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Routes of freedom: slave resistance and the politics of literary geography

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 ROUTES OF FREEDOM: SLAVE RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICS OF LITERARY GEOGRAPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation integrates rhetorical, historical, and spatial analysis in an effort to expand our understanding of the cultural work performed by antebellum narratives that take slavery in the United States as their subject matter. Specifically, it focuses on the complicated relationship between place and human praxis as revealed in five texts: The Confessions of Nat Turner, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred, Martin R. Delany’s Blake, Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave,” and Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno. In my attention to literary geographies, I trace spatial patterns in which considerations of organized resistance and slave rebellion are repeatedly placed in “wild-spaces” such as the Great Dismal Swamp, the Red River region of Louisiana, and the open ocean. Exploring their strict alignment with considerations of violence, I argue that these wild-spaces do not function as passive settings, supporting and paralleling narrative events or themes. Instead they can be seen to drive narrative action as they carry with them powerful cultural associations that translate into plot momentum.

My methodological approach employs two general steps. First I document how antislavery writers developed a historically resonant narrative landscape to defuse criticism and buttress their rhetorical indictments of slavery. Second, I investigate how these writers negotiated the complicated demands of such landscapes in order to supplement moral interpretations with creative imaginings of how alternative forms of slave resistance might play out. By isolating the ties between literary landscapes and the narratives’ imaginings of slave resistance, we are able to see the intensely pragmatic, real world problem-solving in which these writers were engaged. Such a methodology highlights the formative function of place in literary output, while also providing insight
into obstacles to real-world reform. I conclude that the narratives I examine served as a forum for cultural experimentation as their writers attempted to work through social and political problems that had no easy or ready solutions. Considerations of place are shown to be essential to antislavery writers’ attempts to see through the shadow of slavery to its end, and, in doing so, point the way forward.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
INSCRIBED IN SPACE, TRACES OF THE PAST

On November 11, 1831, Nat Turner was hanged for his role in instigating and carrying out a rebellion of slaves in Southampton County, Virginia. His ostensible goal, in addition to enacting retributive violence against the whites of the region, was to attack the military arsenal in the nearby county seat of Jerusalem in an effort “to procure arms and ammunition” for the army of slaves and free blacks he hoped to recruit (Gray 52). Although exact numbers remain unknown, the rebel slaves succeeded in killing at least fifty-five whites before the rebellion collapsed in the face of growing resistance by white militia forces.¹

On December 2, 1859, John Brown was hanged for leading an attack on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. His goal was to distribute the arsenal’s weapons among neighboring slaves in order to build an army that would lead incursions throughout the South, while helping unprecedented numbers of runaway slaves escape to the northern states and to Canada. Brown’s band of nineteen men killed four and suffered ten deaths themselves before they were overwhelmed by troops led by Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart of the U. S. Calvary.

More than a century and a half after the Southampton rebellion, resident and local historian James Magee conducts private tours of the area where the 1831 uprising occurred. In his interpretation of Southampton County’s historical significance, he notes, “I tell blacks, ‘[t]his is hallowed ground, this is where the emancipation of your people began. It’s a direct path from Nat Turner to John Brown to the Civil War’” (qtd. in Horwitz 85). With his emphasis on the famous rebel figures of Nat Turner and John Brown, it is possible to overlook Magee’s complementary attention to the importance of place, or physical location, within the violent journey to freedom for U.S. American slaves. By invoking Southampton County as “hallowed ground,” implicitly tied to other hallowed grounds upon which freedom was fought for and finally gained for all U.S.

¹ This minimum estimate corresponds to the list of names of white victims that Thomas R. Gray appends to his text of The Confessions of Nat Turner. Later historians frequently put the estimate slightly higher. No accurate count of the number of African Americans killed in the aftermath of the rebellion exists. Enraged whites were guilty of indiscriminate killings of blacks in addition to the seventeen legally-sanctioned hangings of slave rebels. Estimates of the number of African Americans killed are typically in the hundreds, well above the total number of participants in the uprising.
American slaves, Magee ties together individual geographic locations commensurate to this journey. Southampton becomes tied to Harper’s Ferry and then implicitly to the firing on Fort Sumter and all other battlefields—large and small—where the Civil War was fought.

This emphasis on geographic locations suggests two prominent themes relating to the struggle over U.S. American slavery in the antebellum period that I wish to explore in the following pages. First, Magee places the famous events and historical figures within their specific geographic context. In such a vision, geographic locations are of interest because they are, in fact, unique and non-interchangeable as they form individual steps in a “direct path” of violent confrontation. Second, he implicitly characterizes the march to freedom as being composed of causal steps of escalating violence, one seemingly leading directly to the next. These steps culminate logically, and perhaps even inevitably, in the mass bloodshed of the Civil War and the eventual emancipation of all slaves in the United States.

At first glance, Magee’s emphasis on specific geographic locations such as Southampton does not seem unique or theoretically complicated. After all, the integral relationship of geography to the subject of U.S. American slavery seems unquestionable. And it is. And herein lies the problem. The general association of slavery with the expansive region of the U.S. American South and freedom with the free-soil North has been largely taken for granted and, thus, oversimplified. The infinite variation within such diverse regions has been frequently suppressed within totalizing generalizations about the relationship between place and slavery. Such geographic ties have come down to us as a series of binary oppositions that explain the dynamic of conflict that subsumed
human interactions within the system of slavery. For instance, slavery pitted U.S. Americans of African descent against those of European descent. In addition, it pitted southern whites from agricultural regions against northern whites who represented the interests of more industrialized states. Slavery thus became viewed as a struggle within the South between black and white, and within the nation as a whole between agriculturalists and industrialists or merchants. Such binary oppositions have been used to explain how the country was destined to erupt in the sectional violence of the Civil War, which was fought between the opposing regions of the free North and the slave South.

Upon careful examination, however, these binaries begin to break down, exposing the complicated, and frequently interdependent, relationship between such seeming opposites. For instance, a strict binary understanding of race does not account for the biracial children of masters who, as Mary Boykin Chestnut famously observed in her Civil War diary, “one sees in every family.” In a second instance, it is impossible to separate fully the economic interests of the southern planters from those of northern merchants. As was frequently noted at the time by slaveholders and abolitionists alike, a substantial portion of the North’s economic wealth was tied directly or indirectly to southern crops, cotton in particular. Thus, northerners as well as southerners benefited from the South’s system of slave labor.

Even more pernicious, perhaps, was the racial prejudice that pervaded northern communities, which prevented African Americans from finding a place of equality anywhere in the United States. Even as the abolition of slavery in all northern states was gradually enacted, the racist assumptions that originally justified and upheld such a system persisted throughout the region. As slavery died out in the North, a racial
apartheid took its place. Consequently, African Americans were denied anything approaching complete freedom. In her preface to Our Nig, the first published novel by an African-American woman, Harriet E. Wilson negotiates the subject of northern oppression carefully. She decries racism and labor practices in the North, while trying not to deflect attention from the crimes of southern slavery. Explaining her “motives” for composing a narrative of northern servitude, she wrote:

Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life. I would not from these motives even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with southern principles. I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home. (287)

Martin R. Delany did not tread so lightly. Describing the experiences of free people of color in the North, he wrote in 1852, “[w]e are slaves in the midst of freedom” (Delany, Condition, 155).

Despite the oversimplification of the totalizing binaries used to explain the “slave problem,” they had enough truth in them to garner considerable authority in the cultural understanding of the conflict over slavery. In the combative give-and-take between slavery’s defenders and critics, it proved tempting to represent the conflict over institutionalized slavery in simple, easily described absolutes. But as suggested above, recognition of the problematic nature of such binary thinking with respect to slavery was present from the very beginning. Both sides found themselves trapped by caveats and exceptions to their general arguments.² The wealth of writing generated by the debate

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² In my analysis of the literature of slavery, it is evident that I too fall back on an oversimplified binary distinction between supporters of slavery and its critics, testifying to the practical difficulty of overcoming
exposes, often inadvertently, this complexity. Antislavery writing, in particular, can be seen to grapple with the problems inherent in the simplified oppositions it introduces and variously upholds. And as I hope to prove in subsequent pages, these problems play out in geographical terms that have not as yet been fully identified and explored.

In my emphasis on geography, I have two separate but related objectives. First, I hope to provide an opportunity for expanding the literary analysis of antislavery writing of the antebellum period. Despite the obvious importance of place and geography to any consideration of the literature of slavery, they have frequently been undervalued. This neglect of rigorous examination possibly arises from their very obviousness. Rather than being seen complexly as “simultaneously … a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium)” (Soja 7), geography has been largely treated as the backdrop or scenery against which events play out. In literary studies, as in other types of cultural criticism, “[a]n already-made geography sets the stage, while the wilful making of history dictates the action and defines the story line” (Soja 14). The following examination of antislavery literature (with interspersed attention to texts that do not promote an obviously antislavery message) attempts first to integrate historical, rhetorical, and spatial analysis to understand more fully the cultural forces at play in the debate over slavery.

Second, it attempts to provide added insight into the shaping force of space as well as time in the writings associated with slavery. In doing so, I hope to help counter the

binary thinking and analysis. In the following pages, I hope at least to complicate this binary by suggesting the diversity of opinion that characterized U.S. Americans’ beliefs about slavery and race relations in the nineteenth century.

3 Here I do not mean to imply that antislavery writing put forth more simplistic arguments than were found in proslavery writing. Quite the contrary. As proponents of radical change, abolitionists were forced to confront the complexities of their argument in a more complicated way than was required of the defenders of the established social structure.

4 In this view, antislavery texts depict events relating to slavery in the South, or on the roads and in the towns leading out of the South, because these are the areas where the obvious effects of slavery seemed to be concentrated. It is as simple as that.
critical tradition that Michel Foucault identifies, which actively diminishes the importance of geography in preference for time in cultural and literary formation. In this dominant criticism, according to Foucault, “[s]pace was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectical” (Foucault, “Geography,” 70).

A second objective of such a sustained analysis of literary geography is to question the assumption of simple historical causality that seems to pervade much temporal analysis. True to this tradition, historical analysis of the antebellum period, abolitionism, and the literature of slavery has frequently considered slavery within a rigid framework of temporal causality and evolution. This type of history weaves a kind of narrative to explain how the country ended up in a Civil War that resulted in the immediate and uncompensated emancipation of all U.S. American slaves. A problem arises, however. Such a temporal approach often takes the ending as the practical beginning and attempts to map out how the country got from any one of an infinite number of “theres” to a single, preselected “here.” The methodology unfolds in a manner similar to that of a mathematical proof, which identifies logical steps that lead reasonably, even inevitably, to an already known conclusion, in this case to the cataclysmic violence of the Civil War and to the ultimate interest in, and acceptance of, violence by many abolitionist writers who had previously rejected all but nonviolent means of combating slavery.

This is an inviting methodological route. It presents itself as logical and finite in a maddeningly infinite world; it successfully reduces complexities to enable the writing of a past that is both manageable and understandable. Throughout this project, I have
continually given in to its allure, repeatedly identifying and documenting important events in time that gradually illustrate the increasing interest in violence by even the most committed nonviolent abolitionists. As expected, this sequence of events of increasing violence culminates in the mass violence of the Civil War. For literary analysis, a parallel pattern offers itself up, allowing one to document the eruptions of violence in written texts, and thus to show how such eruptions became more frequent with the passage of time. This pattern too ends as expected with such well-known pacifists and writers as Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass defending John Brown after his violent raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry.

But I began to have doubts about the very ordered, logical, and understandable picture of temporal evolution that I was creating. The ending I sought to reach seemed overdetermined. No alternative path or outcome was allowed to exist. The question then became, why must all roads lead so directly to the Civil War and mass violence, when in fact it is only in retrospect that the Civil War becomes the inevitable conclusion of all that comes before it? That is, why must this outcome be viewed as inevitable when the vast majority of northerners were not abolitionists, and when even the most committed abolitionists were often expressly nonviolent? Or to return to James Magee’s description of Southampton’s place in the journey to emancipation: is it only in retrospect that the paths from Southampton lead to Harper’s Ferry and then on to Fort Sumter in such neat, straight lines?

At this point, it is important not to overstate. I do not wish to disregard temporal analysis, of course. Clearly events happen that influence other events, and texts are written that directly influence other texts. The problem arises when this kind of analysis
is given such weight that a specific historical evolution is implicitly presented as having been inevitable, and when such temporal analysis subsumes all critical attention so that complicating counterevidence and counter-traditions are hidden from view. Or as Edward W. Soja argues in *Postmodern Geographies*, the problem arises when a rigid historicism becomes hegemonic in critical discourse. Thus, instead of discounting all temporal analysis, I wish to expand it to allow for alternatives, for discontinuities, for confusion. Careful attention to literary representations of geography in antebellum texts concerned with slavery constitutes one path to unearthing complications that have remained largely hidden from view by strict temporal analysis of antislavery literature. In fact, it provides for the discovery of complications of which the writers themselves may not have been fully aware, or, if they were aware, for complications that may have been explored and possibly even worked through in the narratives.

The following chapters focus on the relationship between place, violence, and slavery in narratives written during the thirty years before the Civil War. There is little new or original about these choices of scholarship for the antebellum period, as the tremendous volume of works devoted to such subjects attests. What I attempt to achieve is a new perspective on their relationship by foreshadowing the formative function of geography in literary representations of slavery and slave resistance. By refusing to see the places of these narratives as a passive setting, thematically undifferentiated from any number of alternative slave settings, such an analysis highlights how literary geography can, in fact, work against the totalizing assumptions or binaries that characterized much of the public debate over slavery. In his discussion of postmodern geographies, Soja

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5 In his revised edition of *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, James Brewer Stewart refers to the recent scholarly attention devoted to U.S. American abolitionism as “a slow but ever more massive avalanche of scholarship.”
argues that “[w]e must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (6). By implication, then, sustained attention to literary geography can unveil previously obscured ideological conflicts and consequences within the antebellum debate over slavery.

The importance of geographical place is, of course, not unique to antebellum narratives relating to slavery. As recent scholarship has shown, geography shapes the structure of various literary forms. In his discussion of literary maps and the European novel, Franco Moretti emphasizes “the ortgebunden, place-bound nature of literary forms: each of them with its peculiar geometry, its boundaries, its spatial taboos and favorite routes” (5). Systematic examinations of literary geography in a sample of texts allows us to discover generic patterns that can be mapped, thus illustrating “two things at once: what could be in a novel—and what actually is there” (emphasis in original, 13-14). By adapting Moretti’s model to an analysis of antislavery narratives, three noticeable trends come to light. The first one relates to the binary between North and South that many northern moderates reified. By insisting on a strict division or discontinuity between the two regions, as first established in 1820 by the Missouri Compromise, these northerners were able to deny complicity in slavery’s abuses. This division allowed them to distance themselves from the brutality of slavery without having to take much more than a symbolic stand. Thus, they were able to assume an antislavery stance without necessarily having to act in any substantive way.
Antislavery narratives, both nonfiction and fiction, typically adhere, at least loosely, to this binary relationship between the South and the North. The South represents the scene of repeated atrocities, while the North offers a promise of freedom for African Americans. The resulting oppositional relationship serves as an organizing motif for much of antislavery writing. It finds its most prominent expression in the fugitive slave trope of a south-to-north escape to freedom. Obviously this route represents more than just a literary device. Tens of thousands of runaway slaves did in fact flee to the North and to Canada, on their own and along the more established routes of the Underground Railroad. They did so because, as Ira Berlin puts it, “compromised freedom in the North was far superior to slavery in the South” (234). This sustained, if sporadic movement of fugitive slaves out of the South and into northern states was a powerful image of African Americans’ unquenchable desire for freedom. It also became a recurrent symbol within antislavery writing that, in effect, isolated the two regions into the binary of the slave South and the free North. The result was that abolitionists implicitly mapped out the country into separate and easily identifiable regions of freedom and unfreedom, with freedom residing in the North and unfreedom sprawled across the whole of the South.6

While a strict division between the two regions was always suspect, the Compromise of 1850 effectively sundered any semblance of this division for many abolitionists by strengthening the rights of slaveholders in federal law. Despite the furor over the law within abolitionist circles, it did not represent a departure from the dominant sentiment in the North at the time. As Ira Berlin argues in *Generations of Captivity,*

6 This dominant geographic image of the country allowed for slight variation in its coloring of the country into large sections of freedom and unfreedom. The most common variations were that freedom for African Americans became more secure and more consistently widespread the farther north (i.e., the farther away from the South) one traveled, and that certain regions of the South, especially the deeper south one went, were thought to contain especially egregious forms of plantation slavery.
the systematic proscription of free people of color compromised the North’s claim to be a free society … With the silent complicity—if not the active concurrence—of white northerners, the federal government became the agent of slavery’s expansion during the nineteenth century and its surest source of security in a world that was turning against chattel bondage. Certainly without the acquiescence of the North’s white majority, there would have been no delay in closing the slave trade, no enactment of a federal slave law, no expansion of slavery into the territories, and no new slave states. Until the final break with slavery on January 1, 1863, the North was part of a slaveholding republic. (233)

Berlin’s assessment of the lingering proslavery leanings of many white northerners echoes charges made by the fiery abolitionist Theodore Parker at the time of the Compromise law:

Slavery, the most hideous snake which Southern regions breed, with fifteen unequal feet, came crawling North, fold on fold, and ring on ring, and coil on coil, the venomed monster came; then Avarice the foulest worm which Northern cities gender in their heat, went crawling South; with many a wriggling curl it wound along its way. At length they met and twisting up in their obscene embrace, the twain became one monster, Hunkerism; theme unattempted yet in prose or song; there was no North, no South, they were one poison. (qtd. in Boyer 34)

Despite recognition by leading abolitionists of this lack of a strict sectional division, few antislavery narratives delve very deeply into thematic examinations of diversity. This is understandable in that attention to such diversity would inevitably complicate, and thereby undermine, the general opposition between the brutality of the South’s slave labor system and the purportedly humane and equitable labor relations of the North that was central to the abolitionist argument.

But antislavery writers could not (or did not want to) avoid these complicating factors completely. As a result, a second noticeable trend in antebellum narratives is revealed. By foregrounding questions of literary geography, we can see how representations of place within narratives relating to slavery frequently work against the
overt thematic arguments of individual texts. Specifically, representations of the vast regions of the North and the South fail to coalesce into the abstractions upon which the oppositional binary of the two regions depends. That is, individual places do finally function as unique and non-interchangeable sites, thus disrupting any over-generalized regional identity. We can also see how the complicating function of an inherently diverse geography is not unique to one or two texts, but is part of a larger pattern that finds expression again and again in antislavery narratives. The thematic binary of the slave South and the free North can therefore be seen to sag under the weight of representations of geographic diversity.

Particularly of note are antislavery representations of wild-spaces in the South. The expansive swamps and forests provide protective cover for escaped slaves, allowing “safe-places” for communities of African Americans to develop. Although these safe-places are imperfect, and continually pressured by the surrounding slave power, they offer a glimpse of a kind of freedom and autonomy that is unavailable elsewhere, even perhaps in the racially stratified cities and townships of the North. I have chosen here to use the admittedly awkward descriptive term “wild-space” rather than the more traditional “wilderness” for two reasons. First, “wilderness” has traditionally denoted land free from human activities, and I am particularly interested in the subversive human communities that dotted these seemingly foreboding geographic regions throughout the history of slavery. Second, the term “wilderness” is saturated with religious connotations that, although obviously related to my subject of African-American resistance movements, are not my primary focus. It is therefore my hope that by invoking “wild
spaces” I will avoid confusing my immediate point of geographical analysis with the many important studies of religious symbolism in slave resistance.

This brings us to a third trend in antislavery narratives that is revealed by geographical analysis. As noted above, images of violence pervade antislavery representations of the system of slavery. And, as with geographic place, such attention to violence seems unexceptional. After all, the system of slavery was born out of brutal conflict between the enslaved and their enslavers. Much of the represented violence focuses on sustained, vicious treatment of slaves by their white masters and overseers. At the same time, however, abolitionists do not wholly avoid examinations of violent resistance to enslavement by African Americans. The reality was that attempts to strike out against the seemingly ubiquitous power of the enslavers often took a violent turn. Representations of such violence by slaves in antislavery narratives frequently focus on simple, retributive acts. But they do not always do so. The texts I consider here suggest another use for violence than this obvious one: a use that is integrally bound to negotiations of space.

In his seminal book *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin describes how European settlers of the North American continent, and New England Puritans in particular, viewed themselves as providentially chosen to claim and inhabit the land they had found. Their new home offered them the chance to shed the spiritual imperfections that clung to them from the old world of Europe and to be reborn innocent and clean within a vast, new world. The problem was that the North American continent was not new even if the colonial settlers insisted upon seeing it as a blank space upon which they were free to write their destinies. The complicating fact that, rather than being empty, the
continent was already populated with native peoples contributed to a Puritan approach to spiritual regeneration that was inextricably tied to both violence and geographic expansionism. The interactions between the Puritans and Native Americans were defined by frequent warfare, with each side mounting attacks and counterattacks as they vied for possession of the same land. In addition to the inevitable deaths, a byproduct of these skirmishes was that each side took prisoners, some of whom lived among their captors for many years. Narratives of Puritan captivity among the Indians were extremely popular in New England and helped define symbolically the relationship of Puritans to the Indians within a “captivity psychology.” As Slotkin notes, “[c]aptivity psychology left only two responses open to the Puritans: passive submission or violent retribution. Since submission meant defeat and possibly extermination, New England opted for total war, for the extirpation or imprisonment on reservations of the native population” (145).

The Puritans thus opted for total war in order to create by force a land that they professed already existed, one that was free and empty and primed for their salvation. Two hundred years later, the violent confrontation over land continued. Warfare continued to break out between Native Americans and whites throughout the nineteenth century in border regions such as Florida and the Great Plains. By focusing on “the Indian problem,” it is possible to see the violent battle for the eastern region of the country as decided. In fact, the terms of battle had simply changed with competing economic interests vying for supremacy. The conflict was less spiritual and no longer primarily between Native Americans and whites. Instead, it pitted African Americans and their allies against slaveholders and their allies. The most obvious battlegrounds for these eastern interests were displaced into western territories such as Nebraska and Kansas.
where open warfare erupted in the 1850s. But it is important not to overlook the areas of
the East that remained under contention. These were the places that white Americans
feared because they had failed to exert their control over them. Herein lay the places in
the South in which the hegemonic power of slave society broke down. And herein lay the
places that most obviously challenged the traditional binary between North and South.

Representations of such wild-spaces surface repeatedly in antislavery narratives.
For instance, antislavery writers including Henry Bibb, Solomon Northup, Harriet
Beecher Stowe, and Martin R. Delany, to name just a few obvious examples, focus on
areas such as the Red River region in Louisiana and the Great Dismal Swamp along the
Virginia and North Carolina border that had become associated in the cultural memory
with rebel activities by slaves. These locations were not incorporated into narratives as
mere backdrops for rebellious activities that challenged the system of slavery. Instead,
they assumed a much more formative role, simultaneously *producing* as well as
containing the circumstances necessary for defying slave power. As Henri Lefebvre
identifies, there exists an “etymology of locations” that grows out of “what happened at a
particular spot or place and thereby changed it—all of this becomes inscribed in space.
The past leaves its traces” (37). In antislavery narratives a pattern of radical challenges to
slavery arose out of the historical traces inscribed in the wild-spaces of the South as
writers capitalized on their powerful cultural associations. Such patterns exposed
opportunities for challenging the system of slavery. They also exposed opportunities for
fostering a new kind of freedom right in the midst of slave territory rather than in the
faraway regions of the North or West.
Antislavery representations of the failure of the slave power to subsume all southern territories are consistent with trends in land use at the time. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger document, the vast majority of slaves who ran away from their masters did not make the journey to the North. Some slaves failed in their attempt to escape north. Many more never made the attempt and remained in the vicinity of their masters’ land, often hiding in the woods or swamps that snaked their way across the entire southern region. Some of these slaves were only “lying out” and returned to their masters within a few days or weeks of their leaving. Such activities did not substantively challenge the system of slavery and were thus frequently tolerated by masters who often did not resort to severe measures to punish these infractions. Other escaped slaves, however, chose to remain in hiding in their masters’ own neighborhood for much longer periods of time. In fact, maroon communities of slaves were formed that existed for periods of months, and even years, providing refuge for runaway slaves as well as a constant source of economic and social upheaval for their masters. As Peter P. Hinks notes in his biography of David Walker, “[b]efore and during the years Walker spent in the South, the entire coastal plain running from Norfolk through Wilmington, Georgetown, Charleston, Savannah, and farther south was riddled with the camps and communities of runaways and maroons, causing constant problems for local and state authorities” (42).

Issues of slave resistance, violence, and place meet and commingle within these wild-spaces. The literary pattern of violence certainly draws upon an “etymology of location,” in which the swamps and forests are associated with desperate runaway slaves as well as with historical rebel figures such as Nat Turner who is reputed to have led the
largest slave rebellion in terms of the number of whites killed in U.S. American history. But the violence emanating from these wild-spaces is not simply representative of a destructive principle designed to resist, and possibly even to tear down, the surrounding order. Instead, it corresponds to a creative, revolutionary impulse, one meant to forge an entirely new space out of the land. As with the Puritans who struck out violently to create a space they claimed already existed, antislavery writers explored images of slaves employing violence to create a true land of freedom (possibly even in the South) that was supposed to exist already in the North or in Canada. These images defied the simplistic binary of the free North and the slave South. They also reflected an inevitably violent underside to the utopian quest for a radically free land.

**Place and The Confessions of Nat Turner**

A logical place to begin an analysis of the interworkings between antislavery activism, violence, and literary output is the 1831 slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia. The Southampton rebellion, or “Nat Turner’s Rebellion” as it is more widely known, has served as a common point of origin for numerous temporal analyses of militant abolitionism and violence. The year 1831 is seen to mark a new crisis in the national struggle over slavery, a crisis that repeatedly found expression in the writings of the period. David Walker’s pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the United States*, which advocated the use of violence if whites continued to deny African Americans freedom and equality, had recently been discovered in numerous locations across the South. The first issue of William Lloyd Garrison’s radical antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, printed in Boston, was dated January 1, 1831. And in August of that year, the most successful rebellion in U. S. history erupted in southeastern
Virginia. Following the rebellion, Thomas R. Gray, a Virginia lawyer, published the pamphlet *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which he claimed was “a faithful record of [Turner’s] confessions” “with little or no variation, from his own words” (Gray 40). This emphasis on 1831 as a turning point in the debate over slavery, and in the history of antislavery writing, is not a recent phenomenon. Referring to the Southampton rebellion, Garrison wrote in the September 3, 1831 edition of *The Liberator*, “[t]he first step of the earthquake, which is ultimately to shake down the fabric of oppression, leaving not one stone upon another, has been made.”

Shifting the interpretive framework, the rebellion at Southampton and the subsequent publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* also represent an important point of entry into geographical analyses of violent slave resistance and antislavery writing. Although the historical rebellion never came closer than twenty or twenty-five miles to the Great Dismal Swamp, it permanently associated in the antebellum white mindset the region’s most famous wild-space with rebellious slaves intent on murderous violence. While the nightmarish visions of thousands of armed fugitive slaves emerging from the Dismal Swamp to join Nat Turner in his insurrection were certainly the result of the panic that engulfed white inhabitants of the region in the wake of the rebellion, such fear of the swamp was not entirely groundless. Like many other sparsely populated forests, marshes, and swamps in the South, the Dismal Swamp provided cover for varying numbers of fugitive slaves, and even whole maroon communities, throughout the history of U.S. American slavery. As Vincent Harding notes, of those slaves on the run from their masters, “[m]any went no further than the surrounding forests and swamps, creating microcosmic new societies that remembered the ways of Africa” (114).
In contrast to other wild-spaces in the South, the Dismal Swamp gained a notoriety during the antebellum period that was not limited to the immediate Tidewater region of eastern Virginia or neighboring North Carolina. Proslavery and antislavery writers from across the country invoked its image, even when they had very little specific knowledge of its history or geography. Or, as David C. Miller explains in his study of “desert spaces” and nineteenth-century U.S. American culture,

[a]lthough the presence of large numbers of escaped slaves in southern swamps had long been noted, the earliest tendency to link the slaves imaginatively with their strange sanctuary surfaced in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion, which took place in the vicinity of the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina. (90)

The imaginative association of the Dismal Swamp with Nat Turner thus left an indelible “trace,” forever altering its cultural landscape. This trace, when combined with the swamp’s evocative name, provided great fodder for writers’ creative representations of organized violent resistance to slavery by African Americans.

Notably, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which is arguably the most important historical document relating to the Southampton rebellion, makes no mention of the Dismal Swamp. The question then arises, how did Nat Turner become so permanently associated with a geographic locale that is never even mentioned in his one recorded statement? This question is more suggestive of the complex relationship between historical event, cultural discourse, and the “writing” of history than it may initially appear. Following the Southampton rebellion, geographical concerns were prominent in the cultural discourse. Most significant was the continual debate over whether the rebellion represented an isolated, local plot, or whether it transcended the local and involved participants from beyond the immediate Cross Keys neighborhood of
Southampton County. In the panic following the rebellion, slaves from all over eastern Virginia and North Carolina were suspected of knowing about, and possibly planning to join, a coordinated strike against the institution of slavery. African-Americans from the remaining southern states, as well as northern abolitionists, were also implicated in the Southampton violence.7

Despite this expanding geographic concern, Nat Turner and the Dismal Swamp continued to function as the mythic centers of a cultural discourse obsessed with widespread slave violence. The fearsome mystery represented by both the rebel leader and the vast wild-space right in the midst of Old Virginia permanently altered the cultural landscape of the Tidewater region. In other words, the Southampton rebellion represented a transformative event in the etymology of the Great Dismal Swamp despite the fact that it is quite possible that none of the rebels set foot in its immediate vicinity.

This spatial transformation becomes particularly evident when The Confessions of Nat Turner is analyzed in conjunction with subsequent fictional representations of slave violence. Such an analysis suggests two literary questions related to the cultural-historical issues raised above. First, how did a purportedly autobiographical narrative principally concerned with a small corner of a single Virginia county become a defining precursor for fictional representations of slave violence throughout the southern United States, and even the rest of the New World? Second, how did these fictional representations come to be grounded so prominently in geographic wild-spaces, and in the Dismal Swamp in particular? To begin to answer these and corollary questions, we must compare the specific function of geographic place in the text of The Confessions to the extensive

7 For a detailed discussion of the conspiracy theories that raged in the immediate aftermath of the Southampton rebellion, see Scot French, The Rebellious Slave, 33-64.
concern with place that dominated the cultural discourse in the wake of the rebellion, as well as to the more general treatment of geographic space in later fictional representations of slave violence. Such sustained attention to literary geographies exposes the mutually formative effects of event and place, both in a real-world context and in literary fiction. Or, as Miller argues for narrative landscapes:

The landscape is not only a free field for the projection of unconscious content—not just symptomatic of the culture’s inner life—but, because of its ambiguous features, it actually provokes projections and even helps determine their form. It can therefore be viewed as an active force in the unfolding of cultural sensibility during a period when Americans still looked primarily to nature for their understanding of the world. It figures among the instruments for mapping the way through regions of difficult social reality. (88-89)

Before turning our attention specifically to questions of geography, however, it is important to address problems that have repeatedly confronted scholars interested in the relationship between the Southampton rebellion and The Confessions of Nat Turner. The Confessions is a problematic text, often raising more questions than it answers. As a result, it has proven extremely difficult for historians and literary scholars to distinguish between the historical facts of the rebellion (as far as they can be determined), the text of The Confessions, and the numerous other writings that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion. These three areas of study are important and mutually informative, but we must make every effort not to conflate them as has too often happened in the past. When such conflation occurs, it becomes tempting to treat The Confessions as a transparent account of Nat Turner’s early life, his motivations for violence, and his actions during the rebellion itself. It is also tempting to answer the difficult questions raised within the narrative by uncritically importing information
contained in contemporary newspaper articles, personal letters, and diary entries relating to the rebellion.

This analytic confusion stems from several factors. First, it has been very difficult to determine accurately the nature and extent of the rebellion. Initial reports of violence were met by panic among the region’s white population, and grossly exaggerated rumors regarding numbers of slaves involved and numbers of white residents killed sprang up all around. Dispelling these rumors and establishing more accurate counts proved very difficult. Even more difficult to determine was the number of African Americans killed in the aftermath of the rebellion as enraged whites enacted indiscriminate (and mostly undocumented) retributive violence on the black population of the region.

As the recent scholarly controversy surrounding the 1822 Denmark Vesey rebellion in Charleston, South Carolina demonstrates, even our most routinely accepted assumptions about insurrectionary movements in the United States may be called into question. Tony Horwitz captured this uncertainty when he subtitled his 1999 article on Nat Turner for the *New Yorker*, “Is most of what we know about the rebel slave Nat Turner wrong?” (80). In his article, Horwitz documents the conflicting evidence that undermines the traditional understanding of what happened in Southampton County between the twenty-first and the twenty-third of August, 1831. Of particular interest are the “[m]any reports prior to Turner’s capture [that] suggested that other blacks may have led the uprising” (89). Such reports raise the question that Nat Turner’s notoriety may be largely accidental. His ability to elude capture led to the growing mythology that surrounded him, eventually placing him at the center of a rebellion in which it is possible

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8 In his article “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” Michael P. Johnson argues that the vast plan for rebellion by slaves in the region around Charleston was largely the figment of white residents’ imagination.
that he did not hold a leadership role. The publication of his purported “Confessions” would thus have worked to solidify his ascension to prominence.

Despite the controversy, the general consensus among historians seems to be that beginning in the early morning hours of August 22nd a group of slaves and free blacks rampaged through the southern section of Southampton County, killing all the white residents they found regardless of age or gender. They recruited additional participants along the way from the farms they ransacked, until their numbers swelled to between fifty and sixty. The rebels’ movements were largely arrested that afternoon when they were met by a white militia force from the nearby town of Jerusalem. The rebellion collapsed entirely the following morning when the last of the rebels were dispersed. All known conspirators, with the exception of Nat Turner, were soon apprehended or killed. Of those later tried, thirty were sentenced to death for their participation, but a number of them had their sentences commuted by the governor of Virginia. They were then sold out of state. In the end, nineteen defendants were executed.

Initial reports of the rebellion proclaimed that a large group of runaway slaves had emerged from the Dismal Swamp and were massacring white slaveholders and destroying their plantations. In the following days, it was determined that the participants were not runaways, but instead were slaves from plantations in the Southampton area. After the rebellion was suppressed, Nat Turner evaded authorities for more than two months and was rumored to be hiding in the Dismal Swamp with a mob of

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9 These reports were often printed in newspaper accounts of the rebellion. In one example, the August 23rd edition of Richmond, Virginia’s The Constitutional Whig included the following: “We understand that the insurrection in Southampton is little more than the irruption of 150 or 200 runaway slaves from the Dismal Swamp, incited by a spirit of plunder and rapine. It will be quickly suppressed.” In a second example, the August 26th edition of The Richmond Enquirer included a letter in which the writer maintained, “I have been diligent in my inquiries to obtain information that can be relied on. The result is, about 250 negroes from a Camp Meeting about the Dismal Swamp, set out on a marauding excursion, and have, for the sake of plunder, murdered about 60 persons, some of them families much known.”
runaway slaves to help him. This rumor proved untrue when Turner was captured in a
hiding place that was very close to the plantation on which he had been a slave.

In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, African Americans in Southampton
and neighboring counties were murdered by white citizens seeking revenge. As with
other uncertainties regarding the rebellion, no accurate estimate of the number of
innocent African Americans killed exists. Nor is the rebels’ specific goal known. In his
study of the rebellion and Nat Turner’s rightful place in historical accounts of the violent
uprising, Scot French concludes, “I think we have to confront and embrace the
uncertainty rather than imposing a false order on it … About all we know for sure is that
fifty-seven whites died. We have the bodies” (qtd. in Horwitz, 89).

In addition, the mass confusion that reigned at the time is not all that has hindered
historical fact gathering. Instead, such fact gathering was—and continues to be—heavily
influenced by politics. A conundrum of often contradictory political motives informs
explanations of what happened, when, and where. For example, antebellum supporters of
slavery frequently raged against the extreme brutality of the insurgents who killed with
no regard for their victims’ age or sex. They cited the rebellion as proof of the need for
stricter laws governing slave behavior. At the same time, however, other supporters of
slavery downplayed the importance and extent of the rebellion in an effort to counter its
destabilizing effect on the institution of slavery in the United States.

For opponents of slavery, the rebellion proved equally difficult to negotiate. In
one vision, it represented a tragic example of how slavery reduces its victims to
unconscionable acts of violence. But in another sense, it demonstrated the rebels’
unyielding, even laudable, desire for freedom that served to dispel the racist myth that
African Americans were constitutionally suited for, and therefore content with, slavery. The result is that political pressures existed in both proslavery and antislavery circles to emphasize and deemphasize simultaneously the size and scope of the rebellion. These pressures have not necessarily diminished over time. As French notes, “[e]verybody has a stake in the confessions” (qtd. in Horwitz, 88). Therefore, even entering into a discussion of the historical rebellion or literary representations of organized slave violence constitutes an overtly political act on my part. Within such a highly charged atmosphere, it is especially difficult to sort through the contemporary accounts of the rebellion that have survived.

A third factor that contributes to the analytical confusion involves the text of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* itself. The narrative is unquestionably dual-authored and therefore must be approached with great care. Problems of authorship are common in analyses of antebellum writing by African Americans. In the genre of fugitive slave narratives, for example, it was not uncommon for a former slave to dictate his or her narrative to a white amanuensis. Even when the amanuensis was a committed abolitionist who was largely sympathetic to the fugitive slave’s condition and desire for freedom, the final product typically bears the marks of his or her handling of the slave’s story. The problem for modern scholars then becomes dissecting the text in an effort to isolate the two (or more) voices that inevitably cohabit the narrative. Even well-known slave narratives that were written by the former slaves themselves, including *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, were produced and published within a rigid system of white patronage. Such a system inevitably exposed the writers to political pressures that influenced what could and could
not be easily included in their personal narratives. As a result, a great body of historical and literary analysis has developed over the last few decades as scholars attempt to understand the complicated relationship between black and white storytelling and writing during the antebellum period.

