as a fugitive, he continued to travel widely, lecturing on abolitionism in Michigan, “a section of [that] country where abolitionists were few and far between,” and returning to that restive borderland, the southern counties of Ohio, which, originally viewed from the other side of the river, spurred his determination to be free (180).

The migratory “avalanche” that brought Brown to Missouri also beckoned Bibb’s first Kentucky owner, John Sibley, who, Bibb writes, sold him to Gatewood on the presumption that he would be unable to prevent Bibb from fleeing Missouri to return to his wife in Bedford. Thus Bibb’s *Life and Adventures* portrays a life shaped by both of the period’s concurrent mass migrations to the western and southwestern frontiers. These movements also shape Bibb’s narrative, as he richly cites geographic details, naming states, counties, parishes, towns, and rivers, as well as the cardinal directions and distances (often measured in time) of his escapes. These robust references give his narrative a cartographic infrastructure by orienting the progress of Bibb’s life around geographic movement. Like Bibb’s *Life and Adventures*, Brown focalizes his 1847 *Narrative* through the many thousands of miles he traveled as an enslaved person hired onto Mississippi steamboats, and he also takes great care to name each ship, captain, and course of these river expeditions. He “plies

between St. Louis and Galena" on the *Missouri* under Captain William Culver, descends to New Orleans by way of Hannibal (the river town that Twain will make famous) on the *Enterprise* with Captain Otis Reynolds, travels a western course from St. Louis to Independence on the *Otto* under Captain J.B. Hill, and spans the Mississippi River for a final time on the *Chester* under Captain Enoch Price (23). Brown carefully recites these references and routes because at the time of his enslavement on these vessels, in the late 1820s and early 1830s, these names held great meaning for the nation's western residents. The iconic *Enterprise*, for example, was only the fourth steamboat on the Mississippi, launched on the river in the year of Brown's birth. The advent and arrival of these boats transformed Brown's St. Louis aesthetically and economically, crowding its harbor with imposing white barges and connecting its products and people to cotton country. When Brown composed his *Narrative* in 1847, St. Louis had been utterly reshaped by steam technology and had become a central locus of the industry during what Twain, in his 1883 *Life on the Mississippi*, would call "the flush times of steamboating," before transcontinental railroads rendered commercial steamboating effectively obsolete (63).

Brown's *Narrative* presents steamboats not simply as the functional vehicles of his movements, however, but as polyvalent and often foreboding signs that he must learn to interpret. Much of Twain's famous account concerns learning the fluctuating geography of the river, as Captain Bixby teaches his young apprentice that the "science of piloting" involves comprehending the river's changing forms, "learn[ing] it all over again in a

different way every twenty-four hours" (87). While the river's "fickleness" initially demoralizes Twain, he eventually comes to see the "face of the water" as "a wonderful book" that delivers "its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice" (115, 94, 95). Yet, Twain learns the river from a much different perspective and social position (a pilot and a legally free man) than does Brown, and these different perspectives shape both their retrospective narratives. Although Twain writes that the "science of piloting" diminishes some of the "romance and beauty" of the river, he nonetheless waxes lyrical about its beauty (96). Describing a river sunrise, for example, he writes: "When the sun gets well up, and distributes a pink flush here and a powder of god yonder and a purple haze where it will yield the best effect, you grant you have seen something that is worth remembering" (229). But for Brown, steamers symbolize the domestic slave trade, and they are inseparable from the sorrows that attend it, including Brown's own. Brown spends the "longest year [he] ever lived" enslaved to Walker on steamers, and he suffers "a trial [even] more severe and heart-rending" when his sister is sold down the river to Natchez on a steamer (63). "I cannot give a just description of the scene at that parting interview," Brown laments upon her loss: "Never, never can be erased from my heart the occurrences of that day!" (65-6).

In addition to being symbols of the domestic slave trade and its centrifugal force, fugitive authors describe steamers as paradoxes, vessels that simultaneously threaten and facilitate self-emancipation. During his fugitive travels, Martin Delany's protagonist Henry

Blake, for example, experiences great panic at the “sound of a steamer coming up the channel” and finds himself trapped between the approaching boat, whose captain, Henry fears, will demand free papers, on the one hand, and “numerous sharks and alligators,” on the other (69). Henry makes a quick calculation about the relative danger of each, deciding that while the carnivorous creatures threaten his body, the steamer threatens his freedom. These options before him, Henry chooses to battle the “squad of huge alligators,” whom he subdues, narrowly “escap[ing] the observation of the passing steamer” by receding into the forest (69-70). In this scene, Delany weighs the peril of an approaching steamer against that of ferocious alligators and assesses the former as ultimately more dangerous to his fugitive protagonist. Bibb also discusses the extreme anxiety of boarding a steamer as he attempts to reach Cincinnati for the first time: “When the boat had landed at Madison, notwithstanding my strong desire to get off, my heart trembled within me in view of the great danger to which I was exposed in taking passage on board of a Southern Steamboat; hence before I took passage, I kneeled down before the Great I Am, and prayed for his aid and protection” (48). A similar anxiety compounds the misery of Brown’s “longest year” with Walker, as Brown travels to New Orleans unsure of his fate: “Although my master had told me that he had not sold me, and Mr. Walker had told me that he had not purchased me, I did not believe them; and not until I had been to New Orleans, and was on my return, did I believe that I was not sold” (40).

Steamers represent danger in yet another way, figuring into fugitives’ narratives as

volatile, untested technologies whose histories comprise as much violent failure as they do grandeur. Readers meet Henry Blake for the first time when he arrives at Judy and Joe's home on the S.S. *Sultana*, a boat that in 1865 would explode a few miles north of Memphis and kill eighteen hundred people, making the disaster the deadliest in United States maritime history (14). While this event occurred after the publication of *Blake*, the narratives of Delany, Bibb, and Brown all note the risk of explosion endemic to steamers. Bibb writes, "I had often heard explosions on board of Steamboats; and every time the boat landed, and blowed off steam, I was afraid the boilers had bursted and we should all be killed; but I lived through the night amid the many dangers to which I was exposed" (49). In *Clotel*, Brown narrates a deadly steamboat race during which the *Patriot* explodes, killing or scalding nineteen people. Brown uses the occasion of this violent event to craft the novel's second tale of two ships. In this second parable, the wooden, colonial ships that carried the "embryo elements" of freedom and unfreedom have been transformed into prodigious steamers whose efficiency has drastically accelerated the economic prosperity of the nation. But as the *Patriot* races the *Columbia*, it skirts safety measures, "using oil, lard, butter, and even bacon with the wood, for the purpose of raising the steam to its highest pitch." Locked side by side with the *Columbia*, the *Patriot* fatally "fasten[s] down the safety-valve, so that no steam should escape," and after stopping to take on more unwitting passengers, explodes. When the "shrieks, groans, and cries" of the wounded subside, the *Columbia* takes the *Patriot* in tow, dragging the ill-fated boat in its wake (68). Not only does Brown's tale of the

steamboat race contradict Twain's assertion that "racing was royal fun," but it employs the imagery of two ships—one law-abiding, responsible, and careful with its human cargo, and the other unreasonably defiant of limits in pursuit of unearned superiority—to symbolize the paths and ultimate fates (Columbia will prevail) of the nation's two economic systems (*Mississippi* 139).

These real and figurative dangers notwithstanding, narratives of mobility like Brown's and Bibb's also present the great usefulness of steamboats for conducting fugitives northward. Steamers acquired another layer of conflicting meaning to people wishing to appropriate their efficiency for their own speedy transportation out of slave territory. Thus Bibb's anxiety about boarding a steamer bound for Cincinnati is matched by the joy of hearing "the welcome sound of a Steamboat coming up the river Ohio, which [would] soon to waft [him] beyond the limits of the human slave markets of Kentucky" (48). Brown realizes that his "long looked for opportunity to make [his] escape from slavery was near at hand" when Enoch Price decides to reroute his steamer to Cincinnati on their return trip from New Orleans (90). While Price shows some concern "as to the propriety" of taking Brown into a free state, Brown deceives him into trusting that he will not flee, stating (falsely) that he has previously been brought onto free soil without making an attempt. When the steamer docks at Cincinnati, on New Year's Day 1834, Brown "makes directly for the woods" (95). From the moment Price announces his intention to take the *Chester* to Cincinnati, Brown conceives of the steamer as the vehicle moving him toward freedom. Yet,

on his final night aboard the boat, the steamer's other meaning—as the cruel, sorrowful vessel of the domestic trade—intrudes, and Brown lies awake, mourning the loss of his family to the Deep South: “I imagined I saw my dear mother in the cotton-field, followed by a merciless task-master, and no one to speak a consoling word to her! I beheld my dear sister in the hands of a slave-driver, and compelled to submit to his cruelty! None but one placed in such a situation can for a moment imagine the intense agony to which these reflections subjected me” (94).

Steamboats are to Brown's *Narrative* what wooden slavers were to late eighteenth-century antislavery writings that agitated for the abolition of the transatlantic trade. Texts such as Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) and Wilberforce's *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1807) focused on the horrifying conditions of slave ships to demonstrate graphically the inhumanity of the trade. Brown draws on tropes from these earlier texts to show the continuity between the transatlantic and the domestic trade: “There was on the boat a large room on the lower deck, in which the slaves were kept, men and women, promiscuously—all chained two and two, and a strict watch kept that they did not get loose; for cases have occurred in which slaves have got off their chains, and made their escape at landing-places, while the boats were taking in wood;—and with all our care, we lost one woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard, and drowned herself. She was not chained” (40). He punctuates this grim but familiar scene with the observation that “it

was almost impossible to keep that part of the boat clean" (41). In the *Narrative*, steamboats carry multiple and conflicting significations, but they primarily function as the technology without which the domestic trade, an extension of the outlawed transatlantic trade, could not flourish and as a metonym for the trade's evils. Brown's far-reaching movement on these vessels, which the *Narrative* meticulously delineates and which, in turn, serve as the work's basic architecture, allows Brown to witness the full-scale shift from the transatlantic to the domestic slave trade and to observe the latter's acute intensification in the middle antebellum period. These observations undergird the critique Brown develops in his fiction of the way slavery falsely disperses a people who were set on stemming the trade's diasporic force by creating bonds of kinship and community on the American continent.

In *Clotel*, the broad, cartographic view of the domestic trade Brown employs in his *Narrative* narrows its focus to the local and personal facets of the trade. The novel opens on a slave auction *in medias res*, where a throng of farmers and speculators "compete for the property about to be sold" (62). Brown's rendering of a scene whose iconicity coincided with the domestic trade's upswing attends to two imbricated types of dismemberment: the dismemberment of Clotel's person as the auctioneer itemizes and assigns value to her physical and metaphysical virtues and the rending of families and communities through sale from Virginia to the Lower South. Brown weaves the two into relation by discoursing on the second while Clotel stands on the auction block. As "the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen [are being] sold for five hundred dollars; her

moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more," Brown's narrator pontificates on the supreme importance of marriage and family to perpetuation of the "true sentiments of humanity" (63-4, 57). Brown grounds this discourse on marriage not in Christian dogma or social norms but in the language of nature: in marriage, "husband and wife through each other become conscious of complete humanity, and [of] every human feeling, and every human virtue," which they, in turn, pass on to their children by exemplifying love, sympathy, gratitude, and devotion (58). Brown lays this discourse over the quintessential scene of familial sundering, where marriages between slaves were both disavowed as having no legal standing and conspicuously, often purposefully shattered. This overlay creates a sense of irony, a technique that the scholars William L. Andrews and John Ernest have shown Brown to employ throughout his corpus, while also demonstrating that the trade, by scattering families, strikes at "the foundation of all civilization and culture" and erodes the "complete humanity" of free white and enslaved black Americans alike. In this opening scene of double dismemberment, Brown decries not only the inhumanity of the internal trade—"What words can tell the inhumanity, the atrocity, and the immorality of that doctrine which, from exalted office, commends such a crime of the favour of enlightened and Christian people?" he begs—but the way it opposes and interrupts nature (57, 64). "Nature abhors it," writes Brown (64).

If the trade interrupts "the most intimate covenant" through which people

experience the “true sentiments of humanity,” it does so by imposing a false, counter-natural distribution of African-descended people across the national geography (57). Each of the novel’s six female protagonists—Curren and her daughters by Thomas Jefferson, Althesa and Clotel, and their children, also fathered by white men, Henry Morton and Horatio Green—finds herself, at one time or another, sold down the river. Brown’s narrative eye traces these forced movements from Richmond to the Lower South. Brown begins this process of tracing the family’s dislocation by naming Curren and Althesa’s purchaser “Dick Walker,” a fictional iteration of the historical “soul driver” to whom Brown was enslaved and who plays Brown’s antagonist in the *Narrative*. Brown continues this weaving of his autobiography with his novel by creating an alter-ego in the character of Walker’s enslaved helper Pompey, a self-citation that reinforces the novel’s claim to being a fiction that represents an even deeper truth, a “truth stranger than fiction” (203). Brown depicts the partially fictional, partially historical Walker transporting the partially fictional, partially historical Curren and Althesa by steamer down the nation’s primary migratory channel, following their geographic movements and landings along the Mississippi, and portraying this channel’s diverse cultures of violence and resistance.