_The Confessions of Nat Turner_ ultimately generates all of the questions of authorship typical of antebellum black narratives, and perhaps more. As Eric J. Sundquist notes, the text of _The Confessions_ “defies our normal conceptions of authorship and narrative” (_Wake_ 29). Although it purports to be the authentic narrative of Nat Turner, the first-person section of _The Confessions_ was written and published by Thomas R. Gray, a white lawyer assigned by the Southampton Court to defend several of the accused rebels. According to Gray’s preface, Turner dictated his narrative to Gray while he awaited trial in a Southampton County jail cell. Gray describes his interactions with Turner as follows:

> Since his confinement, by permission of the jailor, I have had ready access to him, and finding that he was willing to make a full and free confession of the origin, progress and consummation of the insurrectory movements of the slaves of which he was the contriver and head; I determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing, and publish them, with little or no variation, from his own words. That this is a faithful record of his confessions, the annexed certificate of the County Court of Southampton, will attest. (40).

Gray thus claims that as Turner’s amanuensis he simply transcribes the rebel slave’s testimony for wider distribution and that, in doing so, he makes no substantive changes to Turner’s meaning, or even to his specific wording. He cites without irony the Southampton court, a pillar of the dominant white power structure in the area, as an unquestionable authority for authenticating his version of Nat Turner’s story.

Evidence to contradict his claim exists throughout the narrative. As a white slaveholder and resident of Southampton County, Gray was unlikely to have been a
sympathetic audience for, or interpreter of, Nat Turner’s views regarding slavery or the rebellion. He explicitly reveals his deep-seated animosity toward Turner in several places in the text, referring to the rebel leader in his commentary as a “gloomy fanatic” (41) with a “fiend-like face” (54) who served as “the leader of this ferocious band” (40). He even describes how his “blood curdled in [his veins] as he watched and listened to Turner.  

Gray’s voice also reveals itself throughout the first-person narrative section he claims is Turner’s own. In an early example, he quotes Turner as opening his account of the rebellion by characterizing his own motivation as “that enthusiasm, which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the gallows” (44). The stilted and judgmental phrasing of the quotation is more suggestive of a white southern lawyer’s language than that of a rebel slave. Additionally, the historical Turner was unlikely to refer to his religious convictions as an “enthusiasm,” which had decidedly “negative connotations” in the nineteenth century (Greenberg 9). Later in the narrative, Turner explains how, as the rebellion wore on, the rebels discovered that the remaining white families in the neighborhood had fled their homes. Gray quotes Turner as saying that he and the other rebels were thus deprived of “more victims to gratify our thirst for blood” (emphasis mine, 52). Such emphasis on the rebels’

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10 For an opposing view of the relationship between Turner and Gray, see Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 105-21. Parramore argues that, rather than having a predominantly antagonistic relationship, the two men “conspired to create the most compelling document in the history of black resistance to slavery” (113). He goes on to speculate, on the basis of Gray’s declining fortunes, that “[t]he same blind destiny that cast Nat into a life of slavery had robbed Gray of his patrimony, his wife, the affection of his father, his standing in the community. As with the narrator, so with the recorder, might the pattern of regulatory beliefs and devices of white dominion have appeared more as an enemy than an ally. Unwilling to acknowledge his affinity with the rebel, yet unable to escape it, the young attorney seems to have found in the recesses of his own heart a chord that responded vibrantly and in unison with the savage confessions of the slave” (113).
brute enjoyment of the violence, and disappointment when it comes to an end, once again seems more consistent with Gray’s perspective than with Turner’s.11

The obvious insertions of Gray’s point-of-view in the sections he attributes solely to Turner make necessary a critical skepticism about the faithfulness of the rest of the first-person narrative to Turner’s representation of events. But even a quick glance through nineteenth- and twentieth-century considerations of the relationship between the Southampton rebellion and *The Confessions* reveals that many readers have failed to heed the warning of these uncertainties. Too often historical accounts have taken Gray’s representation of Turner’s words at face value, assuming little or no critical distance. As a result, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has frequently been treated as a largely factual, autobiographical description of Nat Turner’s life experiences, his motivation for rebellion, and his feelings after the fact. Such an approach denies the intensely problematic authorship of the text, and thus potentially underestimates Thomas R. Gray’s manipulation of Turner’s story. It also overlooks the possibility that Turner manipulated his own narrative in an effort to confound Gray and his extended white audience. Or, as Sundquist argues, it is important for us to consider “that Turner, as much as Gray, wore the mask, that he too manipulated the rhetorics available to him and sought to shape the public performative function of his tale of rebellion” (*Wake* 43).

In drawing attention to the authorial role of Gray, I do not mean to downplay or under-appreciate the force and purpose of Turner’s own voice in the text. Rather, I hope

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to emphasize the intriguing puzzle contained in the narrative, as the two antagonistic voices vie with one another to interpret the meaning of a historical event. Neither voice manages to dominate, just as neither can function on its own. Or, as Raymond Hedin argues, “[t]he central battle enacted within the text is a battle of voices; Gray seems to need Turner’s voice to demonstrate the power of his own … And because Gray does allow Turner to speak instead of merely summarizing his claims, Turner’s story emerges, if not unscathed by Gray, nonetheless surprisingly intact” (183).

Ultimately, this battle of voices invites reconsideration of the importance of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as a cultural document. Rather than functioning as a transparent documentation of Nat Turner’s life and his historical relationship to the Southampton rebellion, *The Confessions* serves as a pivotal text in the creation of the dominant cultural understanding or interpretation of both the man and the rebellion. These two ways of knowing—factual description of a historical event versus cultural understanding of that event—are inherently different and non-interchangeable. And it is as a tool for the latter that the text Gray presented for publication is most revealing.

Throughout my analysis, I consider *The Confessions* alongside accounts of the rebellion that appeared in contemporary newspapers. Newspapers should not be viewed as factual counterweight to Gray’s more-suspect text. As the selections below document, they proved far from accurate in their initial reporting, offering up widely divergent pictures of the rebellion to the reading public. But their inaccuracies do not discount their relevancy to our analysis of the way the rebellion was—and continues to be—perceived. In fact, as Lucy Maynard Salmon once argued for newspaper coverage in general, these very inaccuracies may actually enhance their relevancy to such a project:
The belief that the press cannot be used to reconstruct the past because of its manifold inaccuracies is not well founded. It is true that the press may claim accuracy for itself, but in the very nature of things it is and must be inaccurate. But it is remembered that it is possible to make a fetish of accuracy. Literal accuracy, as … in the case of verbatim official reports, interviews, and illustrations, may often be misleading and in essence untruthful. A specious accuracy is perfectly compatible with fundamental misconceptions of an existing situation and with an ignorance of the real truth. (qtd. in Tragle, 34)

Newspaper accounts thus provide alternative contemporary “narratives” to The Confessions that are important for understanding how the image of Nat Turner and the Southampton rebellion became entrenched in the cultural memory.

In his article “The Construction of The Confessions of Nat Turner,” David F. Allmendinger, Jr. performs painstaking textual analysis of The Confessions alongside the more detailed newspaper accounts of the rebellion in an effort to disentangle the voices in Nat Turner’s recorded statement. In doing so, he chronicles the way the story of Nat Turner and his rebellion evolved in the weeks following the rebellion. He documents a pattern of similarities between Gray’s representation of the rebellion in The Confessions and a story of the rebellion that appeared in a letter printed in the September 26th edition of the Richmond Constitutional Whig. With his detailed analysis, Allmendinger argues persuasively that Gray was the author of the letter to Pleasants. In his analysis of the two documents, he points to the information contained in The Confessions that is not present in the letter as deriving from Gray’s interrogation of Nat Turner: “[e]xcept for parenthetical insertions (clearly marking Gray’s comments), [the first-person narrative] imparted only what Nat could have known and made no claim that he had witnessed everything. Even with these limitations, the narrative disclosed at least 116 factual details about the uprising that had never appeared in print” (40). Allmendinger’s analysis thus
points to information that Gray most probably received from Nat Turner. It does not, however, manage to separate fully Turner’s story of the rebellion from Gray’s handling of that story.

Because of this, I believe it is ultimately impossible to find a definitive point of authorial reference in *The Confessions* that cannot be called into question by the presence of another competing voice. Acknowledging this and distancing ourselves from the demands of identifying absolute historical “truth” or factuality in the narrative allows us to focus more fully on how the text participates in the creation of Nat Turner as a mythic figure in the U.S. American cultural consciousness. In doing so, the character of Nat Turner that finally emerges from the adversarial authorial relationship between Gray and Turner, himself, becomes a pivotal image within the evolving national vision of the slave rebel, a vision that finds repeated expression in literary imaginings of violent resistance to slavery.

After a rather lengthy diversion, this liberation from the strict demands of historical fact brings us back to questions of place and the relationship between Nat Turner and the Great Dismal Swamp. In the context of this analysis, it no longer seems as important to determine whether the historical Nat Turner actually generated a plan to lead his growing army of slaves specifically to the Dismal Swamp twenty-five miles to his east. What is important instead is that the image of the rebel leader became identified with the vast wild-space of the Swamp in the cultural understanding and retelling of the rebellion, establishing a union that was solidified by representations of slave violence in subsequent antislavery writings. The evolution of this union into a generic convention of antislavery writing constitutes a highly politicized aesthetic development. The repeated
emphasis on the association between Nat Turner and the Dismal Swamp functions ideologically in that it suggests the potential for the Southampton rebellion transcending the merely local and growing into a viable, regional threat to the larger institution of slavery. It also emphasizes the possibilities for slaves to live and operate outside of the control of the white power structures, even as they remain in slaveholding territories. While we can largely disregard the seemingly unanswerable question of whether this association is historically accurate, understanding how such a widespread belief in the connection came about tells us a great deal about the ideological dynamics at play in the antebellum debate over slavery. It also tells us a great deal about the role played by written narratives in this debate.

As noted above, ideological conflicts over geography are at the heart of the debate over slavery in the United States. This relationship between geography and ideology is certainly not unique to issues of slavery. As Lefebvre argues, “[w]hat is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies” (44). Although the relationship is not unique, it did become especially evident as slavery’s advocates and critics vied with each other for the right to define and control large territories. The proslavery structuring of space was very rigid, founded upon slaveholders’ ability to restrict and control varying types of movement. Most obviously, the stability of the institution of slavery necessitated the strict regulation of slaves’ movements from one location to another.

The stability of slavery also necessitated the strict censorship of ideas, countenancing only those perceived to support the interests of the slave power. Antislavery writings were obvious targets of such censorship, as slaveholders attempted
to curtail their dispersal through southern states. The state of Georgia’s proposed five thousand dollar reward for the capture of William Lloyd Garrison is a testament to the extreme measures that southern slaveholders were willing to consider to prevent the dissemination of abolitionist ideas and writings. Following the Southampton rebellion, however, a different form of communication proved especially disruptive. The frenetic movement of rumors in the wake of the rebellion was seen to undermine the security of slavery even more than the actual violence was able to do. Ironically, this threat to slavery did not stem from without, as antislavery writings and even slave violence were seen to do. Instead, rumors that threatened the public’s perception of slavery grew up right in the heart of the slave power. As a result, the uncontrolled movement of stories and ideas elicited a determined crackdown on the dispensation of all unauthorized accounts of the violence in Southampton County.

The Southampton rebellion therefore represents a spatial challenge to the institution of slavery on two levels. As Mark Simpson argues, “revolt and mobility cannot be disengaged; in important ways, the first holds no meaning without the second” (31). Initially, the rebels attempted to wrest control of the region, and obviously of their own lives, away from the white slave power. In doing so, they defied the slave power’s ability to regulate the movements of African Americans as they seized the opportunity to move freely without the required authorization of the written pass. Viewing the Southampton rebellion with an eye to questions of geography, Simpson concludes that “not just as a rebel but as a traveler, Turner contests strictures within slavery’s ideological field; accordingly we need to view his rebellious tour in terms not of failed escape but of institutionalized and ideological reckoning” (35). This unauthorized and
unrestrained movement by African Americans served as a catalyst for a significantly larger movement of white inhabitants of the region. The countering movement included local militia and federal military forces, from as far away as Richmond and Norfolk, who traveled to Southampton County to aid in the suppression of the rebellion. The eruption of black force was thus met by a disproportionately larger white force as many more people crowded into Southampton County than were needed to suppress the rebellion.

The movement by the slave rebels also resulted in a very different kind of movement. Unlike the countering movement of the white militia forces, this movement was strictly unauthorized by the established slave power. Growing out of the panic in the white community, rumors ran rampant through the neighborhood of the rebellion, the states of Virginia and North Carolina, and onto the rest of the South. They also were variously repeated, corroborated, and refuted in newspapers across the expanding nation. John Hampden Pleasants, who deployed with the Richmond militia unit to Southampton Country in the wake of the rebellion, described some of the rumors in circulation in a letter published in Richmond’s *The Constitutional Whig*: “Here for the first time, we learnt the extent of the insurrection, and the mischief perpetrated. Rumor had infinitely exaggerated the first, swelling the numbers of the negroes to a thousand or 1200 men, and representing its ramifications as embracing several of the adjacent counties, particularly Isle of Wight and Greensville” (29 August 1831).

In addition to grossly magnifying the size of the Southampton rebellion, rumors also detailed numerous other uprisings occurring throughout the region. Some of these uprisings were said to be coordinated with the Southampton violence. Others were thought to be autonomous, but complementary occurrences. A September 29th article
from *The Richmond Enquirer* deserves to be quoted at length as it provides some hint of the extent of such rumors. The article begins by describing the ongoing trial proceedings in Southampton County. It continues as follows:

Thirty or forty slaves have been tried or examined in Nansemond, but only one has been sentenced to death. It is said that he was present at a meeting of the blacks; at which a black preacher (from the Isle of Wight or Surrey) had asked such as were willing to join, to hold up their hands—this fellow was identified as one of those who held up their hands.

We understand that eight or nine convictions have taken place in the county of Sussex. And in Prince George, a black preacher, and by trade a blacksmith, has also been sentenced to death…We had an unpleasant rumor on Sunday, about the murder of an old lady, two young ones, and two maid servants, in the county of Dinwiddie. But it turns out to be all a hoax, or rather a dream. Many of the militia had proceeded to the scene before the hoax was discovered…

The accounts from our Sister State of *North Carolina* have been very much exaggerated; though as they relate to the designs and plans of the Banditti, they are of a more serious complexion. The Raleigh and Warrenton papers, which reached us on Saturday, teemed with very unpleasant accounts—as for instance, according to the P.S. of the Warrenton paper, that Wilmington had been burnt, its inhabitants massacred, and that a large force, swelled up to 2000, was on the march for Raleigh. All these reports turn out to be ‘the mere coinage of the brain,’ and it is now exceedingly questionable whether a single black has been under arms. It is certain that not a drop of white man’s blood has been shed. (emphasis in original)

The unrestrained movement of these rumors had the potential to be even more damaging to the institution of slavery than the rebellion itself. As Simpson puts it, “[r]umor, like a fugitive slave, threatens to upset the smooth workings of an economic regime where stories alongside bodies constitute the commodities exchanged in the marketplace. Thus, it becomes imperative that texts, like slaves, travel and circulate with their proper documentation” (50). As a result, a concerted effort to contain and disprove rumors grew up. Repeatedly, correspondents to regional newspapers professed to have authentic information that dispelled the frequently hysterical rumors about widespread
rebellious activities that were circulating in the public press as well as in private conversations (Figure 1.1). Readers were continually reminded that no organized threat existed and that they must resist giving in to the hysteria that was seizing the populace after the rebellion. The following admonition from the August 24th edition of *The Richmond Compiler* is typical: “We must caution our readers against all exaggerations.—He ought to take *every report* with many grains of allowance—he will scarcely be safe if he believes a fiftieth part of what he hears” (emphasis in original).

![Figure 1.1 Towns and Counties with Rumored Unrest in the Aftermath of the Southampton Rebellion](image)

Figure 1.1 Towns and Counties with Rumored Unrest in the Aftermath of the Southampton Rebellion

It was into this atmosphere that Thomas R. Gray published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, presenting it as the authoritative text for discounting the “thousand idle, exaggerated and mischievous reports” in circulation about the rebellion (40). Gray’s
efforts to contain the free-flow of rumors ironically gave rise to Nat Turner’s greatest influence. Or, as Sundquist notes, “Nat Turner did not travel, but his message did” (198).

In significant ways, The Confessions of Nat Turner makes for a rough beginning to an analysis of geographic patterns in antislavery writing. Most obviously, it does not fit easily into a simple category of antislavery writing. In the abstract, it appears to conform to the formal conventions of fugitive slave narratives in that it includes a first-person account of a slave’s experiences under U.S. American slavery that is framed by the introductory and concluding remarks of a white witness. As noted above, however, this basic structure belies the complexity of The Confessions. Thomas R. Gray wrote and published Nat Turner’s narrative with the express intention of defending the institution of slavery against real and imagined threats. While he largely limits his overt commentary to the framing sections, he infuses Turner’s narrative with his own, antagonistic interpretations on numerous occasions. In this respect, The Confessions functions as a monological text that assumes a polyphonic guise, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology. Gray includes Turner’s voice only to have the rebel slave indict himself, thus lending support to Gray’s own political objective. Despite his persistent meddling, however, Gray is never fully able to control Turner’s narrative. As a result, the text that he deceptively presents as polyphonic remains double-voiced in spite of all his efforts. That is, he fails to subsume Turner’s voice into a unified defense of the stability of slavery.

More subtle, perhaps, but equally problematic to an analysis of literary geography is The Confessions’ uneven treatment of geographic space. In his preface and concluding comments, Gray repeatedly returns to the subject of geography, addressing the prevailing fear among southern whites that the Southampton rebellion was not merely a local
phenomenon. He argues that there were no plans for an organized uprising among African Americans in the region. Consequently, the rebellion was not indicative of a significant threat to the institution of slavery as a whole. He writes in his preface that “[i]f Nat’s statements can be relied on, the insurrection in this county was entirely local, and his designs confided but to a few, and these in his immediate vicinity” (41-42). He returns to the subject near the end of the narrative, reporting that Turner denied all knowledge “of any extensive or concerted plan” to strike out against the slave power (54). Gray concludes that the lesson that should be learned from the rebellion was not that widespread violence was likely, or even possible, but that “[e]ach particular community should look to its own safety, whilst the general guardians of the laws, keep a watchful eye over all” (41). He therefore presents the first-person narrative as evidence that there was no need for panic by the region’s white citizens. A rebellion that was local in nature posed no real threat to the institution of slavery in the United States.

Thus far, I have stressed the points of tension or contradiction between Gray’s and Turner’s interpretations of the rebellion as they appear in The Confessions. Interestingly, their individual considerations of geography do not necessarily exhibit a similar conflict. In this notable instance, Turner’s narrative coexists rather easily with an important assumption of Gray’s political argument. That is, Turner’s representation of place ultimately seems to validate Gray’s claim that the rebellion was a local phenomenon. The most important textual evidence for this validation does not stem from those statements Gray attributes to Turner in which he explicitly states that the entire plan was local. While it is certainly possible that Gray quoted Turner accurately, we should not ignore the fact that there are obvious reasons to doubt the veracity of such statements. For Gray,
Turner’s claims provide essential support for his central argument. For Turner, little tactical advantage could be gained by revealing any outstanding plans for rebellion, if such plans did indeed exist. By insisting on the local nature of the violence, he could provide cover for any conspirators who had managed to avoid detection and capture, thus increasing the possibility of some future success in the battle against slavery. It is impossible to determine finally which scenario is correct given the historical evidence that is available. But the point remains that the statements guaranteeing the local nature of the rebellion that Gray attributes to Turner are too obviously political to be accepted without reservation.

This is not necessarily the case for Turner’s representation of geographic place throughout the rest of the narrative, however. It seems reasonable to assume that Gray was primarily interested in the overt political messages contained in the narrative and was less likely to alter significantly those aspects of Turner’s narrative that appear, at least on the surface, apolitical. In other words, my basic assumption is that Gray’s heavy handed editing is unevenly distributed across the narrative, and that it is most concentrated in thematic rather than formal concerns. Such attention to theme over form overlooks the ideological nature of literary forms. That is, it overlooks the fact that “ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right” (Jameson, *Unconscious* 79). But the fact remains that the ideological foundations of formal conventions are frequently less overt and therefore less likely to invite alteration or comment by Gray.
In contrast to Gray’s commentary, Turner’s first-person narrative seems remarkably unconscious of geography as being of vital interest to one’s interpretation or understanding of the insurrectionary activities. The structure of the narrative is principally chronological, as Turner places the significant events in his life in their temporal sequence. He begins the narrative, stressing the importance of a causality based in time: “Sir,—You have asked me to give a history of the motives which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call it—To do so I must go back to the days of my infancy, and even before I was born” (44). He then proceeds to narrate the memorable events of his life that led him to his current location. Thus, Turner explicitly emphasizes evolutionary time with little or no attention to place as a structuring device.

This lack of overt attention to place raises an interesting theoretical issue. As noted above, I believe that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* plays a pivotal role in the development of the cultural image of the swamp or wild-space as the site of slave violence. In doing so, it serves as an important precursor for conventional representations of slave violence in antislavery writing. The theoretical issue arises from the fact that there is an absence of an obvious place-consciousness at the heart of Nat Turner’s narrative, which I have introduced as the foundational text for my analysis. This absence invites a defense of the project’s general theoretical and methodological framework from the outset. In other words, we must begin to address the following question: how (and/or why) should a place-oriented analysis be centered around a text that outwardly eschews the importance of geography in preference for a more traditional emphasis on time?

To begin to address this question, I would note that Turner’s privileging of historical time as a structuring device for his narrative is hardly unusual. In fact, Foucault
argues that “[t]he great obsession of the nineteenth century was … history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world” (“Spaces” 22). Despite this overt attention to time, geographic space can never be seen to lie dormant. Foucault maintains: “it is necessary to notice that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space” (22). This is undoubtedly true for U.S. American thought in the nineteenth century where the great national crises and cycles Foucault alludes to consisted essentially of a battle over how to define large geographic regions. Within a cultural environment that is so obsessed by questions of time, the formative function of geography still reveals itself. That is, geography cannot accurately be seen as a simple backdrop for historical forces; instead it functions as a determining force in social and political relationships. In the literary output of the period, representations of space likewise transcend the role of mere setting and function instead as determining conventions of narrative structures, even when they are not necessarily recognized as such.

After defining the nineteenth-century as time obsessed, Foucault writing in 1986 concludes:

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (22)
While our theoretical discussion of the spatial foundation for human experience and development may be more self-consciously developed, the current epoch does not differ substantively from preceding epochs. As I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, the rhetorical debate over slavery in the antebellum United States repeatedly, and persistently, revolved around problems of space. Consequently, representations of slave violence in antislavery writings are inevitably structured upon images “of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed,” images that also help structure Nat Turner’s narrative despite his seeming lack of conscious attention to problems of spatiality. Such an emphasis on place does not deny the importance of time as a structuring device in human experience or cultural output. As Soja repeatedly argues, a geographic focus recognizes a complex “social being actively emplaced in space and time in an explicitly historical and geographical contextualization” (emphasis in original, 11).

As discussed above, Gray’s commentary and the contemporary newspaper articles exhibit a similar preoccupation with questions of geography. These texts, which form a body of companion readings to Nat Turner’s first-person narrative, repeatedly attempt to situate the events of the rebellion in an identifiable location. By “placing” the rebellion in this way, proponents of slavery seize the authority to define or interpret its violence, and, in doing so, to contain it. Such containment necessitates that slaveholders re-exert their control and effectively limit both the movements of the rebellious slaves and the diffusion of the rumors. The pervasive attention to place in these readings highlights the importance of geography to the cultural dialogue surrounding the debate over slavery as it manifested itself with respect to the Southampton rebellion. In addition, the readings are suggestive of the importance of reconsidering Turner’s rhetorical attention to
geography, in all of its subtleties, to determine how it functions within the larger political battle over space.

Turner seems to incorporate geographic places into his narrative in two different ways. As he begins, he provides only the most general spatial references to the locations in which the events that led up to the rebellion occurred. For instance, he recalls “remaining in the woods thirty days” (46) after running away from a new overseer. He does not specify which woods or where they are located beyond juxtaposing them to “some other part of the country” (46) where the other slaves mistakenly supposed he had fled. He also recounts hearing voices and witnessing spiritual visions while “praying at [his] plough” (46) and while “laboring in the field” (47). Again he does not place these sites within an identified geographic area. He thus takes for granted “the neighborhood” (45) of his several masters’ farms where all of his life was spent as the setting for the events he describes.

At this point in the narrative, Turner’s experiences are not explicitly rooted in any single place. Such placelessness can be seen to function ambiguously in the narrative, suggesting either that issues of place are essentially unimportant to Turner and his interpretation of the events leading up to the rebellion or that the lack of specificity regarding place is extremely important and indicates that the events Turner narrates were larger than any one location and could have occurred anywhere in the slave South. Turner’s near total omission of place in the first half of the narrative seems to invite the first interpretation, but possible evidence for the second does appear near the narrative’s end. After insisting to a purportedly skeptical Gray that the rebellion was entirely local, Turner responds, “can you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this
time in the heaven’s might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking” (54). He thus explicitly connects his experiences and beliefs, but not his violent actions, to a community of slaves beyond his immediate vicinity. This response invites a third interpretation of Turner’s use of geography to this point, one that combines the two alternatives above. That is, Turner’s lack of interest in geography is genuine, and it coincides with an understanding that Southampton is not unique. In this case, Southampton County can be viewed as representative of slaveholding regions as a whole.

In the second half of his narrative, however, Turner’s negotiation of geography shifts abruptly as he turns his attention to the movements of the slaves during the rebellion itself. With no noted prompting by Gray, he becomes very specific about the locations of the events he recounts. He describes in detail which farmhouses the rebels stormed, in what order, the routes they followed, and the distances they traveled. He is also very specific about the violence they inflicted, or the resistance they met, at each location. With this increased attention, however, geographic locations seem to be presented even more firmly as a simple backdrop for the events discussed. Turner cites the county seat of Jerusalem as the primary destination for the rebels, but he never specifies their overall goal except “to procure arms and ammunition” (52).

Never once does he mention a specific location beyond the immediate vicinity of the rebellion. He does not refer to the Dismal Swamp, to Richmond, to Norfolk, to Africa, or to any other destination that was ascribed to the rebels in the popular mythology that rose out of the rebellion. Nor does he pay any attention to the physical landscape of the locations through which he and the rebels move. His purpose is to chronicle rather than describe or interpret. This detailed but uncomplicated attention to
place invites an interpretation of the prior placelessness of the narrative that emphasizes the local nature of the rebellion. All told, Turner seems uninterested in questions of geography until they relate directly to the movements of the rebels during the rebellion. Once he does turn his attention to geographic place, he limits his discussion entirely to a superficial rendering of the southern portion of Southampton County. Never in the narrative can he be seen taking notice of the effect geographic location has on the rebellion—in its inception, its progress, its goal, or its outcome.

The latter emphasis on specific locations in his own neighborhood serves to align Turner’s first-person narrative with Gray’s claim that the rebellion was a confined, local event. Gray repeatedly yokes his belief in the rebels’ isolation to an additional claim that the rebellion was solely the product of Turner’s fanaticism. Rather than representing a logical reaction to the system of slavery, it is portrayed as the irrational outcome of Turner’s “own dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind” (41). Such interpretations coincided with the slave power’s established line on the events in Southampton.

Throughout newspaper reports of the rebellion, Turner is repeatedly referred to as a religious fanatic who manages to exert his influence over a group of ignorant slaves. By characterizing Turner as a fanatic who instigates an isolated rebellion, proponents of slavery advance the argument that the rebellion represents a unique occurrence that has little relevance for the institution of slavery as a whole.

Despite all of its efforts, the slave power’s interpretation of the rebellion never fully replaced the public perception of a connection between Nat Turner, the Dismal Swamp, and a larger, organized slave rebellion. As a cultural image Turner remained elusive, thriving in black folk traditions. Frequently referred to as “Ole Nat” or “Prophet
“Nat,” the image of the historical Nat Turner metamorphosed into a trickster and liberator figure. As the WPA researchers for the Negro Studies Project discovered in the 1930s, Nat Turner was not forgotten even if the particulars of his historical actions had grown murky with time. He remained a mysterious and powerful figure roaming the wild-spaces of the South. Recalling the frequency with which slaves ran away and hid in neighboring woods and swamps, Cornelia Carney of Williamsburg, Virginia explained, “[n]iggers was too smart fo’ white folks to git ketch. White folks was sharp too, but not sharp enough to git by old Nat.” When asked who Nat was, she replied, “Nat? I don’t know who he was. Ole folks used to say it all de time. De meanin’ I git is dat de niggers could always out-smart de white folks” (qtd. in French, 205). This image of Turner as tied to southern geography also finds expression in African-American folk culture that has survived. Albert Murray quotes a nineteenth-century song that characterizes the threat posed by the mythical Nat Turner as ongoing:

Well you can be milk-white and just as rich as cream
And buy a solid gold carriage with a four-horse team
But you caint keep the world from movering round
Or stop old Nat Turner from gaining ground.
(qtd. in Sundquist, To Wake the Nations, 44)

A mythical image of Nat Turner continued to loom large in antislavery examinations of the dynamics of slave violence, as well. In an 1861 article for the Atlantic Monthly, Thomas Wentworth Higginson quoted an unknown source in which he claimed that “Nat Turner intended to ‘conquer Southampton County as the white men did in the Revolution, and then retreat, if necessary, to the Dismal Swamp’” (175). Higgininson also claimed, again without documentation, that after the collapse of the rebellion, “[t]hree times [Turner] tried to get out of that neighborhood, but in vain:
travelling by day was, of course, out of the question, and by night he found it impossible to elude the patrol” (184). Such emphasis on Turner’s purported attempts to defy the restrictions on his movement implies that the possibility of action remained alive long after white authorities claimed to have totally suppressed the rebellion. In this view, the rebellion did not end until all avenues for movement by the rebel slave were eliminated. More generally, it can be argued that the rebellious spirit that Turner unleashed, and gave voice to, was never fully contained. Walter Benjamin’s observation about memory is telling: “A lived event is finite, concluded at least on the level of experience. But a remembered event is infinite, a possible key to everything that preceded it and to everything that will follow it” (qtd. in McKeon, 767).

The following chapters examine, in part, how the connection between Turner and the Dismal Swamp solidified and become conventional in the popular perception of the rebellion. More generally, these chapters focus on the development of literary conventions that repeatedly place rebel slaves moving through a vast network of wild-spaces. Often the wild-spaces are located in the southern United States, but an alternative tradition exists that places them outside of U.S. American borders and, thus, largely beyond the hegemonic control of the southern slave power. Repeated attention to wild-spaces marks a notable problem-solving tendency in antislavery writing. Such attention “figures among the instruments for mapping the way through regions of difficult social reality” (Miller 89). As a result, the conventional linking of rebel slaves with wild-spaces that have not been effectively subsumed under the slave power’s control is not indicative of a wholly destructive vision of slave violence. Rather, it imagines a utopian push to create via force a true land of freedom. This land of freedom, coming to life right in the
center of slave territory, implicitly (or occasionally even explicitly) counters the
imperfect freedom available to escaped slaves in the northern states or in Canada.

In keeping with my overall claim that place is as important a structuring force as
time in cultural production, the following chapters are grouped by geographic similarities
rather than chronology. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale
of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856) and Martin R. Delany’s *Blake; or, The Huts of
America* (1859-62), respectively. Both novels depict rebel slaves planning violent
incursions against the institution of slavery from safe-places in the swamps and forests of
the South. *Dred* focuses almost exclusively on U.S. American wild-spaces, but *Blake*
expands the narrative landscape to encompass Cuba and the Atlantic sailing routes of the
Middle Passage. Because of their extended placement in the sparsely developed South,
the novels contain the most obvious parallels to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and to the
mytho-cultural representations of Nat Turner. These parallels clearly highlight the
enduring cultural association of slave violence with remote regions like the Dismal
Swamp. In both *Dred* and *Blake*, the negotiations of geographic space are much more
obviously complex than was evident in *The Confessions*. Consequently, they provide
valuable starting points for charting the formative function of geography and
representations of violence in antislavery writing.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” (1853) and
Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), respectively. These two shorter narratives
fictionalize historical rebellions aboard slave ships. In doing so, they offer an expanded
portrait of the ocean as a place of rebellion from the one Delany initiates but ultimately
abandons in *Blake*. The narrative action of “The Heroic Slave” unfolds first on land and
then at sea. This narrative movement invites a shifting critical gaze from the wild-spaces of the South to the untamed waters of the open ocean.

*Benito Cereno* has the distinction of being the only narrative in this analysis that takes place entirely away from the United States. Its narrative action plays out in an ocean harbor off the coast of Chile. Again unlike the others, Melville’s novella does not put forth an obvious moral interpretation of slavery. By analyzing “The Heroic Slave” and *Benito Cereno* together, we are able to see how, regardless of overt authorial politics, the ocean landscape helps determine plot development, fundamentally altering the enslavers’ options when rebellion breaks out. The geographically limited space of the slave ship thus provides a radically simplified cultural forum in which rebellions can unfold largely without the intervention of the dominant society’s policing institutions. It also provides a simplified narrative forum that allows writers to imagine a crack in the slave power’s seemingly ubiquitous authority.
CHAPTER 2: *DRED AND THE REBEL-FUGITIVE*

The reader who consults the map will discover that the whole eastern shore of the Southern States, with slight interruptions, is belted by an immense chain of swamps, regions of hopeless disorder, where the abundant growth and vegetation of nature, sucking up its forces from the humid soil, seems to rejoice in a savage exuberance, and bid defiance to all human effort either to penetrate or subdue. These wild regions are the homes of the alligator, the moccasin, and the rattle-snake. (Dred 275)

The same wild regions are also the home of the Harriet Beecher Stowe’s title character in her second and lesser known antislavery novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). Dred is a fugitive slave who travels through the swamps and forests of the southern United States providing refuge for other escaped slaves while recruiting participants for an armed rebellion against slavery. Stowe’s title links the rebel-fugitive to the Great Dismal Swamp, the geographic wild-space that had become associated with Nat Turner in the cultural mythology after the Southampton rebellion. In the narrative, Dred is given a prominent lineage. He is specifically described as the son of Denmark Vesey, a historically free black man in Charleston, South Carolina who was executed in 1822 on suspicion of organizing a widespread rebellion against slavery. The third-person narrator in *Dred* quotes extensively from contemporary accounts of Vesey’s aborted insurrection to reinforce the connection between Dred’s and Vesey’s plans for violence. The development of this fictional lineage thus aligns the character of Dred with a famous historical figure who purportedly turned to violence to strike out against the system of slavery in the United States.

Despite the early attention to Denmark Vesey, however, Dred’s specific characterization is primarily indebted to the representation of Nat Turner in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as well as to the cultural mythology that grew up around Turner in the aftermath of the Southampton rebellion. Making the connection explicit,
Stowe appends extended sections of *The Confessions* to the novel for the purpose of providing, as she puts it, a historical “illustration of the character and views ascribed to Dred” (679). She also notes in her appendix that one of the principal conspirators in the Southampton rebellion was named Dred (679).

Like Nat Turner in *The Confessions*, Stowe’s Dred is revered among the novel’s slaves as a preacher and prophet. Also like Turner, he invokes passages from the Old Testament to justify his plans for violent retribution against slaveholders. The visions he experiences mirror those attributed to Turner in *The Confessions*. Both men witness strange hieroglyphics written in blood upon leaves in the woods (*Dred* 277, 560; *Confessions* 47). Both men observe white and black spirits battling in the heavens (*Dred* 622; *Confessions* 46). Unlike Turner, however, who reports having voluntarily returned to his master after running away, Dred lives as a fugitive slave and establishes a maroon community deep within the Dismal Swamp. Stowe therefore draws upon the cultural etymology of the Dismal Swamp to lend authority to her fictional representation of violent resistance to slavery. As a result, Dred follows most closely in the footsteps, not of the historical Nat Turner, but of the image of Nat Turner that came alive in cultural mythology after the rebellion.

Stowe’s careful but selective modeling of Dred on Nat Turner is suggestive of her methodological approach throughout the novel. Initially, *Dred*’s plot sequences seem to be largely character-driven as Stowe capitalizes on the memory of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey to validate her portrait of a morally ambiguous figure of a slave rebel. But, as we look closer, we find that geography and the cultural associations attached to specific geographic sites (including of course the Dismal Swamp) play a prominent role
in guiding narrative development in *Dred*. As a consequence, these same sites are essential to the novel’s final shift from organized rebellion to slave flight.

In *The Role of Place in Literature*, Leonard Lutwack writes that “[t]he structure of events and themes is … supported and paralleled by the arrangement of places in a narrative. Plot is a map of a story’s physical environment as well as the pattern of its events” (66). Lutwack thus highlights the integral relationship between plot and geography in fictional narratives. But he concludes that these literary geographies essentially maintain a passive, illustrative function. They do not drive narrative events or themes: they *support* and *parallel* them. At first glance, this is the way geography seems to function in *Dred*. The individual places Stowe includes in the narrative carry with them cultural significations that reinforce narrative events and themes. But, I would argue that such a formulation misses the way the powerful cultural associations of individual places translate into plot momentum. That is, Lutwack’s argument overlooks the role of place in dictating narrative action. Or, as Franco Moretti writes in *Atlas of the European Novel*, “different spaces are not just different landscapes (although they are also that …): they are different narrative matrixes. Each space determines its own kind of actions, its plot – its genre” (emphasis in original, 84).

As a result of the criticism she received in response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe was intensely aware of the need to legitimate her representation of slavery to ensure maximum credibility and political influence for her new novel. She therefore theorizes and employs a kind of literary “factualism” in which she builds much of her fictional narrative upon strict historical precedent. In doing so, she attempts to counter claims that her representations of slavery are the product of her imagination rather than of objective
circumstances in slaveholding territories. Within *Dred*, Stowe draws the reader’s attention to several of her historical sources via footnotes and three lengthy appendices.  

*A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* serves as an important external guide to additional source material for both narrative event and landscape.

Published several years before *Dred*, *A Key* retrospectively explains and justifies Stowe’s literary vision in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It also anticipates closely the narrative methodology she would pursue in *Dred*. As she writes in its opening,

> [a]t different times, doubt has been expressed whether the representations of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” are a fair representation of slavery as it at present exists. This work, more perhaps than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents,—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered,—grouped together with reference to a general result, in the same manner that the mosaic artist groups his fragments of various stones into one general picture. His is a mosaic of gems,—this is a mosaic of facts. (5)

Stowe thus describes her tale of slavery as admittedly fiction, but a fiction that grows out of strict historical “fact.” This theoretical privileging of fact over creative imaginings provides an intriguing point of entry for our analysis of geography, narrative action, and politics in *Dred*.