In the three-chapter sequence that follows the separation and dislocation of the family, Brown focuses on the new geography in which each character suddenly finds herself and expounds on the prevailing cultural features of each location. The sequence begins by snapping into abrupt focus on Natchez (“We shall now return to Natchez”), where Curren

has been enslaved on the Peck plantation. Brown distinguishes Natchez on the basis of the extraordinary “inhumanity and barbarity of its inhabitants.” The “cruel deeds perpetuated there,” he writes, “have not been equaled in any other city in the Southern States.” Brown confirms and illustrates the reputed cruelty of Natchez not, as might be expected, by focusing on Currer’s experience but by depicting a slave hunt. In dramatizing the ghastly episode, Brown creates a nested pastiche and builds a sense of historical facticity by including newspaper advertisements for slave-hunting dogs: “The undersigned, having bought the entire pack of negro dogs (of the Hay and Allen stock), he now proposes to catch runaway negroes” (73). Not only do these advertisements constitute an exemplary instance of Brown’s use of irony—the dogs are allowed traceable genealogies while enslaved Africans are denied them—but they suggest the widespread culture of hunting for fugitive people. It is so common that the named advertisers can prosperously capitalize on it by breeding slave-hunting dogs for hire. For Brown, this culture of escape, capture, public torture (in this case, slaveowners gather nearly four thousand of their enslaved people, including Currer, to witness the fugitive man burned at the stake and to hear “numerous speeches [by] the magistrates and ministers of religion [warning] them, and telling them that the same fate await[s] them, if they should prove rebellious”), and death defines slavery in Natchez (77).

Brown cuts from this horrific spectacle to the apparently peaceful scene of Clotel’s home in Richmond, where clematis, passion flower, and Pride of China mix their “oriental-

looking foliage with the majestic magnolia,” and where the air smells “redolent[ly] with the fragrance of flowers.” While this scene of “rural beauty” contrasts sharply with the grisly scene preceding it, Brown establishes a sense of peace only to undermine it (79).

Antebellum readers of Lydia Maria Child’s 1842 short story “The Quadroons,” from which Brown directly borrows these botanical images, would have perceived the fate of Clotel that Brown adumbrates with his reference to Child’s story. As in Child’s “The Quadroons,” Clotel’s white husband, Horatio Green, will soon repudiate their marriage in order to secure a political alliance by marrying an influential man’s daughter, profaning Clotel’s unwavering probity and leaving both her and their daughter vulnerable to the whims and desires of the trade’s profiteers. The second scene in the post-separation sequence, Brown disorders chronology, rewinding from the common end result of the domestic slave trade—the lethal game of escape and recapture in cotton country—to the seemingly benign circumstances in Richmond that can, in hindsight, be seen as its beginning. In Richmond, Brown suggests, white men with evidently noble intentions systematically fall prey to baser desires at the expense of African American women, and these women, many of whom are fair-skinned on account of a mixed-race ancestry and thus considered highly valuable on the New Orleans market, end up torn from their superficially peaceable existences, displaced further south, and sexually abjected. Unlike Natchez, where brutality lives a spectacularly public life, Brown characterizes Richmond as a theater of subtler but no less devastating control of enslaved people’s fates.

When Brown's narrative eye pans for Althesa in the final movement of this sequence, it finds her in New Orleans, but it rests first on the city's emblematic architectural feature, the slave pen. Brown opens Clotel's chapter with lyrical reflections on her pleasing botanical and built environment, and he likewise opens Althesa's chapter with a view of her dwelling, "a two story flat building surrounded by a stone wall twelve feet high, the top of which is covered with bits of glass," whose rooms contain "any number of iron collars, hobbles, handcuffs, thumbscrews, cowhides, whips, chains, gags, and yokes" (83). In this parallel opening, Brown replaces clematis and passion flower with instruments of torture not only to heighten the contrast between the sisters' circumstances, and thus to display slavery's arbitrary but fateful sorting of people, but to characterize New Orleans as a city bound to the cultural and architectural implications of its position as the domestic trade's culmination. It is a city of immeasurable "human agony and suffering," where the faces of enslaved people express the "deep anguish" of separation, and where the sounds of this anguish—"mothers weeping for their children, breaking the night-silence with the shrieks of their breaking hearts" and "burst[s] of bitter lamentation" and "the loud hysteric laugh, denoting still deeper agony"—fill the New Orleans air (86). Like many other antislavery writers concerned with slavery's fetishization and sexual exploitation of light-skinned African American women, Brown also synonymizes New Orleans with concubinage, characterizing it not only as a city of manifest suffering, but also as a city differentially dangerous according to one's gender and complexion. If Natchez is the most barbarous city

in the nation, New Orleans, Brown concludes, “is doubtless the most immoral place in the United States” (181).

Brown moves his characters along what was, by the novel’s 1853 publication, the primary migratory route for slaveholders and speculators, and as the narrative follows the family’s geographic redistribution, Brown surveys the local forms of violence and resistance that have taken root along this path. Employing techniques of pastiche—reprinting newspaper advertisements, borrowing from Child’s “The Quadroons,” and citing his own experience and autobiography by referencing Walker—Brown creates a panoramic geographia that recalls the visual Panorama “of beautiful and interesting American scenery, as well as of many touching incidents in the lives of Slaves” he presented to British audiences on his 1850-51 lecture tour (*Description* 5). Brown assembled his Panorama and its textual supplement, *Description of William Wells Brown’s Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave*, after viewing a Panorama of the Mississippi River in 1847. Like Twain’s retrospective representation, which fell all but silent on the topic of slavery, this Panorama of the Mississippi River portrayed slavery in a “very mild manner.” Brown offered his Panorama as a corrective to this mild representation, hoping it would “disseminate truth upon this subject [of slavery], and hasten the downfall of the greatest evil that now stains the character of the American people” (5). To do so, Brown specified the geographic location of each woodblock, and thus the *Description* abounds with place names of the key sites along the river, as well as with statements of the regional distinctions slavery

has manufactured. Brown writes, for example, that “the Slaves are made to labour so hard, that the average life of a slave in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Georgia is said to be only seven years,” and that “Slaves are not permitted to bury their dead during the day, except in some of the better portions of Virginia, Kentucky, and Maryland” (7, 21).

Brown’s *Description* of his Panorama makes precise regional distinctions, but across his writings, Brown challenges conventional wisdom about the nation’s great regional divide between North and South. Brown deviates from abolitionists’ idealized map of freedom and unfreedom because for Brown, the North, permeated with racial prejudice and the threat of recapture, did not represent freedom and security. Rather, as *Clotel*’s friend and fellow fugitive William discovers, “liberty in the so-called Free States [was] more a name than a reality” because “prejudice followed the colored man into every place that he might enter” (176). This prejudice was “but another form of slavery itself” (172). As his *Narrative* attests, from a young age, Brown perceived the geographic border between unfreedom and freedom not to be between the Southern states and the Northern states but between the North and Canada, a country that initially symbolized true freedom and organized both his and Henry Bibb’s plans to start new lives as freemen. “A fugitive slave has no security whatever that he will not be returned to his owner, until he shall succeed in escaping to Canada, or some territory over which the United States Government has no control,” wrote Brown from London after the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, which exiled him from the United States until his 1854 legal emancipation (*Description* 34). After

1850, even Canada came to seem insecure to Brown on account of its adjacency to the Northern “so-called free” states. Brown’s second edition of his *Narrative*, published in London in 1849 and reissued after the consequential 1850 date, appends a lengthy story about two American fugitives kidnapped from their homes in Canada, an attempt at re-enslavement that Brown and fellow antislavery activists successfully thwart. Brown eventually came to see the Atlantic as the only reliable buffer between slavery and freedom. As Brown wrote in his 1849 letter to his former owner Enoch Price, only in England could Brown truly escape Price’s grip, and only there could he “rejoice that [he was] regarded as a man,” something he could “never be in America while Slavery exists there” (*Description* 49). Thus Brown’s protagonist Clotel does not implore her husband Horatio to relocate to the North or to Canada but “to remove to France or England, where both her and her child would be free, and where colour was not a crime” (*Clotel* 81).

As Brown troubles the conventional map of slavery and freedom by redrawing the line in an ever-widening circle around the “stained” United States, he also repeatedly challenges Americans’ distribution of humanitarian sentiments, arguing that these sympathies range too widely into foreign lands when they should center on domestic injustice. Americans “have tears to shed over Greece and Poland; they have an abundance of sympathy for poor Ireland; they can furnish a ship of war to convey the Hungarian refugees from a Turkish prison,” Brown writes in *Clotel*, but slaves are “out of the pale of their sympathy” (218). Brown reaches two conclusions about this differential distribution of

sympathy according to one's legal status as free or enslaved. Humanitarians either "pretend" this sympathy for sufferers abroad, or they enact "hypocrisy [or] gross inconsistency" when they pour out sympathy for non-Americans "while they chain, whip and sell their own countrymen" (*Description* 11). Brown sees no reason humanitarian sentiments cannot be directed at enslaved Americans, for "if the atrocities recently perpetrated upon defenceless women in Austria make the blood run cold through the veins of the humane and good throughout the civilized world, the acts committed daily upon the Slave women of America should not only cause the blood to chill but to stop its circulation" (*Description* 49).

Brown's early writings display and criticize slavery's dispersal of people, the geographic spread and diversification of its institutions and cultures, and the geographies of freedom, unfreedom, and sympathy it engenders. Yet, as much as Brown represents slavery's diasporic force, his writings, as well as those of his contemporaries, Bibb and Delany, represent a powerful counter-diasporic force. In each of their narratives, Brown's, Bibb's, and Delany's fugitive protagonists return to slave territory to rescue and reconstitute their families. Bibb writes of multiple trips from Ohio to Kentucky to retrieve his wife and child, efforts to keep his family intact that comprise the overriding theme of the *Life and Adventures*. Bibb's narrative concludes on the melancholic note that, for all of these efforts, his wife Malinda has been taken into concubinage by her master, for which Bibb forsakes her. Delany opens his novel with the sale of Henry Blake's wife Maggie, and the plot, set

entirely in slave territory, unfolds around the fugitive's effort to recover her, movements that serve a double function by allowing him to execute his long-held plan of organizing enslaved people into an expansive, insurrectionary army. By entwining these movements, Delany links the counter-diasporic effort to reconstitute bonds of kinship with the destruction of slavery via open rebellion as two elements of the same abolitionist program.

In *Clotel*, Brown offers two contrasting examples of characters' efforts to reverse the diasporic flow of slavery. In the first, Althesa, married to the rich, white man Henry Morton, somewhat halfheartedly attempts to purchase her mother from Parson Peck, who refuses to sell Currer on account of her being "such a good housekeeper that he could not spare her." While Althesa feels "sad when she [finds] that her mother [cannot] be bought," she feels a "consciousness of having done her duty in the matter" and decides to wait idly for the day of their reunion (113). Their earthly reunion never arrives, however, as yellow fever claims both their lives. Brown's depiction of Althesa's effort to rescue Currer as apathetic implies that Althesa has been lulled into a sense of security and contentment, a sense bolstered by her husband's public expressions of his budding antislavery views. But Morton, like the novel's other white fathers (Thomas Jefferson and Horatio Green), proves unreliable, and Althesa's sense of security proves false: Morton dies before he emancipates their daughters, and the two end up on the auction block. In contrast to Althesa's complacent attempts to restore and emancipate her family, Clotel bravely traverses unfree and unsafe geographies to reclaim her daughter in Richmond, a city Brown repeatedly calls

Clotel's "native" city as a way of reinforcing his sense of the unnaturalness of the trade's southwardly displacement of people (210). Clotel arrives in Richmond to find it rippled with chaotic and paranoid responses to Nat Turner's rebellion, and this state of heightened vigilance and vindictiveness, along with the highly circulated advertisements for her recapture, leads to her discovery and arrest.

Clotel's counter-diasporic movements do not end with her arrest and failure to recover her daughter Mary in Richmond, however. Clotel's captors transport her to Washington, D.C., and imprison her in one of the "negro pens" that Brown visualized in his *Panorama* and that for many antislavery writers epitomized the hypocritical discrepancy between the nation's ideals and its realities (215). As Solomon Northup summarizes in his 1853 *Twelve Years a Slave*: "The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains, almost commingled. A slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol!" (42-3). But Clotel manages to escape from the pen, "dart[ing] past her keeper, and [running] for her life." She plans to run across the Potomac River on Long Bridge and into the "extensive forests and woodlands of the celebrated Arlington Place, occupied by that distinguished relative and descendant of the immortal Washington, Mr. George W. Curtis" (216). In the world of Brown's novel, Clotel and George W. Curtis are both blood-kin to the nation's figural fathers (Jefferson and Washington), and Brown suggests that Clotel seeks safety in Curtis as a kinsman, a fellow member of the small group who share blood with the men who bore the nation. Brown also

suggests that Clotel runs toward Washington's descendant because he symbolizes the nation's founding promises of life and liberty. Whether Clotel perceives Washington's descendant as a flesh-and-blood or symbolic rescuer, Clotel directs her run toward him with hopes that he will restore her natural and civil right to freedom and thus counteract the long history of exclusion from liberty to which the United States has subjected her, her family, and her race.