Just as the visual artist’s mosaic depends upon spatial relationships, *Dred’s* representation of slavery and slave resistance is structured by the historically resonant locations that comprise its narrative landscape. Analyzing such a landscape can be cumbersome because problems of space pervade narrative structures. As Henri Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space*, “[t]he problem is that any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of,

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1 In addition to excerpts from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the appendices include (1) excerpts from several judicial cases and newspaper articles to substantiate her depiction of slave abuse and (2) excerpts from official church declarations to demonstrate the southern church’s complicity with the system of slavery.
speculated about” (15). In *Dred*, the narrative landscape, which is dominated by the wild-space of the Dismal Swamp, is unquestionably complicated. It is simultaneously comprised of historical places and symbolic spaces. It also points to real-world obstacles to reform as well as to generic conventions in antislavery writing. Through this complicated landscape, Stowe attempts to encapsulate all of U.S. American slavery and slave resistance within a fictional narrative that remains true to individual historical events and identifiable locations.

In this chapter, I explore how geography functions both thematically and formally in *Dred*. As Lutwack details, “[p]lace gets into literature in two ways, as idea and form: as attitudes about places and classes of places that the writer picks up from his social and intellectual milieu and from his personal experiences, and as materials for the forms he uses to render events, characters, and themes” (12). Place gets into antislavery literature in a third way, as well. As discussed in the previous chapter, the struggle over slavery was rooted in a contest between slavery’s proponents and its critics to control labor relations and the laws of vast geographic territories. Because of this, issues of place become very much a part of antislavery narratives’ subject matter as they attempt to inscribe control over, and rewrite, individual locations and geographic territories. In other words, a primary goal of antislavery narratives is to identify a place of freedom for African Americans.

Typically in literary analysis, symbolic readings of place have generated more interest than literal readings. As Lutwack writes, “in the final analysis all places in literature are used for symbolic purposes even though in their descriptiveness they may be rooted in fact” (31). Such emphasis on geographical symbolism is important for any
analysis of *Dred*. Stowe’s descriptions of southern locations are, in fact, saturated with such “symbolic purposes.” So much so that it is impossible to explore all of these purposes within the confines of the current analysis. As the novel’s third-person narrator notes in detail, the vast wild-spaces of the South carry with them complex and vivid religious connotations suggestive of the Christian idea of a spiritual wilderness. At the same time, her description of the Dismal Swamp also makes explicit a parallel between Dred’s psychological state (or the psychology of slave violence) and “the wild solitudes of the swamp” (277). Such religious and psychological symbolism in Stowe’s narrative has received significant critical notice in recent years. As a result, I see little I can add to the detailed and rich information already available.

This is not true, however, for the political significations of place and wild-space in the novel. It is therefore my purpose to explore Stowe’s treatment of geographic sites with an eye, of course, to how they symbolically reflect and engage the political debate over slavery in the United States. At the same time, I hope to highlight how Stowe develops a historically resonant narrative geography, not just to represent slavery, but also to imagine and work through alternative approaches to slave resistance. Rather than a monological statement on slave rebellion, Stowe’s novel seems to be a theoretical work-in-progress as it metaphorically tries alternative forms of resistance on for size and, in doing so, strains to see where each might lead if put into practice.

Stowe’s emphasis on historical landscapes came at a time of increasing cultural interest in the physical environment of the expanding nation. Such interest is exemplified by the rise of the Hudson River school of painting and renewed attention by transcendentalist writers to nature as a source of spiritual and aesthetic inspiration. The
nineteenth-century wilderness functioned as a spiritual retreat for nature writers who, like Thoreau, lamented its ongoing destruction. As Don Scheese puts it, “[f]or Thoreau the attenuation of the pastoral realm was alarming, and nature writing is transformed by the possibility that a wilderness retreat might no longer exist” (24). Stowe’s narrative treatment of geography is certainly informed by this cultural interest in the natural environment. But, at the same time, it advances a very different political agenda. Wildspaces in *Dred* (as well as in the other texts I consider here) are not retreats to be preserved, conserved, or mourned. Nor are they spaces to be explored, documented, or celebrated. They are, instead, political tools to be used to encourage a radical rewriting of political and cultural space across the slaveholding territories of the United States.

In dissecting the functions of geography in *Dred* it has proven useful to follow a two-stage approach. The first stage is primarily descriptive. It involves identifying the specific locations included in the text and isolating the historical precedents for these locations and their associated narrative events. By mapping the movements of individual characters in the novel, we create a visual model of their specific travels as well as an aggregate model for the thematic movement of the novel as a whole. In subsequent chapters, we compare the aggregate model for *Dred* with models for other narratives that consider slave resistance in an effort to discover generic patterns that are, in effect, ideologically determined. Literary maps such as these, as Franco Moretti writes, simultaneously highlight “what *could* be in a novel—and what actually *is* there” (emphasis in original, 13-14). Mapping the movements of characters in the novel thus represents an important step in both the analysis of *Dred* and the current project’s larger exploration of generic and geographic patterns in antislavery writing.
The second stage in analyzing *Dred* involves examining the ways in which the different movements of the novel function with respect to one another. This stage revolves around explorations of the possible “solutions” to the problem of slavery that Stowe’s narrative considers. These solutions while obviously political are also spatial in nature. Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of chronotopes with its emphasis on the mutually formative relationship between time and space provides a complementary theoretical framework to the maps developed in Stage One. Joint analysis of these maps and literary chronotopes allows us to explore from two different critical perspectives the spatial structures that undergird the political solutions the narrative examines. Bakhtin defines a chronotope (or literally a time-space relationship) as representing “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Rather than being supportive of—or merely contingent on—the “meaning” of the text, Bakhtin argues that chronotopes constitute all such meaning.

Focusing on the geographic landscape via the competing chronotopes in *Dred*, then, effectively broadens our analysis of the politics of the novel. It does so by shifting our discussion from the very slippery debate over Stowe’s final message in the novel to an examination of the ideological demands of its spatial structures.

As we begin Stage One, it is useful to identify the historical events that influenced Stowe as she crafted her complex and often wandering narrative. Although she includes details from numerous events, she draws most heavily on three legal actions from three southern states for her primary plot movements. She specifically identifies two of these with textual documentation. First, as discussed above, she acknowledges her debt to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in her characterization of Dred. Second, she informs the reader
in her preface that she has “placed in the mouth of one of her leading characters a judicial
decision of Judge Ruffin, of North Carolina” (30). She thus makes her fictional character
Judge Clayton the spokesperson for Thomas Ruffin’s written decision in North
Carolina’s State v. Mann (1829). She does not cite within the text a third legal source for
her narrative, but it receives significant attention in A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The
misfortunes suffered by Cora Gordon closely parallel Stowe’s description in A Key of the
events that precipitated the legal case Hinds v. Brazealle, which was decided by the
Supreme Court of Mississippi in 1838. Stowe lifts her Cora Gordon episodes with very
little alteration from the judicial records of the state of Mississippi.

In an effort to solidify the connection between fictional representation and
historical precedent, Stowe methodically places her plotlines in the same locations in
which the historical events occurred.² As Table 2.1 suggests, plot episodes in Dred
frequently occur where they do simply because that is where the historical events upon
which they are based occurred. As we see in the following pages, this one-to-one
relationship is not ideologically or aesthetically neutral. Geography in the novel functions
much as Edward W. Soja argues spatiality functions in the life of a society: “as
simultaneously … a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium)” (7).
Stowe selects the historical events she models because, as she maintains in A Key, she
sees them as representative of systemic abuses in U.S. American slavery. But these

² In this formulation, I knowingly simplify the relationship between literary and historical sites. It is of
course true that literary representations of place are necessarily abstractions, available to us only through
the medium of language, and can therefore never cohere to real-world places. But then even the idea of
real-world places is not objectively stable as they too cannot exist “apart from an interpreting
consciousness” (Kennedy 5). Such theoretical problems are largely outside the scope of this analysis,
however, as I am less interested in Stowe’s efforts to “represent” place as I am in her technique of
cataloging specific, historically-resonant locations. By simply citing each of these locations, she engages in
a type of literary shorthand that invokes their cultural associations while expanding the physical landscape
of Dred’s narrative action to cover much of the territory of nineteenth-century United States.
Table 2.1. Historical and Geographic Precedents for Plotlines in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictional Episodes and Storylines</th>
<th>Geographic Location in <em>Dred</em></th>
<th>Historical Precedent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nina Gordon as sentimental heroine and heiress to her family’s plantation, Canema</td>
<td>Chowan River region of northeastern North Carolina</td>
<td>Home of John Mann, defendant in North Carolina Supreme Court case <em>State v. Mann</em> (1829)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dred’s founding of a maroon community to protect fugitive slaves and to foster armed resistance to the system of slavery</td>
<td>Great Dismal Swamp</td>
<td>Swampy region that was frequently associated with Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Edward and Anne Clayton’s experiment in creating a benevolent form of slavery on their plantation, Magnolia Grove</td>
<td>Unanchored location in South Carolina</td>
<td>General South Carolina location provides a pretext for repeated references to the Denmark Vesey rebellion in Charleston (1822).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cora Gordon as twist on traditional tragic heroine: slave daughter of white planter whose inheritance and freedom are stolen from her by her white half-brother</td>
<td>Plantation in the vicinity of Natchez, Mississippi; Cincinnati, Ohio</td>
<td>Home of the Brazealle family, defendants in the Supreme Court of Mississippi’s case <em>Hinds v. Brazealle</em> (1838); Ohio location of Elisha Brazealle’s attempts to emancipate his slave mistress and their son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Agricultural township of escaped slaves at the end of the novel</td>
<td>Southern Canada</td>
<td>Site of the Elgin township (also known as Buxton), founded by Reverend William King. Historical settlement lay 12 miles south of Chatham, near the northern shore of Lake Erie in Ontario.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
historical events do not enter the narrative unanchored geographically. Instead, Stowe imports their geographic landscapes along with them. Considered this way, geography would seem to play a passive role in *Dred*, entering the narrative frame as simple byproducts of the historical events.

But these individual locations do not function passively in the narrative. Rather, they take on a formative function, placing demands and/or constraints on the plots they surround. As Moretti argues, “[s]pace is not ‘outside’ of narrative, then, but an internal force, that shapes it from within … What happens depends on where it happens” (70). For antislavery writing, such an observation seems obvious, at least on a very general level. Consistent with the binary opposition between the free North and the slave South, representations of events pertaining to slavery are located primarily in the South, or on the roads and in the towns leading out of the South, because legalized slavery is most concentrated in these areas. But character movements in *Dred* suggest that narrative action is determined by geography in more specific ways than this. For example, representations of wild-spaces like the Dismal Swamp invite slave violence and rebellion in a way that is not true for other southern spaces. In fact, the etymologies of these wild-spaces seem to require such violence. At the same time, however, wild-spaces do not prove conducive to representations of peaceful or more stable alternatives to such violence. These other forms of resistance are reserved for geographic sites that are not so closely linked to slave rebellion in the cultural memory.

In analyzing the interdependent relationship between geographic location and plot development in *Dred*, I focus on four subplots that are interwoven to create the larger narrative. These subplots do not contain all of the narrative action in the novel, but they
do make up the primary storyline relating to the violent struggle over U.S. American slavery. Looking at these subplots separately, at least in the early stages of the analysis, enables us to identify the diverse historical precedents Stowe incorporates into her novel. It also exposes the way in which she invokes such narrative factualism to diffuse ideological criticism and promote her antislavery agenda.

The four subplots are interlinked by familial ties between characters, and eventually by movements of single characters between the different spheres of action. Throughout most of the novel, however, the subplots develop in relative isolation from one another as the participants in individual storylines frequently remain unaware of what is happening outside of their immediate cultural and physical surroundings. As Stowe’s narrator observes, “[t]he aristocratic nature of society at the South so completely segregates people of a certain position in life from any acquaintance with the movement of human nature in circles below them, that the most fearful things may be transacting in their vicinity unknown or unnoticed” (361). Notably, only a few select slaves have ready knowledge of and access to the various spheres of action in the novel. And, several of these slaves serve as organization leaders of the planned rebellion.

The first subplot in order of narrative development revolves around the young plantation mistress and heiress Nina Gordon. As the novel opens, Nina has just returned to her North Carolina plantation, Canema, from boarding school in New York. She has inherited Canema at her father’s death and is therefore legally responsible for its business affairs as well as for the welfare of its many slaves. Rather than taking an active role, however, she happily leaves the daily management of the plantation to the slave Harry
who, unknown to Nina, is her half-brother. Although Nina is surrounded by slavery, this subplot initially seems preoccupied with the sentimental story of a rich, orphaned girl who is released into the world of romance without guidance or support. Accordingly, Nina’s thoughts at the beginning of the narrative are primarily occupied with whimsical memories of New York society, Parisian fashion, and romantic courtship. When two of her suitors arrive at Canema on the same day, the foundation for a sentimental narrative seems firmly in place. The novel appears to be about the dangers of love for a young, orphaned, rich girl.

But the subject of slave injustice is never far from view (at least from the reader’s view if not from Nina’s). The narrator repeatedly juxtaposes Nina’s unthinking freedom with the slavery of her half-brother, Harry. While Nina focuses on courtship as a comic battle of the sexes, Harry privately ruminates on the very real violence suffered by slaves under the system of slavery in the United States. Harry’s experiences at the hands of his brutal half-brother, Tom Gordon, provide the context for the development of the three remaining subplots devoted to slavery examined in this analysis. Each one explores the connection between the slave system and a different form of violence. The first focuses on the physical violence suffered by the slaves of cruel masters; the second on the organized violence slaves plan in order to challenge the system of slavery; and the third on the self-inflicted violence individual slaves employ to release themselves or family members from a life of slavery.

In the first of these subplots devoted to slavery, the sentimental storyline of love and courtship that initially preoccupied the residents of Canema is overshadowed by an act of violence perpetrated against one of the most trusted slaves on the plantation. In
fact, all conflicts in the relationship between Nina and her preferred suitor, Edward Clayton, evaporate when the two “benevolent” slaveholders join forces to defend Milly against the man who has hired her services from Nina’s financially-strapped aunt.

Modeled on Sojourner Truth, Milly shares much in common with Stowe’s earlier portrait of Uncle Tom. She is ever patient and persistent in her espousal of Christ-like forgiveness and love rather than retribution and vengeance. When she is physically abused and shot by the man who has rented her services, Nina and Clayton turn to the legal system for redress. This initiates the court case Stowe modeled on North Carolina’s *State v. Mann*, in which Edward Clayton’s father, as Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, reads an opinion that is a virtual transcript of Judge Thomas Ruffin’s 1829 opinion.3

Stowe’s placement of Canema along the Chowan River in North Carolina is indicative of how closely she modeled the fictional subplot on its historical source: North Carolina court documents identify the defendant, John Mann, as being “[f]rom Chowan.”

In the second subplot devoted to slavery, Dred’s call for a violent challenge to the tyranny of slavery stands in opposition to Milly’s Christ-like acceptance of her oppression. As an inhabitant of the Dismal Swamp, Dred travels easily through the wild-spaces surrounding Canema. Situated along the Virginia-North Carolina border, this region provides a hiding place for Dred and for the growing band of escaped slaves he

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3 In *State v. Mann* the defendant, John Mann, was charged with shooting and wounding Lydia, a slave whose services he had hired. The shooting occurred when Lydia tried to flee from Mann as he punished her for an earlier offense. Similarities between the historical and fictional cases abound. Both victims were female slaves whose services had been hired out to a male slaveholder by their female owners, and both were shot as they fled punishment. Both cases were originally heard by a lower court in North Carolina, and both defendants were found guilty because they “had only a special property in the slave” and had used force “disproportionate to the offense.” Both lower verdicts were overturned by the North Carolina Supreme Court in rulings stating that “[o]ur laws uniformly treat the master, or other person having the possession and command of the slave, as entitled to the same extent of authority” and that “[t]he power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect” (*Key* 77-78; *Dred* 447; *Devereux’s Ct.* Cl. 263).
harbors in his encampment. The white plantation owners of the area remain largely unaware of his presence, but their slaves interact with him, providing him with food and supplies and turning to him for help when they are in trouble. As the narrator explains,

Harry, in common with many of the slaves on the Gordon plantation, knew perfectly well of the presence of Dred in the neighborhood, and had often seen and conversed with him. But neither he nor any of the rest of them ever betrayed before any white person the slightest knowledge of the fact … Harry was acute enough to know that his position was by no means so secure that he could afford to dispense with anything which might prove an assistance in some future emergency. (279)

In turn, Dred recruits participants for his planned rebellion from the Gordon plantation as well as from neighboring plantations. He pays particular attention to Harry, noting the frustration and anger that result from his life as a slave who is legally owned by his father’s white heirs. Ultimately this plotline becomes dominant in the narrative, tracing Harry’s evolution from an embittered but devoted servant to an active participant (after Nina’s death) in Dred’s plan to combat the system of slavery through organized violence.

These first two slavery plotlines expose Stowe’s careful attention to historical locations throughout the novel. Her choice for placing most of the action near the Dismal Swamp seems clear: she utilizes its geographic etymology as a thematic shortcut by drawing upon its cultural association with the Southampton slave rebellion. It is interesting, however, that the narrative action largely takes place across the border in North Carolina rather than in Nat Turner’s Virginia. This is not a random or quixotic change by Stowe. In moving the bulk of the narrative action into North Carolina, Stowe draws Judge Ruffin’s decision in *State v. Mann* into the heart of the novel with as little change to historical fact as possible. Thus, she links the 1829 North Carolina court case
to the 1831 Virginia insurrection by capitalizing on both events’ close proximity to the Dismal Swamp.

The third slavery subplot details the movements of Harry’s enslaved sister, Cora Gordon, who murders her children to prevent their being returned to slavery. Like Harry, she shares a father with Nina and Tom Gordon. But she and Harry are slaves because, unlike Nina and Tom whose mother was the white plantation mistress, their mother was a slave. As the legal property of her father’s sister, Cora was moved to Mississippi from Canema before the narrative action of the novel begins. In Mississippi, her mistress’s son falls in love with her and takes her to Ohio when he inherits his mother’s estate. In Ohio, he marries her and emancipates her along with their two children. After her husband’s death, Cora assumes management of his Mississippi plantation. She is thwarted in her efforts, however, as Tom Gordon sues for ownership of his cousin’s estate, declaring Cora’s emancipation illegal. When she is once again proclaimed a slave by the southern court, Cora escapes to Cincinnati with her children but is found and sold by Tom to slave dealers in Virginia. On arrival in Alexandria, Cora kills her two children and is subsequently imprisoned.

The Cora Gordon subplot can be perplexing, often seeming tangential to the narrative development of the rest of the novel. Its events are reported indirectly. Harry briefly summarizes the circumstances of Cora’s life to his wife. Later, word of her trials passes in two short letters. As a result, her story receives significantly less attention than the episodes associated with Nina and Clayton’s romance, Milly’s abuse, or Dred’s plans for rebellion. In addition, the three other subplots are tightly centered in the Carolinas while Cora’s is geographically removed, shifting back and forth between Mississippi and
Ohio. These western locations are cited, of course, but they otherwise remain wholly undescribed.

The inclusion of Cora’s story does allow Stowe to reference briefly a number of notorious abuses associated with slavery, including the existence of sexual relations between masters and their slaves; the prevalence of laws preventing slaveholders from emancipating their slaves; and the repeated breakup of slave families through sale and removals. It also allows Stowe to allude to the violence slaves occasionally employ in desperate attempts to prevent slavery from being perpetuated on their children. Despite introducing these topics, however, Stowe never focuses her narrative attention on Cora Gordon long enough to develop them fully. Instead, Cora’s misfortunes seem designed to serve as yet another motivation for her brother Harry’s growing bitterness and eventual espousal of violent rebellion. Immediately after receiving a letter from Cora detailing her re-enslavement, Harry stumbles across Dred on the border of the Dismal Swamp. The narrator translates his “vague thoughts” into the following words:

“I have two sisters, daughters of one father, both beautiful, both amiable and good; but one has rank, and position, and wealth, and ease, and pleasure; the other is an outcast, unprotected, given up to the brutal violence of a vile and wicked man. She has been a good wife, and a good mother. Her husband has done all he could to save her; but the cruel hand of the law grasps her and her children, and hurls them back into the abyss from which it was his life-study to raise them. And I can do nothing. I am not even a man!” (434)

This brief interlude in the narrative, focusing on Cora, quickly circles back to a consideration of Harry’s plight. Dred recognizes Harry’s desperation over the news of his

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4 Cora’s initial displacement from the Gordon’s North Carolina plantation to another family plantation along the Mississippi River corresponds to the mass transportation west of slaves that dominated slave relations during the first half of the nineteenth century as a result of the cotton and sugar revolution. See Ira Berlin’s Generations of Captivity for a detailed discussion of this “Second Middle Passage” that accounted for the removal of more than one million slaves from the Atlantic seaboard states to the southern interior between 1810 and 1861.
sister, but also over the constraints on his own actions, and uses it to draw him into his rebel organization.

A second explanation for the inclusion of Cora’s subplot exists outside of the narrative frame itself. As noted above, the subplot is drawn largely from the 1838 case *Hinds v. Brazealle* that was decided by the Mississippi Supreme Court. Stowe closely models the experiences of the fictional Cora Gordon on the historical slave woman who was re-enslaved after the Court ruled that her late owner’s efforts to emancipate her and their child violated state law. Stowe’s description of the case in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reveals both her outrage at the inner workings of slave law and her recognition of the rhetorical power an account of such proceedings might have over a reading public. After describing the facts of the case, Stowe concludes: “Had this case been chosen for the theme of a novel, or a tragedy, the world would have cried out upon it as a plot of monstrous improbability. As it stands in the law-book, it is only a specimen of that awful kind of truth, stranger than fiction, which is all the time evolving, in one form or another, from the workings of this anomalous system” (115).

The geographic parallels between the historical case and the fictional subplot resemble those present in the other subplots. Both the historical Brazealle estate and the disputed fictional estate are located along the Mississippi river in the vicinity of Natchez. Like her historical counterpart, Cora Gordon is taken to Ohio and emancipated. She returns to Mississippi and attempts to claim her husband’s estate after his death. Also like

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5 The facts of the case as related by Stowe in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and corroborated by Mississippi court documents are as follows: white slaveholder Elisha Brazealle transported one of his biracial female slaves and their son to Ohio where he emancipated them both. White heirs to Brazealle’s estate from North Carolina challenged his will to the Supreme Court of Mississippi and were subsequently awarded the entire estate with mother and son counted as property. In the written decision of the court, Chief Justice Sharkey decided that Brazealle had taken his slaves to Ohio to emancipate them in an effort to circumvent Mississippi law. Because of this, the court declared the emancipation order to be fraudulent (*Key* 114-15; 2 *Howard*, 836).
her historical counterpart, Cora becomes the property of her husband’s distant North Carolina relatives. Up to this point, the two accounts are almost identical in both event and geographic location. Stowe faithfully mimics the Brazealle family’s movements from Natchez to Ohio and back, and she has Cora Gordon and her children turned over to Tom Gordon, her husband’s cousin from North Carolina just as the Brazealles were turned over to Elisha Brazealle’s North Carolina relatives.

In her fictionalization of historical events, then, Stowe capitalizes on the link between Mississippi slave law and North Carolina slaveholders that exists in the Brazealle case. Although I have found no historical precedent for a sibling relationship between the Brazealle slaves and their new North Carolina masters, Stowe develops such a connection in her fictional account, tying together the disparate subplots of her narrative. She identifies Cora, a slave in Mississippi, as the half-sister of her new owner, Tom Gordon, a slaveholder from North Carolina. She thus forges an unlikely and dramatic link between the events in the two distant states by having them occur between siblings. This yoking of fictional events and locations works in the narrative to link symbolically the historical events on which they are based. All become interconnected in a web of abuse and violence fostered by a single system of slavery. That is, the abuse of Cora Gordon in Mississippi, which results in her re-enslavement, is geographically as well as thematically connected to the attack on the North Carolina slave Milly, which precipitates Judge Clayton’s legal decision in the narrative. In this manner, Stowe’s representation of Cora Gordon and Milly as slaves owned by a single North Carolina family buttresses her attempts to tie together thematically the historical cases *Hinds v. Brazealle* (1838) and *State v. Mann* (1829).
This point of connection corresponds to a perceived disjunction in the narrative, however. Rather than unifying the various plotlines into a cohesive whole, such forced connections across vast geographic distances seem improbable. Despite her obvious sensitivity to the need to legitimize her subplots with historical sources, Stowe does not hesitate to collapse the events of her sources from its original array of historical participants onto a smaller cast of fictional characters. At the same time, she does not similarly collapse the geographic landscape onto a smaller, more tightly centered region. In this way, an expansive geographic landscape can be seen to override characterization and historical event in her representation of the brutality of the U.S. American slave system.

Over the course of the novel, then, Stowe creates a narrative plan that hopscotches across the map of the 1850s United States. When locations in which prominent events of the narrative occur are marked on a map, the end result is a scattering of dots from the Mississippi River eastward (see Figure 2.1). Between these dots are vast blank spaces that remain untouched (and unmentioned) in the novel’s narrative frame. By symbolically connecting these dots through her narrative action, Stowe effectively encapsulates all of the intermediate territory. That is, the forced connections between the various characters tie together the dispersed geographic locations so that they draw in all the territory that lies between. As a result, the novel is not just a tale of the Great Dismal Swamp. It is also a tale of Natchez, and Charleston, and Ohio, and Canada, and everywhere in between.

When viewed together, however, these locations fail to map out a logical path for the narrative as a whole. Although Stowe works to connect each one to her small cast of
Figure 2.1 Principal Geographic Locations in *Dred*

characters, the primary explanatory relationship for the choice of these locations remains outside of the narrative, arising from the legal treatises of U.S. American slave law and from the historical accounts of fugitive slaves rather than from some internal narrative logic. The final result is a series of improbable connections that disrupt—even as they are designed to unify—the coherence of the novel. Thus, Stowe’s attempt at portraying the “truth” about slavery through a reliance on historically accurate locations requires that she resort to narrative twists and turns to connect the individual subplots. Or, as Edwin H. Cady might put it, *Dred* corresponds to “the literary situation in which apparently
realistic means have been employed to secure final, total effects which are not realistic” (18).

The formal construction of *Dred* is thus marked by a striking fidelity to historical sites that, perhaps counter-intuitively, produces a general sense of narrative improbability. But, as Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs*, a strict insistence on narrative probability or “realism” fails to recognize the cultural immediacy of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Advocating a redefinition of literary realism as it relates to plot development in sentimental fiction, Tompkins recognizes how sentimental writers rely upon extravagant plot twists and unlikely or repetitive scenarios to develop a more accurate representation of the way U.S. Americans experienced the circumstances of their lives. She writes:

> Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meanings that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality. (127)

Thus, Tompkins’s argument can be used to rework or complicate Cady’s formulation. In such a view, both factual and imaginative episodes are essential to Stowe’s efforts to create a portrait of slavery that is faithful to the general experiences of U.S. American slaves, if not to the immediate details of the lives of individuals.

With its complex negotiation of geography, then, Stowe’s narrative slides between catering to and eschewing the demands of logic, probability, and historical fact. To complicate matters, not all narrative events in the novel are based on historical precedent. A pattern develops between those events that derive from historical sources and those that do not. Typically, Stowe ties the subplots that detail slave abuse to
identifiable, historical events and locations. By maintaining a strict geographic correlation between historical precedent and fictional representation, she seeks to insulate her narrative, and herself, from much of the criticism that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* generated. In contrast, however, the sentimental subplot detailing Nina Gordon and Edward Clayton’s courtship does not have a similar historical basis. We recognize this, in part, because it remains largely unanchored from specific geographic sites. Throughout the novel, Stowe places episodes involving the inter-relationships between members of the slaveholding families in an abstract space that is relatively free from the constraints of a precise historical precedent.

In his study of literary geographies, Franco Moretti documents a trend in Jane Austen’s novels that exhibits telling similarities to Stowe’s treatment of place in *Dred*. Although Moretti fails to develop detailed conclusions, the questions he raises provide a useful theoretical framework for our purposes here. In a footnote to his text, he asks:

> Why do novels so often mix real geographic sites and imaginary locations? Are the latter needed for some specific narrative function? Are there in other words, events that tend to happen in real spaces—and others that ‘prefer’ fictional ones? It is early to give a definitive answer, but Austen’s novels certainly suggest that fictional spaces are particularly suited to happy endings, and the wish-fulfillment they usually embody. By contrast the more pessimistic a narrative structure becomes, the more infrequent are its imaginary spaces. (18)

In *Dred*, the precise placement of Canema along the Chowan River is easily traced back via the subplot detailing Milly’s abuse to the historical *State v. Mann* court case. While Canema also serves as a setting for the sentimental subplot that focuses on Nina and Edward Clayton, it is not the only one to do so. The lovers move between Canema, Edward’s South Carolina plantation, and his father’s North Carolina plantation. Unlike Canema, with its specific geographic location, the latter two plantations inhabit one of
Moretti’s “imaginary” spaces. That is, they are not anchored to precise geographic locations that we can pinpoint on a map.

As opposed to other narrative locations, these unanchored places are not designed to document the violence of slavery in the United States. Instead, they serve just as Moretti speculates, as “wish-fulfillment” sites for the blossoming love between Nina and Edward Clayton. More importantly, they also serve as sites of authorial wish-fulfillment for the possibility of reforming the system of slavery in the South from within. While the plantation houses, outbuildings, and grounds of the two Clayton plantations are described in detail, their locations within the neighboring states remain largely unspecified. Although his legal decision is taken almost verbatim from Judge Ruffin’s 1829 opinion, the representation of Judge Clayton’s home life and family relations is highly stylized. It corresponds simply to Stowe’s romantic vision of the response to slavery by a benevolent, educated, and aristocratic slaveholding family.

The opening description of the plantation library points to the idyllic nature of the plantation as a whole:

The curtain rises on our next scene, and discovers a tranquil library, illuminated by the slant rays of the afternoon’s sun. On one side the room opened by long glass windows on to a garden, from whence the air came in perfumed with the breath of roses and honeysuckles. The floor covered with white matting, the couches and sofas robed in smooth glazed linen, gave an air of freshness and coolness to the apartment. The walls were hung with prints of the great master-pieces of European art, while bronzes and plaster-casts, distributed with taste and skill, gave evidence of artistic culture in the general arrangement. (41)

The “tranquil library,” the “perfumed” air, the “freshness and coolness,” and the refined “artistic culture” all emphasize the serenity of the image, especially when juxtaposed to the disorder of the previous scene in Canema. But it is not a site specific description. It
does not need to be: Judge Clayton’s plantation represents a vision of the best a southern plantation has to offer. It is therefore situated in an abstract space rather than an identifiable historical place. The only narrative requirement is that this space be in North Carolina, and this is true only because Judge Clayton is a stand-in for the historical Judge Ruffin who wrote his famous opinion while serving as Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court.

Stowe’s description of Edward’s plantation, Magnolia Grove, is similarly detailed with respect to the beauty of the plantation grounds and buildings. Specifically, the main house has an “inviting coolness”; the furnishings are “light” and decorated with “glazed white linen”; and magnolia trees, “climbing plants,” and “large vases of roses” adorn the house and lawns (391-92). The schoolhouse Edward and his sister Anne have built for their slaves is equally inviting. It contains

a large room, surrounded on three sides by black-boards. The floor was covered with white matting, and the walls hung with very pretty pictures of French lithographs, tastefully colored. In some places cards were hung up, bearing quotations of scripture. There were rows of neat desks, before each of which there was a little chair. (403)

Magnolia Grove is thus ordered and comfortable, calm and humane. It is also relatively unanchored with respect to its geographic location. The narrator identifies it as lying in South Carolina rather than North Carolina on several occasions, but no mention is made of which part of the state or even what crops are cultivated by the plantation’s slave labor. This geographic indeterminacy is in contrast to Canema and to Cora Gordon’s Mississippi plantation, which are placed alongside specific geographic landmarks that have been forever altered in the cultural memory by past events.
Despite such inattention to geographic specifics, Magnolia Grove’s general location in South Carolina is highly relevant to the formal logic of the novel. Geographic placement once again serves as a form of thematic shortcut. Just as Canema’s proximity to the Dismal Swamp builds upon the history of Nat Turner’s rebellion, Magnolia Grove’s location allows Stowe to capitalize on a widely known instance of planned rebellion in the same state. By placing Clayton’s plantation in South Carolina rather than North Carolina, which serves as the site of much of the remaining narrative action, Stowe returns the reader’s attention to Denmark Vesey’s plans for rebellion in Charleston. A representative example of this cultural shorthand occurs when one of the Claytons’ neighbors protests the reforms that are being undertaken at Magnolia Grove, passionately denouncing their desire to educate their slaves:

Why don’t you see? You begin teaching niggers, and having reading and writing, and all these things, going on, and they begin to open their eyes, and look around and think; and they are having opinions of their own, they won’t take yours; and they want to rise directly. And if they can’t rise, why, they are all discontented; and there’s the what’s-his-name to pay with them! Then come conspiracies and insurrections, no matter how well you treat them; and, now, we South Carolinians have had experience in this matter. You must excuse us, but it is a terrible subject with us. (emphasis added, 400)

Thus, the narrative’s movements between Magnolia Grove and Canema serve as a bridge—both geographically and thematically—between Denmark Vesey’s South Carolina and Nat Turner’s Dismal Swamp.

Stowe’s oscillation between unanchored and anchored sites marks a shift from wish-fulfillment to more practical problem-solving within the novel. Magnolia Grove can exist anywhere within the borders of South Carolina and still provide the desired thematic shortcut for the widespread fear of rebellion generated among white South Carolinians by
Denmark Vesey’s plot. Unlike the settings that correspond to the abuses of slaves, the plantation’s exact location is not important because Stowe does not tie the Claytons’ experiment in benevolent slaveholding to a specific historical precedent. Without successful historical attempts at reformation from which to draw, too detailed attention to precise locations would be counterproductive. The unrealized dream of benevolent reformation and gradual emancipation must therefore exist beyond specific locations, in an unanchored, but metaphorically laden narrative space.

In the end, Stowe’s narrative abandons the Claytons’ idyllic plantation because the happy ending it promises proves to be unattainable given the death grip slavery continues to maintain over the slaveholding states. All opportunities for reform on the Gordons’ Canema plantation vanish with Nina’s death from cholera and her brother Tom’s subsequent claim of ownership of the estate and its slaves. Edward Clayton and his sister Anne also discontinue their reform efforts at Magnolia Grove when the opposition from their neighbors grows too persistent, and finally violent, to be withstood. After a mob burns down the schoolhouse they have built for their slaves, the Claytons decide to leave the South for Canada to pursue their efforts at promoting racial uplift among former slaves outside of the borders of the United States. Having witnessed the destruction of their property, Edward’s friend and confidant, Frank Russell, tells him, “'[t]he fact is, you are checkmated. Your plans for gradual emancipation, or reform, or anything tending in that direction, are utterly hopeless; and, if you want to pursue them with your own people, you must either send them to Liberia, or to the Northern States’” (665). Recognizing the truth of his counsel, Anne Clayton concludes for herself and for
her brother, “[w]ell, let us go out of the state, then. I will go anywhere; but I will not stop the work I have begun” (666).

The collapse of these efforts at paternalistic reform of slavery within the United States thus gives rise to the concluding subplot in the novel. This subplot details the escape of fugitive slaves from Dred’s maroon community in the Dismal Swamp to New York, Boston, and southern Canada. Clayton facilitates their escape, first by convincing Harry and the other fugitives to abandon their plans for rebellion after Dred is suddenly killed by slave hunters, then by providing the money necessary for the fugitive slaves to make their escape, and finally by purchasing the land in Canada on which they build their new agrarian settlement. As a result, all of the novel’s preparations for coordinated resistance in the South die with Dred and the swamp community. The Canadian settlement and the final emphasis on reform primarily outside of the United States take precedence with Clayton’s ascendancy to figurehead of the group of former rebels.

Stowe’s description of the escaped slaves’ new homes in New York and Canada differs formally from her treatment of the Claytons’ plantations in the Carolinas. While Magnolia Grove remains to the end geographically and historically unanchored, Stowe emphasizes precise sources for the final episodes of the novel. She provides two footnotes documenting the historical figures and geographic locations that serve as models for the Canadian settlement of former slaves and for the interracial orphanage Milly establishes in New York. Like the subplots detailing slave abuse, and unlike the wish-fulfillment subplots of Nina and Clayton’s courtship and efforts at reforming the slave system from within, the final “solution” to the problem of slavery provided in the novel is rooted in specific historical examples. Once again, Stowe validates her fictional
representations of slave resistance by mimicking their historical locations with fictional sites. This return to a strict geographical alignment between source and fiction suggests that Stowe concludes her novel by turning away from both (1) political wish-fulfillment in the form of benevolent, internal reform and (2) imaginative theorizing about ways of abolishing slavery through revolutionary, violent upheaval. She instead settles on the familiar ground of removing individual slaves from the South, a means of deliverance for which she can provide precise historical examples.

**Dred and the Problem of Diverging Chronotopes**

Consideration of the slaves’ abrupt abandonment of organized rebellion and subsequent escape to New York and Canada thus leads us to the second stage of our analysis of *Dred*. This shift from organized rebellion to slave flight highlights a formal, if not necessarily thematic disjunction between the two political “solutions” to the problem of slavery that the novel explores: slave flight and slave rebellion. Both of these forms of resistance are dependent on specific movements across the geographic landscape. While slave flight and slave rebellion each represents a way of opposing slavery, they potentially require divergent geographic movements from their participants. The slave flight north that is commonly depicted in fugitive slave narratives provides a passage out of slaveholding territories to at least nominal freedom located typically in northern states or Canada. On the other hand, slave rebellion denies individual slaves the opportunity to remove themselves physically from the slave states but, in turn, ensures they remain in

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6 Organized rebellion and flight from slavery represent only two forms of slave resistance. Other less radical, and therefore more frequent forms of resistance, included individual and coordinated work slowdowns, theft, and lying. Historical evidence documents that slaves also resorted to unsystematic violence including arson, murder, suicide, and infanticide in personal rebellions against enslavement. For more detailed discussions of the relationship between daily slave resistance and slave flight or rebellion, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 587-98, and Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slavery*. 

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contact with the multitude of slaves who can act in unison against the slave system. Literary representations of these two forms of slave resistance therefore depend upon differing movements across the narrative landscape.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of chronotopes provides a useful theoretical framework for examining how the spatial structures related to slave flight and organized rebellion play out in antislavery narratives such as *Dred*. Bakhtin argues in *The Dialogic Imagination* that these time-space relationships are not byproducts of the thematic or discursive arguments in a text. Rather, they represent the building blocks upon which all such textual meaning is based. By examining chronotopes, then, we can see how thematic disjunctions in antislavery narratives are not attributable only to overt contradictions in the writers’ political messages. The origins of these disjunctions may instead derive from tensions in the narrative form itself as the chronotopes that structure the plot diverge. Or, as Bakhtin argues:

> What is the significance of all these chronotopes? What is most obvious is their meaning for narrative. They are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative. (emphasis in original, 250)

In *Dred*, the divergent geographic movement of the chronotopes associated with the slave flight north and slave rebellion coincides with, and is exposed by, the striking disjunction in the novel’s thematic unity.

Readers of *Dred* have often remarked that the novel fails to coalesce into a unified whole. Lisa Whitney notes that it is marked by a striking duality that derives from “two separate plots, never adequately tied together” (555). This has typically meant that *Dred*
is simultaneously a plantation romance and a narrative of violence and rebellion. But such a distinction does not fully account for the structural duality that is conspicuous in the novel. Even when disregarding the subplot that details the courtship between Nina and Edward Clayton, which seems increasingly appropriate to do as it virtually disappears over the course of the novel, the narrative remains thematically and formally divided in its representation of slave resistance. Critical debate has centered largely on arguments over whether Stowe ultimately repeats the political arguments she develops in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or whether she takes a new, more militant stance and implicitly advocates violent rebellion as a means of finally dealing the death blow to the system of slavery in the United States.

As the ongoing critical debate suggests, identifying Stowe’s precise political message or intentions in the novel seems ultimately impossible to do. Recognizing a potential source for this thematic ambiguity in underlying structural patterns is not, however. Because of this, the current analysis focuses on the tensions in the narrative structure of *Dred* and what they can tell us about the ideological pressure points and generic conventions in antislavery thought and writing.

The chronotope associated with slave flight has its origin in the historical movement of slaves running away from their masters to a variety of destinations. The

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7 In contrast, Whitney argues that the duality derives primarily from its alternating legal and sentimental discourses rather than from its plot.
8 Despite the virtually unanimous critical consensus regarding *Dred*’s artistic failings, no consensus exists regarding the politics of the novel. Joan Hedrick and Theodore Hovet argue separately that Stowe reiterates and expands on the message she developed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In their view, she advocates “feminine” patience and Christ-like suffering in response to the brutality and oppression of slavery. In contrast, Lisa Whitney contends that Stowe abandons the “sentimental solutions offered in her earlier popular work” (522) and “raises the distinctly unsentimental possibility that violent action on the part of slaves might be required to bring an end to slavery” (554). Carving out a kind of middle ground, Mary Kemp Davis writes, “[w]hat are we to make of the covert parody with which Stowe ends her novel? Given her recent portrayal of Uncle Tom, it would be logical to assume that Stowe was constitutionally incapable of endorsing the bloody, eschatological content of Turner’s and Dred’s visions. This may be so, but it is not necessarily so. Clearly Stowe was divided against herself in writing this text” (139).
general chronotope of “flight elsewhere” finds its most frequent and complete expression in fugitive slave narratives. Although literary representations of slave flight include varying movements inside and out of slave territories, the south-to-north flight from southern slavery to the northern states or Canada is most common. This flight north chronotope is imbued with an ideologically consistent way of meaning even as it is incorporated into very different texts. First, the journeys to freedom of slave narrators suggest that personal freedom is a necessary precursor to larger reform efforts. That is, individual slaves must free themselves in order then to labor in the cause of freedom for others. In *Dred*, Milly joins the group of escaping slaves “out of regard to her grandchild, poor little Tomtit” (645). Once in New York, Tomtit works at an antislavery office while Milly cares for neglected and abused children, making “no distinctions of color” (674). They actively combat slavery and poverty once they are free from the constraints of their own enslavement.

Second, the flight north chronotope implicitly suggests that a place of adequate, if not perfect freedom already exists and can be reached via flight from the South. The conventional south-to-north flight associates this land of freedom with northern states and Canada, thus supporting the binary opposition between the slave South and the free North. Despite having highlighted the North’s complicity in slavery, observing that “[t]he mouth of the North is stuffed with cotton” (665), Stowe ultimately adheres to a relatively simple binary image of the country through the flight north chronotope. After Dred is killed by slave hunters, Edward Clayton encourages Harry and his co-conspirators to give up on slave rebellion and, instead, pursue freedom in the North:

> The day after the funeral, [Clayton] talked with Harry, wisely and kindly … showing to him the undesirableness and hopelessness, under present
circumstances, of any attempt at right by force the wrongs under which his
class were suffering, and opening to him and his associates a prospect of a
safer way by flight to the Free States. (642)

Clayton is persuasive, and the rebel-fugitives abandon their plans of rebellion in favor of
escape out of slaveholding territories. Thus, such ideological resonances can be seen to
remain consistent as the flight north chronotope was appropriated by Dred.

Despite the considerable authority fugitive slave narratives garnered in
abolitionist discourse, the flight north out of slavery that they trumpet has not gone
uncriticized. This criticism is, at heart, spatial in nature. Historians of U.S. American
slavery have frequently studied the complex relationship between individual resistance
and the possibilities for collective action when fugitive slaves run away from slavery. In a
prominent example, W. E. B. DuBois recognized the heroic ambitions of escaping slaves,
but he also saw the Underground Railroad as a “safety valve” that counterproductively
worked to uphold the system of slavery. DuBois contended that when slaves ran away the
South was relieved of its most ambitious, brave, and assertive black inhabitants. In other
words, the South was relieved of those slaves most likely to bring about revolutionary
change by leading organized rebellions. DuBois’s assessment echoes Stowe’s discussion
of slave flight in Dred. Having witnessed the organizational efforts of Dred’s group of
rebels, “[Clayton] had at this time a firm conviction that nothing but the removal of some
of these minds from the oppressions which were goading them could prevent a
development of bloody insurrection” (643).9

9 Eugene D. Genovese notably takes issue with this interpretation of the Underground Railroad as a safety
valve. He argues: “The danger in focusing on the drain of insurrectionary leadership, even on the
assumption that runaways could have provided such leadership, lies in a questionable assumption of cause
and effect. If the possibilities for successful insurrection had not so closely approximated zero, especially
during the nineteenth century, those runaways with insurrectionary inclinations might have stayed put. That
they chose to leave as individuals may say no more than that they saw the futility of insurrection and the
probable destruction to their people” (657). With this in mind, Genovese concludes that “[runaway slaves]
Throughout her novel, then, Stowe focuses on the issues of slave rebellion and unlawful movement of slaves within and away from slave territories. As suggested above, she attempts a kind of literary problem-solving in which she considers various forms of slave resistance as possible solutions to the real-world problem of slavery in the United States. While she references several common forms of resistance, she focuses primarily on a possible link between slave flight and organized rebellion. Two of her primary characters, Dred and Harry, assume the dual roles of fugitive and rebel at varying points in the narrative.

Initially, these two ways of resisting slavery work in concert with one another. Both Dred and Harry use their relative freedom as escaped slaves who remain in the South to further plans for rebellion. Such coordination between escape and rebellion depends upon a specific geographic movement. The flight from slavery that the two men pursue is not the flight north that was conventional to fugitive slave narratives, but an escape to a nearby wild-space in the heart of slave territory. This escape, while it certainly does not reach a place of true freedom, removes them from the immediate control of their masters, allowing them to defy many of the constraints imposed by the slave system. Significantly, it allows them greater freedom of movement and communication within slave territory than was possible on their plantations or from the geographically distant North. In preparation for rebellion, “[Dred’s] associates were to be preparing the minds of the people, and he was traversing the swamps in different directions, holding nightly meetings, in which he read and expounded the prophecies to excited ears” (620). The chronotope of rebellion in the novel thus seems to correspond
most fully to the furtive movements of Dred and his conspirators through the wild-spaces that border slave plantations. In doing so, it encompasses the slaves’ localized movements rather than the linear path out of slave territories.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as related by Thomas R. Gray, Turner himself alludes to an uneasy relationship between slave flight and rebellion. He describes the conflict he experienced between his hope to escape and his desire to battle slavery openly: “About this time I was placed under an overseer, from whom I ran away—and after remaining in the woods thirty days, I returned to the astonishment of the negroes on the plantation, who thought I had made my escape to some other part of the country, as my father had done before” (46). Turner explains that he chose to return to his master’s plantation in order to follow the destiny that had been revealed to him. Prominent among his mystical visions is one in which “[he] saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and [he] heard a voice saying, ‘Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it’” (46). Thus, Turner abandons his personal escape in order to play his part in the collective action he sees ahead.

Although Turner does not elaborate on exactly where he hides during his escape, the implication is that he remains in the vicinity of his master’s home. He thus follows a localized path that was much more common historically than the path north that garnered such notice in antislavery writing. Dred’s movements in Stowe’s novel display a similar decision not to depart the South. In detailing his history, the narrator emphasizes the ease with which he travels throughout the swampy regions that lie along the southeastern seaboard, extending from the Dismal Swamp down to the “everglades of Florida, with all
their strange and tropical luxuriance of growth” (632). He winds through large sections of the South seemingly without difficulty, but he never attempts to flee north out of the slave states. Instead, he uses his newly acquired independence to provide refuge for other fugitive slaves and to recruit for a coordinated rebellion.

Under Dred’s guidance, Harry is drawn into the plotted rebellion. He and his wife flee Canema to escape Tom Gordon’s violent rages and sexual advances, but, like Dred, they do not initially attempt to reach a non-slaveholding region. Instead, they remain in the vicinity of the Gordons’ plantation as inhabitants of Dred’s maroon settlement in the Dismal Swamp. While there, Harry actively participates in the clandestine meetings in which Dred and his followers plot a violent rebellion against slavery.

Over the course of the novel, additional conspirators converge on northeastern North Carolina, coming together finally at Dred’s maroon camp. As Figure 2.2 illustrates, their movements can be traced from various parts of the South. These conspirators eschew south-to-north travel out of the slave states and instead choose to congregate in a wild-space surrounded by slave territory. In doing so, they come to inhabit the region that was culturally associated with Nat Turner and slave violence. While such wild-spaces should not be confused with true freedom, they do provide the fugitives with the protection and relative autonomy to experiment with utopian social formations such as

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10 Simple historical precedent is not the only explanation for the repetition of wild-spaces in literary texts that depict racial violence. In Dark Eden, David C. Miller explores the surge in attention in mid-nineteenth-century United States to largely uninhabited or exotic settings. Addressing the function of swamps in cultural discourse, Miller writes: “A developing self-awareness lay behind the quickened interest in the metaphoric possibilities of the swamp that, owing to its own recent emergence from the realm of social taboo, could embody heretofore-unsanctioned types of experience and feeling” (4). Thus the swamp simultaneously serves as a prominent hideout for fugitive slaves and as an unclaimed and uncharted landscape in which Stowe can experiment with the taboo subject of violent slave resistance. In a novel that explores the role of rebellion in abolitionist doctrine, the conspirators’ geographic journeys to the maroon settlement function as a necessary foundation for their ideological journeys to violent rebellion.
the communal camp in which they live. More importantly, they enable the fugitives to plan for the violent creation of such communities throughout the South.

Figure 2.2 Geographic Convergence by Rebel Conspirators

Up to this point in the novel, Stowe’s representations of slave flight and organized rebellion coalesce easily into a single plan of action. The mutually supportive relationship dissolves in the novel’s final pages, however, as the chronotopes upon which they are based diverge. The concluding subplot of the slaves abandoning Dred’s maroon community in the Dismal Swamp for the North and Canada suggests a resurgence of the conventional flight north as the dominant spatial organization in the novel. The slave
flight north and organized rebellion are therefore shown finally to be incompatible in the narrative logic of *Dred*, just as DuBois would later argue they were historically.

The unexpected death of Dred at the hands of slave hunters marks a moment of crisis in the novel. It is, of course, a crisis of content, arising when black-on-white, coordinated violence seems most imminent. It is also a crisis of form. The local, unrestrained movement of individual conspirators through southern wild-spaces has reached a climax. All have come together; no further travel, recruiting, gathering, or planning is necessary. Thus something must happen, and what ultimately happens is that Stowe discards the chronotope associated with local slave flight and rebellion and finds refuge in the conventions of the fugitive slave narrative. Rather than inflicting violence on the surrounding community, a violence that would potentially require graphic depiction in the narrative, the fugitives escape North Carolina for the North. The flight north thus replaces the wild-spaces as the organizing chronotope for the remainder of the novel. Figure 2.3 highlights the final locations in which they settle. The opposing movements mapped in Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 reflect the narrative’s jarring reversal in spatial momentum.

The chronotopic shift from wild-spaces to the flight north as the primary organizing structure of the narrative suggests a corresponding thematic shift from collective to individual action. In the Dismal Swamp, Harry was a member of a group of slaves who sought to work together, and fight together, to transform the South for the betterment of all slaves. In Canada, he becomes “one of the head men of the settlement, and is rapidly acquiring property and consideration in the community” (672). Hannibal, another slave intimately involved in Dred’s plot, becomes the owner of “[a] large farm
waving with some acres of fine wheat, with its fences and out-houses in excellent condition, [which] marks the energy and thrift of Hannibal, who instead of slaying men, is great in felling trees and clearing forests” (672). Both men, without noticeably looking back, leave behind their anger and their fantasies of reigning violent justice down upon the guilty slaveholders of the South.

Figure 2.3 Concluding Flight North after Dred’s Death

Just as the wild-spaces of the South invite unrestrained movement, violence, and collective action, Canada invites stability, contentment, and individual achievement. Harry and Hannibal lead exemplary lives in a thriving settlement. Their pacific natures are allowed to predominate because they no longer suffer the injustices of slavery. They
serve as examples of what former slaves can achieve when not shackled by slavery. But their role becomes largely symbolic rather than active in the struggle for universal emancipation. They become private men, focused on their own opportunities and advancement. They have, in effect, completed their geographical and spiritual journeys from the Great Dismal Swamp to an idealized freedom that is once again located outside of the United States.

This shift from communal rebellion to private advancement seems especially abrupt because it is contained within a subplot that is proportionally underdeveloped in the narrative. Harry’s physical journey to Dred’s camp, which coincides with his spiritual journey to acceptance of Dred’s revolutionary ideology, progresses slowly and circuitously in terms of narrative development, at last culminating a full five hundred pages into the novel. In contrast, his abandonment of Dred’s revolutionary plan and his corresponding straight-line flight from the South begins and ends in the final thirty pages. Thematically, his life in Canada suggests a loss of hope for substantive change within the slave states. Not only is the slave system still very much intact, but the most benevolent slaveholders have either died (Nina Gordon) or they have vacated the South (Edward and Anne Clayton). If the plot development of Stowe’s earlier antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as well as the conventional organizational structures of fugitive slave narratives, is taken into consideration, the conclusion of *Dred* seems strikingly familiar, perhaps even expected. As with Stowe’s decisions regarding geographic sites for her subplots, the explanatory logic of *Dred*’s conclusion lies outside of the narrative that precedes it. That is, the conclusion ultimately adheres to conventions of fugitive slave narratives rather than to the narrative logic that accumulates in the preceding sections of the novel.
In spite of Stowe’s growing attention to violent resistance in *Dred*, its plot begins and ends in much the same way as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* does. Both novels commence with a glimpse of slavery in its most mild form, among valued slaves on plantations of well-meaning owners. The also conclude similarly with some of these same slaves escaping their bondage and founding agricultural settlements outside the boundaries of the United States. The intervening routes between the narrative poles differ, however. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* follows Tom’s journey through the relative ease of life with the St. Clare family in New Orleans and onto the brutal oppression of Simon Legree’s Red River plantation, *Dred* increasingly focuses on the settlement of fugitive slaves in the Dismal Swamp. The focus on Tom’s Christ-like acceptance of his fate in Stowe’s first abolitionist novel is countered by a detailed examination of Dred’s violent quest for the destruction of slavery in her second. Stowe’s pursuit of variant geographic sites mirrors this divergence in thematic exploration. Her emphasis on abject slavery in the southern interior in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is replaced by a detailed representation of coordinated resistance based in one of the South’s most famous wild-spaces.

Such thematic and geographic differences between the two novels do not finally lead to substantively different narrative conclusions, however. Both novels recount fugitive slaves’ escape north out of slavery and their eventual removal from the United States. In other words, Stowe’s examination of violent resistance by slaves (and the underlying localized movement it requires), which takes over the middle of *Dred*, leaves little or no trace on the final outcome of the novel. Ultimately, this disappearance of violence potentially tells us less about Stowe’s politics during the late antebellum period and more about the conjunction of political, generic, and geographical pressures under
which she wrote. The abrupt shift from local movement through southern wildspaces to the flight north chronotope notably corresponds to the moment of crisis in the novel when the political pressures and formal tensions are at their height. Having brought her fictional narrative to the logical conclusion of an organized, violent challenge to slavery, Stowe finds her characters on the brink of widespread bloodshed. In response, she hurriedly backtracks in search of an alternative to the chaos that seems to loom in this portrait of the future.

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11 Or, as Maggie Montessinos Sale puts it in *Slumbering Volcano*: “Though Stowe refuses actually to imagine a rebellion, I would argue that she does so because of her underlying belief that finally such a rebellion in an environment in which the rebels, as she saw it, could not hope to win, would degrade its agents by drowning them in blood. Like her contemporaries, including [William Wells] Brown, [Frederick] Douglass, and Martin Delany, author of *Blake*, Stowe cannot imagine successful rebellion within the confines of the United States, and therefore sends off to Canada (or Europe or the Caribbean) her surviving protagonists” (209).
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL INTERLUDE, OR, OPENING THE DOOR AND POINTING THE WAY

As evidenced by our preceding discussions of The Confessions of Nat Turner and Dred, narratives of U.S. American slavery provide unique historical evidence for the claim that “geography matters.” Close examinations of these texts can tell us a great deal about the formative role of geographic space within nineteenth-century economic systems and cultural or political relationships. Of particular interest for this study, they can also expose the formative function of place in literary production. On a basic level, antislavery narratives were intended to participate in the rhetorical debate over slavery. In doing so, they necessarily commented upon and attempted to influence the underlying battle for control of large geographic regions. This rhetorical contribution to the slave debate should not be underestimated. At the same time, it is important to recognize the more subtle ways in which space and spatiality (i.e., socially organized space) infuse narrative form and, subsequently, make their own demands on plot development. As I document in greater detail in my analysis of Martin R. Delany’s novel, Blake; Or, the Huts of America in the next chapter, the same southern places and wild-spaces repeatedly crop up in antislavery narratives. The resulting geographic pattern developed, in part, because the cultural significations of this subset of places resonated widely in nineteenth-century U.S. American culture and, therefore, repeatedly demanded attention from those writers who took slavery as their subject. New Orleans, Charleston, Natchez, the Red River, the Great Dismal Swamp: geography does not simply set the stage for narrative action and meaning in antislavery fiction. It precipitates them.

Which brings us back to Franco Moretti’s central argument in Atlas of the European Novel: “Space is not ‘outside’ of narrative, then, but an internal force, that
shapes it from within … what happens depends a lot on where it happens” (emphasis in original, 70). Or more specifically, in Henri Lefebvre’s words, “[t]he past leaves its traces” on geographic places, traces that in turn shape the narrative parameters of their fictional representations (Production 37). The past that is relevant here is not confined to the historical events that occurred in specific places. Rather, it encompasses the cultural understanding, mythology, or narrative retelling that arose out of—but is not reducible—to those events. That is, the geographic etymologies antislavery writers invoke are as much determined by an oral and written past as by historical events themselves.

And, it is important to note, this rhetorical past is ever expanding as each additional text contributes to the literary momentum from which it sprang. The end result is that a small number of notable locations recur frequently in antislavery texts, become conventional, and ultimately take on representative status for the innumerable other possible locations within U.S. American slaveholding territory. In this way, antislavery fiction protects the reader, and its own political message, from the geographic variety that was the South by reducing it to a finite number of highly recognizable locations. In doing so, it proves itself susceptible to the conservative forces that seem to predominate in literary evolution, contributing to “the growing sameness that holds sway within the literary field” (Moretti 192). Even the most innovative antislavery narratives in terms of plot development can be seen to be constrained by the cultural and literary baggage that accompanies historical locations when they are imported into narrative frames. That is, these narratives are constrained by the formal demands of a historically resonant geographic landscape.
As I discuss in the previous chapter, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Dred* presents a detailed, fictional examination of plans for violent resistance to slavery. The narrative gives voice to compelling arguments in favor of widespread rebellion before it finally retreats into the flight north to Canada that was made familiar by fugitive slave narratives. Stowe’s strict attention to aligning fictional locations with historical sites represents an attempt on her part to authenticate the validity or “truthfulness” of her portrait of slave violence and resistance. With this alignment, the novel seems to be predicated on the view that individual southern locations possess unique significations. Or, as Michel Foucault observes for geography in general, all of human experience is “live[d] inside a set of relations that delineates sites that are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (“Spaces” 23). An important corollary of this emphasis on “geographical factualism” is that fictional representations of slavery are most evocative and “realistic” when they correspond to specific locations and historical events.

A tension arises in Stowe’s methodology, however. This emphasis on geographical factualism suggests that individual sites are not thematically or formally identical. But after invoking such geographic variability to authenticate her narrative, she shifts her attention from the details of individual events to how they symbolically represent the system of U.S. American slavery as a whole. She thus cultivates a kind of “realism” based in geographical factualism that self-consciously invokes a variety of recognizable historical locations and events to depict a unified (and unitary) system.

In both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred*, Stowe’s characters pass through geographically distant cities and regions that are familiar to readers of fugitive slave
narratives and other writings associated with the national debate over slavery. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom is shuffled from Kentucky, to New Orleans, and then onto the Red River region of Louisiana. In *Dred*, the slaves owned by the Gordon and Clayton families inhabit the surrounding territories of the Dismal Swamp, Charleston, and Natchez. As Martin R. Delany notes in a disparaging letter printed in the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Stowe’s selections are drawn almost entirely from a historical-literary precedent:

I am of the opinion, that Mrs. Stowe has draughted largely on all of the best fugitive slave narratives—at least on Douglass’s, Brown’s, Bibb’s, and perhaps Clark’s, as well as the living Household of old Father Henson; but of this I am not competent to judge, not having as yet read “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *my wife having told* me the most I know about it. But these draughts on your narratives, clothed in Mrs. Stowe’s own language, only make her work the more valuable, as it is the more *truthful*.¹

Stowe does not shrink from such criticism. In fact, she embraces it. As the publication of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* testifies, she accepts the argument advanced by Delany and others that her fiction is only valuable in its ability to mirror “real-life” as depicted in earlier nonfictional texts, whether they be written or oral. She therefore turns on its head criticism that is meant derisively and allows it to function as the primary explanation of, and justification for, her rhetorical strategy.

¹ Printed in the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 29 April 1853: 3. See E. Bruce Kirkham, *The Building of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 100-102 for a detailed discussion of the slave narratives that Stowe drew upon for her selection of plot developments, places, and character movements in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* served as one of Stowe’s most obvious nonfictional sources. In his narrative, Bibb details his birth in Shelby County, Kentucky, his escape to Cincinnati, his return to Kentucky to facilitate his wife’s escape, his capture and subsequent sale to a slave trader bound for New Orleans, and his sale from a New Orleans slave market and removal to a plantation on the Red River. The parallels to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are obvious. In the novel, George Harris escapes from his Kentucky plantation to Cincinnati and then onto Canada. Uncle Tom is sold from the same plantation down to New Orleans and then finally to Simon Legree who transports him to a remote plantation in the Red River region of Louisiana. Stowe’s debt to Bibb’s narrative is further evidenced by her choice of Shelby for the surname of the Kentucky family who originally owns both men, which hearkens back to Bibb’s birth in Shelby County, Kentucky. See the preceding chapter in this study for a detailed discussion of Stowe’s historical sources for her several plotlines in *Dred*. 
Stowe’s fidelity to historical locations allows her to draw upon the etymologies of southern locations as thematic shortcuts in her novels. The repeated use of such shortcuts ties together geographically distant sites, with their associated events, and presents them as individual components of a single system of abuse. In the process, however, the distinctiveness of each place-event pairing begins to fade as it conforms to the general model advanced in the narrative. The great variety of the slaveholding territory thus becomes more manageable. Stowe is quite forthcoming that this is her rhetorical strategy. In both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred*, she utilizes individual instances of abuse as proof that slavery is brutally exploitive in its many manifestations. Whippings, sexual abuse, forced separation of families, starvation: all come together and are united within the larger system of chattel slavery in the United States.

In *Dred*, she is especially careful to place these instances of abuse in historically accurate geographic sites. As a result, abuses in Mississippi are tied to those in North Carolina; planned violence in South Carolina becomes attached to bursts of violence in Virginia. The dispersed threads of her various plotlines converge thematically and geographically to illustrate that the material differences in slaves’ lives, as evidenced by individual events and places, is finally immaterial. Slavery functions as a single, interdependent, and universally exploitive system.²

Which calls to mind the classical hermeneutic circle: the whole can only be understood through an examination of its parts, while the parts can only be understood with respect to the whole. Or, for our purposes, if we consider the institution of U.S.

² My argument here owes a theoretical debt to Benedict Anderson’s analysis in *Imagined Communities* of the way in which Christianity in the Middle Ages was *universalized through variety* so that geographically-and culturally-distant populations could view themselves as members of a single religious community (22-23).
American slavery to be a narrative or “text” that antislavery writers seek to interpret, the so-called meaning of the institution can only be determined by considering the innumerable interactions and events that comprise it. At the same time, however, individual occurrences do not stand alone: they cannot be adequately understood except when viewed in relation to the larger institution. In such a balanced—or circular—interpretive equation, neither the part nor the whole can be seen to precede the other in causality or importance. Such a circular relationship gives rise to a theoretical paradox that calls into question linear or causal approaches to the process of interpretation. This, in turn, complicates the ways in which social problems such as slavery can be understood, combated, or represented.

In advancing their respective arguments, nineteenth-century critics and proponents of slavery operate within a kind of hermeneutic circle. Both groups invoked individual examples and anecdotes as building blocks for their representations of the larger system of slavery. In this way, the balance inherent in the interpretive equation seems to slide to one side as the “parts” appear to precede the whole in the hermeneutic process. This appearance of simple causality in historical interpretations (and representations) of slavery is deceptive, however. Each side of the slavery debate’s use of individual examples was, in fact, dictated by a predetermined image of the larger system it wished to promote. Thus, abolitionists and defenders of slavery, alike, adhered to a particular image of the larger system at the expense of a complex examination of its individual parts. In other words, identifying a specific whole was deemed of greater importance than examining how that system manifested itself across time periods and geographic regions. For these social activists and reformers (but not historians),
addressing the system of slavery in its entirety took precedence over understanding its particularities. Such an interpretive methodology functioned well as a means to criticize or defend the moral foundation of slavery. It was less effective, however, in creatively imagining how slavery might finally be brought to an end should the necessary moral revolution fail to materialize.

The methodologies of the two groups grew into inverse images of one another. In general, slavery’s critics emphasized individual instances of abuse, not to delve deeply into their specific, historical intricacies, but to demonstrate how they were fundamentally similar and, thus, representative of a unified larger system. This elision of anecdotal variation proved necessary for abolitionists who needed an identifiable, knowable target for their rhetorical assault. Slavery’s supporters, on the other hand, countered abolitionist claims by whitewashing instances of abuse as individual (and isolated) anomalies or exceptions. They therefore simply dismissed or downplayed evidence that did not support their argument that the system of slavery was inherently compassionate. As a result, the proslavery argument was marked by an urge to obscure variability or complexity.

Neither group explored the ways in which southern states were marked by a great variety that potentially undermined the coherent whole it wished to present. For supporters of slavery, this manifested itself as a willful refusal to see how the overt violence of individual events provided a glimpse into the emotional and physical violence that underlay all master-slave relations. While this (intentional) blindness reveals a staggering moral deficit, it did not necessarily represent a tactical error. Arguments regarding the morality of a system of human relationships do not need to transcend abstractions or universalizations to be effective. And, the proslavery agenda would have
little benefited from a sustained examination of the living and working conditions of the millions enslaved within the United States.

In contrast, however, it was the abolitionist program that was saddled with the dual burden of advancing a moral argument regarding slavery and developing a plan that pointed the way to universal emancipation. Thus, it was the abolitionist program that would most benefit from moving beyond a cursory attention to the details of slavery. A complex recognition of the way slaveholders and their allies solidified their power across vast geographic regions in which slavery was unevenly distributed was crucial for supplementing abolitionists’ moral indictments with practical plans for combating and replacing slavery. I would argue that, despite its universally exploitive nature, U.S. American slavery could not be adequately understood, countered, or “problem-solved” if considered solely as a single system that effectively dissolved all difference throughout the expansive regions where slavery was legal.

As Ira Berlin argues in *Generations of Captivity*, slavery was composed of myriad circumstances that were largely geographically determined. That is, slave life differed materially as a result of the different types of crops harvested or work performed—activities largely dependent on the specificities of geography. In such a complex view of antebellum geography, one agricultural region could not then be viewed as an easy duplicate of another despite their adherence to the same exploitive labor system. Nor could a section of a state with numerous slaves seamlessly stand in for another section of the state were slaves were significantly fewer in number. And again, one historical event could not replace another without recognition of the abstraction that has necessarily taken place.
A point of clarification is needed at this point: arguing for the importance of “the difference that place makes” with regard to understanding and interpreting (or combating) slavery in the United States does not, in any way, deny the moral conclusion that slavery in all its manifestations was brutally exploitive. Throughout all slaveholding regions, African slavery was similarly predicated on the power of one group to subjugate another through violence. Returning to the idea of the hermeneutic circle, the details of slavery cannot be understood irrespective of this fact. At the same time, however, our understanding of the whole of the system of slavery remains incomplete without adequate attention to the parts—or individual instances and events—that comprise the whole. In this project, I am interested in how antislavery writers utilized a historically resonant landscape to buttress their moral indictments of slavery. But I am also particularly interested in how writers like Stowe and Delany turned to negotiations of geography to supplement their moral arguments with a creative imagining of how alternative forms of slave resistance might play out. Such an approach focuses on the formal demands geography places on plot sequences more than on the moral arguments they support. In addition to highlighting the formative function of place in literary output, it also provides insight into the obstacles to reform associated with real-world geography.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s negotiation of the tense balance circumscribed by the hermeneutic circle proves instructive for advancing our examination of nineteenth-century fictional representations of place and slave violence. In *Dred*, she attempts to counter the critics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by founding her various plotlines upon verifiable historical events. Stowe’s principal target initially seems to be the morality of the slave system as a whole. Her incorporation of individual examples and identifiable
geographic locations facilitates her efforts, but they never become the primary focal point of the novel. At first glance, there is little problematic about this interpretation of, or representation of, slavery. It corresponds readily to Stowe’s overt intentions, as she describes them in the preface to *Dred*:

> The writer of this book has chosen, once more, a subject from the scenes and incidents of the slaveholding states […] if the writer’s only object had been the production of a work of art, she would have felt justified in not turning aside from that mine whose inexhaustible stores have but begun to be developed. But this object, however legitimate, was not the only nor the highest one. *It is the moral bearings of the subject involved which have had the chief influence in its selection.* (emphasis added, iii)

And, as a representation of the inherent immorality of the system, her incorporation of individual but superficially developed events is quite effective.

A problem arises, however, if the novel is to be seen as a vehicle for logistical problem-solving in addition to a more abstract indictment of U.S. American slavery: it fails to address effectively the practical question of *how* to combat the system of slavery and facilitate emancipation. Within such a problem-solving formulation, the individual sites and abuses associated with slavery assume greater depth and are not as easily assimilated into a generalized whole. Logistical problem-solving depends upon a sensitivity to the complexities of historical circumstance that is not necessary for an abstract indictment of the system as a whole, which can be substantiated by a few choice examples. To be effective, it would require that Stowe take the complicated—and complicating—demands of her narrative landscapes seriously. In doing so, she would have to grapple with the ways in which individual events are not fully explained by the workings of the general system, as well as the way different places are variously conducive to reform efforts.
Sure to arise at this point is the argument that such detailed social or political problem-solving does not fall under the domain of narrative fiction. It is simply too much to expect (i.e., too complex, too onerous, too unliterary) from fictional representations of a system as complex as slavery in the United States. Or, more to the point, Stowe’s indictment of slavery does not attempt to draw a logistical map toward realizing the goals of universal emancipation and racial equality. In her powerful rethinking of nineteenth-century fiction, Jane Tompkins argues that the improbable, repetitive, and even tearful episodes of sentimental narratives “serve as a means of stating and proposing solutions for social and political predicaments” (xvii). Tompkins identifies such literary problem-solving as “heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic” because, as she puts it, sentimental plots “do not attempt to transcribe in detail a parabola of events as they ‘actually happen’ in society; rather, they provide a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place” (xvii).

Tompkins’s analysis sheds valuable light on the sentimental episodes of antislavery narratives, exposing the force and cultural meaning that underlie their often sensational plotlines. At the same time, however, I would contend that her argument overlooks the intensely pragmatic, real-world problem-solving in which they can also be seen to engage. Put another way, antislavery writers like Stowe and Delany employ a variety of narrative techniques in their efforts to write slavery and its solution into their texts. The most obvious of these techniques are directed at remaking the larger cultural environment through sentiment so that it is more conducive to a moral program of abolition. There are others, however, that are more practical, even “realistic,” as they
engage the specific facts and problems of slavery in an effort to work through them. These latter techniques are what concern me most here.

Through my readings of the texts included in this study, I have come to believe that the present critical emphasis on the symbolic cultural work of nineteenth-century sentimental texts represents only the first step in recognizing the real-world problem-solving that is attempted in narratives like *Dred* and *Blake*. Leonard Lutwack is surely correct in his argument that representations of place always have a symbolic function in fiction. At the same time, however, I would argue for the obvious: in addition to their symbolic function (whether it be religious, psychological, or cultural), geographic locations in antislavery narratives remain “rooted in fact.” A text’s negotiation of such facts represents an important component of its cultural work. We must therefore be sure not to dismiss too quickly Stowe’s sustained efforts to forge a kind realism via geographical factualism within her otherwise sentimental technique that allows her to answer her critics while simultaneously confronting and thinking through real-world obstacles to reform.

Viewed in this light, Stowe seems to flirt with the idea of just such a logistical map out of slavery as she constructs her narrative on examinations of three alternative approaches to slave liberation. She begins with a brief discussion of Harry’s efforts to save enough money to purchase his and Lisette’s freedom. After the quick failure of his plans, Stowe moves on to explore more fully slave flight and rebellion. Both flight and rebellion can be seen to depend on specific spatial movements, but only organized rebellion seems to hold out hope for mass emancipation. Stowe withdraws further into her abstract indictment of slavery once widespread emancipation becomes creatively
unattainable, or, more precisely, when the effects of the mass action of rebellion finally prove unthinkable in the narrative.

Her juxtaposition of alternative methods of resisting slavery in *Dred* thus provides a glimpse into the limitations of narrative fiction as a forum for discursive (or what I would call “overt”) social problem-solving. In my use of the label “overt,” I knowingly reestablish a distinction between texts that cultural critics have worked steadfastly to explode. As an example, W. E. B. Dubois writes in his essay “Criteria of Negro Art” that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (42). Frederic Jameson takes up this same point, arguing that “the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life” (*Unconscious* 20). The argument that there is no such thing as a realm of true, apolitical artistic freedom, or that all art is “in the last analysis” political, is hardly controversial these days. But, at the same time, I would contend that something rather obvious yet important is lost if we completely disregard the old working distinction between texts that take political issues as their subject matter and those that do not. All works of art do not own their politics in the same way. And careful examinations of nonfictional and fictional narratives that openly explore contemporary social problems can expose both the different possibilities for, and the limitations of, literary narrative as a means for real-world problem-solving.

Narrative texts can be roughly separated into two groups that represent a variant of the two categories that DuBois, Jameson, and many others decry. The first group embraces politics, explores specific social issues discursively, and typically stakes out a
thematic position relative to those issues. Traditionally, such texts have been maligned as propaganda rather than true “literature” or “art.” Pro- and anti-slavery narratives fall into this group, of course, as pioneering texts in a tradition of African-American writing that J. Saunders Redding has famously labeled a “literature of necessity” (3). Redding writes that “[a]t the very heart of this literature … lies the spore of a cankerous growth. This might be said to be the necessity of ends” (3). For Redding, then, the common didacticism of black texts is lamentable, even as it is necessary and inevitable. For other readers of African-American writing, however, such an overt social purpose to literature is to be celebrated. DuBois writes, “I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (42). Ann Petry agrees: “I think I could make out a fairly good case for the idea that the finest novels are basically novels of social criticism, some obviously and intentionally, others less obviously, unintentionally” (95).

Such arguments anticipate and prepare the way for sustained critical attention to a second group of texts that appear to eschew politics. These texts have been traditionally applauded because they outwardly detach themselves from the social crises of their day. But, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, they are, in fact, steeped in social and political issues. Once again, Jameson is instructive:

We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal solutions to unresolvable social contradictions. (79)
The ideological foundation of all narratives can be found within the cultural assumptions or value systems that frame their textual universe. The inevitable presence of these belief systems corresponds to the narratives’ (frequently unacknowledged) negotiations of specific contemporary crises. That is, it represents the narratives’ immersion into the politics of their day. Therefore the texts traditionally dismissed as propaganda are not different in kind from all other narratives. Instead they can best be viewed as a specialized subset within the larger grouping in which all narratives fall.

The critical emphasis on identifying the political in the “apolitical” has revolutionized our readings of literary texts. This was a much needed correction to conservative claims of “art for art’s sake.” But, an unfortunate side-effect of efforts to expose the political underside of the traditional literary canon has been to shift attention away from rigorous formal analyses of those texts that wear their politics (or, at least a portion of them) on their sleeve. Analyses of texts that are “obviously and intentionally” political have disproportionately focused on thematic explications or “semantic” interpretations that frequently attempt to answer questions regarding authorial intention. Rather than being straight-forward, however, the politics of this subgroup of narratives are typically convoluted. As a result, they provide a valuable opportunity for analyzing the various and often conflicting ways ideology and politics infiltrate written narratives via the intertwining demands of form and content.

Analysis of overtly political narratives thus exposes two interrelated, but distinct types of literary problem solving. First, like their “apolitical” brethren, these narratives stem from—and propagate—specific cultural assumptions or value systems. Such abstract belief systems take the form of ideologemes, to use Jameson’s formulation. For
our purposes, it is important to “grasp[] the ideologeme, not as a mere reflex or reduplication of its structural context, but as the imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions to which it thus constitutes an active response” (118). The inevitable, if typically unremarked presence of these ideologemes in narrative forms accounts for one type of social problem-solving in which all narratives engage. The problem-solving mechanism implicit in ideologemes can be seen to succeed, not because it actually identifies a solution to a real-world problem, but because it is quite effective in hiding irresolvable social tensions from view. Ideologemes thus masquerade as thematic non-issues, typically remaining below the level of discourse and, thus, unexamined within the text and unrecognized or unchallenged by the reader.