Clotel does not survive her counter-diasporic run toward reconstituted family and freedom, but her heroic effort to undo her family's dispersal reaps its reward in the next generation when, against all odds, Clotel's daughter discovers the love of her youth, George Green, in France. Brown restores bonds of love and kinship through Mary, but, following his belief that no land even proximate to the United States can be considered safe for African-descended people, he pointedly concludes his novel by stating that a reunion such as theirs could not be sustained on American soil: "We can but blush for our country's shame when we recall to mind the fact, that while George and Mary Green, and numbers of fugitives from American slavery, can receive protection from any of the governments of Europe, they cannot return to their native land without becoming slaves" (243). Brown concludes his novel by reversing the diasporic effects of American slavery through Mary and George's happy reunion, but he stages this reunion on the soil of yet another diaspora in the process of being made by slavery through the dispersal of fugitives, refugees, and legally free African Americans to Europe, Canada, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Ben

Fagan compellingly argues that Brown's later historical writings, particularly his 1854 lecture *St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and Its Patriots*, honor this diaspora by tracing black revolutionary consciousness outside the borders of the United States. Indeed, in relocating his insurrectionary character George to France, Brown dramatizes the making of what Fagan calls an "international revolutionary continuum" (367). Yet in *Clotel*, Brown offers Mary and George's unlikely, counter-diasporic reunion in France as only partial consolation for the dislocations that have organized the novel, and he concludes by bemoaning that the couple cannot experience their grandfather's promises of life and liberty on their native soil.

The antebellum period saw naturalists from both sides of the Atlantic synthesizing geographic data into maps that demarcated species' ranges and boundaries. Occasioned by the global view that voyages of conquest and scientific exploration had provided, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biogeographic efforts used these maps to recreate species' histories of migration, histories that revealed as much about how the earth had changed over time as they did about how species had dispersed themselves. Biogeography thus foregrounded nature's historicity and dynamism, conceptual breakthroughs in the natural sciences crucial to the evolutionary theories emerging simultaneously with Brown's literary output. Like these biogeographers, Brown was very concerned with tracing the histories of people's movements from their homelands to new geographic spaces. He moved widely across the continent, movements that enabled the bird's eye view of North America that emerges in his 1847 *Narrative*, as well as his ability to see the continent's

distinct regions. *Clotel* not only maps these regions but, in a biogeographic spirit, it seeks the history of their emergence, which Brown shows as inseparable from the history of slavery, and their racial and national evolutionary significance. Brown inhabits a biogeographic perspective not merely to outline the evolving diaspora but, rather, to argue against what for Brown was its most vicious mechanism, the domestic slave trade. Brown thus refocuses, politicizes, and wields an emergent natural scientific paradigm to reveal the profound unnaturalness of these forced dislocations.

3.2 Brown's sociological spoof

In studying the causes and effects of slavery's distributions of people and cultural forms, *Clotel* engages the same types of questions that organized biogeography during the antebellum period, questions of where species originated, why and how they migrated, and what effect these migrations had on species development. Biogeographers made maps to demarcate species' ranges and to visualize the history of their movements from homelands into new geographies. Brown's autobiographical and fictional narratives assume a similar cartographic sensibility, mapping African-descended people's diasporic spread and, more figurally, the migrations and spatial ranges of affects and experiences. Posing biogeographic questions specifically to the human domain, however, Brown found that reconstructing the histories of humans' distributions and analyzing their effects required

historicizing the political and economic institutions, primarily slavery, that compelled geographic movement and shaped local cultures. Thus Brown's early writings interrogate how slavery moved African-descended people across the hemisphere and the effects of this movement, while examining the developments of slavery and the differential way its cultures (of violence, of sexuality, of religion, of education) became attached to geographic sites, particularly the river cities that played a crucial role in the massive, forced dislocation of the so-called second middle passage. Brown's attention to the relationships among human culture, political institutions, and economic structures bears as much a sociological as a biogeographical bent, and his writings pivot between the two interrelated discourses, posing biogeography's questions of population distribution (and what biogeographers call these distributions' "evolutionary significance") to sociology's object of study.

When Brown published his final narrative, *My Southern Home; Or, the South and Its People*, in 1880, nearly forty years after the publication of his first autobiography, the discipline of sociology was beginning to take shape. It was still entangled with earlier discourses of human variety, especially ethnology, however, and not yet clearly separable from other ascendant disciplines of human culture, including anthropology and linguistics. Scholarly analyses of *My Southern Home* have stressed the text's tonal differences from Brown's earlier autobiographical and fictional narratives, describing its narrator as detached from and often distressingly critical of the narrative's black characters. Paul Gilmore and William Andrews have argued that Brown's characterizations of enslaved men, including

those in *My Southern Home*, are marked by the period's culture of minstrelsy, even as they challenge its depictions (Andrews) and its logic of race and gender (Gilmore). John Ernest's favorable view of *My Southern Home* derives from his sense that the text continues Brown's longstanding formal experiments (in voice and in mixing genres), and that the narrator's detachment, which opens the way for unflattering, sometimes caricatured depictions, correlates to Brown's roaming search for a homeland that he finds he must ultimately construct through writing. These analyses proceed either by comparing *My Southern Home* to Brown's antebellum writings (finding it wanting in militancy by comparison) or to postbellum visual and dramatic cultures (finding it unnervingly close to minstrelsy). However, given Brown's continuous concern with the influence of slavery and racism on human behavior and culture, *My Southern Home* converses more directly with and powerfully criticizes the postbellum literary milieu (including Twain, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris) that infused literary narrative with ethnography, folklore, and linguistics—the heterogeneric threads of sociology.

The literary fray into which *My Southern Home* entered contained a distinct strand of nostalgic, retrospective tales about harmonious plantation life, now often grouped as the “plantation tradition.” These proto-sociological tales affirmed the earlier proslavery edict that slavery represented a “positive good” for African-descended people and that it orchestrated peaceable, mutually beneficial relations among the races. These narratives also made claims to truth, hoping, in the words of the genre's great enthusiast Thomas Nelson

Page, “to awaken inquiry into the true history of the Southern people and [to aid] in dispelling the misapprehension under which the Old South has lain so long” (*Old South* 4). Writers such as Page used black dialect to signify their stories’ truthfulness, often structuring their tales around black characters narrating episodes from their lives under slavery to white listeners. Indeed Harris, who published his first dialect story in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1876, based his authority as a folklorist and his ability to give “the whole flavor of the plantation” without “embellishment and without exaggeration” on the fact that he received his tales directly from the mouths of formerly enslaved people. This claim created a collaborative scene of a white interviewer-scribe and black narrators that postbellum plantation fiction continually reiterates (*Uncle Remus* 3). Twain’s 1874 tale “A True Story: Repeated Word for Word As I Heard It,” for example, uses a frame narrative in which a white family provokes their black servant, whom they call Aunt Rachel, to speak of her experience of slavery and the war. Twain’s title positions the story as an unmediated record of Rachel’s true experience and its author as a mere scribe, and while Twain shows Rachel rejecting her white employer’s claim that she has “never had any trouble” and telling instead of her painful separation from her children, the story ends with the redemptive reunion of Rachel and her son. These conventions of form and theme (“realistic” black speech that presents a “very mild” representation of slavery, to recall Brown’s phrase) reaches a peak in Page’s fiction, whose black narrators wax nostalgic about life before the war (“Dem wuz good times, marster—de bes’ Sam uver see dey wuz, in fac’!”) and regret

the North's intervention (Twain, "True" 591, Page, *Ole Virginia* 13).

In his Preface to *My Southern Home*, Brown evokes the plantation writings of Harris and Page by stating that he has used similar ethnographic methods to compose his text. "The earlier incidents were written out from the author's recollections," Brown writes, but "the later sketches [are] the results of recent visits to the South, where the incidents were jotted down at the time of their occurrence, and in their own unadorned dialect." Brown mirrors the genre's claim to be a truthful, unembellished representation of plantation life, stating, "no attempt has been made to create heroes or heroines, or to appeal to the imagination or the heart" (iii). Not only does the language of Brown's Preface mimic the truth claims of postbellum plantation retrospectives, thereby throwing *My Southern Home* directly into conversation with this genre, but it references Brown's own earlier writings. Brown repeatedly calls *Clotel* a heroine, using the word in the subtitle of the novel's fourth and final version, *Clotelle, Or the Colored Heroine; A Tale of the Southern States* (1867). He also repeatedly describes the escapes of enslaved people and their willingness to help others flee slavery as heroic. "No country has produced so much heroism in short a time, connected with escapes from peril and oppression, as has occurred in the United States among fugitive slaves," Brown writes (*Clotel* 164). Indeed, Brown's antislavery writings were designed precisely to display African Americans' heroism and to appeal to the imagination and the heart. Brown's Preface references his antebellum works seemingly to differentiate *My Southern Home* from them, to affiliate the book with the new postbellum milieu, and to (seem

to) position it as a realistic portrait of antebellum black life and the true, relatively harmonious relations between the races.

Brown immediately undermines his Preface's differentiation of *My Southern Home* from his earlier antislavery writings, as well as its snug fit with the period's redemptive plantation retrospectives, however. The first chapter opens with a lyrical description of the lavish home of Dr. Gaines, the pseudonym Brown also assigns the historical Dr. John Young in his 1858 play, *The Escape*, which Brown ritually performed on the antislavery lecture circuit. Brown describes Dr. Gaines's mansion as situated "on a pleasant plain, sloping off toward a murmuring stream," among "a beautiful lake [and] an old orchard filled with apple, peach, pear, and plum trees." Yet, in the midst of this congenial, fruitful landscape, clematis and passion flowers intrude, and with them, *Clotel*. The book's inaugural passage forebodingly reproduces Brown's description of Clotel's Richmond cottage, replicating verbatim a sentence from his chapter "The Quadroon's Home" to describe the Gaines mansion's botanical environs: "The pride of China mixed its oriental looking foliage with the majestic magnolia, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of flowers, peeping out of every nook and nodding upon you with a most unexpected welcome" (1). Brown follows this self-reference by introducing the enslaved boy, Billy, whom a visitor to the mansion mistakes for the white son of Dr. Gaines, exclaiming, "I should have known he was the Doctor's son if I had met him in Mexico," much to Mrs. Gaines's chagrin (5). Brown's self-reference likens the mansion to the cottage because, as his anecdote of Billy reinforces,

under its roof, Gaines, like Horatio Green, fathers children with enslaved women. Brown deepens the equivalence by showing Mrs. Gaines to enact the same punishment on Billy that Horatio's white wife enacts on Clotel's daughter, Mary, forcing Billy to remain in the sun until his skin darkens enough that he will not be mistaken for white, a punishment Brown preemptively ridicules with the visitor's comment that Billy's likeness to Dr. Gaines would be apparent even under Mexico's skin-darkening sun.

References to *Clotel* and *The Escape* abound in *My Southern Home*, suffusing the text with Brown's antislavery and antiracist legacy. The interweaving of these earlier narratives into *My Southern Home* allows Brown not only to conjure his liberationist politics, but also very subtly to mock the text's white characters. For example, in *My Southern Home*, Brown paraphrases Snyder's religious sermon from the "Religious Teacher" chapter of *Clotel*, attributing the sermon to Mr. Mason, who preaches to Dr. Gaines's enslaved people that the more humbly they accept their position, the more they will be rewarded in heaven (16). Mason concludes his sermon by describing hell, "that awful place, that you will surely go, if you don't be good and faithful servants," as a "great pit, more than two hundred feet deep, [and] walled up with stone, having a strong iron grating at the top" — an image of the "negro pens" Brown describes in *Clotel* as much as an image of hell (17). This scene's references to *Clotel* allow Brown to undermine Mason in two ways. First, in *Clotel* Brown writes that this same sermon did not have its intended effect, for it did "not succeed in keeping the negroes all interested: four or five were asleep, leaning against the trees; as

many more were nodding, while not a few were stealthily cracking and eating hazelnuts” (97). At the sermon’s end, one listener concludes, “I don’t believe a word of it” (100).

Secondly, Brown shows Mason unwittingly conflating hell with a slave prison, accidentally (or perhaps unconsciously) confirming the hellish nature of the institution he consciously supports.

In a notable departure from the white-authored plantation retrospectives Brown evokes in his Preface, *My Southern Home* exhibits the foolishness, cruelty, or self-delusion of each of its white characters, particularly Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, and implies class-based fractures in white society. Brown describes Dr. Gaines as “born and brought up in a family, claiming to be of the ‘F.F.V.’ (First Families of Virginia), but were comparatively poor” (2). (Although *My Southern Home* predates most of Page’s literary output, Brown’s characterization of Dr. Gaines as a comparatively poor member of the First Families of Virginia comes uncannily close to describing Page’s social status, as well as that of almost all of Page’s white characters; Page devotes much of his writing to lamenting this group’s fall in status and to arguing that their aristocratic blood should trump their fallen economic status.) Brown’s formulation—“*claiming* to be of the ‘F.F.V.’—intimates the questionable truth behind the Gaines family’s claim to blue blood, suggesting either that Gaines belongs to a poor family that stakes a false claim to American aristocracy or to one whose economic and social status has fallen even if its blood has remained pure. Mrs. Gaines takes great exception to Dr. Gaines’s social and religious pretensions, pronouncing, “My mother told

me that I was a fool to marry a man so much beneath me—one so much my inferior in society, [and] now you show it by hectoring and aggravating me,” a pronouncement that Brown’s narrator punctuates by defensively reassuring readers that “these scenes of unpleasantness” were “not an everyday occurrence and, therefore, the great house at ‘Poplar Farm’ may be considered as having a happy family”—a claim that the narrative repeatedly falsifies (4).

As this exchange between Dr. and Mrs. Gaines indicates, although the narrator of *My Southern Home* occasionally speaks in the first person, the narrator should not be mistaken for the author (an overlap that scholarship on *My Southern Home* has presumed) or for one of the text’s black characters. The narrator correlates, rather, to the type of book described by Brown in his Preface, a book of sociological fact, which would seem to require an objective, detached narrator. Just as Brown undercuts the Preface’s differentiation of *My Southern Home* from his fictional and antislavery works by weaving these works into the text, he also routinely subverts his detached narrator by creating an ironic gap between the narrator’s observations and the characters’ actual thoughts and behaviors. The narrator describes Mrs. Gaines, for example, as “a lady of considerable merit, well-educated, and of undoubted piety,” but Brown consistently shows her acting contrary to these virtues, scolding her servant Hannah for causing her to exert energy in beating her, and praying for a yellow fever epidemic so that her husband’s medical practice will flourish (3, 27, 30). “Everybody here seems to be in good health,” the supposedly meritorious and pious Mrs.

Gaines laments, “and I am afraid they’ll keep so. However, we must hope for the best. We must trust in the Lord. Providence may possibly send some disease amongst us for our benefit” (30). Likewise, while the narrator describes the patriarch Dr. Gaines as “kind and indulgent,” Brown shows Gaines to be both volatile and bumbling, a man whose “financial affairs [are perpetually] in an unfavorable condition,” and who must therefore hire out his enslaved people to slave traders, “one class more thoroughly despised than [any other] by the high-born, well-educated Southerner” — the very class from which Gaines purports to have descended (37, 36). Thus by establishing a detached sociological narrator and using a separate authorial voice to undermine the authority of this narrator, Brown creates a thick but subtle sense of irony that derides the text’s white characters while spoofing the genre of plantation retrospectives that purported to represent the truth of antebellum life and black character.

This sense of irony also infuses Brown’s seemingly disparaging and incongruous comments about the racial character of African and African-descended people. His controversial Chapter Nine describes “the African” using the language and tropes of ethnological and phrenological discourse: “Sympathetic in his nature, thoughtless in his feelings, both alimentativeness and amativeness large, the negro is better adapted to follow than to lead. His wants easily supplied, generous to a fault, large fund of humor, brimful of music, he has ever been found the best and most accommodating of servants” (91). Not only does this pat ethnological description reference the truth discourses that Brown uses

irony and parody to critique throughout *My Southern Home*, but as with the text's white characters, it creates yet another ironic gap between the narrator's observations and Brown's portrayal of its black characters. The passage describes exactly none of the black characters in *My Southern Home*, who outwit their social superiors at every turn, and who, Brown shows, only seem to be accommodating their owners when they are, in fact, advancing their own social, economic, and liberationist goals. Moreover, Brown follows this passage by describing a corn shucking, an event Harris renders with a woodcut and a "Corn-Shucking Song" in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, a book published the same year as *My Southern Home* that expanded the Uncle Remus sketches Harris began publishing in the mid-1870s (158). Brown's rendering also includes a dialect song, but instead of evoking the "large fund of humor, and brimful of music" that ethnology attributes to "the African" and Harris attributes to Remus, Brown's song evokes his 1848 songbook *Anti-Slavery Harp*. With its chant-like rhythm and repeated line ("Shuck dat corn before you eat"), Brown's dialect song also evokes enslaved people's work songs. Unlike Harris, who presents his "Corn-Shucking Song" as a pure transcription of the black linguistic and social culture that his writings essentialize, Brown politicizes the apparently apolitical song and thus attenuates its status as a pure, "unadorned" sociological artifact.

If Brown's earliest writings endeavored to understand capacity of slavery to distribute people and to produce local forms of violence and resistance, *My Southern Home*, written at the cusp of the disciplinary formation of sociology, presents a retrospective

panorama of antebellum culture by engaging sociology's heterogeneous idiom of ethnology, linguistics, and folklore. However, while *My Southern Home* extends Brown's career-spanning interest in the relationship between human culture and socioeconomic institutional forms, it also demonstrates the exception Brown took to the "very mild" representations of plantation culture life being penned by members of Brown's postbellum literary cohort and being received by post-Reconstruction American readerships with great enthusiasm. As much as Brown experiments with sociological methods and forms, he parodies them, the purpose and effect of which is not only to replace Harris's and Page's mild representations with less romantic pictures but, more generally, to call into question the very possibility of presenting an unmediated and apolitical record of life under slavery.

Throughout his writings, Brown characterizes slavery as unnatural because it ruptures families and communities, dispersing people away from their "native" homes, and because it corrupts white character, which Brown's final text incisively portrays. Like Walker's *Appeal*, Brown's writings concern the human toll of slavery, but while Walker focuses on the psychological damage wrought by the ideological campaign of slavery, Brown focuses on the damage to communities wrought by the shattering of the networks that Jacobs takes great pains to describe. *My Southern Home* cannily depicts an enslaved community at Poplar Farm allied against the white Gaines family, whose members have been made both bumbling and cruel by their commitment to slavery, but Brown's intertextual weaving of his antebellum fictions into *My Southern Home* suggests the

vulnerability of Poplar Farm's black community to the desires and whims of the domestic slave trade and to the way it moved people to meet the demands of the changing economic and social face of slavery. Brown's representation of the tactical unity of the enslaved community at Poplar Farm and Clotel's counter-diasporic run into slave territory express Brown's wish for and his politics of intact black communities, posed against the centrifugal force of the trade. In 1846, Brown's friend and political ally Gerrit Smith took Brown's idea of the naturalness and political efficacy of intact and unified human communities and materialized it in the mountainous wilderness of upstate New York. In the Adirondack Mountains, Smith donated land to free African Americans for the purpose of starting an experimental agrarian community. As the following chapter details, Smith extended Brown's point that the separation of families and communities contradicted nature by proposing that the labor of regime of slavery also inevitably diminished natural environments. Smith's agrarian experiment represents the period's growing sense that the deleterious effects of slavery were not limited to the human domain but, rather, extended to the nonhuman domain, particularly the land. Indeed, for Smith, if humans were prevented from flourishing by the economic system, so, too, would the land fail to flourish.

Chapter Four

Ecologies of the Freehold at Timbucto, New York

In 1846, the wealthy upstate New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith concocted a plan to give 120,000 acres of Adirondack land, divided into forty-acre freeholds, to New York's free people of color. Smith charged three prominent African American abolitionists—James McCune Smith, Henry Highland Garnet, and Charles Bennett Ray—to select landless African Americans to receive grants. In 1837, McCune Smith had become the first African American to earn a medical degree, and at the time Smith was drawing up his scheme, he was working as the physician-in-residence at the Colored Orphan Asylum in Manhattan, striving, as he told Smith, to “fling [himself] into the cause of colored children, that they may be better and more thoroughly taught than their parents” (12 May 1848). Garnet had risen to national attention in 1843 when, in his “Address to the Slaves of the United States” at the National Negro Convention, he encouraged enslaved people to “use the same manner of resistance, as would have been just in our ancestors, when the bloody footprints of the first remorseless soul-thief was placed upon the shores of our fatherland,” remarks that reached their widest audience when his “Address” was reprinted in an 1848 edition of David Walker's *Appeal* (Garnet 5-6). And Charles Bennett Ray, a Congregationalist minister in New York City, had been at the helm of the important African American newspaper *The Colored American*. Assuming the role of land agents, these three men held meetings across

the state to promote what they blithely called the Gerrit Smith Farming Association. At these meetings, “tall, stalwart, [and] hard-fisted” men—“the Hope of the Race,” in McCune Smith’s words—signed up for land. Although McCune Smith cautioned Smith that the scheme would “subject [him] to trials more painful than anything [he had yet] endured,” including the “taunt of Fanaticism” and “cold ingratitude,” between September 1846 and November 1847, Smith issued three thousand land indentures (McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 18 December 1846).

Smith envisioned two settlements in New York’s high-peak region, one in Essex County called Timbucto and the other in Franklin County called Blackville. In his vision, black city-dwellers would relinquish urban squalor for clean and virtuous agrarian living. The 1847 National Convention of Colored People, held in Troy, New York, praised the scheme, urging free blacks to “forsake the cities and towns and settle upon this land and cultivate it, and thereby build a tower of strength for themselves.” In the pages of *The North Star*, Frederick Douglass encouraged “the sable-armed pioneer” to lift his “sharp axe” over “the soil of Franklin and Essex Counties, [where] the noise of falling trees [would] proclaim the glorious dawn of civilization throughout their borders” (“Smith Lands” 1848). Yet, despite these spirited inducements, only a fraction redeemed their land. When McCune Smith toured Timbucto at its peak in 1849, he found sixty residents who, though “cheerful, hardy, industrious,” and “making fine talk [about] their feeling of independence,” were destitute, without money to buy even basic farm implements (McCune Smith to Gerrit

Smith, 6 February 1850). Douglass perceived that Smith's donation, although "generous and magnificent," did not take into account the costs of clearing land and starting a farm. "Houses cannot be built and farming utensils obtained without money; and this the grantees have not got," he wrote in 1849. This lack of overhead not only threatened the livelihoods of those who had already emigrated—"the hardships and difficulties stare them full in the face"—but according to Douglass, it stopped hundreds who wished to go but felt they could not "emigrate with safety." *The North Star* pledged twenty-five dollars and asked its readers for donations to put toward "purchasing farming utensils and helping those who settle on those lands next Spring" (Douglass, "Smith" 1849).

The few settlers who did manage to establish farms found some success growing root vegetables and grains (O'Brien 10). In 1849, Timbucto resident James Henderson wrote Garnet that "there is no better land for grain" than in Essex County and reported that the farmers "get from 25 to 50 bushels of oats to the acre," potatoes and turnips at 200 to 400 bushels per acre. Timbucto's most agriculturally successful resident, Lyman Epps, harvested ample rye, corn, peas, and turnips, as well as plentiful butter and wool. But devastating winters—tragically, James Henderson froze to death in 1852 and his family left the settlement soon after—and upstate New York's short growing season drove all but a dozen pioneers to abandon their homesteads. Even the scheme's great enthusiast McCune Smith, who spoke in romantic tones about the "lofty" and "majestic" spruce and maple trees, "could not see the way clear for a livelihood" and never redeemed his land (McCune

Smith to Gerrit Smith, 6 February 1850). In 1852, most of the unredeemed land was sold by the state for back taxes. By most standards of measure, Smith's settlement scheme failed: very few even claimed their land, and those that did faced brutal conditions without the proper equipment, abandoned, after the initial gift of land, to fend for themselves in an unforgiving environment—a narrative of agricultural and social failure that characterizes all the literature on the Smith lands.

This literature also agrees that the most important context for understanding Smith's scheme is that, in 1846, New York proposed a new constitution that included a provision disenfranchising African American men unless they owned \$250 worth of property. In a pamphlet entitled "To the Voters of the State of New York," Smith pleaded with citizens to reject the provision through referendum. Not only was disenfranchisement like "exclusion from the common air and common water"—a violation of a political right that bordered on a violation of a natural one—but barring legally free African Americans from the vote ultimately bolstered slavery: "Northern men [never] more effectually [do] the slaveholder's wicked work, than when engaged in disenfranchising their colored brethren, and multiplying impediments in the way of his obtaining science, property, respectability, and happiness." But the constitution was ratified, and Smith, who owned three-quarters of a million acres of land, sought to enfranchise black men by giving them freeholds worth exactly the cost of the vote. "Since the State has again determined that although white men because they are white may vote," Smith wrote to McCune Smith, Ray, and Theodore

Wright, “nonetheless black men because they are black shall be obliged to buy the right to vote—since they [must] become landowners that they be entitled to vote, they will become landowners. Vote they will, cost what it will” (qtd. Godine 50).