This observation is not new. Over the years, Marxist critics have repeatedly refined their analyses of the ways in which ideology becomes sedimented in generic forms. What makes texts like *Dred*, which take political crises as their subject matter, different is that they face an additional kind of social problem-solving that functions much more in the light of day. At first glance, this problem-solving seems to be worked out discursively, consequently inviting from readers semantic interpretations that attempt to answer the question of what texts relating to a specific issue are “saying,” as well as how an individual text’s message fits into a larger political movement. The sedimented ideology of a generic form can work against a text’s discursive momentum, however, thus confining the possibility for a free-play of ideas. Because of this, a text’s overall “meaning” can never be seen to mirror exactly authorial intention. The resulting conflict between content, form, and ideology has given rise to “syntactic” structural analyses of how texts work rather than what they finally mean.
Such syntactic analyses emphasize the way ideology molds narrative output. This molding occurs in all cultural production, including overtly political narratives. I will return to this subject in greater detail in the next chapter as I explore the intricate relationship between plot development, formal structures, and ideology in *Blake*. In doing so, I examine the ways in which ideology makes subtle but substantive demands on narrative form, particularly on literary geographies. For now, it should suffice to introduce briefly the ways in which seemingly innocent formal decisions are actually steeped in political or ideological resonances. These decisions restrict a narrative’s free-flow of ideas, which further limits the possibilities for plot development. This chain of influence (or determination) occurs in all narrative. But I am most interested in how it plays out in nineteenth-century short-stories and novels that wrestle with and attempt to problem-solve chattel slavery in the United States. With a focus on this group of texts, we expand our analysis to explore the way problems of literary geographies in antislavery narratives potentially coincide with and expose real-world constraints on human action.

By now, it seems evident that fictional plots are constrained by the twin pressures of ideology and form that, while potentially different in origin, fold back on one another and become intertwined. Regarding form: the narrative structures of all novels and short fiction, including those that engage in discursive social commentary, necessitate a move away from the complexities of historical reality even as writers grapple with social problems steeped in such complexity. Marthe Robert emphasizes this general tendency toward abstraction in his analysis of the rise of the novel:

Similar in many respects to the imperialistic society from which it sprang … [the novel] is irresistibly drawn toward the universal and the absolute, toward generalizations of events and ideas. Thus it inevitably standardizes and levels down literature while simultaneously providing it with unfailing
outlets, since it can write about everything under the sun. (rpt. in McKeon, 58)

The (realistic) novel can thus be seen as simultaneously unlimited and limited: unlimited in possible subject matter while limited by the practical demands of an aesthetic form that can never encompass or cohere to the infinitely complex reality it purportedly represents. Georg Lukács argues that this disunity or dissonance between concrete life and representations of that life constitutes the formal core of all novels:

In a novel, totality can be systematized only in abstract terms, which is why any system that could be established in the novel … had to be one of abstract concepts and therefore not directly suitable for aesthetic form-giving. Such abstract systematization is, it is true, the ultimate basis of the entire structure, but in the created reality of the novel all that becomes visible is the distance separating the systematization from concrete life. (qtd. in McKeon, 194).

When considered from this theoretical viewpoint, Stowe’s response in her novel *Dred* is telling, as she simultaneously invokes and contains historical complexity. Her negotiation of complexity—both with regard to event and place—highlights the trend toward abstraction that is fundamental to narrative form, as well as to social theories and activism. Renewed, if brief, attention to *Dred* leads us finally back from our rather circuitous path to an analysis of literary geography in nineteenth-century representations of slavery in the United States. The following chapter expands on this examination of the novel as a forum for antislavery problem-solving.

As noted above, by importing into her narrative geographically diverse historical events, Stowe seeks to defuse contemporary criticism by appearing to expand her view of the physical and cultural landscape of slavery. A nifty sleight-of-hand can be seen to underpin her appeals to the specificity of individual places, however. Despite its unusually deliberate incorporation of multiple historical locations, *Dred* ultimately
adheres to a monolithic vision of U.S. American slavery. While seemingly-suggestive of the diversity of the southern landscape, the identifiable location-event pairings included in the novel make a feint toward diversity that is never realized. Instead, the various locations conform to a neat, univocal depiction of slavery in the United States. That is, the narrative provides an arrangement of individual locations that, although selected for their specific historical resonances or etymologies, is made to argue for uniformity rather than difference, abstraction rather than particularity. This final abstraction occurs as the sequence of narrative events reasserts dominance in the novel, eclipsing once and for all the complexity that a geographically diverse landscape seemed to portend. Or, as Doreen Massey might phrase it, in Dred Stowe displays a marked “urge to normalize for the specificity of outcomes” (6).

This we can see by rethinking the duality in Dred’s narrative structure. Yes, Dred is simultaneously a plantation romance and a tale of tremendous violence. It is also a comparative exploration of the morality of slave flight and slave rebellion as different ways of combating slavery. At the same time, however, it is a narrative of competing problem-solving tasks. The first, and most obvious, is tied to Stowe’s sentimental vision of remaking the world outside of the novel so that abolition as a moral revolution can gain traction. The second purpose is more unusual if ultimately unsuccessful. In this purpose, the novel can be seen to go beyond identifying abolition as the general solution

3 In his review of Doreen Massey’s geography text Spatial Divisions of Labor, Allan Cochrane makes a similar argument about the difficulties of constructing a social theory that simultaneously takes into account the general and the unique. His criticism of Massey’s materialist geography seems especially relevant to Stowe’s treatment of historical place in Dred: “There are two theoretical approaches lying side by side in the book and rarely making much contact. The first concerns itself with overall patterns and trends, while the second focuses on regional and local issues. This enables Massey [insert Stowe here] to adopt an unspoken theoretical pluralism which means she can use whichever methodology suits her argument at the time. It allows her to move easily—rather too easily—between issues of national and international restructuring and restructuring within individual enterprises in particular localities, in such a way that the differences in approach rarely have to be clearly spelled out” (359).
to slavery to offer a vision of the logistical steps that may be pursued in that elusive search for freedom for all African Americans.

It is in this task that Stowe’s project is most ambitious. It is also because of this task that narrative cohesion proves impossible, suggesting that logistical problem-solving may in fact be beyond the domain of narrative fiction. As Toni Morrison argues, “[fiction] should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens, something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve these problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (199). Ann Petry puts it differently, but essentially agrees:

All novelists attempt to record the slow struggle of man toward his [sic] long home … The sociological novelist sets out to do the same thing. But he is apt to become so obsessed by his theme, so entangled in it and fascinated by it, that his heroes resemble the early Christian martyrs; and his villains are showboat villains, first-class scoundrels with no redeeming features or virtues. If he is more pamphleteer than novelist, and something of a romanticist in the bargain, he will offer a solution to the problem he has posed. (97)

In *Dred*, Stowe shows herself to be all of them at once: pamphleteer, novelist, and romanticist. But she also shows herself to be something of a realist. Thus, the duality of Stowe’s text seems to stem from the fact that it functions as both a moral denunciation of slavery as a general system and as an antislavery pamphlet that explores specific solutions and real-world routes toward freedom.

The conflict in Stowe’s representation of place is suggestive of the tension between systems and their component parts. It is also suggestive of a corresponding critical tension that has yet to be resolved in theoretical geography. Proponents of a materialist geography have argued that economic and political theorists must take into
account the inevitable uniqueness of place in their studies of social formations rather than sliding back into highly generalized or universal abstractions. A dilemma arises, however, because abstractions prove essential for identifying avenues for social activism. If too much emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of individual localities, it becomes impossible to identify the structural relationships that are essential to codifying a succinct strategy for combating a society’s economic and political abuses.

The end result seems to be that an emphasis on the specificity of place defangs social activism. Or, as Allan Cochrane argues, the logical outcome of a materialist emphasis on locality is that the overarching, “Althusserian” structures give way to an infinite series of microstructures that cannot be stabilized. But if, on the other hand, place is not taken into account, the general theories that seem to facilitate social activism effectively deny the determining factors of differences in geographic location and potentially damn themselves to ineffectuality. The paradox inherent in the hermeneutic circle becomes something more than a theoretical problem: it limits or circumscribes possible strategies for promoting real-world change, within narrative fiction and without.
CHAPTER 4: BLAKE AND THE POLITICS OF TRAVEL

A determined opposition to the increase of the slave power, and encroachments upon their God-given rights, should signalize the bondman everywhere, and they should at this juncture be taught, we care not how, by whom or in what manner it is imparted to them, that on the attempt at such an effort they should hold themselves in readiness, and at the instant of the annexation of Cuba to these United States, it should be the signal for simultaneous rebellion of all the slaves in the Southern States, and throughout that island.¹

Martin Robeson Delany’s above call to arms is excerpted from an essay that appeared in the April 27, 1849 edition of the North Star, the abolitionist newspaper founded by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York. Delany served as co-editor of the North Star from late 1847 through the middle of 1849. In his essay, he advocates cooperation among African Americans and Cuban blacks to frustrate U.S. American slaveholders’ expansionist ambitions toward their island neighbor. Delany’s emphasis on international cooperation grew out of his recognition that slavery in the United States did not exist in isolation from other slaveholding societies in the western hemisphere. Nor did it exist in isolation from Euro-American exploitation of West Africa. He therefore rooted his challenge to institutionalized racism in an international struggle to redistribute control over a vast geographic space. Just as slavery crossed cultural or national borders, slave resistance had to cross these same borders. Just as the white power structure’s strength and stability derived, in part, from its sprawling reach across physical barriers, African resistance had to garner power from a similar geographic sprawl. Delany therefore argued that the most effective way of breaking the self-reinforcing, international grip of white dominance was to mount an organized challenge that was its geographic mirror.

It is revealing, however, that Delany does not offer specific advice in his North Star essay on how to go about fostering such an ambitious system of international

¹ From “Annexation of Cuba,” North Star 27 April 1849: 2.
cooperation. His reliance on the passive voice, along with a claimed indifference to the particular means of transmitting his call to arms, testifies to the formidable obstacles that stood in the way of unifying slaves and free blacks across great distances. It seems clear that Delany does not spell out easy strategies for organization because none were readily available. But the difficulties of the project did not entice him to give up on it. Ten years after resigning his co-editorship at the *North Star*, he continued to entertain the idea of an international network of resistance, again bringing it before the reading public with the publication of his only novel, *Blake; or, The Huts of America*. Between January and July, 1859, lengthy excerpts from the novel appeared in serial form in the antislavery periodical *The Anglo-African Magazine*. Two years later, from November 1861 to May 1862, the complete novel was published in *The Weekly Anglo-African*.

In *Blake*, Delany revisits in fiction the logistical questions he sidestepped in his *North Star* essay. The novel depicts one man’s efforts to forge the contacts between U. S. American slaves and Cuban blacks that would be necessary to launch a transnational challenge to Euro-American domination. Unfortunately, the extant copy of *Blake* appears to be incomplete. Modern scholars have not been able to locate issues of *The Weekly Anglo-African* from late April and May, 1862 that contained the final chapters of the novel (assuming Delany completed and submitted them). The novel’s concluding episodes are therefore missing.

The missing ending notwithstanding, the seventy-four chapters that have survived comment upon, and attempt to work through, physical and cultural obstacles to Delany’s decade-old call to arms. His fictional text can therefore be seen to engage in real-world, political problem-solving. The novel’s format allows Delany the creative freedom to
imagine strategies for promoting an international organization of resistance for which there were no historical precedents. Such creative freedom derives, at least in part, from the simplifying mechanism inherent in the novel’s form. As I discuss in the previous chapter, writers can frame their fictional narratives around explorations of any real-world problem, including in Delany’s case international rebellion. But they are insulated from an infinitely complex reality by an aesthetic structure that can never replicate that reality. As a result, Delany the novelist can look beyond, and potentially work through, obstacles that stand in the way of Delany the real-world activist. Such fictional problem-solving should not be seen as a mere theoretical exercise. It holds out the possibility of identifying for the writer (as well as for the reader) real-world possibilities that might otherwise remain obscured by the ubiquitous noise surrounding human experience.

Thematic discussions of Blake typically focus on Delany’s espousal of international slave rebellion in the novel. This makes sense because the novel’s storyline follows its title character, Henry Blake, as he travels great distances in an effort to organize a system of resistance to slavery in which individual acts of violence spawn more violence, creating a ripple effect that spreads revolution across the New World and back to Africa. For the most part, the plot unfolds sequentially. The first thirty-four chapters depict Blake’s travels through the southern United States, north into Canada, and finally to New York where he prepares to embark on a sea voyage to Cuba. Chapters 35-74 follow him as he journeys from Cuba to Africa and back. In his travels, he fans the flames of rebellion in the United States, Cuba, the Atlantic sailing routes of the Middle Passage, and the slave-holding pens of the West African coast. His stated purpose is clear: to cover as much territory as possible so that, at the appointed time, blacks in far
flung regions can strike in concert against the pillars of the white establishment in their area. In his final speech in the novel, Blake reiterates his call to unified action: “You know my errand among you; you know my sentiments. I am for war—war upon the whites. ‘I come to bring deliverance to the captive and freedom to the bond.’ Your destiny is my destiny; the end of one will be the end of all” (290).

Delany’s sustained attention to international rebellion is unique in antebellum fiction. Only Herman Melville’s tale of slave rebellion, *Benito Cereno*, similarly explores the way individual acts of violence reverberate internationally. And it does so on a more limited scale than the one Delany attempts in *Blake*. At the same time, however, I would argue that it is a mistake to read *Blake* as a single issue text. There can be no question, of course, that Delany is intrigued by the possibilities of widespread violence for bringing about cultural change: the novel’s plot is wholly devoted to preparations for an international rebellion. But this is not all that is going on. When we look below the surface argument of the novel’s subject matter, we find a complex negotiation of the geographic landscape that is immediately relevant to other forms of black resistance besides violent rebellion. Of particular interest given Delany’s career as a political activist, the geographic landscape speaks to the real-world debate in abolitionist circles over African-American emigration that consumed much more of his public attention than considerations of slave rebellion ever did. With this in mind, Delany’s novel may be as much “about” African-American movement and the conquering of space as it is “about” violent rebellion.

As we have already seen, advocating unrestricted travel for slaves and free blacks in the nineteenth century was no trivial matter. It held out the potential for radically
altering the power structures of slave societies. In previous chapters, I have described
how the slave system in the United States depended on a strict denial of freedom of
movement for slaves and frequently for free blacks, as well. All unauthorized travel was
seen as a direct threat to the stability of the slave institution. If slave resistance in any
form was to succeed, then, it had to circumvent widespread, legal restrictions on travel.
Again, to quote Mark Simpson: “revolt and mobility cannot be disengaged; in important
ways, the first holds no meaning without the second” (31). Focusing on Blake’s travels
allows us to see the way in which the novel imagines a logistical strategy that supports
different forms of resistance, or, more particularly, one that supports voluntary
emigration as well as organized slave rebellion. Through Blake’s journeying, the novel
addresses (if not fully answers) the principal objection many abolitionists had to
emigration: that it inadvertently thwarted efforts to promote emancipation in the United
States by removing much-needed activists from the geographic arena most conducive to
effecting change.

Beginning as early as the mid-1830s, Delany championed plans for the organized,
voluntary emigration of free blacks away from the United States. He maintained that
white racism was so firmly entrenched within U.S. American political and economic
institutions that African Americans could never hope to achieve equality in their current
location. They therefore had to be willing to forego historical ties to the United States if
they wanted to achieve true freedom. Delany’s political concern with emigration is not
immediately evident in Blake because it is never explicitly addressed in its content. But,
as I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, the novel’s detailed depiction of African-
American movement works through problems of organization that were logistically
similar to those Delany and others faced as they advocated emigration as an answer to racial exploitation in the United States. Namely, through his travels, Blake recruits a network of supporters who overcome geographic and cultural obstacles as they collaborate to build an independent black nation-state outside of the United States which, through its very existence, challenges the international system of slavery in the New World.

Before turning our attention to the problem-solving task of antislavery fiction, it is important to understand the geographic context in which Delany wrote his novel. We must therefore consider the real-world obstacles that Delany confronted in his efforts to recruit and organize allies across great distances. These obstacles fall roughly into two geographic groupings. The first corresponds to the constraints on human agency associated with the physical geography. Antislavery activists had to face the reality of communication and travel in the nineteenth century. The vastness and diversity of the physical landscape worked against their efforts to organize disparate groups of people, especially in the face of an institutionalized opposition by the slave power. The second corresponds to the constraints on human activity that are inevitable in a heterogeneous cultural landscape. Antislavery activists confronted the difficulties of organizing peoples from a myriad of cultural backgrounds. The ‘colored citizens of the world’—to use David Walker’s radically inclusive appellation—did not, in fact, belong to a single cultural group. They spoke different languages, followed different cultural and religious customs, and had different experiences under slavery and Euro-American oppression.

The task Delany chose for his fictional character Blake was to serve as the visionary leader whose role it was to lead this culturally diverse, geographically dispersed
people out of the horrors of slavery and racial degradation toward a free, autonomous black state. To do so, he had to formulate a plan that would allow them to come together and overcome their differences so that they might form a united force. Or, as Paul Gilroy writes, “[t]he version of black solidarity Blake advances is explicitly anti-ethnic and opposes narrow African-American exceptionalism in the name of a truly pan-African, diaspora sensibility. This makes blackness a matter of politics rather than a common condition.” As his writings make clear, Delany possessed a sophisticated understanding of the complex relations that tied together free blacks and slaves (as well as slave systems) throughout the western hemisphere. But in his attention to all that united the descendents of Africa, he faced a vast and uncooperative geography that isolated slaves and free blacks, one from another. In Blake, we see Delany wrestling with this geography, intent on subduing it in a way that is conducive to different types of real-world political action, including international slave rebellion and organized, voluntary emigration.

Abolition and the Emigration Debate

Delany’s focus in Blake and his nonfiction writings on the integral relationship between racial oppression and geography is not unusual among leading abolitionists in the United States. It was quite common for antislavery activists to frame their rhetorical attacks on slavery with observations relating to the nation’s physical and cultural geography. In fact, orthodox abolitionism relied heavily on a “politics of location” to borrow a phrase from bell hooks, in which the U.S. American South became synonymous with the slave institution in the cultural lexicon. What did differentiate Delany from many of his contemporaries was his insistence on looking outside of the United States as he

2 For Gilroy’s discussion of Blake and Delany’s Pan-African vision, see Chapter 1 of The Black Atlantic.
searched for answers to the nation’s problem of slavery and racial degradation. Most notably, he systematically challenged the allegiance of free African Americans to the country of their birth in his political treatise _The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered_ (1852). After describing free blacks as virtual “slaves in the midst of freedom” (155), he argued that they should be willing to abandon the United States for a new home in the Caribbean.

He repeated this challenge in later speeches and writings. Over the years, he promoted various plans for the organized removal of free African Americans from the United States to another land where they could unite with others of African descent and build a powerful nation free from European domination. His preferred destination shifted from Central America, to the Caribbean, and finally to the African continent, but his commitment to emigration seldom wavered.

From Delany’s emigrationist perspective, political and social freedom depended on the ability of African Americans to move about freely, within the United States and, perhaps more importantly, beyond its borders. Implicit in his argument is a recognition that geographic space is not neutral, empty space. Or, as Henri Lefebvre would say, “[space] has always been political and strategic. It is a product literally filled with ideologies” (“Reflections” 31). An important corollary of this understanding of the ideology of space is an acceptance that locations do not evolve simultaneously or consistently. That is, history manifests itself differently in different locations. As a result, black activists faced an uneven geographic landscape in which individual locations were variously suited for accommodating a free black community. Unlike most other prominent abolitionists, Delany repeatedly argued that the best site for such a community
lay outside of the United States. Thus, as Scot French observes, “Delany made a decisive break with the black abolitionist mainstream in 1852” over the issue of African-American emigration (99-100).³

It is important not to oversimplify here. To a varying degree, all leading abolitionists recognized the international scope of slavery. For two hundred and fifty years, the African slave trade had tied together Europeans, Africans, and the inhabitants of the New World in a vast system of exploitation, brutality, and movement. Even after the legal prohibition of the international slave trade in 1808, economic trade and national or cultural alliances (as well as an illegal trade in slaves) continued to link the United States with other slaveholding territories as well as with European markets for products of slave labor. It was common for abolitionists in the United States to look beyond national borders for inspiration, financial help, and political assistance in combating slavery. Prominent abolitionists—black and white—traveled extensively in Europe, giving lectures and raising funds for antislavery activities back home. Despite this appeal to international allies for assistance, the abolitionist mainstream implicitly turned its focus inward, identifying the abolition of slavery in the United States as the most pressing moral and political issue of the day. This nationalist agenda typically coincided with calls for African Americans to remain in the United States in order to help facilitate change in the land of their birth.

³ One of Delany’s more vocal critics was his former co-editor Frederick Douglass. Douglass dismissed Delany’s emigrationist agenda with a telling geographic metaphor. He wrote in an April 1853 editorial for the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* that “[Brother Delany] has written a book—and we may say that it is, in many respects, an excellent book—on the condition, character, and destiny of the colored people; but it leaves us just where it finds us, without chart or compass, and in more doubt or perplexity than before we read it” (1 April 1853).
In *To Wake the Nations*, Eric J. Sundquist argues persuasively that modern scholars should consider slavery “in hemispheric terms.” He goes on to add that, in doing so, we will approach the study of slavery “as it most often was in the early nineteenth century by black and white writers alike” (29-30). At first glance, Sundquist’s argument that nineteenth-century writers typically wrote about slavery within its larger international context seems to contradict my premise that Delany’s creative imagining of an international challenge to slavery and racial oppression was highly unusual. Upon closer examination, however, it should be clear that I share Sundquist’s basic assumption that the abolitionist mainstream had a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which slavery in the United States was tied to slave cultures throughout the western hemisphere. In fact, abolitionists routinely emphasized that U.S. American slavery was an outgrowth of the historical triangulation between Europe, Africa, and the New World. They also documented in their speeches and writings instances of slave resistance throughout the Caribbean as models for what was possible in the United States. Notably, they pointed to the successful rebellion in Haiti to support their core assumptions that slaves did in fact desire freedom, that they were willing to make great sacrifices in their struggle for emancipation, and that they could indeed succeed in their quest.

In spite of this attention to African slavery as an international phenomenon, however, I see little evidence that antislavery writers of fiction and nonfiction narratives maintained a similar, transnational focus in their texts. Instead, they typically treated U.S. American slavery as an individual—or at least separable—problem from its international context. Haiti may have served as an inspiration, albeit a complicated one, for antislavery activism, but it remained a separate fight logistically from the one being waged in the
United States. The same was true for ongoing antislavery agitation in the West Indies and Brazil. If universal emancipation in the United States was proving to be such an elusive goal, how much more so world-wide emancipation must have seemed.

Up to this point in my analysis, I have focused primarily on the overriding issue of slavery in the United States and the ways in which antislavery narratives negotiated geography—typically a U.S. American or North American geographic landscape—in their rhetorical challenges to the slave institution. In doing so, I have followed the lead of my primary sources as they represent slavery in the United States in geographic isolation. In their respective texts, Nat Turner and Harriet Beecher Stowe approach U.S. American slavery as a relatively autonomous system. This approach is revealed by their choices of narrative landscapes, which are centered in the slaveholding states. Even Stowe’s brief references in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred* to communities of former slaves in Canada and Liberia do little to complicate the perception that U.S. American slavery could be largely understood and represented in a national context. It would be too simple, of course, to say that such texts present slavery as a problem unique to the United States. But, it is also true that few narratives focus on slavery as a complex, hemispheric condition or explore in detail ways of combating it in an international or Pan-African context.

Delany expressed little patience for abolitionists who persisted in segmenting the fight against racial oppression into individual battles defined by national, colonial, or physical borders. His novel, *Blake*, represents a notable exception to this trend in U.S. American literature. It is unusual in its attention to the transatlantic networks that tied

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4 This geographic segmenting of slave resistance was not true for slavery’s advocates. Proponents of slavery frequently justified increasingly-repressive practices as necessary for containing the spread of the “disease” of rebellion from islands such as Haiti and Cuba into the southern United States.
individual nations and colonies together within a system of racial exploitation that stretched from Europe and Africa to South America, the Caribbean, and the North American continent. It is even more unusual in its representation of a burgeoning system of hemispheric resistance to such exploitation.

Soon after excerpts from *Blake* appeared in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Delany openly criticized mainstream abolitionists in a speech before residents of Liberia. He denounced their calls for free African Americans to remain home in order to promote change from within. As reported in the *Liberia Herald* by Edward Wilmot Blyden, he accused abolitionists of contributing to the politically paralyzing immobilization of all African Americans. He went on to emphasize the importance of freedom of movement to any form of antislavery agitation. As Blyden recounts,

> [Dr. Delany] spoke at length of the various causes which have conspired to retard the progress of the colored man in the United States. He described the condition of the negro in that country as being stationary, for the reason, said he, that two opposite forces of nearly equal power are brought to bear upon him, Abolitionism and Colonization. He compared the influences of these two institutions to two strong cords passed around the body of the colored man; one would drag him from the land that gave him birth to Africa,—and the other is brought to bear upon him with equal force to keep him in his native land; so that a well known law of philosophy, being under the influence of two equal forces operating in contrary directions, his position must be stationary. (Rpt. in *The Weekly Anglo-African*, 1 October 1859: 1)

Thus, as Blyden portraits it, Delany did not see the abolitionist mainstream as an effective advocate for change. Its U.S. national agenda undermined strategies for improving the

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5 Proponents of voluntary emigration struggled to differentiate their proposals from the politically- and racially-suspect system of colonization that was promoted by the American Colonization Society (ACS). Rather than advancing the interests of African Americans, the ACS was seen as an agent of the white establishment that sought to rid the country of the disruptive presence of free blacks while shoring up the support structure for U.S. American slavery. The often-bitter controversy surrounding Harriet Beecher Stowe’s apparent endorsement of colonization at the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is suggestive of the anger the issue was capable of generating within antislavery circles. It is also suggestive of the difficulties abolitionists faced in their efforts to identify a true place of freedom for African Americans.
prospects of free African Americans, ultimately obstructing rather than encouraging emancipation and widespread racial uplift. It did so by curtailing the movements of free blacks.

By the mid-1850s, abolitionists had failed to define a unified plan of attack around which mainstream abolitionists and proponents of emigration could rally. The two groups came to represent the defining poles in an antislavery dispute that sought to dictate the future of African Americans. Of vital interest for this study is the fact that the future under dispute depended upon competing plans for African-Americans’ movements across space. The challenge for emigrationists became to demonstrate how travel of free African Americans away from the United States would advance the cause of general emancipation for the several million slaves left behind. That is, it became necessary to show that the seemingly divergent spatial movements required by emigration and abolitionist agitation could be harnessed into a unified social action that would promote freedom and equality for the slaves left behind as well as for those free blacks leaving the country.

Delany, who was arguably the most influential antebellum advocate for organized emigration, addressed this controversy over organized movement frequently in his speeches and political writings. In his keynote speech before the 1854 National Emigration Convention of Colored Men in Cleveland, he recognized that “[t]he plea will doubtless be, as it already frequently has been raised, that to remove from the United States, our slave brethren will be left without a hope” (qtd. in Levine, Reader, 278). To counter this argument, he envisioned a series of new pathways for fugitive slaves to
follow out of slaveholding regions. In this vision, preferred flight shifts from northern to southern routes. Or, as he explained it,

[slaves] already find their way in large companies to the Canadas, and they have only to be made sensible that there is as much freedom for them South, as there is North; as much protection in Mexico as in Canada; and the fugitive slave will find it a much pleasanter journey and more easy of access, to wend his way from Louisiana and Arkansas to Mexico, than thousand of miles through the slave-holders of the South and slave-catchers of the North, to Canada. Once into Mexico, and his farther exit to Central and South America and the West Indies, would be certain. There would be no obstructions whatever. (qtd. in Levine, Reader, 278-79)

In one sweeping motion, then, Delany upends the flight north to freedom motif that held such prominence in abolitionist circles. In its place, he seeks to forge connections between African Americans and peoples of African descent in the Caribbean and South America that open new, potentially more viable routes to freedom for slaves in the southern interior. This shift in real-world emphasis is mirrored by a shift in literary plot movements, as we can see in the following analysis of Delany’s *Blake*. By turning away from Canada and the northern states as the preferred destination for slaves and free blacks, alike, Delany downplays the Flight North chronotope that organizes so many fictional and nonfictional narratives of slave resistance by antislavery writers. In its place, he develops a Pan-African vision that is rooted primarily in a southward migration of African Americans away from the North American mainland.

*Blake and the Politics of African-American Travel*

In *Blake*, Delany ties African-American freedom to unrestricted travel first within the United States and then outside of its national borders. The extant novel is divided into two volumes of roughly equal length. The first volume focuses on events that occur in the

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6 See Chapter Two for a discussion of the Flight North chronotope as it develops in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Dred*. 
slave territories of the United States, while the storyline of the second unfolds entirely outside of U.S. borders. Volume One depicts Henry Blake’s transformation from obedient slave to organizational leader of a vast rebellion against U.S. American slavery. His journey into slave resistance begins when he discovers that his wife, Maggie, has been sold to new owners who have taken her south from Mississippi to their sugar plantation in Cuba. He vows to find his wife, but, rather than immediately setting out after her, he turns his personal anguish to public action against the institution of slavery that sanctions such abuses. Traveling in a sweeping arc across the southern United States, he visits each slaveholding state and territory in the union in order to recruit conspirators for his “plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery” (39). He spreads his message in city centers and rural plantations, nearby forests and remote swamps, the District of Columbia and the Indian Nations.

Blake’s journey across the United States highlights the dependency of the slave institution on the ability of slaveholders to prevent their slaves from moving about freely. Blake does not represent a unique threat to slavery because he calls for violent rebellion. He is not alone—either historically or in the novel—in his espousal of fighting slavery through violent means. Instead, he is most dangerous because he is able to disseminate his message across great distances. His unparalleled mobility allows for much greater organization among potential conspirators in disparate regions than was ever before possible.

His focus in the first volume is primarily on combating slavery in the United States, the region that is circumscribed by his travel route (Figure 4.1). At the conclusion of Volume One, however, the geographic focus of the novel shifts from the United States
to the Caribbean when Blake prepares to travel to Cuba to search for his wife. As Volume Two begins, neither Blake nor the third-person narrator cites a plan to extend slave rebellion across national borders. In fact, the storyline of the first several chapters is devoted solely to his search for Maggie. Even the scope and method of his journey alters. He travels the relatively short distance from Havana to Matanzas, doubling back on his route when he learns that he has already met Maggie but failed to recognize her. Once he is reunited with his wife, and has purchased her freedom, the narrative action abruptly returns to the topic of slave rebellion, only this time it is focused on organized resistance in Cuba. Blake dedicates himself to fostering an organization of rebels to challenge slavery and white oppression in the Spanish colony, as he had done previously in the United States.

Figure 4.1 Blake’s Travels through U.S. Slave Territories
Through widespread rebellion, Blake hopes to bring about a radical reorganization of the Spanish colony’s sociospace. His strategy for achieving that goal depends on initiating a battle with slaveholders and colonial officials for control of the physical landscape. To be successful, he (and presumably other slave rebels) must find ways to move about freely. This is true for his organizational efforts in the United States as well as in Cuba. Blake himself emphasizes the interdependence of geography and violence in his explanation of what the rebels hope to achieve: “We want space for action—elbow room; and in order to obtain it, we must shove our oppressors out of the way” (197). Delany’s novel thus invokes a theme we have seen before: slave violence is not a simple, destructive force designed only to tear down the existing power structure. It is also a creative force for building a radically new community of freedom in a landscape that has been defined historically by institutionalized slavery. At the conclusion of the extant text, Blake’s quest for freedom and a lasting peace in Cuba stands ready to be born in violence and death.

As the novel shifts from the United States to the Caribbean, the types of movements Blake initiates also change. Blake’s international efforts are again rooted in travel, but this time they take a different form. He does not move by land across great swaths of the slaveholding territory in Cuba as he had done previously in the United States. Instead, he relies on communication networks among the slaves and free people of color in Cuba to spread his message. Delany’s narrator emphasizes the efficiency of these communication networks:

so completely were [the rebels] organized, and systematic their plans, that whatever might be going on among them in Matanzas those in Havana were conversant with it, and that which might take place in Havana was at once known to those of Matanzas, Principe, Trinidad and St. Jago de
Cuba, Fernandina and every part of the colony. Many who visited the city from a distance on the occasion of the Queen’s nativity, having entered the seclusion and received commissions in the Council, went forth to establish confidence in all parts of the island. (282-283)

He therefore evokes these disparate locations, and encapsulates them into the narrative frame, by simply listing them in quick succession.

Rather than traveling across Cuba, then, Blake journeys to Africa and back onboard the slave ship *Vulture* (Figure 4.2). He sets out for Africa, intending to incite a rebellion of the slaves while far removed from the police and military apparatuses of the Spanish colonial and the U.S. American governments. A successful sea rebellion would serve three important functions. First, it would liberate the newly enslaved Africans, allowing them to escape the hardships of New World slavery for which they are destined. Second, it would prepare them to join the ranks of the Caribbean army Blake is building. And, third, it would enable that army to assume control of a ship for future use in military action against the Spanish colonialists.

**Figure 4.2 Blake’s Journey aboard the Slave Ship *Vulture***
Despite Blake’s influence over the slaves onboard the *Vulture*, and despite their ability to free themselves from their shackles, the desired rebellion never occurs. The slaves’ rebellious mood is mirrored, but also strangely dissipated, by an approaching storm. When the storm finally subsides, the white sailors have managed to confine the slaves below deck. But Blake’s efforts are not wholly unsuccessful. Upon the *Vulture*’s arrival in Cuba, he directs the sale of the slaves to allies friendly to his insurrectionary plans. The newly arrived Africans are thus able to join his growing army of collaborators committed to claiming a space for an autonomous black nation on the island of Cuba.

At this point in the narrative, Blake settles permanently in Havana. There he recruits from all levels of Cuba’s highly-stratified black community. In these Havana episodes, extensive journeys are no longer necessary. Instead, Blake and his supporters maneuver within a crowded urban space. In doing so, they plan and prepare for the coming warfare in the immediate vicinity of the Spanish Captain General and his army. In fact, several of the Captain General’s own slaves assume prominent positions in Blake’s growing army of liberation.

As suggested above, the development of the novel’s storyline across the two volumes is basically linear: Blake’s African and Cuban exploits follow on the heels of his travels in the United States. Thematically there is a certain continuity as well. In both volumes, Blake articulates an unflinching call to arms to a diverse group of slaves and free people of color. He moves about freely, recruiting collaborators for a war on slavery and oppression. Despite the parallels between the narrative events of the two volumes, the plot’s overall momentum is not similarly forward. Or, as Roger Hite observes, “[Blake’s] episodes are disjointed, as part one only relates tangentially to part two and the
This disjunction stems from the differing narrative landscapes and the divergent spatial movements that underlie Blake’s travels. Put differently, the novel’s expansive geography and its opposing chronotopes forestall the plot’s momentum toward its goal of a synchronized, transnational rebellion.

In the novel, Delany pursues an outside-in geographic approach that begins with general preparations over a vast landscape and then zeroes in on specific activities in a single location. In this way, the novel thematically suggests that a rebellion that begins in individual homes in Havana will spread across Cuba and back to the North American mainland, inciting slaves throughout the slaveholding territories in the United States to rise against their masters. But there is a problem. While the novel meticulously circles inward, there is no formal outline or mechanism for the necessary momentum back out. As Floyd J. Miller writes, “[i]n Blake, as in his North Star articles, Delany … implicitly suggests that a black Cuba will lead to the downfall of slavery in the United States” (xxii). The word “implicitly” is important here as the narrative movement in the novel’s second volume is wholly away from the United States. First, Blake leaves the U.S. never to return, at least not in the extant text. Then, his friends and fellow fugitives from slavery in Mississippi join him in Cuba after a brief stint in Canada West. They likewise harbor no plans to return. More importantly, slavery and slave resistance in the United States go unmentioned once the principal rebels congregate in Cuba. The U.S. organizations therefore seem to be lost from narrative memory as all focus is on the Cuban present. The organizational connections needed to draw the two rebellion plots together into a single, unified system of resistance remain undeveloped.
At first glance, this disruption between the two volumes might be dismissed as thematically insignificant, corresponding only to a problem in the novel’s formal structure. Much has been made in recent critical commentary of such problems in Delany’s literary craft. Proponents of the novel make little effort to refute negative assessments of its aesthetic value. Instead they often acknowledge the awkwardness of Delany’s fiction before proceeding to argue for its unique importance as a political and cultural marker. These critics present a compelling case that no other antebellum narrative includes as expansive a view of the hemispheric system of slavery or of the U.S. American South’s position within the larger system. Eric J. Sundquist’s assessment of the novel in *To Wake the Nations* exemplifies this point of view:

> A novel such as Delany’s *Blake* … acquires new importance less for its stylistic innovation, which is negligible, than for its startling panorama of African Americans in slavery, both in the American South and in the Caribbean, and its consequent capacity to reflect upon the entire history of enslavement, middle passage, plantation life, and the growth of an ethos of slave resistance. (11)

Sundquist goes on to approve the novel’s side-by-side structure, arguing that the complexity or sophistication of Delany’s international vision defies a simple, linear storyline. As a result, *Blake*’s formal structure is based in a “back and forth” movement that highlights the interconnectedness of the U.S. American and the Cuban slave systems. Sundquist concludes that “the [novel’s] stark division into halves may be seen less as a mechanical device than a means to accentuate the fact that the Cuban situation was a kind of twin, a shadow play, of the American South for masters and slaves alike” (184-85). With this in mind, it becomes increasingly apparent that a complex attention to geography rather than a rigid, temporal progression drives *Blake*’s plot development.
This is not to say that Delany is not interested in the unfolding of historical events, of course. The novel’s repeated allusions to historical rebels situate it thematically within the 1850s debate over slavery in the United States. His inclusion of the Cuban poet Placido as Blake’s cousin and most trusted Cuban collaborator speaks specifically to the escalating demands by U.S. American slaveholders to annex their island neighbor in a preemptive strike. Supporters of annexation claimed that it was necessary to prevent Cuba’s ongoing slave unrest from spreading to the United States. But as has been frequently documented, Delany telescopes the historical timeframe so that events that occurred over a span of several decades comprise a much shorter fictional time-span. He therefore creates a fictional world that allows Placido, who was executed in 1844 for insurrectionary activities, to collaborate with Blake in inciting an international rebellion that seemingly postdates the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the United States Supreme Court.

Delany thus restructures the time sequence of his real-world precedents in an effort to condense them into a workable fictional plot. In doing so, he creates an abbreviated fictional time-span that signifies a much longer swath of the history of New World slavery. This reordering of time, when considered in conjunction with the side by

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7 The 1854 Ostend Manifesto details the expansionist agenda of many U.S. Americans who wished to extend their control of slavery southward. As United States minister to England, James Buchanan coauthored the dispatch with Pierre Soulé and John Y. Mason, his fellow ministers to Spain and France, respectively. They argued that it was in Spain’s best interest to sell Cuba to the United States because of the colony’s upheaval due to ongoing slave unrest. They went on to argue that should Spain refuse to sell its colony the United States would be justified in seizing it because of “the very same principle that would justify an individual tearing down the burning house of his neighbor if there were no other means of preventing the flames from destroying his own home.” For a discussion of the literary response to the Ostend Manifesto, see Eric J. Sundquist’s essay “Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance.”

8 Placido was executed by Cuba’s colonial government for his alleged role in the conspiracy of La Escalera, a conspiracy in which slaves, free blacks, and Creoles came together in an effort to overthrow white Spanish rule on the island.

9 This latter historical dating is suggested by the narrative’s several allusions to Chief Justice Roger Taney’s notorious written decision in which he argued that African Americans “[were] so inferior that they had no rights which a white man was bound to respect.”
side structure of Blake’s two volumes, exposes the ways in which the novel strains against a rigid temporality that equates plot development (and history itself) with a linear march through time. Even as it defies the strictures of chronological time, however, Delany’s novel is not without an obvious order. As Blake’s extensive travels suggest, this order depends primarily on space. Throughout the novel, Blake’s narrative landscape refuses to remain in the background. Instead it acts as a driving force in the plot, continuously revealing itself as the narrative action shifts from one location to the next in rapid-fire succession. In this way, it drives the narrative tempo as well. Or, as Leonard Lutwack observes, “[t]he tempo of action may be controlled by the manner in which places are introduced. Time moves slowly when an orderly discovery of a landscape is made to the observing eye … Time accelerates when places are discovered in quick succession” (54).

It would be tempting to leave our discussion of the narrative break between the novel’s U.S. American episodes and its Cuban and African episodes here if it were not for the political discord it exposes. The lack of narrative coherence between the two volumes points beyond questions of literary craft to real-world disagreements over which type of political action is most conducive to facilitating emancipation and widespread racial uplift. This becomes especially evident when considered against the backdrop of the controversy over African-American emigration that raged in antislavery circles in the 1850s. The continuity of the novel’s storyline breaks down at precisely the point of contention between proponents of emigration and its critics. That is, it breaks down as it attempts to draw the connections that show how African-American travel away from the United States, and the creation of an external nation-state, specifically helps U.S.
American slaves in their struggle for freedom. As we saw in our earlier discussion of *Dred*, a rapid shift in chronotopes in a narrative is potentially indicative of a real-world problem that is too complex for the writer to control, even within the simplified forum of a fictional narrative. In *Blake*, Delany glosses over the strategic connections that tie together the two geographically-removed resistance movements Blake cultivates. As a result, the novel falls short of offering a chart or compass (to use Douglass’s metaphors) that effectively details organized emigration’s role in bringing about the abolition of slavery in the United States.

I want to be very clear here. As I focus on the tension between the resistance movements Blake fosters in the United States and in Cuba, I do not mean to overlook or dismiss Delany’s unprecedented narrative attention to the political and experiential connections between geographically dispersed Africans and African Americans. I wholeheartedly agree with Sundquist’s assessment that “[i]n its lucid combination of literary and political strategies, *Blake*, whatever its weaknesses in narrative structure and characterization, is among the most compelling statements of black transnationalist ideology in the nineteenth century” (*Wake* 206). And, I am particularly interested in the role Blake’s diverse travels play in identifying and promoting this transnational vision. As a result, I explore how his movements work to encapsulate within a single, political system the expansive geography—both physical and cultural—that Paul Gilroy has dubbed the Black Atlantic.

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10 Critics of Delany’s emigration plans maintained that the twin goals of an autonomous black state outside of the United States and the abolition of U.S. American slavery did not coalesce into a single, workable political agenda. By promoting organized emigration of the nation’s free blacks, Delany was seen as siphoning off the most likely black leaders, sending them away from the geographic arena in which political battles affecting the majority of African Americans were necessarily waged.
At the same time, however, I am intrigued by what the novel’s formal structure reveals about Blake’s preferred solution of international slave rebellion to the problem of New World slavery and racial degradation. I therefore also examine its competing chronotopes. These chronotopes, and their failure to coalesce neatly into a single resistance movement, point to potential real-world conflicts that are not fully worked out in Blake’s organizational plans. My purpose here is not to praise or criticize the novel for its choice of strategies for reform. Nor is it to lament or explain away the novel’s aesthetic deficiencies. Instead, I hope to provide insight into the way Delany uses his novel as a forum for logistical problem-solving to work through the complications of organized slave resistance. There can be little doubt that the storyline and theme of the novel promote an organized challenge to racial oppression in the New World. As we look closer, however, it becomes apparent that Delany’s sophisticated and complicated political agenda runs up against an uncooperative geographic landscape that points beyond the literary sphere to real-world obstacles to international reform.

The Places of Delany’s Blake

In his article “The People of Delany’s Blake,” Germain Bienvenu identifies the historical individuals Delany references or includes in the novel’s narrative action. Bienvenu’s analysis suggests that Delany buttresses his fictional account of slavery and slave resistance by specifically tying it to historical events and persons. The most recognizable references are to famous slave rebels. Like Dred, Blake is an intellectual heir to such noted rebels as Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner. In his

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11 These overt ties between the fictional world of Blake and its real-world precedent resemble the strict ties Harriet Beecher Stowe forges between the narrative action in Dred and verifiable historical events and geographic sites. See Chapter Two for a discussion of Stowe’s claims to have created a fictional mosaic of historical fact.
travels, he visits the geographic regions associated with each of their plots against slavery and, in doing so, capitalizes on the cultural associations in which they are saturated. In Charleston, he conspires with “one of the remaining confidentials and adherents of the memorable South Carolina insurrection” who praises Blake as “a nudder Denmark ’mong us” (112). In the Great Dismal Swamp, he meets with maroon slaves who idolize Nat Turner and claim to have fought with “General Gabriel” in the Revolutionary War. And in Richmond, he holds seclusions with others for whom “the name of Southampton … was like an electric shock” (116).

Blake’s travels take him through the upper south at a rapid pace. But the novel’s narrator slows down to describe in renewed detail his meeting with “a number of old confederates of the noted Nat Turner” in the Dismal Swamp (112). Blake takes particular notice of the cultural myth that had grown up around Turner and the Southampton rebellion. But his greatest discovery is not the inhabitants or the legends of the Swamp. Instead, it is its geographic landscape:

Here Henry found himself surrounded by a different atmosphere, an entirely new element. Finding ample scope for undisturbed action through the entire region of the Swamp, he continued to go scattering to the winds and sowing the seeds of a future crop, only to take root in the thick black waters which cover it, to be grown in devastation and reaped in a whirlwind of ruin. (112)

In his analysis of the novel, Timothy Powell identifies the Dismal Swamp as “the spiritual capital” of Blake’s revolutionary quest. I would argue that Powell is correct, but perhaps not for the reasons one might expect. As we have seen, the Dismal Swamp held considerable notoriety in the United States at mid-century because of the conjunction between its cultural association with the Southampton rebellion, its forbidding physical environment, and its evocative name. It represented one of those “unique internal
“frontiers” that slaveholders failed to understand, penetrate, or conquer (Slotkin 462). But as Blake journeys to meet with Nat Turner’s confederates, including the seven high conjurors who hold so much power over the imaginations of slaves, he discovers that the myth surrounding these mysterious conjurors far outdistances the reality. After years of failing to “induce the slaves to a general rising” (114), the group of seven “seemed … to place greater reliance in the efforts of Henry for their deliverance than in their own seven heads together” (115). What does not disappoint, however, is the Swamp’s physical environment. The Dismal Swamp therefore serves as an anchor point of the novel, not only because it is the home of Nat Turner’s followers, but also because it exposes the central component necessary for successful rebellion: a geographic landscape that allows for unfettered movement as well as secret consultation and collaboration among conspirators.

The landscape of the Swamp therefore does not function as a passive backdrop for human actions that would occur regardless of geographic location. Instead it actively invites, or gives rise to, slave resistance and conspiracy. In other words, the Swamp can be seen to create as well as shelter the maroon communities of slave rebels that lie in its midst. This is true for the Dismal Swamp as a setting for fictional plots and as a setting for real-world action. Such an active role for the Swamp in nineteenth-century representations of slave rebellion conforms to what Franco Moretti argues more generally for all literary geographies: “different spaces are not just different landscapes (although they are also that …): they are different narrative matrixes. Each space determines its own kind of actions, its plot—its genre” (84).
Blake is gratified by the reception he receives from the inhabitants of the Dismal Swamp, “who hailed the daring young runaway as the harbinger of better days” (112). But he leaves their company convinced that he is better equipped to bring about their deliverance than they are, as evidenced by the very few gains they have made in the thirty years that have elapsed since Nat Turner’s rebellion. This is true in spite of their auspicious surroundings. Geography therefore does not eclipse character in driving narrative action in Blake but, instead, it is shown that the two must work together if plans for slave resistance are to succeed. Unlike the inhabitants of the Swamp, Blake does not seek to mimic the historical rebellions they look back upon with such reverence: his plans far surpass the events of both Southampton County and Gabriel’s Richmond conspiracy. Rather than occupying a small corner of Virginia, Blake’s proposed battlefield spans all of the southern United States, Cuba, and even the open ocean.

Because of this ever broadening scope, Blake must find new locations that invite the secret deliberations and furtive movements necessary for mass rebellion. Throughout his travels, he seeks individual sites that can serve, like the Dismal Swamp, as regional centers for his war against slavery. As the novel progresses, the tactical and spiritual center of the rebellion shifts from the wildspaces of the U.S. American South to the uniquely isolated space onboard the slave ship Vulture as it crosses the Atlantic. In Cuba, the physical landscape becomes less important in determining preferred locations for Blake’s covert seclusions. Instead the tactical center of the Cuban rebellion settles in the Havana salons of those free blacks who have attained privilege within Cuba’s rigidly stratified social hierarchy. In the confusion of the city, conspirators find freedom to come
together and plan future actions, protected from the nearby eyes of white slaveholders and colonial officials.

As the tactical center of the rebellion shifts across the two volumes, the narrator attempts to strike a balance between representing slavery in its geographic complexity and simultaneously emphasizing that it must be understood and countered as a single, integrated system. In Volume One, the narrator pursues a horizontal strategy that enables Blake to hold seclusions with as many conspirators as possible, across the greatest extent of territory possible. When he begins his loop through the southern states, the narrator describes distinctive attributes of slavery in several locations he visits. He pays especially close attention to the physical and cultural geography of the Red River region of Louisiana and Arkansas and the city of New Orleans. The roots of this first stage in Blake’s fictional movements lie in Delany’s own domestic travels. Blake travels from Mississippi to Louisiana and then onto Texas, Arkansas, and the Indian territories. In doing so, he covers the same region Delany visited twenty years before in his search for a suitable location for an autonomous black community. But as Blake’s travels progress, and as he quits the slaveholding regions that Delany himself had visited, the narrator devotes considerably less time to describing unusual attributes of each new location.

Delany can therefore be seen to pursue an interpretive methodology in Blake that was common among abolitionists and proslavery writers alike. He invokes individual examples to serve as building blocks for his aggregate representation of slavery in the United States. As he begins, the narrator devotes five chapters (Chapters 17-21) to Blake’s travels through the western slave territories of the United States. His subsequent

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12 As Germain Beinvenu documents, the narrator accurately cites the names of historical planters as well as the specific locations of their plantations.
description of Blake’s exploits in New Orleans covers Chapters 22 and 23. After Blake departs New Orleans, however, the narrative momentum picks up dramatically. Alabama blends into Georgia, which gives way in rapid succession to South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, all within a single chapter. The sense of slavery’s complexity that a cataloging of individual locations might generate thus remains limited in the narrative. The incredible rapidity of Blake’s travels, along with the increasingly cursory treatment of later locations, produces an unrelenting momentum that resists specificity or nuance. Instead, it circumscribes the diversity of the slave experience within a thematically unified whole. As we saw previously in *Dred*, the individual sites included in the narrative are made to stand in for, or encapsulate, all the intermediate areas that are otherwise untouched by the novel’s storyline.

In Volume Two, however, Blake completes his journey to Africa and then focuses all of his attention on the diverse black population of Havana. Because he quits his long travels, several of his Cuban allies receive more narrative attention than did his more numerous confidants in the United States. In fact, individual characters take over for the physical landscape as a unifying presence in the plotline. The narrator’s horizontal approach to representing slavery (and slave resistance) in the United States has thus shifted to a more vertical approach that explores in detail a cross-section of Havana’s black society. This vertical approach highlights Blake’s efforts to overcome the hierarchical divisions among people of color so that they can work together to forge a new world order.

Delany therefore presents an unusually broad view—first horizontally and then vertically—of the culture of racial oppression as it developed across the Black Atlantic.
He draws into his portrait of New World slavery U.S. American slaves, recently captured Africans bound for slave markets in the West Indies and the United States, and free blacks who live under Cuba’s caste system. In the Cuban salons, Blake decries the cultural distinctions that historically divided descendents of Africa, one from another. He insists that all black peoples must put aside such artificial differences as nationality, religious denomination, and economic status in order to embrace their common experiences under Euro-American domination. The narrative thus envisions a single, Pan-African nation that exists outside of—or beyond—cultural and geographic boundaries. Or, as Powell argues, “Delany’s novel enacts what Homi Bhabha calls the performative time of postcolonial nation building such that Delany comes to be seen as being engaged in the project of ‘writing the nation’ of the black Diaspora into being” (emphasis in original, 357).

Movement and the Pan-African Nation

By focusing on people of color who have been traditionally isolated from one another, either physically or culturally, Delany attempts to encompass all of black experience in his novel. Throughout his travels, Blake listens to the stories of the slaves he meets. Each instance of physical abuse, starvation, sexual violence, or family separation intertwines into a narrative of a slave system that is similarly exploitive across geographic regions. Or, as the novel’s subtitle suggests, there is little symbolic difference between the experiences of African Americans who occupy the widely scattered “huts of America.” This narrative technique conforms to a pattern of ‘national imaginings’ that Benedict Anderson identifies in Imagined Communities. Like the writers Anderson considers, Delany creates a “social space full of comparable” places and events
Blake’s plot too follows “the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside” (Anderson 30). The resulting image is one of a black nation that transcends geographic location, which stands counter to the officially white United States and European colonies. As a unified (if not geographically rooted) nation of people, it invites a unified response to international slavery.

Such geographic and experiential cataloging in the novel provides ample evidence to answer the question of why organized, violent resistance is justifiable and necessary. It also points to Delany’s efforts to answer through fiction the question of how such a rebellion might develop. That is, it attempts to describe the steps that are necessary for bringing about successful rebellion in the New World. In this way, Blake resembles Dred. As I argue in previous chapters, Stowe explores violent slave rebellion in an attempt to problem-solve slavery in a narrative context. In Dred, she constructs individual plot sequences on a historically accurate pairing of event and place. These plot sequences are then brought together by fictionalized family ties that span the United States from North Carolina to Mississippi and from Ohio to Massachusetts. As the various sequences converge, the geographic frame of the novel is made to encapsulate all of the blank space of the intermediate territories, supporting the novel’s generalized picture of U.S. American slavery. Stowe thus uses the novel’s format to reduce the cultural and geographic variety that was the United States into a manageable thematic formula.

In Volume One, Delany attempts something similar. As Blake’s travels lead him finally back to Mississippi, geography and theme hold together. His rapid movements have allowed him to collect individual locations and cultural practices. Each location is
brought into contact with the ones that come before it and is refashioned in such a way that it conforms to the novel’s generalized picture of U.S. American slavery and slave resistance. Because he travels in a closed loop, the geographic momentum is inward, drawing all of the intermediate territory into this picture.

Volume Two, however, reveals a much more ambitious geographic plan than any we have seen previously. As a result, its momentum is not similarly inward. While Stowe focuses almost exclusively on several highly recognizable locations in the United States, Delany expands Blake’s tour away from the United States mainland. In an effort to cover even greater distances, Blake no longer loops his way through contiguous regions. Instead he travels in straight-line shots to Canada, Cuba, and Africa. Such movements allow him to recruit conspirators from these disparate regions. They are less effective, however, in circumscribing the vast regions into a single, interlocked network of resistance. To counter the decentered geographic momentum such movement creates, Blake summons his allies to Havana (Figure 4.3). Here, the geographically dispersed threads of the novel are made to converge. Such convergence suggests that a representative black identity trumps geographical and cultural divisions in Blake’s army of resistance (and, of course, in Delany’s political vision). Language barriers evaporate. Differing cultural norms fade, and economic and social competition is overcome. The resulting Pan-African identity allows blacks from around the world to unite as comrades in a single army of emancipation. As Blake exhorts his Cuban collaborators,

[n]o religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but He who owns us as his children will we serve. The whites accept of nothing but that which promotes their interests and happiness, socially, politically and religiously. They would discard a religion, tear down a church, overthrow a government, or desert a country, which did not enhance their
freedom. In God’s great and righteous name, are we not willing to do the same? (emphasis added, 258)

Figure 4.3 Rebels Converge in Cuba

Initially, then, the novel seems to work through the spatial tensions that signal the derailment of Dred’s plan of organized resistance in Stowe’s novel. Slave flight to Canada and organized rebellion no longer appear to be inescapably opposed to one another. Instead, they work together as individual components of a larger, hemispheric plan. In the United States episodes, Blake repeatedly refers to himself as a “runaway” as the wild-spaces chronotope takes precedence over, but does not negate the Flight North chronotope. Even as he travels through the South, preparing the way for rebellion, he assists individual slaves in their flight to Canada, suggesting that it is the preferable route for those slaves who are either too young or too old to participate in the violent rebellion.13

13 Blake’s plan to couple slave flight with general insurrection is similar to John Brown’s plan for his raid on the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. Brown’s ostensible goal was to procure the arms necessary to lead violent
An interesting tension arises, however, between his own extensive travels and his plans for those slaves whom he calls to participate in the actual rebellion in the United States. Even as he prepares to move on (first to a nearby location but eventually away from the United States entirely), he insists that others remain where they are in anticipation of the coming struggle. In his instructions to the future rebels, he alters in spirit but not in mobility the slaveholders’ self-serving injunction that they must “stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.” For Blake too, these slaves must effectively stand still, but standing still is not a call to inaction or servility. Instead, it is a necessary tactic that ensures that participants in the rebellion will be dispersed throughout slaveholding territories rather than clustered together in a few locations that are geographically removed from the battle-lines in the rebellion against slaveholders. In addition, standing still is a smokescreen that diverts attention from ongoing preparations for war.

Blake, himself, attempts to hide his movements under a similar guise of immobility. As he prepares to depart Mississippi for the first time, he instructs his friends to cultivate an image of him as a maroon who has camped out in the vicinity of his master’s plantation. In doing so, he hopes to be seen as a local nuisance rather than as a larger threat. He also hopes to deflect attention from the plans of those slaves who remain behind.

“I now go as a runaway, and will be suspected of lurking about in the thickets, swamps and caves; then to make the ruse complete, just as often as you think it necessary, to make a good impression, you must kill a shoat, take a lamb, pig, turkey, goose, chickens, ham of bacon from the smoke house, a loaf of bread or crock of butter from the spring house, and throw them down into the old waste well at the back of the old quarters … Everything that is missed don’t hesitate to lay it upon me, as a runaway, it raids into slaveholding territory that would inspire nearby slaves to rise up against their masters while simultaneously expanding or streamlining the Underground Railroad.
will only cause them to have less suspicions of your having such a design” (41).

Even as Delany overtly characterizes slave flight and organized rebellion as compatible strategies for attacking the system of slavery, their corresponding chronotopes in the novel begin to diverge, raising questions about the efficacy of Blake’s plans for challenging slavery across vast regions. His plan of rebellion in the United States specifically requires that the slaves he recruits forego opportunities to flee. He urges them to stay where they are so that they can serve as regional leaders of the widespread rebellion. Throughout the United States episodes, Blake’s continual movement is juxtaposed by the necessary immobility (or limited mobility) of his collaborators. In fact, Blake’s efforts to recruit adherents to his plan fail in Kentucky because “though there seemed to be a universal desire for freedom, there were few who were willing to strike. To run away, with them, seemed to be the highest conceived idea of their right to liberty. This they were doing” (123). As Blake’s travels take him back to Mississippi, then, a familiar chronotopic divergence between slave flight and organized rebellion surfaces in the novel.

This divergence only becomes more obvious in the Cuba episodes. A side-effect of the vertical focus on Havana’s black society is that the geographic momentum that has so far carried Blake’s organizational plans comes abruptly to a stop. As we have seen, the United States episodes focused disproportionately on landscape and movement rather than on any sustained development of characters besides Blake himself. Blake’s continued presence in Havana replaces the previously dominant chronotope of wildspaces, forestalling a geographic convergence in the narrative’s formal structure. The armies of largely undifferentiated allies spread across the United States and Africa remain
notably isolated from one another. But, more importantly, they remain isolated from the swelling wave of revolutionary sentiment in Cuba.

The extant novel ends with a Cuban conspirator’s cry of “Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say” (313). While this ending coincides thematically with the wave of insurrectionary fervor Blake cultivates in the United States, it does not effectively stem the decentered momentum of the novel’s formal structure. As a result, Blake’s didactic message and its form can be seen to work against each other, subverting Delany’s efforts to imagine a unified—and viable—call for transnational action against racial exploitation. Possibilities for successful, widespread rebellion are not the only forms of slave resistance called into question, however. As the logistical connections between Blake’s networks of conspirators in the United States and Cuba fail to materialize, the geographic landscape in the New World shows itself once again to be uncooperative. The novel therefore leaves unanswered the principal objection to African-American emigration by its critics. No clear vision emerges to illustrate how sustained movement away from the United States effectively promotes abolition for the slaves left behind. We can therefore see how the complexity of slavery once again defies the simultaneously unlimited and limited bounds of narrative fiction, forestalling its ability to help us see through the historical crisis to its solution.
CHAPTER 5: ROUTES OF FREEDOM AND “THE HEROIC SLAVE”

“It is quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on land, where you have the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command; and where, if a negro shall lift his hand against a white man, the whole community, with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down. I say, in such circumstances it is easy to talk of flogging negroes and of negro cowardice; but, sir, I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward, or that your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of salt water” (emphasis in original, 61-62).

In Part IV of Frederick Douglass’s short story “The Heroic Slave,” two sailors in a Richmond coffee-house debate “the real character of darkies” (61). The exchange is occasioned by a successful rebellion onboard a U.S. American ship that was engaged in the domestic slave trade. Tom Grant, the ship’s first mate, describes how after departing Richmond the Creole was en route to New Orleans when violence broke out. Unable to subdue the nineteen slaves who had managed to free themselves from their fetters, the surviving white crewmen had no choice but to assist the slaves in sailing to Nassau in the British Bahamas. Despite the sailors’ calls for aid from the U.S. American consulate once they reached port, a company of black soldiers representing British authorities boarded the Creole and released the slaves. Grant reports last seeing them as they marched along the wharf, exulting in their exchange of unending slavery in the southern interior of the United States for the promise of freedom in the British West Indies.

In his debate with Grant, Jack Williams, “a regular old salt” (61), insists that “a nigger’s a nigger, on sea or land; and is a coward, find him where you will” (62). He attributes the Creole crew members’ failure to subdue the slaves to their ignorance of the cowardice that marks all peoples of African descent. Grant disagrees. Drawing on his recent experiences, he counters Williams’s contention that slaves’ nature allows for the easy suppression of violent outbursts. He argues instead that place, rather than some
essential nature among black peoples, determines their reactions to slavery. As he puts it, "[i]t is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty. For the negro to act cowardly on shore, may be to act wisely" (62). Through Grant, then, Douglass gives voice to an argument that a hundred and fifty years later postmodern geographers continue to theorize. In contemporary terms, it boils down to the simple assertion that "geography matters." Or that human action, or praxis, must negotiate the confines of a social and physical geography that places its own demands on the unfolding of events.

As we look more closely at the relationship between geography and U.S. American slavery, two observations come to light. First, it is clear that the intricate relationship between them has been recognized from the beginning by both slavery’s advocates and its opponents. And, second, this relationship seems to have counter-intuitively diverted attention away from rigorous examinations of the ways in which geography in all its manifestations (place, space, location, and landscape) "works" within antislavery fiction. In previous chapters, I have foregrounded questions of geography in an attempt to see antislavery narratives from a different perspective. What I have glimpsed is a whole politics of narrative space that is simultaneously obvious and obscure. In the former case, proslavery and antislavery writers, alike, openly engage in a rhetorical struggle to gain control over disputed territories. They also criticize the economic, political, and social systems that the other promotes. In doing so, they address cultural systems that are necessarily tied to the physical landscape. In this way, geography enters into antebellum narratives as part of the subject matter. These rhetorical
struggles to define the geographic space of slavery have received considerable attention from critics engaged in thematic analyses of slave texts.

What I believe remains more obscure, however, are the problems of space—or the spatial constraints of narrative form—that antislavery writers faced as they examined, wrestled with, and tried to problem-solve institutionalized slavery in fiction. In previous chapters, I began my study with texts whose plots were grounded in the Atlantic seaboard states. As my analysis has progressed, the geographic radius of each additional narrative has increased, drawing in a larger historical and narrative landscape. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, with which I began, depicted only a small section of southern Virginia. My second text, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Dred*, took the mythical land of Nat Turner, the Great Dismal Swamp, as its center, but broadened its physical landscape to include North Carolina, South Carolina, and brief notices of such geographically removed places as Mississippi, Ohio, New England, and Canada. In doing so, the cultural landscape of the novel was designed to encapsulate symbolically all of the free and slave territories that lay between these points of reference. In *Blake*, the third text I consider, Martin Delany resists a national (i.e., U.S. nationalist) focus on slavery. He does so by expanding the novel’s geographic landscape to include Cuba, West Africa, and the sailing routes of the middle passage, as well as individual sites in the United States and Canada. This narrative landscape provides the structural frame for Delany’s depiction of economic systems and international alliances that he recognized as essential to the stability (and profitability) of slavery in the United States and the rest of the New World. Notably, an equally expansive landscape provides the structural frame for his imagined challenge to international slavery.
Blake’s truncated ending has generated considerable discussion among readers as to how best to read the novel. It remains unknown if the extant text corresponds to all that Delany wrote or if the original ending has been lost as a result of chance or overt censorship. Whatever the reason, “the effect,” as Eric J. Sundquist writes, “is to suspend the course of revolution in a crisis comparable to the historical moment at which Blake first appeared … the stymied narrative is fitting representation of slavery in the Americas at the point of explosion” (Wake 220). While I agree with Sundquist’s reading, I would argue that we must not be wholly distracted by the abruptness of the novel’s conclusion that calls so much attention to itself. That is, we must not allow the ending to obscure the fact that it is part of a larger pattern of forestalled violence in the novel. This pattern has its origin in Part 1 as Blake recruits participants for his coordinated, armed rebellion against the institution of slavery in the United States while simultaneously instructing his co-conspirators that the time is not yet ripe for action.

It is reinforced in Part 2 by his sudden departure from Cuba onboard a slave ship bound for Africa. Signing on as first-mate on the Vulture, Blake justifies his decision to leave Cuba to his friend and cousin, Placido, explaining that on the return voyage he will be able to incite a rebellion among the recently enslaved Africans at sea where the slavers’ are particularly vulnerable. In doing so, he hopes to seize control of the ship for use in the impending war against international slavery while simultaneously recruiting the new slaves to join his army of liberation upon their arrival in either the United States or Cuba. As with the unrealized rebellion that concludes the novel, preparations for violence rise to a fevered pitch onboard the Vulture, but they do not ultimately come to pass. Instead, a storm approaches and dissipates the captives’ violent mood.
While the slave voyage and its aborted rebellion can be read as an example of Delany’s oft-noted “awkwardness” as a novelist, they should not be dismissed as an inconsequential sidebar—which thematically or formally—to the larger development of Blake’s narrative action or didactic message. Notably, the voyage to Africa and back allows Delany to expand his representation of international slavery to include the brutal treatment of slaves in the barracoons on the African coast as well as to represent the attendant horrors of the middle passage. Blake’s sea travels can thus be seen as a crucial if awkward linchpin that works to uphold the novel’s thematic and formal coherence. Or, as Robert Levine argues, “[t]hough Blake can seem lacking in formal unity in the manner of a picaresque novel, the chipper and its group of owners work to hold the novel together” (Representative 191). Blake’s voyage to Africa, or more generally the image of the sailing ship, thus traces the continual interchange and mutual influence between geographically isolated peoples of the Black Atlantic.

The conjunction of the image of the ship and the threat (if not the actual realization) of slave violence in Blake points to a larger cultural discourse in which slave rebellion was frequently associated with sea travel. As Sundquist notes, “[a]side from the revolt of Turner, the instances of slave uprising that most drew public attention in the late antebellum period took place aboard ships and involved international rights entailing long court disputes” (Wake 176). Despite periodic uprisings, no organized slave rebellion on U.S. American soil successfully liberated its conspirators. This was not true for rebellions at sea, however. As Maggie Montesinos Sale documents in The Slumbering Volcano, rebellions on the Spanish ship Amistad and the U.S. American ship Creole, both of which resulted in the eventual freeing of all involved, were widely reported in U.S. newspapers
of the time. Representations of such rebellions were not limited to periodicals: they also garnered notice in the fiction of the day. In the remaining pages of this analysis, I turn my attention to Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” and Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, two antebellum short texts that fictionalize historical rebellions onboard slave ships. In doing so, I follow the movement laid out in *Blake* and shift the geographic focus of my analysis from its previous anchor in the United States to a new center that effectively internationalizes the problem of U.S. American slavery. At the same time, I expand my examination of the confluence of geography and fictional considerations of slave rebellion to include texts in which violence is neither abandoned nor forestalled as it ultimately was in *Dred* and *Blake*. In contrast, the plots of both “The Heroic Slave” and *Benito Cereno* include slave rebellions that are actualized as well as theorized, justified, and planned.

The eruption of violence in Douglass’s and Melville’s narratives is therefore suggestive of a literary convention that associates slave rebellion and racial violence with the sea rather than with U.S. American soil. Which brings us back to the epigraph to the current chapter and Tom Grant’s argument in “The Heroic Slave” that the ocean inspires seemingly tractable slaves to turn to violence once they leave dry land. A rigid association of organized resistance with the sea is of course historically inaccurate. It fails to account for rebellions that were planned and executed on land, both in the United States and, more frequently, in the West Indies and Brazil. It also fails to recognize the innumerable subtle, and not-so-subtle, acts of resistance by slaves throughout the history of slavery in the United States. What it does do, however, is highlight the way in which
cultural dictates promote (one might even say, determine) the development of plots in fictional texts.

In the following sections I begin to explore this conjunction of slave violence with an ocean setting in antebellum fiction. I focus primarily on “The Heroic Slave” and *Benito Cereno* in order to examine from another angle the way spatial landscapes give rise to narrative action rather than simply serving as a backdrop upon which each text’s plot plays out. At first glance, these two narratives seem like the obvious product of an increasing tendency among antislavery theorists and writers to consider violent rebellion as an appropriate means of combating slavery. While I do not want to discount entirely this historical momentum toward violence in the 1840s and 1850s, I believe that it is too easily emphasized at the expense of a careful examination of an ongoing politics of narrative violence that is as dependent on space as it is on time. In doing so, I draw upon recent geographers’ efforts to redefine historicism as an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory that actively submerges and peripheralizes the geographical or spatial imagination. This definition does not deny the extraordinary power and importance of historiography as a mode of emancipatory insight, but identifies historicism with the creation of a critical silence, an implicit subordination of space to time that obscures geographical interpretations of the changeability of the social world and intrudes upon every level of theoretical discourse. (Soja 15)

As I see it, a rigid literary historicism runs the risk of flattening out spatial demands on narrative representations of slave violence that are only partially explained by temporal evolutions.

In *The Slumbering Volcano*, Sale argues that “at the historical moment at which Douglass’s short story was written, published, and received, slave rebellion was virtually unrepresentable in national forums, and further, the righteousness of such an act was
unimaginable to most U.S. Americans” (175). By turning our attention to literary
geographies, we can see that the politics of narrative violence is more complex than
Sale’s formulation suggests. Sale is surely correct that few white readers in the United
States were likely to interpret violence by U.S. American slaves against their white
masters as a form of heroic self-liberation. But I believe she misses the mark with her
claim that slave rebellion was “virtually unrepresentable” during the antebellum period.
As we have seen in earlier chapters, slavery’s defenders and critics both had to negotiate
the complex, and often contradictory, significations of violence. Abolitionists were
extremely wary of representing violent rebellion in their writings. Slavery’s champions
were less reticent to do so. As I discuss in greater detail in the Chapter 1, Thomas R.
Gray’s editorial practice in The Confessions of Nat Turner draws the reader’s attention to
the brutality implicit in Nat Turner’s descriptions of individual acts of violence
performed by the Southampton rebels. Proslavery newspapers of the day similarly
included graphic accounts of real and imagined acts of violence by the rebel slaves. Such
attention to the brutality of Nat Turner’s followers hearkens back to U.S. American
periodicals’ depictions of the brutal treatment European colonialists received at the hands
of their slaves during the Haitian revolution, a topic that remained current in proslavery
newspapers and propaganda throughout the antebellum period.

Proslavery writers displayed a similar willingness to imagine and represent slave
violence after the Creole revolt. Sale, herself, documents such representative practices,
differentiating between narrative treatments of violence by slavery’s advocates and its
critics. She writes: “In the Creole archive, only proslavery papers and pamphlets
represented violence after the initial reports of rebellion. Supporters of the Creole rebels
instead focused on reasons for and interpretations of the rebellion” (Volcano 193). Thus, an analytic focus on the proslavery and antislavery political messages of antebellum narratives partially accounts for individual writers’ ability (and willingness) to represent violence. It does not tell the whole story, however. That is, it would be inadequate to say simply that slave rebellion was “unrepresentable” among writers who were sympathetic to calls for abolition. Without a doubt, slave violence posed a particular dilemma for these writers, but it was not wholly impossible to address.

We cannot view these representations of rebellion as simply an indication of a historical evolution that allows, finally, for actualized slave violence. In strict historical terms, the publications of “The Heroic Slave” (1853) and Benito Cereno (1855) predate the publications of Dred (1856) and Blake (1859-1862) in which rebellion does not occur. Nor can we determine that Douglass and Melville were somehow braver or more militant than Delany and Stowe in their willingness to include organized slave violence. Both Delany and Stowe give voice to militant espousals of violence in their narratives. They also provide sophisticated justifications for such violence as a means of achieving a radical restructuring of slaveholding societies. The principal difference between the texts that do follow through with violent uprisings and those that do not is traceable back to their geographic landscape rather than to their subject matter. The violence considered is basically of the same kind: it calls for inflicting injury or death on white characters, while inviting retaliatory violence against black characters. It just erupts at sea rather than on U.S. American soil.

The question then becomes why sea rebellions occur more frequently in antislavery fiction than rebellions on land. Can this literary trend be seen to have its
origin in historical events? That is, did the ocean invite historical rebellion in a way that dry land did not? And, as a corollary, do antislavery narratives simply reflect this historical correspondence? Or does the correspondence between fictional representations of organized slave violence and an ocean landscape depend more upon a politics of narrative form than upon strict historical precedent? As we will see in the following sections, the answer to each of these questions is a rather muddled yes and no. It is the goal of the current chapter to begin to work through the muddle.

From the mid-nineteenth-century vantage point of many U.S. Americans, antebellum rebellions that succeeded in liberating their participants were likely to take place onboard slave ships. The more famous of these rebellions received widespread coverage in newspapers of the day. The ocean provided practical and legal limits to the power of slaveholders, as was demonstrated by the *Amistad* and *Creole* rebellions. These limits were necessarily tied up in “a socially-based spatiality,” in which the vastness of physical nature worked against slaveholders’ attempts to impose their social organizations upon the landscape. At sea, state power mechanisms were extremely limited, and the ratio of slaves to their captors was often much higher and, therefore, more conducive to success. In this way, slave ships resembled Caribbean slave communities where slaves outnumbered their colonial masters, often in excess of nine or ten to one. Such disproportionate population numbers made it much more difficult for slaveholders to put down rebellions once they broke out. Eugene D. Genovese argues persuasively in *From Rebellion to Revolution* that slaves in the Americas understood this. As a result, the islands of the West Indies witnessed decidedly more extensive and more frequent rebellions than did slaveholding territories in the United States. This was true,
not because slaves in the United States were inherently more docile, but because their chances for success were clearly much lower.

In addition, the ocean fostered a legal ambiguity as it inevitably internationalized what otherwise was presented as a national dispute over slavery. Both the Amistad and the Creole rebellions evolved into international legal battles that turned on arguments about how to interpret individual countries’ laws in a landscape where no country held dominion. Thus, the ocean can be seen as the ultimate wildspace that resists all efforts by the adherents of slavery to impose their hegemonic or legal control over it. Zeroing in on this spatial ambiguity, William Jay, an antislavery activist, published a pamphlet in which he argued that once the Creole sailed away from the Virginia port, the slaves onboard were subject only to the “universal law of nature.” He insisted that “the case is stronger for Liberty on the ocean than on the land—for the Earth may be, has been, subjugated by the iron hand of Power; but the free, the untamed Sea, disdains the puny grasp of the mightiest of earthly despots” (qtd. in Sundquist, Wake 117).

Conway Robinson, a Virginia lawyer, offered slightly different legal reasoning but reached a similar conclusion that the Creole slaves were entitled to their freedom because they claimed it at sea rather than at home. According to Robinson, U.S. American slaveholders lost their legal protections to their slaves once the slaves were transported beyond the slaveholding territory of the United States. Slavery was a local law that could not be enforced outside of the legal jurisdiction of slaveholding powers. Thus, as Sale observes, “Robinson’s argument locates a geographical boundary between slave and free territories as the site of the slaves’ transformation from property to
persons, from the object of slaveholders’ claims of property rights to subjects of their own narrative of liberation” (“Useful,” 35).

Neither of these legal arguments supporting the Creole rebels’ claims to freedom attacks the basic right of U.S. Americans to consign other human beings to hereditary slavery. Instead, they are predicated on the assumption that spatiality, or the commingling of physical nature and social relationships, determine human fate. Under this formulation, the territory of the United States with all of its attendant legal and political systems is conducive to slavery. The ocean, which defies such human-created organizational systems, is not. In other words, what a difference place makes.