Rather than focusing on the settlements’ failed execution, this chapter treats Smith’s scheme first and foremost as an idea in the history of ideas about the relationship between land-use and labor, or ecology and economy, and supplements the immediate political context of the scheme (enfranchisement) with the environmental-historical contexts that I show converge in it. The three contexts I provide—of a resurgent, abolition-inflected agrarian idealism, of ideas about land as a natural right, and of the growing sense that the South’s system of labor was responsible for destroying its ecosystems and thus imperiling its economy—show that Smith’s scheme articulated itself against the plantation South. In the South, not only were African bodies “degraded” by slavery’s brutality, but it was also well-known by the 1840s that its soils, especially in the Virginia Tidewater and Virginia-Carolina Piedmont, had been stripped by over-cultivation. Its fields were, in Frederick Law Olmsted’s words, “gullied like icebergs.” While Southerners sought to explain environmental devastation in purely agricultural terms, as bad but basically correctable practices, Northerners began to tie land abuse together with labor exploitation. For some antislavery writers, dead fields simply represented a moral judgment: the South was reaping, or indeed *not* reaping, what it had sown. But others saw soil depletion as the inevitable environmental outcome of a false economic system that fostered bloating

landholdings, undiversified fields, and an inflexible and “unmotivated” labor force. Slave-based labor, they argued, enabled planters to put too much land under cultivation, and the prospect of cheap and fertile land on the vast frontier, to be cleared and worked by unfree labor, encouraged them to treat it recklessly. Moreover, planters’ devotion to slavery created a deep obstinacy to agricultural reform if agricultural reform meant any degree of labor reform—which modern economic historiographies of enslavement have confirmed that it did. If one lesson of the South’s stripped soils was that the economic mode of production, its scale and organization of labor, affects the health of the land as well as the health of its laborers, then Smith’s scheme placed the forty-acre freehold at the center of an economy reconfigured around modest surplus and free labor, a new economic base that Smith believed would be the seedbed of a truly egalitarian society.

4.1 Antislavery’s agrarian idealism

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson fastened farming to virtue and virtue to the integrity and prosperity of the republic. “Those who labor in the earth,” he wrote, are God’s “peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (274). Because Jefferson saw independence, humility, and honesty as absolutely required by farm life, he proposed that farm life would naturally exclude moral depravity. Manufacturing, on the other hand, “begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for

the designs of ambition" (274-5). Jefferson envisioned a nation of diligent agrarians, cultivating humble land holdings, content to exchange the windfall of manufacturing for the national "happiness and permanence" that would percolate upward from free and virtuous people: "It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour" (275). While Jefferson's agrarian idealism rang distinctly false in the context of large-scale plantation agriculture, by the 1840s, it had taken on new life in antislavery discourse. One contributor to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* for example, described "rural districts [as] moral schools," where "the farmer has [nothing] to induce him to violate the commands of God," and where slim profit margins encourage frugality. Money has "cost too much labor to be thrown away in costly silver plates or old wines," the contributor reasoned ("Moral Influence"). In their 1849 "Address to the Colored Men of Connecticut," S.M. Africanus, Henry Nott, and Henry A. Thomson explained that "the acquisition of property in the soil, homesteads, farms and the pursuit of agriculture [induce] habits of industry and economy," which "secure comfort, open the way to competence, and result in stability and independence of character." In a similar Jeffersonian spirit, Charles Bennett Ray's *The Colored American* also fused personal morality with agrarian life and positioned these as the only sturdy bases of the republic. As the paper's columnist explained, agriculture "gives those engaged in it a feeling of independence, genuine nobleness without ostentation, honor, honesty, and firmness, well calculated to perpetuate the free institutions of our happy country" ("Importance").

Antislavery's reanimation of agrarian idealism should be understood in the context of ideas about the degrading effects of enslavement and racial oppression. As I discussed in Chapter One, abolitionists like David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet argued that enslavement brutalized enslaved people into the "degraded" condition Walker called "wretchedness," a term that, I showed, connoted both "misery" and "alienation." Garnet, who, it will be recalled, served as a land agent for Gerrit Smith, argued in his 1843 "Address" that oppressors "endeavored to make [enslaved people] as much like brutes as possible," degrading their bodies through corporal punishment and their minds through forced textual illiteracy. As he put it in his 1848 "Discourse on the Past and Present Condition, and Destiny of the Colored Race," under slavery, "young men are brutalized in intellect, and their manly energies are chilled by the frosts" of their circumstances. Like Walker, Garnet also argued that slavery did "its perfect work" when enslaved people believed it their duty to obey their masters and submit to their fates—to internalize and comply with racial prejudice. While Garnet urged enslaved people to "use every means, both moral, intellectual and physical" to break their fetters, his commitment to Smith's agrarian scheme suggests that farm life represented for him a path for legally free African Americans to combat the degrading forces of racial oppression ("Address" 5). If suffering under racial domination caused misery and alienation, then the farmer's industrious life and unalienated labors represented a scene of individual and collective suture and regeneration.

Advocates of black agrarianism contrasted the regenerative power of the country with the corrosive influence of city life. Jefferson had compared the “mobs of great cities” to “sores [that drain] the strength of the human body” and cause “a degeneracy” like a “canker which soon eats to the heart of [the nation’s] laws and constitutions,” and antislavery agrarians similarly argued that “one great cause, if not *the* great cause, of degradation of the colored men at the North, is, no doubt, the way they crowd together in cities” (Jefferson 275; “Settlements,” original emphasis). Antislavery agrarians believed the city lured innocents toward intemperance and lasciviousness, but more deeply, they viewed its economic structures as fundamentally incompatible with authentic freedom. In an 1848 “Address to the Colored People of the United States,” delivered by Frederick Douglass and signed by Henry Bibb, W.L. Day, David Jenkins, and A.H. Francis, the Committee contended that true independence, apart from legal freedom, would only come when black Americans made white Americans dependent on them by exchanging the “menial” labor of the city for the “enduring vocations” of the country. “We must not merely make the white man dependent upon us to shave him but to feed him; not merely dependent upon us to black his boots, but to make them,” they professed. An 1848 Liberty Party address, printed in the *Utica’s Model Worker* next to an advertisement for Gerrit Smith’s presidential campaign on the Liberty ticket, similarly claimed that social and economic elevation was impossible if African Americans continued “clustering in cities, and resigning [themselves] to menial occupations.” Only “ignorance, groveling spirit, and destitution of manly independence”

could result from their undue “congregat[ion] in populous places.” Moreover, advocates of black agrarianism claimed that the city’s inevitable tenancy subordinated African Americans to white landlords, and this condition of indebtedness precluded true personal and economic freedom. Thus Douglass’s 1848 Committee entreated African Americans “to turn [their] attention to agriculture. Go to farming. Be tillers of the soil.”

The belief that land ownership and the rigors of farm life would create generations of virtuous and economically self-sufficient black communities was central to antebellum black settlement experiments across the northern United States and Canada. Historians of these settlements, such as William and Jane Pease, Stephen Vincent, Sharon Hepburn, Jacqueline Tobin, and Heike Paul, have emphasized that, unlike the period’s utopian communities at New Harmony and Brook Farm, for example, which were founded on communitarian principles, black settlements tended to stress self-reliance and individualism, values they linked inextricably to the kind of property ownership that white utopian experiments tended to repudiate. The settlement most comparable in its conception to Smith’s was the Elgin settlement at Buxton, Ontario, founded by the former slaveowner William King with his fifteen emancipated people in 1849. The Presbyterian minister King identified seven thousand acres of land in the Western District of Upper Canada and formed a corporation, the Elgin Association, to raise funds for its purchase and manage the settlement. King conceived Elgin as a regenerative training ground for citizenship, where newly free people would learn to navigate—not challenge—white social and economic

norms. The settlement's founding value, then, was self-reliance, a virtue that King, like Douglass and Smith, believed derived from the true independence forged by a combination of land ownership and Christian education. King thus stridently opposed charity from Elgin's sympathizers, arguing that accepting benevolent gifts too closely resembled the kind of "begging" that he believed had crippled earlier black settlement attempts (at Wilberforce and Dawn in particular). More significantly, accepting charity defeated these settlements' intention to display African Americans' capacity for self-support as demonstrable proof against proslavery's argument of blacks' "natural" dependency on whites. They intended to use "conduct [to] confute the doctrines on which [slavery] is based," in McCune Smith's words. As Hepburn and Tobin recount, when Boston's Anti-Slavery Society sent Elgin boxes of clothing, for example, Elgin settlers voted to accept the gift "in the spirit in which it was intended" but to issue a public notice that they wished for no future gifts: "We do not think it right that colored people, who are supporting themselves by their own industry, should lie under the disgrace of being called public beggars, when they receive nothing, and don't want anything," the settlers wrote (qtd. Hepburn 81).

The aim of black settlements was to regenerate black men and women from the effects of suffering under racial oppression, but, as their emphasis on self-reliance implies, they also understood themselves to be elevation projects. Pease and Pease write that middle-class ideals thoroughly infused black settlements. Founders like King and Smith believed that their settlements' economic base — cultivation of privately-owned land —

would foster independence, but both men also instituted strict social codes, including absolute temperance, that they believed would incubate middle-class respectability. Elgin was not meant to be a “mission for sheltering the destitute, the derelict, the down and out,” Pease and Pease explain, and according to the abolitionist Samuel May, none “were admitted to the [Elgin] Association unless they brought certificates of good moral character” (Pease 99). Similarly, Smith, a stalwart temperance crusader who built one of the nation’s first temperance hotels in his hometown of Peterboro, New York, in 1828, charged his land agents with screening grantees for sobriety and with revoking land indentures when grantees “turned out to be drunkard[s],” agreeing with Samuel Cornish that “no oppressed Colored American who wishes to occupy that elevation in society, which God has designed he should occupy, should be intemperate or even touch, as a beverage, intoxicating drinks, none should be idle or extravagant [but] all, all should be up and doing, should work while it is day” (Garnet to Smith, 22 September 1848; Cornish, “Responsibility”). For elevationists like King, Smith, and Cornish, temperance and industry would not only secure social stability within their settlements and transform their residents into respectable middle-class laborers, but it would be the “sure means of [African Americans’] elevation in society” at large, and perhaps most importantly, it would deprive their “enemies of the strongest arguments, with which to oppose the emancipation of the slave” by rebuffing the racial stereotypes used to justify enslavement (Cornish, “Responsibility”).

Antislavery's commitment to the reparative and elevating effects of farm life goes some way toward explaining why, in the 1840s, agricultural news, advice, advertisements, and encomiums surged in the antislavery press. "Hail, Agriculture, man's first, best employ," began a poem from *The Yankee Farmer* reprinted by the *Liberator* in 1841: "Both Presidents and Senators are proud / To own they in thy healthy fields have pough'd, / Have swung the axe, have drove the sturdy crow, / And oft have laid thy wavy meadows low." Cornish and Ray's *The Colored American* reprinted an article called "Farming" from the *Boston Weekly News*, which lamented that the "most useful art [of farming] is undervalued in America, for it is not sufficiently splendid" and intoned that nonetheless "some of the greatest philosophers have written on agriculture, and some of the greatest heroes have practiced it with their hands." Antislavery publications also circulated addresses delivered to agricultural societies or at agricultural fairs, like Mr. Colman's 1843 remarks to New York's Monroe County Agricultural Society that no occupation "is in itself more honest, more respectable, none has stronger fullness, none is more favorable to virtue, and none is more sure in all reasonable rewards to industry, temperance, and good conduct" than agriculture. Although these panegyrics to agriculture's capacity to inspire virtue and good conduct may seem apolitical, they were in fact directly connected to the reparative stance many in the antislavery cause assumed toward free African Americans, a stance epitomized in black settlement projects.

This reenergized agrarian idealism is an important context in which to place Smith's settlement schemes in Franklin and Essex Counties because Smith agreed that plantations and cities corrupted character, and he implored free blacks to "quit their city life, their self-indulgent life, and to betake themselves to the tracts of land in our State [where] they will begin a new life" (qtd. O'Brien 5). Smith also maintained that labor bore a direct and creative relationship to personality, and hence he believed like Jefferson that farm life's rigors would, as a matter of course, engender industry, honesty, and self-reliance in its practitioners. Yet, it is worth noting that in the Adirondacks, where "the difficulties and hardships attending the settlement of a new country (always great) are [even] greater," agrarianism's emphasis on total self-reliance very quickly ran up against this ideal's impracticability (Douglass, "Smith Lands" 1849 original parentheses). Finding it much too difficult to clear their lands singlehandedly, in 1848, settlers in Franklin County unexpectedly formed "a good-sired and well-organized" mutual aid company. "Their plan," wrote McCune Smith, "[was] to have each man pay \$1.25 initiation fee and 50 cents per month, and the sum amassed to be expended exclusively in surveying the lots, cutting roads, and clearing the land of each member," a plan presented to McCune Smith with such "good spirit" that it made him feel "very desirous to go on the good land" (McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 7 July 1848).

4.2 A right 'by virtue of his existence'

In 1852, New York's 22nd District elected Gerrit Smith to the House of Representatives as a Free Soiler. In an 1854 debate over the Homestead Bill, Smith argued to Congress that "all members of the human family" have "as equal right to the soil as to light and air, because [they have] equal a need of the one as the other" ("Resolutions"). This formulation turned away from Locke's labor-based theory of property ownership and toward Thomas Paine's theory from his 1797 *Agrarian Justice*, that the earth was originally "the common property of the human race" (402). While Paine allowed that cultivation was "one of the greatest natural improvements made by human invention," he believed that "the landed monopoly that began with it [had] produced the greatest evil": it had "dispossessed more than half of the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance" (404). This dispossession had resulted in deplorable wealth disparity, creating a "contrast of affluence and wretchedness [that] continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together" (409). Paine did not argue for land redistribution; instead he argued that all men should be given fifteen pounds sterling upon turning twenty-one as compensation for the loss of their rightful land inheritance. But Smith and his fellow land reformers of the 1840s reinvigorated and revised Paine to argue that because land was, in Smith's words, an "inalienable right," every man who wanted a farm should have one. Smith went to Washington to agitate for a Homestead Bill, but eight years earlier, in Franklin and Essex Counties, the land baron contrived a land redistribution scheme of his own, and his

attempted black settlements should be contextualized in the history of ideas about land as a right “sacred as the right to life itself,” in the long march toward the 1862 Homestead Acts, and in the postbellum efforts to redistribute wealth by redistributing land—efforts conceived, in Paine’s words, “not [as] charity, but [as] a right” (Smith, “Resolutions,” Paine 409).

When Smith and his cohort of land reformers claimed soil to be “a natural, universal, and inalienable right,” they expanded the anti-rent agitation that had embroiled upstate New York for many decades. As the historian Reeve Huston writes, since the late eighteenth century, New York’s tenant farmers had vociferously challenged proprietors’ claims to land ownership on the basis that laboring on the land had made it theirs. In exacting rent, proprietors not only robbed farmers of the fruits of their labors, extracting a surplus that widened wealth disparity, but they impinged upon farmers’ personal liberty. These entwined wrongs—wealth disparity and infringement of personal liberty—compromised republicanism, anti-renters argued. Land ownership, on the other hand, leveled citizens by dispersing money and power, deterring hierarchy and ensuring democracy. While Smith and his cohort agreed with anti-renters’ final analysis that land monopoly (as Smith called it) undermined republicanism, they supplemented anti-renters’ labor-based theory of ownership with the language of natural rights. In the words of Thomas Devyr, land reformer and co-founder (with George Henry Evans and John Windt) of the National Reform Association, “Every man has an indisputable right and title to land

enough to live upon; and no one has a just title to a foot more than is necessary for the subsistence of his family, while another is without land." A man has a right to land, Devyr claimed, "by virtue of his existence."

National Reformers contended that the way to secure every farmer a farm was to legislate against land monopolies, to break up large holdings and redistribute them. In their 1845 "Plan of Restoring the Land of New York to the People," National Reformers proposed that "no one hereafter shall, under any circumstances, become possessed of more than one hundred and sixty acres of land in this state," nor shall "mechanics or professional" men become "possessed of more than one lot in a city or village." The "Plan" gave monopolies five years "to dispose of [their lands] to landless persons." The aim, wrote Devyr in 1844, was to disable "the capitalist" from drawing any revenue from another's land and "to shut the door at once and forever against the blasting principle of land monopoly." Newspapers across the North responded to the National Reformers' bold proposals, some, like the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, agreeing that it was time "to elevate the working class by securing them more equal rights" through land ownership, and some, like the *Schenectady Cabinet*, proclaiming the National Reformers "eager to demolish [the nation's] foundations, and establish a reign of anarchy" ("National Reform;" "Radicalism"). In 1847, the *Mechanic's Advocate* reported that "the Freedom of the Public Lands [movement] is now agitating the public mind to a vast extent, and every day bring[ing] to our notice new proofs of its

increasing popularity among the masses of people,” with associations like the National Reformers “forming all over the country” (“Free Public”).

The land reform movement was not in itself an antislavery movement, but some of its members endeavored to unite with antislavery on the ground that liberation would be meaningless unless the emancipated had access to the means of subsistence, in the form of a guaranteed homestead. “As to whether it would not be better, first of all, to secure the right of man to himself,” wrote William West to the *Liberator* in 1846, “the question seems to me ridiculous. How can the right of man to himself be secured, so long as his right to the soil is not acknowledged? How much is that man benefited, whose right to life is admitted, but who is denied the means whereby he must live?” As West’s formulation indicates, land reformers held man’s right to land to be his most fundamental right and its denial society’s most basic injustice, a violation from which the rest of society’s ills flowed. There was not a racial justice argument; land reformers did not frame their argument around equal land rights regardless of race, nor did they argue against enslavement on the basis that it deprived African Americans of land. Rather, in line with social theorists like Albert Brisbane, who, interpreting Fourier, argued that reforming the organization of labor would be the “essential reform” that would “break the fetters both of the slave and the hired laborers, and secure in addition their social elevation,” land reformers argued that equal access to the means of subsistence was the ground of all social and political equality (Brisbane, “Reformatory”).

Although Smith's primary political identification was as an abolitionist, in the mid-1840s, he came to view land reform and antislavery as deeply connected, at times even arguing the priority of the former, as the National Reformers did. "The philanthropist should strive for 'Land Reform,' as the great basis of reform," Smith wrote to Beriah Green, abolitionist and president of the antislavery Oneida Theological Institute: "This reform accomplished, other reforms will follow, and adjust themselves to it. If 'Land Reform' succeed[s], it will be found to be, not only the seminal principle of other reforms, but their controller, regulator, harmonizer" (18 May 1848). Smith was a prominent member of the Liberty Party—in 1848, the Liberty Party would run him for president—and thus it is no coincidence that Smith decided to divide and donate his vast land holdings the same year that his party became allied with the National Reform Association. The Liberty Party's 1843 Convention Resolutions did not make mention of land reform, but by 1849, its presidential candidate was writing to National Reformer George Henry Evans that "he would have every person get a parcel of land, who can get it" and encouraging citizens to "vote themselves a farm" (4 April 1849).

In 1846, then, Smith found himself in what he called the "paradoxical" position of being a land baron, owning nearly a million acres, and "an agrarian [who thinks] it wrong for a man to own more than one farm," a paradox that, for a Liberty Party leader, was as politically unviable as it was personally awkward (qtd. Godine 49). Forged within this paradox, Smith's land redistribution scheme in Franklin and Essex Counties partially

resolved it, and in 1849, Smith endeavored to donate the rest of his holdings to a thousand of New York's "virtuous, landless, and poor" —but this time, the settlers had to be white. For this stipulation Smith believed he should "not be blasted [by any] who are informed, that three thousand colored persons [had] already received deeds of land from [him], entirely free of all charge" (Smith, "Circular"). Conceiving this second donation five months after Douglass had described black settlers' destitution from lack of start-up capital—"They must have seed before they can have a harvest; and they must have something upon which to live, while they are plowing and planting, and otherwise tilling the soil, [but this] they have not"—Smith gave each white grantee ten dollars "to defray the cost of removal" (Douglass, "Smith Lands" 1849; Smith, "Circular"). In the case that "some of the land [turned out to be] of an inferior quality" and "unfit for farming," as much of it in Franklin and Essex had, Smith offered grantees cash to buy forty acres elsewhere and thereby enact his "deepest conviction [that] every person, who can, should make himself the acknowledged owner of a piece of land," hastening the day "when the right to the soil shall be, every where, acknowledged to be as absolute, universal, and equal, as the right to the light and the air" ("Circular").

If the rigors of agrarian life repaired psyches damaged by racial oppression, then for Paine, Smith, and the land reformers of the 1840s, agrarian justice would restore citizens' natural right to the land deprived them by land monopolists. The forty-acre freehold at the center of Smith's scheme promised this double reparation: it restored unrightfully withheld

lands, and on these lands, the reparative and elevating work of farm life could begin. Not only was it citizens' rightful due, but placed at the center of a recomposed economy, the forty-acre freehold would root out all "disorder, oppression, poverty, vice" and restore a truly republican social order ("Circular"). This dream of the all-healing forty-acre freehold came into focus in contrast to the crushing plantation, and for abolitionists like Smith, to write against land monopolies was implicitly but pointedly to write against the plantation South. It was to propose a fundamentally different economic base, brought about by legislating against the only type of farm on which slave-based labor was actually profitable for the fraction of people who owned them—vast "bonanza farms," as T. Thomas Fortune called them (181). Moreover, viewed as the "seminal principle of all other reforms," the forty-acre freehold, as the new economic base, threatened the South's social and racial order. This threat was intimated in the South's influential *DeBow's Review* when its editor worried that "'Free land' and a farm to any one that will have it, will become as popular watch-cries among us [as] *las liberté, égalité, fraternité*, among the red republicans of Paris" ("Public Lands"). As an idea, then, the forty-acre freehold uprooted Southern norms of labor and land-use, tying the two together as inseparable considerations, as I will argue in the following section. Against a Southern landscape where both enslaved people and the land they labored on were seen by antislavery writers to be dying, the forty-acre freehold emerged as the idealized scene of human, environmental, and economic health.

4.3 To become 'a perfect garden'

"In the months of March, April, and May," wrote the pseudonymous Scotus Americanus in *Informations Concerning the Province of North Carolina* (1773), "all things are alive; the birds make the woodlands ring with mirth; and the kingdom of vegetables, under the Divine care, springing forth in rich profusion, adorning gardens and meadows with gay and glowing colours; the trees produce their buds and foliage, promising rich fruits in their appointed seasons; and no place can exhibit a richer carpet, and more beautiful verdure." The colony's extraordinary fertility and capacious forests—"behind these stretches of good land, the country is covered with pines and firs, from which tar, turpentine, and rosin are made, and for which articles there is a fund inexhaustible for many years"—made poverty in North Carolina "almost an entire stranger," Scotus Americanus attested. He importuned his countrymen to flee their "dark and gloomy prospects" for the land most literally of milk and honey ("prodigious quantities of honey are found here"). The robust early national and antebellum Southern agricultural press followed Scotus Americanus in representing the U.S. South as an agricultural utopia. In an 1817 article reprinted from New York to Baltimore to Raleigh, the Alabama *Halcyon* described the territory as "wild and salubrious" and its soil as "happily adapted to every species of vegetation" with "fruit in as great abundance and perfection as in any part of the world." Moreover, because this vegetation grew "almost spontaneously," the new frontier required minimal labor, and the writer concluded that "in

every point of view in which the country can be taken, none on earth presents greater advantages.”

Both *Scotus Americanus* and the *Halcyon* journalist represented the western frontier as Edenic, with environments so lush that they eliminated work and poverty. By the 1840s, cotton, “white gold,” became the central object of these utopian representations. In Petersburg’s *Farmers’ Register*, “A Planter” explained that nowhere could cotton be more profitably grown than between thirty and thirty-five degrees latitude, Alabama and Mississippi’s exact latitudinal boundaries. This climate “perfect[ed] the cotton pods,” which in turn “yielded [to] the slightest touch of the picker.” As the economic historians of slavery Alan Olmstead and Paul Rhode write, the development of the more pliable and faster-growing Mexican cottons were considered a great boon because, in addition to being “found to ripen in a greater degree at one time, to have a shorter season than any other cotton known among us, and [to be] collected in much greater quantities, by a laborer, in one day,” according to Baltimore’s *American Farmer*, the cotton wool seemed to “hang off the pods of this species of plants, and even to drop at times from them”: these were plants that could pick themselves. Yet, this narrative of agricultural utopia just over the western horizon was the more sanguine of the two related narratives that prevailed in the Southern agricultural press. While enthusiasts portrayed eminent fertility and ease on the western frontier, agricultural reformers bemoaned the state of southeastern soils, which, particularly in the Virginia Tidewater and the Carolina Piedmont, were popularly believed to be dead, and

conducted a vigorous educational campaign to instruct farmers on how to rehabilitate the soils that imprudent agriculture had depleted. Representing southeastern soils as dangerously imperiled but essentially restorable, reformers fought against the utopian narrative, believing it fostered reckless land-use by promising cheap and profitable western lands (“Men will not bestow much time and attention in the improvement and preservation of lands that they expect soon to abandon,” wrote the reformer Eli Baxter). They entreated Old South farmers to stay put, a campaign the historians Jack Kirby Temple, Steven Stoll, Lynn Nelson and others have treated extensively.