Which brings us to a specific consideration of the way literary landscapes work in “The Heroic Slave” and Benito Cereno. At first glance, the settings for both narratives seem predetermined by history. In “The Heroic Slave,” Douglass provides an imaginative biography of Madison Washington, the reputed leader of the successful slave rebellion that occurred onboard the domestic slave-ship Creole. In Benito Cereno, Melville fictionalizes a historical ship rebellion in which the slave rebels were initially successful in wresting control of the ship from their Spanish masters. Both writers’ choices of geographic locations correspond closely to the sites of their historical precedent and, therefore, seem designed to add a dimension of geographical realism, or historical accuracy, to their fictional considerations of slave violence. But does this easy, one-to-one relationship between narrative landscape and geographic precedent adequately explain the reasons for, or the politics of, a generic pattern that assigns slave rebellion to an ocean setting? After all, the history of the Caribbean and South America is rife with occurrences of slave unrest on land as well as at sea. In addition, both Dred and Blake
draw upon a history of domestic slave violence and clearly articulate a pro-violence, pro-rebellion ideology that finds firm grounding in the United States. But I would argue that it is no coincidence that neither of these novels, at least in their extant forms, finally depicts such a rebellion, either beginning on U.S. soil or spreading back to it. The politics of narrative place in the nineteenth-century United States seem to have precluded such plot development.

It therefore seems increasingly plausible that Douglass and Melville chose slave mutinies as their subject matter, not because they were the only—or even the most obvious—examples of slave unrest, but because only a sea landscape allowed for morally complex representations of violent conflict between slaves and their masters. Or, to revise Sale’s formulation, antislavery writers in the United States found heroic slave rebellion virtually unrepresentable unless it was pushed off-shore. This supports the argument advanced by Franco Moretti that literary geographies, in effect, determine what can and cannot be included in fictional narratives. Especially relevant here is Moretti’s argument that “without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply impossible” (100). Or, more specifically, that

*each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story.* There is no picaresque of the border, or *Bildungsroman* of the European in Africa: *this* specific form needs *that* specific space—the road, the metropolis. Space is not ‘outside’ of narrative, then, but an internal force, that shapes it from within … what happens depends a lot on where it happens. (emphasis in original, 70).

Bringing such a formulation to readings of antislavery fiction, I would argue that representations of rebellion offshore in the Atlantic or far-away in the southern Pacific differ substantively from images of rebellion in Southampton or Charleston or New Orleans. Thus, violent slave rebellion can be seen to signify differently enough, for
enough of an antebellum audience, that it proved “representable” when placed at sea but “unrepresentable” if placed at home. This parallel between an ocean landscape and actualized violence provides us with a glimpse of the way in which cultural dictates became inscribed in literary form, thus structuring antislavery writers’ imaginative depictions of a violent challenge to slavery in the Americas.

In “The Heroic Slave,” Douglass develops a fictionalized biography of Madison Washington, the purported leader of the rebellion onboard the slave ship Creole in the year 1841. Little is known of Washington’s life, before or after the rebellion. With only a couple of contemporary newspaper accounts from which to draw, Douglass characterizes Washington simultaneously as a specific, historical individual and as a symbolic figure. In the opening frame of the short story, he describes how he constructed his portrait from “marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities” (26). Divided into four parts, the narrative follows Washington on his journey from Virginia to Ohio and Canada, back to Virginia, and then finally to Nassau in the British Bahamas. Rather than centering the narrative on the rebellion at sea that made Washington famous, Douglass draws upon conventions of fugitive slave narratives, emphasizing Washington’s spiritual and physical quest for a land of freedom. While the Creole rebellion corresponds to the climax of the narrative, it seems an unusually muted climax, especially given its subject matter. The violent takeover of the ship occurs off-stage and is diegetically reported by a character who admits that he was unconscious for most of it. The cumulative focus of the

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1 Two possible sources for Douglass are an article from Friend of Man, which was republished in the April 4, 1842 issue of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, that reported that Washington had escaped to Canada but returned to Virginia to rescue his wife, and a June 1842 article in the Liberator “Madison Washington: Another Chapter in His History” that similarly claimed that Washington had lived in Canada but returned to Virginia in an effort to free his wife.
narrative thus lies in Madison Washington’s extensive journey in search of freedom rather than in his final, violent challenge to his captors.

As Part I opens, Mr. Listwell, a “Northern traveller through the state of Virginia” overhears Washington crying out against his enslavement. Washington’s laments and subsequent decision to follow the North Star to Canada have a transformative effect on Listwell, who embraces the title of abolitionist for the first time. In Part II, the two men are brought together again after a passage of five years when Washington coincidentally stops at Listwell’s Ohio farmhouse in search of a place to stay for the night. Listwell provides him with lodging and then carries him secretly in his wagon to Cleveland where the fugitive from slavery boards a steamer for Canada. While together, Washington describes for Listwell the harrowing events of his life in Virginia since their last meeting. Part III recounts the events of a year later when Listwell is again traveling through Virginia. Stopping at a tavern outside of Richmond, he unexpectedly comes across Washington who tells a tale of reverse flight. Rather than remaining in the Windsor settlement in Canada West, Washington returned to his master’s plantation in an effort to free his wife. He describes turning to fight his pursuers after they kill his wife, being captured, and then being placed in a slave coffle bound for the Richmond slave market. While Listwell watches, Washington and his fellow slaves in the coffle are forced aboard a domestic slave ship bound for New Orleans. Just as Washington prepares to board the Creole, Listwell slips him three files and then determines to leave Virginia for his home in Ohio.

With this departure, Listwell drops out of the narrative. His role as cultural interpreter for Douglass’s white audiences is subsequently filled by Tom Grant, the
fictionalized first mate of the *Creole*, who, in Part IV, recounts the events that led to the freeing of all slaves onboard. With the grudging admiration of a participant in the domestic slave trade, Grant describes Washington’s heroic leadership as he uses Listwell’s files to free himself and eighteen others from their fetters. Once free, Washington seizes control of the ship from his captors and then contains the violence so there are no unnecessary deaths. Grant then recounts how the rebel leader steered the ship through a furious storm to Nassau where he knew slavery to have been outlawed. His tale confirms in the narrative Olaudah Equiano’s observation that “[i]t was a very dangerous thing to let a Negro know navigation.” The narrative concludes with Grant’s description of the slaves disembarking from the *Creole*. He last sees them marching away from the ship, and, by extension, from slavery in the United States, “under the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, MADISON WASHINGTON” (emphasis in original, 69).²

Nowhere in the narrative, however, is there a description of the “freedom” the former slaves find in the Bahamas—or in the northern states or Canada—where legalized slavery is absent. This absence of represented freedom suggests that escaping slavery and finding freedom are not necessarily the same. Despite the release of nearly a hundred and thirty slaves in the final scene, a picture of freedom remains elusive. Freedom is discussed, argued and fought for, even claimed, but it is never fully described or, better yet, represented.

² Douglass’s retelling of the *Creole* rebellion includes one significant change from historical events. In “The Heroic Slave,” all of the slaves, including Madison Washington, are immediately freed on their arrival in the Bahamas. Historically, the nineteen slaves whom crew members of the *Creole* identified as active participants in the rebellion were jailed. After five months, they were released because of lack of evidence. U.S. American authorities protested the loss of all of the slaves. In 1855, two years after Douglass published “The Heroic Slave,” an international arbitration panel mandated that the British authorities pay reparations to the U.S. slaveholders for the loss of their “property.”
Notably, the same is true for the rebellion that brings about the slaves’ release. As we have seen above, Douglass’s inclusion of actualized slave rebellion is unusual in antislavery fiction. It is therefore telling that the rebellion occurs at sea, outside of the geographic borders of the United States. It is also telling that it is described only very obliquely, and by a man who was unconscious throughout most of it. The entire event is related in a single paragraph:

“The attack began just about twilight in the evening … I stood just about midship, on the larboard side. The captain was pacing the quarter-deck on the star-board side, in company with Mr. Jameson, the owner of most of the slaves on board. Both were armed. I had just told the men to lay aloft, and was looking to see my orders obeyed, when I heard the discharge of a pistol on the starboard side; and turning suddenly around, the very deck seemed covered with fiends from the pit. The nineteen negroes were all on deck, with their broken fetters in their hands, rushing in all directions. I put my hand quickly in my pocket to draw out my jack-knife; but before I could draw it, I was knocked senseless to the deck. When I came to myself, (which I did in a few minutes, I suppose, for it was yet quite light,) there was not a white man on deck. The sailors were all aloft in the rigging, and dared not come down. Captain Clarke and Mr. Jameson lay stretched on the quarter-deck,—both dying,—while Madison himself stood at the helm unhurt.” (65-66)

Clearly, the slaves used violence to gain control of the ship, but it is a violence that remains largely undepicted. The only overt symbols of violence Grant mentions are those belonging to the whites onboard. The shot he hears presumably came from either the captain’s or Mr. Jameson’s weapon that he had noted earlier. Grant himself attempts to fight the unarmed slaves with his jack-knife, but he is prevented from doing so by an unnamed person whom we assume was one of the rebels but are never explicitly told so. Employing the passive voice, Grant explains that he was “knocked senseless” without attributing the action required to produce such a result to any one person. In this way, the violence of the slave rebellion is passed over in the short story as much as possible.
Washington’s heroism thus seems to lie less in his striking out violently to win freedom than in his ability to contain that violence and sail the ship away from U.S. American legal jurisdiction.

Recent critics of “The Heroic Slave” have come to a general consensus regarding the cultural work performed in the narrative. With certain shifts in emphasis, they conclude that Douglass attempts to rewrite the national mythology of the United States to make room for rebel slaves in its celebration of revolution against tyranny. In American Anatomies, Robyn Wiegman explores the ideological importance of rewriting this cultural narrative:

By setting the mythology of national origin against the transaction of human beings into property, Douglass casts an ironic addendum to the rhetoric of universal suffrage that accompanies America’s nativity narrative, revealing the deeply profound ideological breach on which “liberty” under a slave economy rests. To repair this breach, “The Heroic Slave” seeks to reclaim the slave’s unwritten human nativity, demonstrating through geographical symbolics (Virginia) and heroic qualities (manliness, strength, and bravery), the slave’s embodiment of the nation’s revolutionary ideals. (71-72)

Krista Walter makes a similar point: “In this work, Douglass sets out to reclaim a genuine republican language and ideology for the purposes of abolition. He also aims to recuperate what he believes is America’s true history—ironically, in the form of fiction—and thereby symbolically liberate the rebel slaves whose story would otherwise remain trapped in the chattel records” (237). Such rewriting of “the mythology of national origin” is characterized as a critical first step in promoting widespread political action.

I agree with the above readings, but I would argue that they miss a very important kind of cultural work Douglass performs in “The Heroic Slave.” They focus primarily on the narrative as a rhetorical argument against the racist ideology that justified and upheld
slavery in the United States. This approach to literary analysis of slave texts, while unquestionably important, focuses on the way slavery is interpreted (morally, economically, politically, socially) without addressing the complex ways slave resistance and the ensuing freedom are shown. Ira Berlin is surely right when he writes in *Generations of Captivity* that “[f]reedom was more than the negation of slavery” (243). But the question remains what is freedom if not simply the absence of slavery. Which leads to a corollary question: which route out of slavery leads to the truest freedom? Douglass’s answers in “The Heroic Slave” are not easily found in the narrative’s discursive arguments. Instead, they can be glimpsed through a series of stop-and-go movements across the literary landscape that comes to equate freedom with a continued search for place (which necessitates unfettered mobility) and slavery with restricted movements. Freedom in the narrative is therefore less about roots and more about mobility, less about historical places and more about the actions needed to forge a new place. Even as the portrait of freedom fails to settle in individual locations, it remains intricately tied to the geographic landscape.

In the opening scene of the narrative, the geographic landscape seems to break down into a simple binary opposition between freedom in the North and slavery in the South. Mr. Listwell is introduced to the reader, not by name, but as “a Northern traveller” (26). Similarly, Madison Washington invokes the North Star as his guide to freedom. As we have seen in previous chapters, such brief geographic allusions serve as short-cuts in a cultural lexicon that equates moving North with antislavery sentiment and freedom. But even as it invokes this oppositional relationship between the North and the South,

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3 Emphasizing this, the visual image of freedom in the narrative becomes the “broken fetters” the slaves hold in their hands at the commencement of the rebellion onboard the *Creole*. 
Douglass’s narrative complicates it, shattering such binary thinking into a knotty continuum of freedom and unfreedom that resists simple, regional generalization. As we will see, a superficial distinction between North and South belies the complexity of Washington’s quest for freedom. His quest works within a plot that moves from place to place in an elusive search for geographic locations conducive to unqualified freedom.

In order to understand more fully the way Douglass’s narrative attempts to forge a positive freedom, it is useful to examine the conjunction between Washington’s quest for liberty and his physical movements through space. To do so, we foreground issues of geography through two interrelated methodological steps. First, we explore Douglass’s treatment of individual locations with special consideration to what locations are included, how these locations are depicted, and the larger cultural significations of such choices. The second step involves mapping Washington’s movements in order to isolate possible routes to freedom within the narrative. These routes highlight Douglass’s efforts to imagine creatively a pathway out of slavery and toward freedom. As we can now see, this pathway represents the interface between geography and ideology, physical movement and political argumentation. Which brings us back to David C. Miller and his argument in *Dark Eden* that spatial landscapes are formative forces in cultural sensibilities rather than mere reflections or backgrounds for the stories a culture uses to make sense of itself. Or, as Miller explains it,

> [t]he landscape is not only a free field for the projection of unconscious content—not just symptomatic of the culture’s inner life—but, because of its ambiguous features, it actually provokes projections and even helps determine their form. It can therefore be viewed as an active force in the unfolding of cultural sensibility during a period when Americans still looked primarily to nature for their understanding of the world. It figures among the instruments for mapping the way through regions of difficult social reality. (88-89)
Isolating individual settings in “The Heroic Slave” can be tricky because the plot development depends upon several layers of narration that each has its own time sequence and geographic landscape. The first layer corresponds to the narrator’s present. For the most part, the narrator, who is closely identified with the author, does not openly participate in the events of the story. Instead his role seems to be to describe in the past tense chance meetings between individual characters, in which they recount for one another events that have already occurred. The recounted events figure as individual steps in Washington’s search for freedom. These meetings between characters form a second layer of narration, while the events they describe constitute a third layer. Washington’s travels out of slavery toward freedom are therefore twice-removed in time from the narrator’s present.

What makes this confusing is that the narrative frequently occurs in three different temporal moments and geographic locations. In doing so, it incorporates the different cultural significations associated with each moment and location. The setting of the first level of narration is never explicitly addressed. Despite the opening frame and several brief instances in which the narrator injects himself into the telling (and retelling) of Washington’s story, the narrator’s present is not rooted in geographic space. The second level, however, moves between locations that are presented only in “stereotyped generalizations”: Virginia and Ohio. In this level, the narrator describes conversations between characters as they, in turn, describe events that have already occurred. This diegetic level of narration is initially set in Virginia (Part I), is then shifted to Ohio (Part

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4 This is an oversimplification, of course, because the story certainly was tied to space through its publication in the North Star and Autographs for Freedom. But, it is accurate to say that the first level of the narrative presents itself as existing outside of space.
II), before returning once again to Virginia (Parts III and IV). The narrative events of the third level depend upon and are tied to a broader geographic landscape. In this third layer, Parts I and II correspond to Washington’s experiences in slavery and as a maroon slave in Virginia; Part III to the events that occur on his return from Canada to Virginia in search of his wife; and Part IV to the events that unfold after the Creole leaves port in Richmond en route to New Orleans. All together, the third level of narration touches upon actions that take place in a slaveholding territory, a northern state, Canada, at sea, and then, briefly, in a Nassau harbor.

Through this three-leveled narration, Douglass’s tale follows Washington on an extensive journey that skips from one culturally significant location to another. In the opening frame, the narrator argues for the importance of geography and its role in determining human fate. He focuses his attention on “[t]he State of Virginia” where much of the action in both the second and third narrative layer occurs. He initially characterizes Virginia as a semi-mythical place that produces statesmen out of ordinary white men and slaves out of great black men:

With Virginia for his birth-place, even a man of ordinary parts, on account of the general partiality for her sons, easily rises to eminent stations … Yet not all the great ones of the Old Dominion have, by the fact of their birth-place escaped undeserved obscurity. By some strange neglect, one of the truest, manliest, and bravest of her children, —one who, in after years, will, I think command the pen of genius to set his merits forth, holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox. (25)

5 Actually, if we follow Gérard Genette’s formula for narrative voice, our levels become even more complicated because Douglass’s narrative would include four levels instead of three. Douglass’s act of writing the short story corresponds to the first level, which Genette labels extradiegetic. The third-person narrator’s act of narration corresponds to the second (diegetic) level of narration. The conversations between Madison Washington and Mr. Listwell and between Tom Grant and Jack Williams, in which they describe events that have already happened, corresponds to the third (metadiegetic) level of narration. Finally, the events that are described make up the fourth (meta-metadiegetic) level of narration.
This symbolic characterization of the Virginia landscape is reinforced in the first scene in which Mr. Listwell overhears Washington’s soliloquy describing the despair he feels because of his life as a slave. It takes place in an idyllic, nonspecific spot beside “a sparkling brook, near the edge of a dark pine forest” (26). There are no geographic, architectural, or cultural markers to narrow down the location beyond the narrator’s initial observation that Listwell was traveling through the state of Virginia. The specific location does not matter. It matters only that it is Virginia. But in that, it matters a great deal as Washington’s later travels across the state demonstrate.

In his analysis, Robert B. Stepto seizes upon this symbolic functioning of literary space, arguing that “‘The Heroic Slave’ is divided into four parts, and in each Virginia becomes less and less of a setting (especially of a demographic or even historical sort) and more of a ‘charged field’ as Victor Turner would say—for symbolic encounters between slaves and abolitionists or Virginians and Virginians” (362). It is true that specific geographic sites in the narrative function symbolically. It is also true that Douglass’s depiction of place in the narrative can hardly be confused with geographical verisimilitude. But, it is important to recognize his turn to a kind of geographical factualism that we have seen in both Dred and Blake in an effort to stabilize and provide cultural validity to his portrait of Washington. In fact, the Virginia landscape in Douglass’s narrative is tied to real-world events in two ways. First, Douglass’s fictionalized Washington sticks to the general geographic path of the historical Washington, at least as it was reported in the newspapers of the day. He travels from a Virginia plantation, to Ohio, to Canada West, back to Richmond, and then finally onto Nassau as his historical source was reported to have done (Figure 5.1). And, contrary to
Stepto’s argument, the geographic locations become progressively more specific (if not more fully described) and, as a result, increasingly rooted in historical event and cultural signification.

In the second level of narration, the first two meetings between Listwell and Washington occur in the notably nonspecific locations of a peaceful Virginia forest and an unidentified Ohio farmhouse. In these meetings, Washington relates his experiences as a slave and as a fugitive from slavery. Like the representation of Virginia in Part I, Douglass’s description of Ohio and the Listwell’s home in Part II functions symbolically.

![Figure 5.1 Madison Washington’s Movements](image)

Figure 5.1 Madison Washington’s Movements

It is not designed to signify a specific location, but instead to be suggestive of a representative abolitionist home that lies on the geographic route from the slave South to freedom in Canada. In contrast, the second half of the short story is increasingly anchored to specific locations. Part III begins on a “great road from Petersburg, Virginia to
Richmond, and only about fifteen miles from the latter place” (47). It ends on a wharf in Richmond from which the slaves embarked onboard the *Creole* for the southern interior. Part IV is placed in “the Marine Coffee-house at Richmond” (60). There, Grant describes the events that occurred in the open ocean, “only about sixty miles from Nassau” (67) to which they subsequently sailed.

The Virginia landscape is tied to real-world events in yet another way. Its symbolic functioning is enabled by an evolutionary process that creates an “etymology of locations.” In this process, historical events, as well as cultural rewritings of such events, leave their traces on specific places, making them forever different than they were before. These places become new again, signifying differently within the cultural discourse, and thus inviting new types of narrative action. Or, to put it differently, history becomes inscribed in geographic space.

In the opening frame, the narrator invokes three famous Virginians: Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. He does not mention two other native Virginians, but their presence informs the narrative through geographic and cultural associations. As Washington travels through Virginia’s “dismal swamps” and the capital of Richmond, he moves toward his destiny as a slave rebel in a spatial landscape that is forever associated with the activities of two other famous slave rebels. That is, his physical and psychological journey to organized slave rebellion occurs in a literary landscape that is saturated with the cultural traces Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser left behind. In fact, Douglass deviates from his historical source by moving the *Creole’s* point of departure from the historically accurate Hampton Roads to Richmond. In doing so, he chooses a more recognizable setting, especially for a northern audience that is
likely to be relatively unfamiliar with the Virginia landscape. At the same time, he 
disrupts the logic of his sea voyage by moving its point of departure from a port town on 
the Atlantic to a town many miles up the James River. What he loses in logic, however, 
he gains in cultural mythology: he places Washington in a location that figured 
prominently in both Gabriel’s rebellion and the suppression of the Southampton 
rebellion.  

As a reading of earlier chapters illustrates, Washington’s journey is hardly unique 
in antislavery narratives in moving through geographic regions haunted by the memory of 
past slave rebels. For instance, it calls to mind Blake’s extensive travels in Delany’s 
novel. Like Blake, Washington runs away from slavery. He lives for five years in the 
“dismal swamps” of Virginia in the vicinity of his master’s plantation before following 
the trail north out of legalized slavery to the border state of Ohio and then finally onto a 
fugitive slave settlement in Canada West. Also like Blake, he returns south in an effort to 
rescue others from slavery. Both men sail aboard slave ships and finally work to secure 
their own as well as their shipmates’ freedom in a new home outside of the United States. 
In comparing Washington’s and Blake’s travels, I do not mean to equate them in any 
quantitative way; Blake’s are certainly much more extensive in breadth and duration. But 
it seems clear that Delany and Douglass turn to similar journey motifs in order to 
embrace within their respective narratives the alternative geographic routes that slaves 
in the United States followed in search of freedom. These routes function symbolically, 

6 At this point, it is important to note that none of the locations Washington passes through are new to our 
study until he arrives in the port of Nassau. Each location appears in one or more of the texts we have 
considered in previous chapters. Most notable, perhaps, is Washington’s description of “the dismal 
swamps” of his native state. These swamps raise the specter of slave violence long before Washington 
himself seems to entertain the idea of organized rebellion.
of course, but they are also rooted in place as they identify real-world pathways potentially available to slaves.

Despite these similarities, the tone and ostensible goals of Blake’s and Washington’s travels are markedly different. From the outset, Blake’s rapid movements from one location to the next are part of a larger plan to organize violent resistance to slavery. His cumulative journey leads by design to the eve of widespread slave rebellion. Throughout the novel, Blake is first and foremost a slave rebel. He assumes the role and movements of a maroon and fugitive slave to advance his chosen plan for an international slave rebellion. For Blake, there is no doubt: the only way out of slavery is through violence, and the only way to effective, widespread violence is through unfettered, rapid movement by a single protagonist.

Washington’s travels do not display a similar devotion to a single, systematic plan. Instead, the narrative’s attention to different sites of freedom resembles the narrative development in *Dred*. As Stowe does in *Dred*, Douglass catalogs possibilities for freedom as Washington experiences them in succession. In Part II of the narrative, Washington recounts how, after his first attempt to travel north out of legalized slavery failed, he decided to “remain in the vicinity” of his master’s plantation so that he could be close to his wife. For five years, he lived as a maroon in the neighboring “dismal swamps” (37-38). This offered him limited freedoms in the midst of a slaveholding territory. He was able to live outside of the slave system, moving around at night and seeing his wife periodically. But, as it did in *Dred*, maroon life proved unstable, threatened from without at all times. Washington finally lost the security presented by the wild-space when a massive fire broke out, making it uninhabitable. He then decided to
flee to the north, just as the inhabitants of the maroon community in *Dred* do when the
slaveholders succeed in penetrating the Great Dismal Swamp and killing their rebel
leader.

While Canada represents the final destination in Stowe’s novel, Washington’s
stay is notably brief. He returns to Virginia in an attempt to rescue his wife from slavery.
Such reversal of the flight north was not unheard of historically as individual conductors
on the Underground Railroad made numerous forays into slaveholding territories in an
effort to ferry as many fugitives out of slaveholding states as possible. Back in Virginia,
Washington is captured and placed in a slave coffle bound for New Orleans. It is only at
this point that he assumes his final role of rebel leader.

The third level of narration, which encompasses his extended travels, thus
documents his movements through four sites of radical resistance: escape, maroonage,
flight north, and violent rebellion. Such successive movements serve to juxtapose the
sites of resistance in a way that highlights their relative merits in advancing the goals of
freedom. Implicit in this juxtaposition is an evaluative process suggesting that no single
plan of resistance as yet takes precedence over the others within the narrative logic.
Madison Washington may have been historically determined to be a slave rebel in
Douglass’s story, but the rhetorical momentum is not cumulative as it is in *Blake*. “The
Heroic Slave” does not seem similarly predestined to culminate in violent rebellion. The
cultural work performed within the narrative remains open-ended, reading like a work-in-
progress, or an ongoing attempt at understanding and imagining ways out of slavery,

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7 Henry Bibb recounts a similar movement south in his *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*,
which was widely read in abolitionist circles. He describes how he returned to slaveholding states from
Canada on several occasions to assist his wife in escaping her captors. Like Washington, Bibb is captured
and subsequently sold to slave traders.
rather than an argument for a specific plan of resistance. Douglass, like Stowe, therefore seems to turn to fiction to see anew the possibilities for successful resistance. 8

The fictional narrative also provides a forum in which Douglass grapples with envisioning what true freedom for all African Americans might, in the end, look like. I realize that creatively envisioning freedom may not be a self-evident goal in “The Heroic Slave.” I must therefore justify my contention that it is part of the unfinished, or open-ended, cultural work Douglass performs in the narrative. He unquestionably labels Windsor and Nassau, both under British rule, as geographic sites of freedom. But, notably, neither township is a setting for narrative action. The plot leads Washington to both locations but does not follow him inside to document or describe what he finds there. In the first instance, the narrator focuses on Mr. Listwell’s return “home that day” rather than pursuing Washington as he crosses out of the United States and, thus, out of the reach of Virginia slaveholders (45-46). In the second instance, the narrator once again assumes the perspective of a white witness that can take us to the threshold between U.S. American slavery and freedom under British rule, but no farther. The narrative concludes with Tom Grant’s description of the procession of slaves marching along the Nassau wharf away from the slave ship. It therefore concludes at just that moment when the land of freedom would necessarily shift from an idea to a material place. As readers, we are told that therein lies freedom, but it is not shown to us.

It is true that such depictions are outside of the narrative frame. But it is also true that such narrative silences are not politically or ideologically neutral. When seen as part

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8 In promoting this idea of the problem-solving function of literature, I draw upon Althusser’s argument that “the specific nature of literature consists in the transformations to which it subjects the categories of dominant ideology, distancing them from within, providing a ‘vision’ of them at work so that, within the literary work, the reader is to an extent divorced from the habitual mental associations which the forms of dominant ideology foster” (qtd. in Bennett, 42).
of a larger pattern in antislavery literature, they are suggestive of the imperfect freedoms available to the descendents of Africa throughout the New World. They also point to the difficulty of imagining or representing a freedom that transcends racism and oppression, especially to an audience that, despite its antislavery leanings, may not embrace full equality between whites and blacks. This absence of represented freedom in “The Heroic Slave” hearkens back to Frances Smith Foster’s observation in *Witnessing Slavery* that many fugitive slave narratives abruptly conclude when the narrator reaches the northern states or Canada. Smith reads such conclusions as evidence that a representation of life in the North would weaken the narrative’s rhetorical argument by requiring narrators to acknowledge the imperfect freedom they find. I suspect that Douglass faced a similar dilemma in his work of fiction: the difficulty of imagining and depicting freedom in a context thoroughly saturated with widespread racism if not with legalized slavery.

In our map of Washington’s several journeys, we are able to see movement as a kind of revolt. In Chapter 1, I note that the Southampton rebellion was not only a rebellion of violence, but also one of movement through space. Or as Mark Simpson argues, “not just as a rebel but as a traveler, Turner contests strictures within slavery’s ideological field; accordingly we need to view his rebellious tour in terms not of failed escape but of institutionalized and ideological reckoning” (35). Such a focus on Turner’s movements rather than on his arrival in specific locations highlights the way that freedom is inextricably tied to self-directed movement. The same is true for Madison Washington’s travels.

In “The Heroic Slave,” freedom is repeatedly associated with travel. As the narrative begins, the narrator refers to Mr. Listwell as “our traveller” four times before
finally assigning him a name. In contrast, the narrator quickly calls Washington “Madison” as he cries out in a lengthy soliloquy against the injustices he has experienced as a slave. Listwell is a free white man who can move around as he wishes. His movements are curtailed when he overhears Washington’s soliloquy denouncing the inhumanity of chattel slavery: “Long after Madison had left the ground, Mr. Listwell (our traveller) remained in motionless silence, meditating on the extraordinary revelations to which he had listened. *He seemed fastened to the spot,* and stood half hoping, half fearing the return of the sable preacher to his solitary temple” (emphasis added, 29). Thus, knowledge of slavery immobilizes him, and for the first time he is called by name. He regains his freedom of movement only after claiming the title of abolitionist. As he explains in his own soliloquy, “[f]rom this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race” (30).

Thus, physical movement or travel is set up as a precursor to freedom. All movement does not lead to freedom, however. Slavery is equated in the narrative with constrained or imposed movement as well as strict immobility. As noted above, Washington’s experiences as a maroon in the dismal swamps, while certainly an improvement over life on his master’s plantation, fail to allow him to travel freely. He is able to move around, but only with caution and only at night. Or, as he describes it, “In the dismal swamps I lived, sir, five long years,—a cave for my home during the day. I wandered about at night with the wolf and the bear,—sustained by the promise that my good Susan would meet me in the pine woods at least once a week” (37-38). Maroon life thus does not seem to hold the promise of facilitating revolutionary change that it does in
Blake or even Dred. The chronotope of movement associated with the wild-space of “the dismal swamps” is much more restricted. Maroonage allows Washington to step away from the most brutal workings of day-to-day slavery, but it does not enable him to escape most of its other strictures. Unable to find true or complete freedom in maroon life, he abandons his maroon camp to pursue another form of resistance.

Like maroonage, his furtive flight to Canada is suggestive of an incomplete freedom. In his journey north, Washington seeks to defy the restrictions placed on his movements by the institution of slavery. He is successful up to a point as he flouts his master’s ability to contain him on his plantation or in slaveholding territories. But the path, speed, and manner of Washington’s flight are still largely prescribed by the realities of slavery and its attendant racial oppression on the ground. He necessarily travels at night, avoiding contact with others as much as possible. He also disguises his identity in an effort to prevent capture. The narrator’s shift of the term “traveller” from Listwell to Washington as he follows his course from Virginia to Ohio and then onto Canada testifies to the increased freedom Washington experiences. But it too remains incomplete. Washington’s travels are not the self-directed meanderings of Listwell, but the rapid, unrelenting movements of a fugitive slave in treacherous territory. Despite the absence of legalized slavery in Ohio, he finds little respite from the threat of re-enslavement as he travels north across the state.

In addition to limited or constrained mobility, slavery also becomes equated in the narrative with forced movement. Notably, this forced movement runs roughly counter to the flight north chronotope he previously pursued out of slaveholding territories. After he is captured on his return to Virginia, Washington is forced to join a large group of slaves
traveling along the Petersburg road to Richmond. As a group, they are directed onboard a slave ship that transports slaves from the Atlantic seaboard to the southern port city of New Orleans. Such forced movement depends upon a conflation of mobility and immobility that is alternatively symbolized in the narrative by the shackles and whips slave drivers have at their disposal. The drivers use these items to simultaneously constrain and propel movement, or, more specifically, to constrain slaves within desired patterns of movement. The narrator points to the link between slavery and forced motion in direct address to the reader: “[w]e pass over the hurry and bustle, the brutal vociferations of the slave-drivers in getting their unhappy gang in motion for Richmond; and we need not narrate every application of the lash to those who faltered in their journey” (58). Freedom in the narrative thus comes to depend upon the power to resist or escape such compulsory movement.

Washington and his companions only find such freedom of movement when they take control of the Creole while out to sea. Only there are they removed from the policing mechanisms that the U.S. American slave power has at its disposal. Only there do they have an advantage in numbers over their captors. Only there can they break their fetters and sail in the direction they choose. The ocean, at least as portrayed in “The Heroic Slave” proves to be the ultimate wild-space. It trumps even the Great Dismal Swamp in the antislavery imagination as the location of freedom and self-directed movement. It can thus be re-envisioned, not as the site of the middle passage or the domestic slave trade, but as a site of freedom in the Western Hemisphere.

As noted above, the sea invites rebellion, and, in doing so, it allows us to see that, although tied to geographic space, freedom can never be static. Nor does it seem to be as
yet fully realized in individual locations in the narrative. What I mean here is that the freedom we are told about is associated with specific places: Windsor and Nassau. The freedom we glimpse—the freedom that is most nearly represented—corresponds to Washington’s navigation of the *Creole*. That is, it corresponds to his ability to move across the geographic landscape without hindrance. Or, as Sale writes, “the ship’s mobility enabled Douglass to choose a historical antecedent in which the captives not only rebelled, but successfully *got away*” (emphasis in original, *Volcano* 59). But the question of what they achieved when they got away remains largely unanswered.

Just as he does in Part I, the narrator begins Part IV with an overt discussion of the formative relationship between geography and human experience. Juxtaposing the international slave trade with its domestic counterpart, he argues that U.S. American slavery is not governed by a consistent moral or political theory. Instead, it is finally determined by a geography of chance:

> WHAT A WORLD OF inconsistency, as well as of wickedness, is suggested by the smooth and gliding phrase, AMERICAN SLAVE TRADE; and how strange and perverse is that moral sentiment which loathes, execrates, and brands as piracy and as deserving of death the carrying away into captivity men, women, and children from the African coast; but which is neither shocked nor disturbed by a similar traffic, carried on with the same motives and purposes, and characterized by even more odious peculiarities on the coast of our MODEL REPUBLIC. We execrate and hang the wretch guilty of this crime on the coast of Guinea, while we respect and applaud the guilty participators in this murderous business on the enlightened shores of the Chesapeake. (60)

In other words, what a difference place makes. Geographic locations not only set the stage for human experience but they also effectively invite certain types of action and forestall others. The same is true for literary space and narrative action. In “The Heroic Slave,” Douglass ticks off one alternative route out of slavery after another. Not
surprisingly, the dismal swamps of Virginia give rise to maroon life, and Canada West provides a (temporary) respite from U.S. American slavery—just as they do in *Dred* and *Blake*. An Ohio setting invites collaboration between a fugitive slave and an abolitionist as it does in *Dred*. And, finally, the open ocean calls for a violent slave rebellion just as it does in *Blake* (and, as we will see in the concluding chapter, in *Benito Cereno*). By comparing the geographic landscapes of individual texts, we find that “The Heroic Slave” shares with *The Confessions of Nat Turner, Dred*, and *Blake* a vocabulary of place and movement more alike than unalike. They are, in fact, conventional and patterned. These patterns draw attention to the symbolic functioning of place in literary formation. They also point to the inscription of historical events on geographic space that enables such symbolics.

But, interestingly, no picture of a place of true, widespread freedom emerges in any of the narratives we consider in this study. Even in “The Heroic Slave,” which includes a successful rebellion, representations of freedom for more than a very few slaves remain elusive. Returning to Maggie Sale’s idea that violent rebellion was unrepresentable in antebellum narrative, it now seems possible that it was freedom rather than violence that finally proved unrepresentable. The most that seems to have been achieved was a cumulative vision of the critical need for unrestricted movement so that the quest for a truly free place could continue.
CHAPTER 6: MAPPING *BENITO CERENO*

Up to this point in my analysis, I have focused on political narratives that readily stake out a thematic position with respect to New World slavery. Although critics have argued over the nuances of the final “meaning” of *Dred, Blake*, and “The Heroic Slave,” there is little question that each text decries U.S. American slavery and provides arguments to justify action, in one form or another, against it. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is less straightforward in this respect because of its dual authorship, but it too presents moral evaluations of slavery and slave resistance. These texts can be seen to address the political process in their subject matter in two ways. First, and most obviously, they describe and interpret the crisis over legalized slavery that dominated the political climate of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, they are designed to motivate their readers to take action in opposition to (or, in the case of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, possibly in support of) the slave power. Second, they point to possible routes out of slavery that are tied to alternative types of geographic movement, ranging from individual escape to mass violence. As I discuss in previous sections, fictional narratives can serve as a forum for antislavery writers to imagine and work through possible future actions against institutionalized slavery.

In the final chapter of this study, we turn our attention to Herman Melville’s tale of violent slave rebellion, *Benito Cereno*. In doing so, we analyze a text that resists classification as either antislavery or proslavery because its third-person narrator does not offer an overt moral interpretation of its narrative action. Concluding my textual analysis with *Benito Cereno* seems appropriate as it points to a much larger field of study than I am able to pursue here, but one that will hopefully interest readers and critics in the
future. As a tale that resists easy political classifications, *Benito Cénot* serves as a bridge from the obviously didactic nineteenth-century slave writings to narratives that engage the issue of slavery (or other forms of racial oppression) but do not overtly moralize on the subject. In addition, it points the way to a larger analysis of those nineteenth-century narratives that appear to shun such subjects altogether but contain similar geographic patterns as the ones we have identified here. Such similarities suggest that these texts may well operate within the geographic and ideological orbit of slave writings despite the differences in narrative content.

Notably, a reading of *Benito Cénot* illustrates that focusing on the formative relationship between geography and narrative action is hardly an esoteric venture when brought to bear on considerations of U.S. American narratives of slavery. It was gratifying, even comforting, when I recognized that the mystery of *Benito Cénot* turns on the same formal relationship that interests me in this study. The Spanish captain’s false tale of gales and disease off of Cape Horn is constantly threatened by an uncooperative geography that his U.S. American counterpart is unable to overlook. Melville’s plotline thereby focuses narrative attention on the fact that geographic landscapes are never simple backdrops for historical or fictional action. Instead, they define the parameters of believable or authentic action. And, in doing so, they can be seen to structure real-world praxis as well as writers’ imaginings of the historical moment.