In the effort to expand and circulate agricultural knowledge, farmers contributed to the growing number of agricultural journals, writing in to describe the condition of their lands, to solicit advice, and to offer techniques they had found successful. Indeed, as the *Southern Cultivator* explained, “the great object of [the] monthly journal [was] to afford us all an equal chance, both to teach and learn all we can, as thinking, reasoning, educated, farmers.” Thus the Virginia farmer Hill Carter regularly editorialized that the “three-field shift” — the use of two fields for crops and the third for pasture — was “the most ruinous system that could be invented” because, under the hooves of animals, pastureland was packed, not replenished. The land was “literally grazed to death,” he wrote (“Four-Field” 132). In place of the three-field shift, Carter advocated the four- or five-field shift, systems that left one field fallow or planted it with restorative grasses like clover (“Remarks” 657). Acknowledging that leaving fields fallow might seem antithetical to profit, many farmers

argued that rotation was nonetheless vital to restoring diminished lands: “When nature is allowed to sow her own seeds and reap her own harvests, the earth, instead of being impoverished by her vegetable productions, seems at each new effort to augment that fertility,” wrote farmer James Hamilton Couper (9). Along with crop rotation, farmers debated the best fertilizers, experimenting with all manner of substances—from the more traditional manure and guano to the more unusual salt, blood, fish, ashes, gypsum, and marl—and reporting their results to journals. The leading agricultural reformer and editor of *Farmers’ Register* Edmund Ruffin tirelessly expounded the merits of marl, a limestone-like compound that reduced soil acidity, publishing his book-length *Essay on Calcareous Manures* in 1852, an “Essay [that] was soon eagerly sought—everywhere discussed—and [productive of] a powerful effect on the convictions and practices of the proprietors of Eastern Virginia,” according to *DeBow’s Review* (“Gallery”). But circulating ordinary farmers’ experimentally-derived agricultural knowledge along with the philosophies of well-known reformers like Ruffin was, in farmer James Meriwether’s words, the only means “to restore [soils] and make the land productive, which would otherwise become sterile.”

Farmers’ extensive writing in agricultural journals documents the widespread recognition among them that the region’s ecosystems had been compromised by inexpedient agricultural practices. The farmer L.A. Morrell, for instance, explained that the region’s soils, “for want of a knowledge of the benefits of the ‘rotation system,’ [had been] sadly abused,” and farmers and reformers spoke of the soil’s evident or impending

“sterility” and its “death,” of the region’s waste and exhaustion. “Fields that once teemed with luxuriant crops, rewarding abundantly the labors of their proprietors, are disfigured with gaping hill-sides, chequered with gullies, coated with the broom straw and pine, the sure indices of barrenness and exhaustion—all exhibiting a dreary desolation,” wrote Eli Baxter in an 1844 address to the Hancock Planters’ Club. While descriptions such as Baxter’s would become cliché in the Northern agricultural and antislavery press—as when an article in the *Maine Cultivator*, reprinted in the *Liberator*, explained that in the South “the fences are bad, the fields are skimmed over and appear sterile, [and] the buildings are miserable”—they also abounded in the Southern press (“Northern”). Moreover, Southern farmers understood soil depletion in economic terms: “Recently, we have seen not a few plantations, which in their virgin state were doubtless worth not far from five dollars per acre, that have been so badly deteriorated as not to pay a net profit of five cents an acre” (“Improve”). For Ruffin, environmental degradation was a moral problem, and farmers who “directly or indirectly lessen[ed] the productiveness of the earth [were] guilty of sin.” But more importantly to Ruffin, depleted soils represented an agricultural problem with potentially catastrophic economic consequences (“Morals” 4). Ruffin portrayed Old South planters as on a destructive march west, where they merely found “new and fertile land to exhaust,” leaving impoverished communities in their wake (“Address” 481). This pattern of “abstracting the whole fertility of a field, in the form of tobacco, wheat and corn, and applying it to another in the form of purchase money” was an untenable basis for a stable

agrarian economy, Ruffin argued, and it therefore jeopardized the region's economic and political autonomy from the North ("Morals" 4).

But while agricultural reformers like Ruffin linked environmental degradation to economic decline, they conceived it as, at base, an agricultural problem. Because bad farming was the source of the problem, their prescriptions focused on correcting these imprudent practices. Their conclusion that soil depletion was purely a problem of agriculture explains why farmer-correspondents attended to the details of rotation and fertilization, and it explains why Ruffin, in his 1836 "Sketch of the Progress of Agriculture in Virginia, and the Cause of Its Decline," attributed the state's decline to farmers having continued "too long the early and exhausting, as well as rude system of tillage," to their resistance to fertilization, to the state's "total absence of [anything] like agricultural instruction," and, finally, to the "inducement and bounty offered in the cheapness of lands" on the frontier—causes and solutions united on account of the fact that they target either land-use practices directly or farmers' outmoded mentality about farming, which Ruffin described as farmers' failure to transition from the mentality of a "planting country" to the mentality of a "farming country" (16-29). The earliest European settlers rightly clear-cut and heavily cultivated the land, but in the farming country that Virginia had become, settled lands required careful attention; Tidewater farmers could no longer afford to treat them as disposable, Ruffin enjoined. Yet, whether Ruffin prescribed new practices or argued for a change in farmers' mentality, his solutions remained strictly within the agricultural domain.

In this point of view, correct practices would restore the region's depleted soils, and this restoration would secure economic and social prosperity.

In general, then, Southern agricultural reform did not study the relationship between the South's slave-based labor system and the health of its environments. In the pages of agricultural journals, discussions of slavery are noticeably minimal, and the articles that appear tend to speak either technically, about cotton-picking efficiency or treatment of enslaved people's common illnesses, or honorifically about slavery's cultural merits. Between 1839 and 1850, *American Farmer*, for example, printed forty articles about slavery: several on cotton-picking, several reporting slaveholder conventions, and several on the need to banish free blacks. "Slavery in the Abstract—Slavery in Practice," the one manifesto it printed, praised slavery's positive influence in terms that recapitulated the period's widely-used "positive good" argument: "We defy the most vehement enemy of that condition, to point to any country, or any circumstances under which the negro race has existed on the face of the earth... where it has enjoyed so many of the sources that go to constitute human happiness." By contrast, the journal printed two hundred and fifty articles about fertilizer and three hundred and fifty about crop rotation. During its run from 1833 to 1843, Ruffin's *Farmers' Register* discussed slavery in somewhat higher proportions, printing eighty articles on the topic to four hundred about crop rotation. One essay, "Slavery," from 1840, touched directly on the relationship between slavery and agriculture but only to argue that rebellion, the inevitable result of emancipation without colonization,

would destroy Southern farms. Most of the rest either praised slavery's benefits in "positive good" terms—"I believe that, constituted as they are, morally and physically, they are as happy as any peasantry in the world; and I venture to affirm, as the result of my reading and inquiry, that in no country are the laborers so liberally and invariably supplied with bread and meat as are the negro slaves of the United States," wrote J.K. Paulding in 1836—or polemicized against "fanatical" abolitionism.

In the context of these publications' objectives to expand agricultural knowledge and improve farming technique, their narrow focus on agricultural topics like rotation and fertilization may seem unsurprising. Moreover, the fact that the majority of essays about slavery that do appear seem to have little to do with agriculture—in their conformity to traditional and widespread proslavery argumentation and in their content's lack of connection to agricultural concerns, they could have appeared in any general proslavery publication—may also be unsurprising, for, after all, contributors were slaveholders as well as farmers, presumably with an interest in both sets of concerns. But it is precisely these journals' lack of interest in the relationship between slavery and agriculture that is revealing. This lack of interest about slavery may seem to signal that, for these agricultural publications, slavery was simply not considered an agricultural topic—but why was it not, and how could it not have been? I would like to suggest that these publications did not simply reflect extant or natural categories (of "the agricultural" or "the economic") but, rather, that they were engaged in defining what counted as an agricultural topic and what

did not. In keeping discussions of slavery largely out of their pages, they drew a boundary around the properly agriculture, creating it as a category that could encompass fertilization and even farmers' education but could not encompass the politics, economics, or environmental impact of the South's system of slave-based labor.

In the 1840s Northern antislavery press, on the contrary, writers were engaged in drawing the boundaries between agriculture and labor differently, in constructing the spheres not as divorced but as overlapping. In other words, they were engaged in creating a direct relationship between the nature of labor and the health of the land by turning labor into an agricultural, or environmental, problem. First of all, as mentioned above, antislavery publications regularly represented Southern landscapes as degraded. Richard Hildreth's 1836 novel *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore*, for example, reflected that "already [Virginia's] fields were beginning to be deserted; already impenetrable thickets had commenced to cover plantations," with "wild vines creeping over the [planter's] house, [where] all was silent, desolate and deserted" (58). Similarly, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe depicted Legree's plantation as a "desolate and uncomfortable landscape," covered "with frowsy tangled grass [and] other slovenly remains," its once beautiful garden "now all grown over with weeds," a portrayal echoed in Solomon Northup's description of "rank and noxious weeds [overspreading] once cultivated field[s]" (Stowe 353; Northup 154). And when in *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass introduced Tuckahoe Plantation, he explained that the Tidewater district pronounced its name with "contempt and derision, on

account of the barrenness of its soil," writing that "decay and ruin [were] everywhere visible" (34).

Some antislavery writers interpreted dead fields simply as a moral judgment on the South. In Hildreth's words, that "Lower Virginia had already begun to feel the effects of that curse" on its land was a fate "she has so well deserved." Beyond this idea that dead soils represented moral retribution, however, antislavery writing proposed the idea that soil degradation was the natural environmental outcome of a false economic system. "Had the soil been cultivated by freemen," wrote Hildreth, the South "might still have produced a rich and abundant harvest" (58). In Stowe's words from *Dred*, "worn-out and broken-down old plantations" were the result of "many years of mismanagement and waste" (107). As these formulations indicate, unlike Southern agricultural reformers, who construed imperiled soils as an environmental problem with economic effects, antislavery writers began to conceive dead soils as first and foremost an economic and political problem, a problem of labor and management, that was making itself felt on the agricultural environment.

Antislavery writers began to build an argument for emancipation around what they argued was a fundamental opposition between an economy based in unfree labor and agricultural health. For example, in an 1839 *Liberator* essay called "The Alleged Effects of Slavery on the Agriculture of Virginia," the unnamed author calculated that "if all [of Virginia's 500,000 slaves] were emancipated, the lands of Virginia would rise \$5 an acre,

[and] this rise of \$5 an acre would alone be equivalent to the estimated value of all the slaves." Moreover, he continued, "Emigration to the South would then take place, to a great extent, from all the Northern free States," and instead of emigrating west, "the Yankees would then flock [to Virginia] and hire up, at advanced wages, the freed slaves, and ere long the whole of eastern Virginia might become a perfect garden." For this author, the South's slave-based labor system depreciated land values by degrading its agricultural productivity. It was unhealthy land, not political differences, he argued, that prevented Northern farmers from leaving their soil, which, though inherently "less highly favored" than Southern soil, was more productive, because it was cultivated by free labor. He concluded that only a fundamental change to the South's economic structure—only abolition—would restore its soils and, with them, its ability to compete economically with the North. Another writer explained that, despite the "common opinion here at the North, that if you go South, where the seasons are warm and the climate more favorable to the growth of certain products, you will find fields almost like paradise, and the people rioting in plenty," the "garden of the Union, after all is in the cold and rugged fields of New England." Slavery had destroyed the South's great agrarian potential, whereas in the North, the "face of the country show[ed] the effects of free white labor infinitely above that of black slave service." In *A Journey Through the Seaboard States* (1856), Frederick Law Olmsted likewise affirmed the South's superior fertility and claimed that this fertility should have secured its economic prosperity. Thus, given Virginia's "richer soils, cheaper soils, and less expensive means of developing wealth

than in Pennsylvania, New York or Massachusetts," Olmsted asked how the South could account not only for the self-evident fact that its "hillsides [were] gullied like icebergs," as he wrote in *The Cotton Kingdom*, but the fact that "immensely more abundant capital" was concentrated in the Northern states (*Seaboard* 179). "I think it is to be established convincingly, that Slavery alone is a sufficient cause to account for any difference there may be between the value of property and industrial prosperity, in Virginia and the neighboring free states," he concluded (*Seaboard* 185).

Historians of slavery have affirmed these antebellum opinions that the South's initial adoption of and final devotion to slave-based labor caused its soils to deteriorate and its economy to decline, and these historians have attempted to explain exactly how this mode of production stripped the soils. Eugene Genovese writes that the adoption of slave-based labor enabled planters to put too much land under cultivation, so much land that, in the words of the Louisiana planter James Peacocke, fertilization "would [have] require[d] all the manure in the parish and all the force to do it justice." While bloated landholdings could be cultivated by a large enslaved workforce, Genovese argues, the soils could not be cared for in the way that even antebellum agricultural reformers acknowledged was necessary. Moreover, slave-based labor fostered the one-crop system, and this lack of crop diversity contributed to soil depletion. But most centrally for Genovese, not only did large, monocultural farms deplete soils, but planters' commitment to slave-based labor also made the agricultural reform program difficult to adopt. The institution could not adapt itself to

the new conditions “after the frontier had disappeared.” It could not, in Ruffin’s words, transition from a planting country to a farming country. For Genovese, this fundamental inadaptability derived from enslaved laborers’ “carelessness,” their lack of motivation and lack of skill. This claim was central to Olmsted’s antebellum analysis as well: “Owing to the proverbial stupidity and dogged prejudice of the negro (but peculiar to him only as he is more carefully poisoned with ignorance than the laborer of other countries), it is exceedingly difficult to introduce new and improved methods of applying his labor” (Genovese pg; *Seaboard* 480). While Olmsted’s formulation clearly manifests anti-black racism, both analyses finally attribute agricultural and economic decline to the inadaptability on the part of enslaved laborers to progressive farming techniques.

Yet, the historian William Mathew’s detailed study of the mechanics of these progressive farming techniques has shown that, despite planters’ cries that reformed agricultural practices were not worth their cost in capital or in labor (“the purchase and application of lime, gypsum, salt, guano, and ashes, [will] cost quite as much, if not more than what they add to our crops”), in most cases, their implementation was not overly expensive or more labor intensive or more “skilled” than everyday plantation agricultural practices (“Familiar Conversation”). Marling, for example, the object of Edmund Ruffin’s fervent reform campaign, “was not particularly demanding on slave skills, [it] could be slotted into slack periods in the plantation calendar, and [its] short-to-medium-term returns seem generally to have outweighed the costs” (Mathew 152). While Mathew agrees with the

economic historiography of slavery that the institution, upon realizing the toll large-scale plantation agricultural had taken on the soils, failed to be able to reform itself, he concludes that “the issue of slave ability is largely irrelevant to any explanation of restricted amelioration” (139). Rather, slavery’s failure to adapt itself to the new conditions of a settled farming country stemmed from intractability on behalf of planters, not enslaved people, to agricultural reform because agricultural reform seemed to require reform to existing economic and social norms. That is, it required the division between agricultural reform and labor practices that planters had been careful to institute to be collapsed. The obstinate desire to conserve its economic structure and racial hierarchies, Mathew writes, defeated the widely-known need for agriculture reform: “It is a fact of the highest importance that, despite all pressures for economic change, the best and most concerned minds in the South could by force of overwhelming race and class considerations transcend strictly material preoccupations and identify existing social institutions as something much more precious than any prospect of agricultural recovery” (16).

This historiography helpfully specifies how the practices of and mentalities surrounding slave-based labor negatively impacted Southern ecosystems, and it enables a critique of slavery from an ecological point of view. It highlights the institution’s environmental unsustainability and attaches the ecological damage that caused slavery’s economy to falter to the regime’s internal structures. In this way, it functions to disprove antebellum Southerners’ analysis and to affirm the Northern narrative. In so doing, this

historiography shows the importance of the history of slavery to contemporary discussions of sustainability. These discussions, in the fields of environmental studies and urban development, social science, and political theory, tend to understand sustainability as contingent on the arrangement of three zones of activity—environmental, economic, and social. Decisions made and actions taken in one of these zones inevitably impacts the others. Thus while discourses of sustainability keep these zones separate heuristically, its overarching point is that they cannot, in fact, be separated; they are elements of one fabric whose proper weaving ensures a future for each domain as much as for the whole. The story of agricultural failure under slavery is significant to these discussions because it serves as an object lesson in the constitutive interactivity of these domains, as well as in the crushing human and environmental damage caused by their tremendous imbalance. Yet, beyond this historiographic “proof,” the “fact” of slave-based labor’s unsustainability, my focus on antebellum antislavery commentators’ narratives about the capacity for an economic form’s internal organization to destroy ecosystems places them in the history of ideas about how to arrange economic and social forms so as to ensure environments’ futures and thus the prosperity of the human communities reliant upon them.

4.4 Land of bondage, land of freedom

In *Clotel*, William Wells Brown calls the South “the land of bondage” and the North “the land of freedom” (164, 5). In *Incidents*, Harriet Jacobs also describes the “free land” and “free air” of the North (41). In these common antislavery expressions, “land” and “region” are essentially interchangeable; Brown and Jacobs use these expressions to signify that only in the North can African Americans experience freedom, whereas unfreedom permeates all aspects of the slave South. But antislavery activists with an eye toward agriculture, including Gerrit Smith, placed the stress on the phrase elsewhere: the South was the *land* of bondage in the double sense that its soils’ crippled condition resulted from the system of bondage used to cultivate them and that its soils had acquired qualities of this system of bondage (as these qualities were normatively construed in antislavery thought). Hence antislavery discourse’s prolific use of the same words (abused, degraded, worn out, broken down) to describe unfree land and unfree people. Although writers like Olmsted attempted to specify the exact mechanisms whereby slave-based labor destroyed soils, it is illuminating that many writers attempted no such specification. As *Pennsylvania Freeman* correspondent John Jackson wrote in 1852, simply “cross[ing] the line” into slave territory guaranteed agricultural failure, for South of this line “the worn out condition of land (naturally fertile and good) under slave cultivation” yielded “half the produce as the same soil with its natural advantages would afford under our system of agriculture and free labor” (original parentheses). Jackson’s formulation indicates that there was something both obvious and mystical about free labor’s capacity to render land free and productive—it

was simply so. Jackson's sense of the miraculous agricultural benefits of free labor, his claim that no "intelligent practical Pennsylvania farmer" would leave his naturally inferior but freely cultivated lands for fertile but unfree Southern lands, suggests an assumed naturalness to free labor's relationship to environmental flourishing. As antislavery's rhetorical conflation of enslaved people and unfree land further indicates, for writers like Jackson, *of course* abusive labor systems abused and destroyed the land. Put another way, in an emergent framework that viewed human and environmental health as inseparable from the organization of the economy, "degradation" could only be general across these zones, and so could prosperity.

Gerrit Smith's settlement schemes at Timbucto and Blackville reflect this idea of the natural fit between free labor, productive land, and a prosperous economy. I began this chapter by proposing that in Smith's schemes, the three contexts I have now explored—of an antislavery-infused agrarian idealism that viewed farm life as conducive to the creation of virtuous and free people; of a land reform movement that shifted from labor-based theories of ownership to a natural rights discourse, which Smith, unlike many Free Soilers, believed held for non-white Americans as well as white Americans; and of the emergent sense that labor was inherently an environmental problem because ecosystems would invariably fail under false economies, as they undeniably and spectacularly had in the South—converge in Smith's idea for these settlements. These settlements were meant to provide land at the appropriate scale and reorganize labor in such a way that virtuous, self-

realized people and a tenable economy would naturally follow. While this chapter has taken the settlements, as ideas, to be the text whose meanings these contexts clarify and augment, Smith's land indentures, a copious but, at first glance, flat archive, also index this convergence, and I conclude this chapter with a reading of the language of these documents.

In 1846, Smith issued a thousand mass-produced land indentures, each stating that he wished to make his donation "in consideration of one dollar and his desire to have all share in the means of subsistence and happiness, which a bountiful God has provided for all." This second clause breaks form with the genre of the land deed, a document that, as a supposedly transparent record of a purely economic exchange, typically recorded salient, factual details about the parties involved, about the land (location, acreage, and any defining natural features), and about the financial terms of the exchange. Smith followed this generic form in the many hundreds of conventional deeds he issued over his lifetime. But in this unusual clause, Smith creates a relationship between "happiness" and land ownership. The indenture's issuance expresses Smith's "desire" that recipients should experience the happiness that derives from owning a parcel of land, and in the context of these deeds' issuance to free people of color, Smith connects to black agrarianism's ideal that racially oppressed people would finally get their share of happiness when they became owners and workers of the land. But the word "happiness" also evokes its most storied context—"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—a series and a source that was in particularly high circulation in abolitionist discourse, as antislavery writers made constant

reference to the Declaration of Independence to show the disconnect between the nation's founding principles and the institution of slavery, and the hypocrisy attendant to this gap. Smith's intertextual use of the word "happiness" therefore suggests that he saw the realization of the nation's founding principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as closely connected to having access to the "means of subsistence," creating an essential link between property, happiness, and freedom. In conceiving each of these terms as necessary to the others' actualization, Smith names agrarianism's cardinal presupposition and deepest taproot: that true happiness and authentic freedom are obtainable only when one has access to the means of subsistence.

Smith's reference to the Declaration of Independence also restores property to Jefferson's list of inalienable rights. In revising Locke's original list of rights, Jefferson replaced "property" with "the pursuit of happiness," but as I have already begun to suggest, Smith's indenture implies that happiness (and by intertextual association, life and liberty) and property (insofar as property, as land, secured a share in the means of subsistence) are in fact indivisible terms. Smith's writings on land reform explicitly name land as an inalienable right, and when in these writings Smith describes the right to land as equal to the right to air and light, he likens it, as a right, to the right to life. Yet, Smith does not simply add land to the list of inalienable rights. Rather, in the context of agrarian and land reform movements, he creates a different relationship across the four terms, a relationship of imbrication. While life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness may be

inalienable as rights, Smith suggests, they are meaningless without access to the means of subsistence: thus the right to land must also be seen as inalienable and, moreover, as basic to the others. This conceptualization of these rights' imbrication connects the indenture to the land reform movement's ambition, as George Henry Evans's *Young America!* magazine put it in 1846, "to secure all the rights of every human being [but] to secure, above all, the HOMESTEAD, that absolute requisite to the existence of freemen, the most essential right of which [the people] are now deprived."

In a similar way Evans's usage of the phrase "every human being" where one might expect "all men," Smith further revises the Declaration when he absents the word "men" where it might be expected, following the word "all": he desires "to have all share in the means of subsistence and happiness," which God has "provided for all." Smith's choice to absent "men" removes all identity markers from the list of subjects whom he believes should be endowed with rights. In removing "men" from his indenture and thus removing restrictions according to gender and race, Smith's deed exposes the disparity between the spirit of the Declaration—the revolutionary statement of freedom for all humankind, on which hung so much patriotism—and its letter—the granting of this freedom to white men only. His indenture in effect creates a new letter, one that more closely matches the Declaration's spirit: "all." It thus can be situated in the abolitionist strategy to bring the Declaration's spirit together with its letter by arguing that, taken at its word, all men, including African American men, should be seen to be endowed with inalienable rights.

But its broader inclusion of women not only aligns with Smith's outspoken support of the antebellum women's movement—Smith, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's first cousin, proposed "universal suffrage in the broadest sense, females as well as males being able to vote" in an 1848 address—but anticipates the 1862 Homestead Act's non-restriction of applicants according to race or gender.

It should be remembered, finally, that all of this has to do with the forty-acre freehold, the object of the exchange behind Smith's declaration of his desire for all to share in happiness, freedom, and prosperity. While the forty-acre freehold may seem like a romanticized or pastoral dream, set against the history of plantations' well-known environmental and human destruction I have outlined in this chapter, it can be seen instead as the economic and environmental alternative to the "bonanza farm." Smith's reference to the possibility of bounty on the Northern freehold contrasts dramatically with the images of depletion and decay rendered by Northern and Southern pens alike, although rendered with very different purposes. The freehold emerges against the plantation as the landform that would by its nature force a reportioning of the economic domain: where the farm and the laborforce was reasonably sized, capitalist ambition would shrink, and with these intertwined adjustments, wealth would cease to be concentrated with the small elite who owned big farms. The small freehold, in other words, was the landform that could regulate the economy and prevent the social hierarchy of wealth disparity. But if, as antislavery writers argued, it was the internal structures of the South's economy that killed its land,

then it was also the landform that would conserve agricultural environments by scaling down and fundamentally reorganizing the economy.

Smith's schemes held faith, then, in the mystical power of free labor on the freehold to right the economic, agricultural, and human wrongs of the plantation South expressed by Jackson in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* (simply "cross the line") and by Horace Greeley when at the 1849 New York State Agricultural Fair he likened the South's agricultural strategy to "killing their bees to get the honey" and "killing a cow to obtain her milk." They "smother their bees to get honey, although the land is full of simple and cheap hives on humaner and more economical principles," Greeley allegorized. Just as antislavery agricultural writers blurred the line between unfree land and unfree people by using the same descriptors for both, Greeley's allegory also blurs this line to suggest that plantation slavery smothers its land and its laborers. It poignantly synthesizes the assumption that animates the idea of the forty-acre freehold, that ceasing to smother both labor and land will steadily and sustainably produce honey.

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Biography

Lynne Feeley was born in Syracuse, New York. In 2006, she graduated from Cornell University with a B.A. in English, and in 2009, she received an M.A. in English from the Pennsylvania State University. She earned her doctorate in English at Duke University. Her honors include a Mellon Sawyer Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, where she participated in a year-long seminar on the theme of "Race, across Time and Space," and a Duke Dissertation Domestic Travel Award for archival research at Syracuse University's Special Collections Research Center. She has also received grants to attend the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell, the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth, and the Clinton Institute for American Studies at University College Dublin. In 2013, having been nominated by her students, she won Duke's Stephen Horne Award for Excellence in Teaching.