Pairing *Benito Cénot* with “The Heroic Slave” is a common practice in recent critical discourse because of both narratives’ attention to historical rebellions onboard slave ships, their close publication dates,$^1$ and their status as short fictions. Unlike the

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$^1$ *Benito Cénot* was initially serialized in the antislavery magazine *Putnam’s Monthly* in 1855, two years after “The Heroic Slave” was first published.
antislavery message of “The Heroic Slave,” however, *Benito Cereno*’s polemics are notoriously murky. In his critique of the novella, C. L. R. James argues that “[i]t is a propaganda story, a mystery, written to prove a particular social or political point” (112). It is certainly true that the novella focuses on the contemporary crisis surrounding slavery and thus can be classified as a narrative that takes an explosive political issue as its subject matter. But it is quite another matter to determine exactly what Melville’s feelings toward slavery, as revealed in *Benito Cereno*, actually might be.

Literary scholars have devoted a great deal of energy to doing just that, and they have scarcely agreed. Some have identified *Benito Cereno* as a racist or proslavery document. Others have countered that Melville’s text implicitly promotes an antislavery agenda. As Maurice S. Lee correctly concludes, depending upon which analysis of *Benito Cereno* one reads, “Melville is a racist or a protomulticulturalist. He is radical but bedeviled by conservative fears. He ultimately advises a political tack or skeptically leaves us adrift” (496). Noting the difficulty in defining Melville’s political statement in *Benito Cereno*, recent critics have often focused on the “problem-solving” function of the text rather than on trying to pin down any consistent, identifiable political message. For example, Carolyn L. Karcher points to the narrator’s description of Benito Cerenos’s deposition as “[a] key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it,” arguing that “[w]e readers are now standing in Don Benito’s and Delano’s shoes, as Melville offers us a key and invites us to unlock the problem symbolizing slavery” (2552). Lee similarly argues that “‘Benito Cereno’ may seem to be a skeptical lock with no key, and yet it struggles to engage, and perhaps even ‘solve,’ the time’s foremost political

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2 See Jean Fagan Yellin and Sidney Kaplan.
3 See Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 135-82 and John Bryant, 3-30.
quandaries” (496). Notably, neither Karcher nor Lee assigns a proslavery or antislavery label to this problem-solving function in the narrative.

Such emphasis on “solving” rather than moralizing the problem of slavery may seem overly ambitious. While Melville’s narrative is unquestionably concerned with various forms of violence that are attendant to slavery, its detailed focus on the complexities of the international system of slavery precludes logistical solutions. In other words, Melville’s narrative undoubtedly engages the debate over slavery in the United States with its representation of slave rebellion onboard a Spanish colonial ship. It does not, however, provide an overriding interpretation of the narrative crisis with respect to colonial slavery or to its symbolic counterpart: slavery in the United States. Nor does the narrative depict or juxtapose alternative forms of slave resistance as do the other texts we consider in this study. It therefore presents no overt plan to prevent the violence it seems to prophesy. The best that Melville seems to hope for is that his readers recognize the hemispheric and national crisis that has been reached rather than willfully ignoring the danger signs as Captain Delano continues to do at the narrative’s end.

This is not to suggest that Melville “skeptically leaves us adrift” or that the narrative does not perform cultural work. Melville unquestionably interjects a voice of warning into the U.S. American debate over slavery that was raging at mid-century. *Benito Cereno* stands as a call to awareness if not an obvious call to specific action as it focuses on defining the problem of slavery. In doing so, Melville’s narrative draws attention to the forces from around the globe that are interlocked in a desperate struggle for dominance, the outcome of which is far from certain. As Joyce Adler writes, “[j]ust as Babo and Don Benito are not moral symbols, so *Benito Cereno* is not an allegory of
abstract Good and Evil. It is a concretization in fictional terms of the great historical question facing the United States at the time the story was written, namely, “What will be the consequence for the country of the continuation of slavery?” (42). To understand the cultural work Melville attempts, then, it is useful to explore the way he geographically depicts the inner-workings of New World slavery, and, in doing so, traces the way human power and agency are inextricably tied to both movement and violence.

Divided into three sections—each one recognizing a different narrative perspective—*Benito Cereno* resists a single, monological reading of slavery or slave rebellion. The first and longest section presents Amasa Delano’s interpretation of the events that occur onboard the *San Dominick*. As captain of a U.S. American ship engaged in sealing and trade in the southern Pacific Ocean, Delano witnesses but consistently misinterprets the disorder that has overtaken the *San Dominick*. The second section is comprised of lengthy excerpts from a legal deposition given by Benito Cereno, the Spanish captain, to the Spanish colonial court in Lima, Peru. This deposition records Cereno’s revised version of the history of the *San Dominick* before and after the slaves onboard rebelled and assumed command of the ship. In the third section, the narrator focuses on the differing responses of the tale’s primary antagonists to the final suppression of the slave revolt. He emphasizes Babo’s silence as the rebel leader meets his death without articulating his own perspective on the rebellion: “Seeing all was over, [Babo] uttered no sound, and could not be forced to” (2554). As Adler observes, “Part III focuses attention on the fact that the view from the angle of Babo, the enslaved African, is missing” (35).
Critics routinely look below the surface responses of Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno to consider more closely what they tell us about each man’s attitudes toward slavery and race. They also explore the two men’s respective roles in upholding the system of slavery in the New World. In this way, the conflict between Delano, Cereno, and Babo is seen to work symbolically to encapsulate two larger conflicts. First is the obvious relationship between European colonial masters and their slaves, which was marred by frequent explosions of violence throughout its history, the successful slave revolution in Haiti being only the most widely known. Second is the struggle over slavery in the United States itself. In this conflict, Benito Cereno, the Spanish master and slave trader, stands in for the southern slaveholder, who in the New England mind of the 1850s was often seen to share his provincial formalism as well as his tendency toward despot rule. In both conflicts, the Massachusetts-native Delano’s role as innocent witness is undermined by his ready intervention on behalf of Cereno and his fellow Spaniards. He may not be a slaveholder himself, and he may even harbor doubts about the abuses of the system, but he is shown to share—both sympathetically and economically—the interests of the slave power against the slave.4

Such analyses explore the cultural assumptions, or ideogemes, that comprise the two men’s (frequently different) understandings of the violence and disorder that have consumed the Spanish ship, the San Dominick. This is a revealing and important approach to studying Benito Cereno as it exposes the narrative’s concern with the ties U.S. “northerners” had to domestic and international slavery. But it has also been well-covered in recent criticism. In the current analysis, I deviate slightly from this dominant

4 In fact, Delano, at one point in the narrative, offers to buy Babo from Benito Cereno for fifty doubloons. Although his manner is humorous, it demonstrates that he is suitably comfortable with the system of slavery to engage in easy banter over the sale and purchase of slaves.
critical trend. I too look below the surface plot, but, instead of focusing on the characters’
specific attitudes toward race, I foreground Melville’s use of geographic references to
frame his narrative action. In doing so, I am more concerned with how power is depicted
in the narrative than with what Melville’s tale might or might not tell us about the
morality of institutionalized slavery.

What I find is that the narrative landscape is hardly a passive background. Instead,
the structures of power that buttress both sea captains’ authority are inextricably tied to
their ability to navigate their physical and cultural environments. The narrative action
unfolds almost entirely in “the harbor of St. Maria—a small, desert, uninhabited island
toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili” (2497-98). But, the plotline
extends much farther back, as the story is as concerned with past actions (and travels) as
it is with present circumstances or future outcomes. Over the course of the narrative,
travelogues emerge in fits and starts for both the San Dominick and Delano’s ship, the
Bachelor’s Delight. The journeys recounted in these travelogues are anchored by a chain
of seaports that correspond to sites of U.S. American and colonial authority. Between the
seaports, however, are vast blank spaces where the ships continuously risk straying
beyond the reach of the master class’s ability to define and control human relationships
onboard.

Focusing on the travelogues opens up several critical approaches to reading
Benito Cereno. First, as suggested above, it highlights the place-bound nature of fictional
narratives. Second, it broadens our attention to the narrative landscape beyond the more
obviously symbolic geographic references, to include specific points of interest that
extend beyond the South American sailing routes that contain the narrative’s immediate
action. It therefore allows us to see in greater detail Melville’s representation of the networks of economic and cultural interchange that span the globe, supporting—directly or indirectly—a system of international slavery. In doing so, it helps isolate the mutually formative relationship between geographic space and human praxis, inside and outside of the narrative.

In addition, focusing on the travelogues offers a way to bring order to the tremendous breadth of scholarly readings of the novella. As we have seen, attention to Melville’s negotiations of geography in *Benito Cereno* is nothing new. Critics have presented sophisticated and detailed analyses that identify the symbolic function of several prominent geographic references. They have analyzed the importance of the Spanish ship as “an unusual symbolic space” that allows Melville to explore the continual interchange between and mutual influence of geographically isolated peoples (Sale 59). And, they have focused on the way the struggle over slavery devolves into a state of chronotopic paralysis in the narrative in which linear time and movement are no longer possible. Despite the wealth of critical attention to spatial concerns, however, we have described verbally what could arguably be better understood and made clearer if it were presented visually. That is, few efforts have been made to systematize geographic readings in such a way as to present a visual portrait of the way space and cultural power function in the narrative. What seems to be missing in recent criticism, then, is a mapping of the geographic allusions and movements that have brought Melville’s primary antagonists to their current state of crisis and paralysis.

In the following pages I try simultaneously to expand and to organize the geographic analysis of *Benito Cereno* by tracing the routes the ships follow to reach the
contact point of St. Maria. Doing so allows us to rethink the ways in which the novella works within an existing narrative tradition of U.S. American slave writings that associates freedom with movement and slavery with stagnation. It also helps us see the complex international relationships that worked to uphold African slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Notably, such an examination does not depend on identifying Melville’s specific feelings toward the morality of slavery, slave rebellion, and/or emancipation—areas of analysis that have proven slippery. Instead, it delves into his representation of the social relationships inherent to New World slavery that, like “a slumbering volcano,” appear destined to explode in potentially cataclysmic violence.

The narrative’s three sections point to principal players in the struggle over slavery: the African slave, the European colonial master, and the United States “northerner” who is complicit in upholding the larger institution of slavery. With maps, we create a pictorial image of the routes each one takes as they converge in a single location, far removed from their places of origin. Franco Moretti makes a compelling argument that mapping the literary landscape is a useful exercise for all narrative fiction. As he puts it,

[Pl]acing a literary phenomenon in its specific space – mapping it – is not the conclusion of geographical work; it’s the beginning. After which begins in fact the most challenging part of the whole enterprise: one looks at the map, and thinks. You look at a specific configuration – those roads that run towards Toledo and Sevilla; those mountains, such a long way from London; those men and women that live on opposite banks of the Seine – you look at these patterns, and try to understand how it is that all this gives rise to a story, a plot. (7-8)

Herein, then, is the great value of literary maps. They enable us to see the text in question from a new, spatially ordered perspective and, in doing so, think about it differently. For our purposes, mapping the ship’s movements as well as the narrative’s
geographic symbolics exposes the international reach of slaveholders that infuses the seemingly isolated events in an obscure harbor off of Chile with hemispheric—even global—significance. Just as interestingly, it exposes the way in which the organization of historical space made demands on the literary imagination of nineteenth-century writers. Melville’s fictional characters do not, and cannot, travel across the narrative landscape in just any direction. Instead, they follow identifiable routes that are saturated with real-world meaning. Maps therefore highlight the spatial structures of historical events and the corresponding pressures on cultural output.

Fiction in general lends itself to analytical mapping, but it is notable how narratives of slavery are particularly illuminated by pictorial representation. In mapping Benito Cereno and its historical source, Captain Amasa Delano’s Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere (1817), we are better able to see the geographic sites that have stood out to readers for so long: Santo Domingo (or Haiti), the Spanish Pyrenees, and the northern states of the United States. Perhaps more importantly, we are also able to see the greater geopolitical landscape that frames the narrative. Here we can see New England and New Holland, Senegal and Santo Domingo, Spain and the extensive sailing routes along the Spanish colonial main. We are also able to see small islands off the North American, South American, and African coastlines that play large in the cultural landscape of Melville’s tale. Critics have long brought thematic readings to the politics of geography in Benito Cereno. Only by mapping the literary landscape of the narrative we are able to identify more fully the way the narrative action and thematic symbolism depend on geography, or, more precisely, how its geographic landscape carries its own significance and subsequently helps give rise to its plot.
And, this is no extraneous matter when brought to bear on a reading of *Benito Cereno*. Throughout the first section of the narrative, Captain Delano works to suppress his doubts about the truthfulness of Benito Cereno’s tale of sickness and adverse weather. There is a critical problem with the Spanish captain’s invented version of the *San Dominick*’s history, however, which Delano recognizes but tries not to acknowledge—even to himself: its geographic landscape does not allow for the misfortune Cereno and his shipmates describe. This discrepancy between place and event is exposed on at least two occasions. First, the third-person narrator draws attention to Delano’s suspicions, noting that “the portion of [Benito Cereno’s] narrative which, perhaps, most excited interest, as well as some surprise, considering the latitudes in question, was the long calms spoken of, and more particularly the ship’s so long drifting about” (2507). Considering the latitudes in question, then, Don Benito’s narrative makes little sense. Delano recognizes this disjunction between the geographic region and the reported calms, winds, and currents, but he willfully looks past the possibility that the story is fabricated and, instead, concludes that only youth and inexperience on the part of Benito Cereno could account for such long drifting about. He deduces that the *San Dominick*’s misfortunes resulted from its captain’s incompetence rather than from the environmental misfortunes Cereno cites or, more importantly, from the true circumstance of slave rebellion.

Despite his many efforts, Delano never entirely suppresses his suspicions regarding Benito Cereno’s veracity. He later gives voice to lurking doubts in the famous scene in which Babo shaves his purported master. Addressing the Spanish captain, Delano remarks,
[f]or here, by your account, have you been these two months and more getting from Cape Horn to St. Maria, a distance which I myself, with a good wind, have sailed in a few days. True, you had calms, and long ones, but to be becalmed for two months, that is, at least, unusual. Why, Don Benito, had almost any other gentleman told me such a story, I should have been half disposed to a little incredulity. (2530)

This acknowledgement of the discrepancy between the landscape and the events Cereno describes results in a moment of crisis in which the slave rebels’ plot is in danger of unraveling under the weight of an uncooperative landscape. To prevent this, Babo cuts the Spanish captain on the neck with his razor. He thus succeeds in threatening Benito Cereno while simultaneously diverting Delano’s attention from the subject at hand. The effect is that the terrified Spanish captain reiterates his false narrative of the San Dominick’s voyage, clinging desperately to claims of “calms of unusual duration” and “obstinate currents” (2530).

Don Benito therefore buttresses his incredible story by situating it in the specific, but exotic setting of the waters off Cape Horn—waters that would seem to invite the hazardous, the profound, the uninvited. That is, he situates it in a vast wild-space where seemingly “realistic” rules of human experience do not apply. This ocean setting at the ends of the earth is therefore the Great Dismal Swamp writ large in Benito Cereno’s narrative. As he incorporates it into his tale, he insists that it is a site of disorder that inevitably defies the master class’s ability to direct or determine the unfolding of events. In placing his narrative in such a location, then, Benito Cereno exploits the cultural mythology that surrounds such remote, forbidding locations. A problem arises, however, because the route around Cape Horn is not unfamiliar to Captain Delano. He has learned from his own experiences that, even there, there are patterns that apply, and these patterns essentially preclude the kinds of experiences Benito Cereno describes.
Like his fictional character Benito Cereno, Melville situates his own tale in a geographic setting that is both specific and exotic. In the opening line of the tale, the narrator sets the date as 1799 and reports the nationality, place of origin, and profession of Delano. He also cites the precise location of the inlet where the Bachelor’s Delight encounters the San Dominick and its cargo of slaves. Therefore, he immediately links Massachusetts to “the long coast of Chili” in a system of U.S. American economic expansion and trade. In response to unseemly questioning by his Spanish counterpart, Delano later recounts passing through the nearby port of Canton to exchange seal skins for teas, silks, and silver. The narrative thus invokes briefly the world-wide pursuit of trade and new wealth, in which U.S. American ships were fully engaged at the turn of the nineteenth-century.

This trade receives much more detailed attention in Melville’s historical source, Captain Amasa Delano’s Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Harold H. Scudder first noted in a 1928 article for PMLA that the plot and narrative structure of Benito Cereno were not products of Melville’s imagination alone. He describes his discovery as follows:

Melville gives his reader no reason to suspect that the story is anything but a narrative of his own invention, but coming by chance upon an old volume of the voyages of Capt. Amasa Delano, an American mariner of Duxbury, Mass., I discovered the interesting fact that in Chapter XVIII of Captain Delano’s book Melville found his story ready made. (502)

The historical Delano frames his narrative of slave rebellion onboard a Spanish ship with a detailed description of his own previous travels and the hardships he and his shipmates had encountered along the way. He recounts having been at sea for a year and a half on what was proving to be an economically unprofitable voyage. Unknown to him
at the time, a group of convicts had been engaged as crew onboard the *Perseverance* before it sailed from Botany Bay on the southeast corner of New Holland, or what is present-day Australia. Learning of their presence only after it was too late, he crossed the southern Pacific Ocean to the coast of Chile ever distrustful of his new crew. He therefore felt himself in an unusually insecure position at the time he made contact with the Spanish slave ship. Upon approaching the South American coast, he touched down at the islands of St. Ambrose and St. Felix in search of seals. He then proceeded to the island of Juan Fernandez and finally onto St. Maria. In the harbor of St. Maria, he had the fortune of finding a second ship from Massachusetts, the *Mars* of Nantucket, under the command of Captain Jonathan Barney. But, as Delano describes it, “Captain Barney sailed about the 17th, and left me quite alone. I continued in that unpleasant situation till the 20th (505) when the Spanish slave ship sailed into port.

Figure 6.1 provides a general outline for the *Perseverance*’s travels that brought it, finally, into contact first with another U.S. American ship and then with the rebellious slaves. These travels are suggestive of an extensive network of U.S. trade that crisscrosses the globe in pursuit of economic expansion. As we can see, the New England ships are not specifically engaged in the international slave trade. At the same time, it is apparent that they do not operate wholly outside of its influence either. Upon learning the true character of events onboard the slave ship, Delano and the crew of the *Perseverance* do not hesitate to intervene under the promise of profiting financially if they succeed in putting down the rebellion. Delano explains their motivation as follows: “By way of encouragement, I told them that Don Benito considered the ship and what was in her as lost; that the value was more than one hundred thousand dollars; that if we would take
her, it should be all our own” (509). The crew of the *Perseverance* thus embraces the role of police and salvage agent for the slave power in the hopes of gaining ownership of the Spanish ship’s human cargo.

**Figure 6.1 Historical Voyage of the U. S. Ship *Perseverance***

Although the narrator of Melville’s tale provides a more cursory account of the *Bachelor’s Delight*’s previous travels, he is extremely precise in relating the specific movements of the *San Dominick*. He first specifies the route of the false journey Benito Cereno concocts and later describes its actual travels under the authority of the rebel slaves. Freedom and slavery are thus, once again, defined by specific types of movement. In both journeys, we can see that those individuals with power move great distances; those without are moved great distances. These patterns of movement are not simple reflections of existing power structures, however. They also influence distributions of power and the subsequent unfolding of narrative events.
Removed from the policing forces of the U.S. American and European nations, the master class’s authority breaks down when the ships’ movements are curtailed by the rebellion onboard. Similarly, the leaders of the rebellion fail to exert their authority fully over the large company of slaves onboard, in part, because they fail to sail the San Dominick to a friendly port. The calms, adverse winds, and dilapidated equipment forestall their efforts, thus inviting discontent and turmoil onboard the ship.

Melville drew his story from the “actual facts” the historical Delano relates in his Narrative, but, using his imagination and narrative creativity, “[he] transformed them into a Gothic masterpiece” (Scudder 529). The changes Melville introduces are well documented in criticism of Benito Cereno. Most notable perhaps, for our purposes, he renames the Spanish ship, Tryal, the San Dominick. In doing so, he places the ship rebellion firmly within the historical context surrounding the slave revolution that engulfed the island of Santo Domingo from 1791-1804. He also backdates the events Delano recounts in his narrative from 1805 to 1799. Scholars have frequently emphasized the political implications of this shift in dates. Sundquist’s argument in To Wake the Nations is typical: “In altering the date … Melville accentuated the fact that his tale belonged to the Age of Revolution, in particular the period of violent struggle leading to Haitian independence presided over by the heroic black general Toussaint L’Overture” (140). Scudder, however, sees the change in date as less overtly political, noting that [t]his discrepancy is perhaps accidental rather than intentional. Delano’s narrative is of a voyage made from Boston around Cape Horn and up the coast of Chili. He left Boston Nov. 10, 1799, and early in 1800 arrived in

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5 In brief, he invents the shaving scene, the play of Ataful in chains, and the placement of Don Alexandro Aranda’s flayed body as the ship’s figurehead with the inscription “Seguid vuestra jefe.” He also invents the Ashanti warriors and oakum pickers as a police force among the slaves, Babo’s homicidal leap into the whale boat, and Benito Cereno’s eventual death in a Lima monastery. For more detailed discussions of the way Melville transforms Delano’s historical account, see Scudder, Kaplan, Sale, and Sundquist, among others.
the neighborhood of Santa Maria, an island a few leagues from the mainland in the vicinity of the port of Talcahuano, and the city of Concepción. At this point he introduces a digression, and devotes Chapter XVIII to his capture of the Spanish ship, *Tryal*, when he was again in these waters on quite another voyage in 1805. (530)

Ultimately, I do not think it important to determine whether the backdating of the fictional narrative was intentional on Melville’s part or not. With or without this one piece of textual evidence, Melville’s tale of slave rebellion and violence repeatedly invokes geographic and historical references to the Haitian revolution. It is hardly possible to overemphasize the importance of the events surrounding the slave uprising in Haiti to a comprehensive reading of *Benito Cereno*. At the same time, however, we must not allow our focus on the obvious symbolics of place to overshadow completely Melville’s detailed, but less noticeable attention to geographically dispersed locations from New England to Spain, from West Africa to Chile, from Argentina to Peru. These spatial connections of the near and far, of the side-by-side, and of the dispersed speak to vast networks of power that uphold the system of slavery in the New World. In doing so, they encapsulate the human relationships that comprise these networks. They also reveal the historical context under which the debate over U.S. American slavery in the 1850s played out. That is, the geographic patterns in the narrative trace the outlines of a global crisis that connects individual outbreaks of violence across cultural, national, and geographic lines. As we map the movements of characters from Europe, Africa, and North America to the island of St. Maria, we are better able to see the way in which slavery spans great distances, making important individual acts that play out in far-flung locations.
When the character of Amasa Delano first boards the *San Dominick* in Melville’s tale, he is met by a scene of disorder, in which whites and blacks intermingle in “a clamorous throng” that Delano finds unusual and disconcerting onboard a slave ship. The history of the vessel comes out slowly and confusedly as slaves and seamen alike interject their version of the calamities they have endured up to their arrival in St. Maria: “in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering” (2501). “[I]mpatient of the hubbub of voices” (2502), Delano seeks out Benito Cereno in an effort to garner a true, ordered, and comprehensive narrative of the events that have taken place. In this he is disappointed as the Spanish captain tells the story, brokenly, with frequent pauses, interruptions, and contradictions. In its nonlinear development, this narrative style parallels the *San Dominick*’s failure to make linear progress from its point of departure to its destination.6

Delano finally pieces together the following purported chain of events. The *San Dominick* was bound from Buenos Ayres for Lima with three hundred slaves and fifty crewmen and passengers when they encountered gales and suffered an outbreak of scurvy while rounding Cape Horn. The gales swept fifteen crewmen overboard and ruined their sails, preventing them from sailing north along the coastline of Chile. “[T]he unmanageable ship … was blown northwestward, where the breeze suddenly deserted her, in unknown waters, to sultry calms” (2506). An outbreak of scurvy took the lives of additional crewmen and a number of slaves. A malignant fever followed the scurvy, which was aggravated by hot calms and scant water rations, killing many of the

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6 The tale’s larger narrative structure similarly mirrors the nonlinear movement of the *San Dominick*. In the first section, the narrator describes what Delano finds onboard the Spanish ship many weeks after the rebellion occurred. It is only in the following section that Benito Cereno’s deposition looks back and provides an account of what happened before and during the rebellion as well as while Delano was onboard the *San Dominick*. 
remaining sailors and proportionally fewer of the slaves. Finally the calms gave way to west winds, allowing Benito Cereno to sail toward “Baldivia, the southernmost civilized port of Chili and South America” (2506). But the Spanish captain missed the port city in the fog: “Since which period … the San Dominick had been battle-dored about by contrary winds, inveigled by currents, or grown weedy in calms. Like a man lost in woods, more than once she had doubled upon her own track” (2506).

With this tale, Benito Cereno attempts to present a credible explanation for the unruly atmosphere Delano discovers onboard the San Dominick. The scurvy and the fever, the long calms and the adverse currents, all are calculated to account for the suspiciously low number of white seamen and the dilapidated condition of sails and ship. The problem is that the tale is untrue from beginning to end, a suspicion of which Delano finds impossible, try as he might, not to entertain. As I note above, the calamities Cereno describes do not coalesce easily with the geographic landscape he claims for them. They would have been even more at odds with the true geographic route of the San Dominick that never ventured far from the inhabited western coastline of South America. Benito Cereno therefore attempts to buy credibility for his tale by first displacing it onto the wild-space off of Cape Horn and then onto the deep ocean waters west of Chile where he said the San Dominick was blown by the adverse winds. But even in these locations the misfortunes described cannot be adequately supported. We are therefore shown within the storyline of the text that narrative action does not develop irrespective of its location. Individual places are not interchangeable. Or, as Moretti puts it, “the nature of a given

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7 This displacement of narrative action calls to mind Melville’s own decision to place his narrative of slave violence in a wild-space away from the U.S. mainland. As Adler writes, “Melville, in choosing the Spanish example, could write with a latitude he could hardly have permitted himself in a story dealing with America” (42).
place’ … is indeed ‘a component of the event’: in the sense that each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story” (emphasis in original, 70).

Readers of Benito Cereno have typically been content to reference the complicated tale the inhabitants of the San Dominick collectively relate, but I would argue that it is important to look more closely at its particular geographic landscape to consider what it might tell us about the practical workings of New World slavery and the politics of space. Figure 6.2 provides a sketch of the false route of the San Dominick. This invented voyage covers a large swath of the Spanish Main along the South American coastline. Unremarked in Cereno’s tale is the presumption of authority by European masters to order the removal of hundreds of slaves to a new location thousands of miles away. Such forced travel is not what gives rise to Delano’s distrust, however. In fact, it is invented to allay his suspicions, thus suggesting the frequency and general acceptance of the practice.

![Figure 6.2 Benito Cereno’s Invented Route for the San Dominick](image)
If Benito Cereno’s tale were to be believed, then, nearly two hundred slaves would have died during the voyage. In Amasa Delano’s view, the tremendous cost in life, while to be lamented on a personal level, is attributable to Benito Cereno’s incompetence as a sea captain rather than to the system of slavery that sanctions such forced movements. The pitiable state of the slaves and whites alike evokes Delano’s compassion, but he is finally most critical of what he perceives to be Benito Cereno’s inability to withstand and counter the unfortunate hardships he has faced, than of the horrible suffering that attends the Spanish slave trade.

In contrast, Figure 6.3 shows the movements of the San Dominick that Benito Cereno reports to be true in his deposition to Spanish authorities in Lima. According to his account, the ship departed Valparaiso northbound for the port of Callao near Lima with one hundred and sixty slaves and thirty-six crewmen. On the seventh day of the voyage, the slaves revolted, ultimately killing all but a handful of the whites onboard who were spared so that they could sail the ship. After learning that there were no “negro countries” in their vicinity, Babo commanded Benito Cereno “to carry them to Senegal, or to the neighboring islands of St. Nicolas” (2545). Citing the necessity of procuring water for the trans-Atlantic journey, Cereno steered toward land in the vicinity of Nasca but did not make port out of fear that the slaves would kill him and the remaining Spanish crewmen for defying their orders. He sailed south past Pisco in Peru along a series of Spanish colonial settlements, and after a seventy-three day journey, in which the ship met with numerous calms, he reached St. Maria and came into contact with the Bachelor’s Delight.
Figure 6.3 Actual Route of the San Dominick

As we can see then, the San Dominick never strayed far from the western coast of South America. Benito Cereno was prevented from making landfall, not by adverse weather or geographic conditions, but by the rebellious slaves. Under orders from Babo and the other leaders of the slave rebellion, Benito Cereno concocts a tale of disease and severe storms to explain why a slave ship carrying approximately one hundred and fifty slaves should be found in such a dilapidated state and with so few white crewmen. In his false tale, the Spanish captain suggests that it is the ship’s inability to progress toward its destination that has culminated in the disarray Delano witnesses.
As the Spanish crew’s freedom of movement is bedeviled, so is its control over its slaves, leading to the breakdown of the master class’s authority onboard ship. (This formulation can be seen to be accurate even under the true cause of the ship’s immobility, slave rebellion.) As the slaves soon learn, however, the loss of command by the Spaniards does not necessarily correspond to a wholesale shift in power and authority to their antagonists. The rebel slaves are dependent upon Benito Cereno’s knowledge of navigation and geography to help them return to West Africa. As Joshua Leslie and Sterling Stuckey note, “[t]he one thing that the master class has at its command is the state machinery and uses of statecraft, symbolized by the ship and by Benito Cereno’s navigational skills. Though Babo succeeds in getting control of the human interrelations, he ultimately fails because he lacks a mastery of statecraft” (298). Considered differently, he fails to gain freedom because he and his fellow rebels are isolated in a part of the world, far from home, where there are no friendly nations nearby. Unlike Benito Cereno, they cannot hope to encounter another ship that might come to their aid.

Repeatedly in criticism of Benito Cereno, readers have highlighted the temporal and geographic stagnation that overtakes the San Dominick. But what is most interesting to me is that the narrative is not simply a story of immobility. Instead, it is a tale of tremendous movement that inexorably leads to paralysis. Figure 6.4 highlights several of the obvious symbolic references included in Melville’s tale. Here we see Santo Domingo, Massachusetts, Senegal, and the Spanish Pyrenees. These geographic sites point to representative antagonists in the struggle over New World slavery. They are also suggestive of the great distances the antagonists in Melville’s fictional narrative had to travel in order to meet in the remote location in which they did. Slavery thus functions,
not as an isolated or national institution, but as a transnational system that draws together and encompasses at least four continents.

**Figure 6.4 Geographic Symbolics for New World Slavery**

Figure 6.5 outlines the larger geopolitical landscape developed in *Benito Cereno* and its historical source, which traces the international connections that are often overshadowed in readings that privilege a nationalist or symbolist analytic prism. We see Botany Bay in Australia and the island of St. Maria off of Chile. We see Senegal and Massachusetts. And we see the seaports in the vicinity of Buenos Aires, Concepción, and Lima along the Spanish sailing routes. And, of particular interest, we see all the blank space that lies between.

Such a mapping points to the tremendous geographic territory touched by the system of New World slavery. It is also suggestive of the movements required to support such a system. Slavery’s practitioners and sympathizers travel the globe, seemingly at will. But in Melville’s tale they become increasingly immobilized in a faraway corner of the world, trapped by a system that depends upon the strength of a master class’s extensive statecraft but that operates outside of its reach much of the time. The specific locations marked on our world map encapsulate the economic, cultural, and geographic connections that brought Captain Delano, Benito Cereno, and Babo together “in the
harbor of St. Maria—a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili” (2497-98). But they do more than that too. In their totality, they trace a kind of geographic logic that ultimately guides the unfolding of the narrative action in Melville’s tale.

Figure 6.5 Geopolitical Landscape of New World Slavery
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have been struck by the near-total absence of representations of freedom and racial equality in antislavery narratives. The narratives I consider here often identify individual locations as sites of freedom: the northern United States, Canada, the British Bahamas. But nowhere are these locations or their attendant freedoms described in anything more than cursory detail. In fact, these same locations are routinely deconstructed and thereby shown to contain imperfect freedom at best.

Counter to this rhetorical tradition of simply labeling the northern United States or British territories as sites of freedom is a recurrent formal pattern that places relatively autonomous African-American communities in geographic wild-spaces in the midst of slaveholding territories. Despite their location in the midst of organized slavery, however, such communities develop outside of many of its more oppressive strictures. In the South, expansive swamps and forests provide cover for escaped slaves, allowing them to move about freely to foster community cohesion and to promote widespread resistance to slavery. The ocean functions as another kind of wild-space in which the traditional power relations that undergird the system of slavery are put under tremendous stress. The geographic isolation of slave ships at sea, as well as the altered ratio between the adversarial groups, provides slaves with improved opportunities for effectively resisting the control of their masters. As we have seen, such wild-spaces serve in the nineteenth-century imagination as the staging sites for a radical challenge to the system of slavery as a whole. They are therefore envisioned as the possible birthplaces of a true freedom that challenges the highly-suspect “freedoms” that exist elsewhere.
The narratives I consider in this analysis are finally more about movement and mediation than about roots or arriving in an established land of freedom. By focusing on patterns of movement that develop across texts, as individual slaves pursue alternative strategies for gaining freedom, it becomes increasingly evident that no clear line of demarcation exists between slave territories and freedom within established political regions or nation-states. In each of the narratives we consider, slaves pursue a variant of the chronotope “flight elsewhere” to escape their lives in bondage. They flee north to the northern states and Canada, and they journey south to Cuba and the Bahamas. Each of these locations offers an existence that is not slavery, but none carry with them a confident representation of a robust freedom that is unquestionably more than the simple absence of slavery. Similarly the divergent movements of these chronotopes prevent them from offering complementary strategies in a larger attack on the institution of slavery.

Only in the wild-spaces of the literary landscape (with their attendant opportunities for unrestrained movement and action) is freedom glimpsed. Here, escaped slaves live and work together in communities that defy exclusionary practices. Here the same slaves prepare for organized action to forge a new land out of the very landscape in which their freedom has historically been denied them. And, not coincidentally, here are the most detailed representations of community contained in the narratives. By foregrounding the writers in this study’s complicated use of place and landscape, we are able to see how literary geographies can, in fact, work against the totalizing assumptions that characterized much of the public debate over slavery. That is, we are able to see how antislavery writers’ efforts to imagine a solution to slavery challenged a simple North/South binary understanding of race relations in the United States.
On a final note: throughout my analysis of literary geographies, I have largely avoided discussions of canonicity and aesthetic quality. The past couple decades have seen challenges to the traditional canon move from a position outside of the dominant critical discourse to one at its center. I have therefore seen little need to spend a lot of time justifying my interest in texts devoted to real-world political action. Implicit in my choice of texts is a rejection of claims for an intrinsic “literariness” that distinguishes between high and low art. I am less interested in weighing in on debates over the literary talent of noncanonical writers or the quality of their texts than in examining how antislavery narratives engaged, reflected, and challenged the world around them.

In this analysis, I focus on antebellum narratives that take slave resistance and rebellion as their subject matter. I have chosen not to dissect the intricacies of each text’s discursive arguments for or against violence as a means of promoting freedom. Instead, I trace the ways in which such violence is envisioned geographically in the narratives. What I have found is that the creative imaginings of slave resistance and rebellion all work within culturally significant patterns of movement across a geographic landscape of individual places and symbolic spaces. Rather than depicting a linear journey through space and time, the individual movements often pull in competing directions, leading finally to a non-cumulative or partial representation of slave resistance. It is not a coincidence, I would argue, that the promise of a successful, widespread challenge to slavery remains unfulfilled in the narratives.

By focusing on the formal patterns of representing slave resistance in antislavery writings, I do not mean to downplay their importance as rhetorical challenges to slavery and racism in the United States. Obviously, close attention to the intricacies of these
arguments is critical to any understanding of antislavery activism and writing. At the same time, however, criticism that focuses primarily on antislavery argument runs the risk of overlooking additional types of cultural work performed in these texts. The narratives that I am concerned with here have received significant attention in recent years, as readers and critics consider the ways they address the debate over slavery. It is generally true that these narratives work within well-established conventions of antislavery discourse. They denounce slavery in theory and practice; they depict specific acts of physical brutality and emotional devastation; and they present sophisticated and rousing arguments in support of emancipation. What is less often noted, however, is the way in which they couple their arguments for freedom with considerations of alternative ways of combating slavery. In other words, antislavery writers turn to fiction to imagine and depict how widespread resistance to the institution of slavery might play out. Each of the alternative approaches to slave resistance depends upon a different kind of movement or route. Representations of such routes to freedom, which require a coming together of human praxis and the spatial landscape, deserve closer scrutiny.

I bring up the canon debate here because it has not always been easy to sidestep critical debates over the “literary” importance of the texts I consider. It was increasingly difficult to do in the final chapters. This is true for two reasons. First, I examine short fictions by Herman Melville and Frederick Douglass and thus draw together two writers who figure prominently in the traditional and the expanded canons, respectively. It is also not unusual for literary critics to dismiss Benito Cereno and “The Heroic Slave” as lesser works in their writers’ oeuvre. C. L. R. James’s sharp critique of Benito Cereno comes immediately to mind:
Masterpiece though *Benito Cereno* is, yet the story is a stage on the road of Melville’s decline into the shallowness of modern literature. It is a propaganda story, a mystery, written to prove a particular social or political point. It is true that idea and story are perfectly fused. It is true also that Melville is master of his plan … But propaganda stories are of necessity limited. Ahab, for example, is a new type of human being. Bartleby is not. Still less so is Babo. The Negro slaves and their leaders are shown to be human. But from Spartacus to Zapata, history tells us ten thousand such stories. Melville had ceased to be creative, and he had lost his vision of the future. Without such vision no writer can describe existing reality, for without it he does not know what is important or what is not, what will endure and what will pass. (112)

Here James presents several modernist assumptions that are vigorously challenged by later opponents of the traditional canon. I almost wholly disagree with his argument about explicitly political narratives, in general, and Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, in particular. But his conclusion that Melville “had lost his vision of the future” seems decidedly insightful. The crisis over slavery in the 1850s functioned like Babo’s shadow at the end of the fictionalized Amasa Delano’s narrative. It blocked out the future by blocking out visions—peaceful and violent—of how the tragedy of slavery in the United States might finally come to an end. Without the ability to glimpse a “solution” to New World slavery, it would seem impossible to imagine and represent, even in fiction, “what will endure and what will pass.” Literature is not the province of the universal, the eternal, the already-worked-out. Instead it is often at its most innovative when it functions as a forum for obvious cultural experimentation as writers work through social and political problems that have no easy or ready solutions. In the nineteenth century, it allowed U.S. American writers to try to see through the shadow of slavery to its end, and, in doing so, point the way forward.
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