

Through the Muck and Mire: Marronage, Representation, and Memory in the Great
Dismal Swamp

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation is a critical examination of both the history of the Dismal Swamp maroon communities (independent and resistant communities of individuals some would label “runaway slaves”) and of the politics of race and representation of enslaved resistance in public historical narratives and in local Black collective memory. Principally, this is a critical exploration of the legacies of slavery and enslaved resistance evidenced by Black people’s resilience in and around the swamp across time – from maroon resilience through the physical swamp muck and mire, an appealing alternative to bondage, to the present-day resilience of Black community memory of enslaved people’s historical agency, in spite of the metaphysical muck and mire, or the entanglement of race and power that too often silences the narrative of Black resistance.

Once recently an extremely understudied and under-researched topic, my research on the history and legacy of U.S. marronage advances the fields of slavery, public history, and collective memory by: (1) connecting the activities of the Dismal Swamp maroons to a hemispheric Black tradition not merely of flight, but organized violence against slaveholding societies as freedom and self-defense; (2) comprehensively clarifying the specificity of U.S. marronage through a reconceptualization of the phenomenon that fundamentally includes all slaveholding contexts; (3) emphasizing the erasure and marginalization of enslaved *resistance*, and marronage in particular, in public historical representation, distinct from previous studies in the fields of public history and collective memory that focus on representational silences surrounding the Civil War or plantation slavery more broadly; and (4) by utilizing the voices of descendants of the enslaved as central to the recovering and uncovering of the historical legacy of the Dismal Swamp maroons.

This interdisciplinary project benefits from the use of mixed methods and the methodology of restorative and transformative history. This is the labor of reconstructing and reconnecting with the past toward social change. Racialized and oppressed peoples’ knowledge about the swamp, about history, and their generational memory are key sources in this project. I place them in conversation with written historical archives, with the archaeological record, and with the ethnography of race and representation in the present cultural landscape of the Dismal Swamp. My methodology approaches the

swamp as a living archive from which ongoing freedom struggles and racial oppression can be read and can be learned from, across time.

The first part of the dissertation focuses on U.S. marronage, its relationship to the maroons of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the activities of maroon communities in the Great Dismal Swamp, a huge morass of swampland straddling the Virginia/North Carolina eastern seaboard. The swamp once covered the space of two thousand square miles and is thought to have contained tens of thousands of self-emancipated individuals throughout the period of 1700-1865. I weigh the historical scale, scope, and impact of marronage in the swamp and its surrounding cities and counties. I investigate autonomous maroon and enslaved community building and organized, collaborative, insurrectionary maroon and enslaved networks of freedom along the peripheries of the swamp. I argue that the presence of the swamp itself greatly influenced opportunities for enslaved resistance, as the rise of marronage and insurrection by the early 19th century threatened the very foundation of the surrounding plantation world, as evidenced by the attempted rebellions of 1792 and 1800-1802.

The second part of this dissertation examines the present-day relationships between the suppression of the history of enslaved agency, marronage, and resistance in public history, and collective memory. I point to the defining role race plays in power struggles for historical representation and the building of memory (or forgetting) about slavery and marronage throughout the swamp's built landscape. I analyze texts, plaques, signs, markers, tour narratives, and other discourse at twenty-seven historical sites and sites that publicly inform the historical significance of the Dismal Swamp and the surrounding Tidewater region of Virginia and North Carolina, to examine the ways these institutions (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Services, museums, historical societies) control the narratives about the swamp and its interpretive significance. I find that institutional practices of representation privilege the historical and present "logic of whiteness" that minimizes, distorts, segregates, or silences histories involving white culpability and the experiences of those that challenge the status quo. This is particularly applicable to those pasts shaped by Black autonomy (marronage) and violent protest. But despite these silences and ensuing struggles for more equitable and just historical representation, interviews with thirty-two Black people living around the swamp today show how Black communities continue to contest dominant epistemes and create alternative spaces of knowledge and resilient memory that are self-validating, empowering, and that directly inform local Black identity, place, and belonging.

*To Blanche Edwa Daniels Hardy,
for her research and her storytelling that inspires this work,
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Introduction: The Living History of Marronage

The southeastern seaboard of Virginia and the Carolinas stands out as a region shaped by the nation's earliest and arguably most entrenched and developed systems of Anglo-settler slavery.¹ But the region can also be distinguished by its rich history of the most remarkably agentive and overt histories of Black resistance to enslavement. Of the six documented major revolts or insurrections in the history of United States slavery (1712 New York City Revolt, 1739 Stono Revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, 1800 Gabriel Prosser Insurrection in Richmond, Virginia, 1811 Deslondes Revolt in St. Charles and St. James Parishes, Louisiana, 1822 Denmark Vessey Insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina, and the 1831 Nat Turner Revolt in Southampton, Virginia), four took place along the southeastern seaboard, while two occurred in the state of Virginia.² The close proximity to major port cities like Charleston, Portsmouth, and Norfolk, major centers for the exchange of global news and information, the countless waterways, the Black majority in Lowcountry, South Carolina, and the presence of two thousand square miles of nearly impenetrable swampland in the Tidewater, (southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina), made the region prime for flight from enslavement, overt resistance, and marronage.³

The maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp, a huge entanglement of forested swampland nestled in the northern corner of the southeastern seaboard, asserted, created, and defended their freedom by establishing some of the largest and most enduring maroon communities ever to exist in the slaveholding U.S. south. The maroons were Black men and women who took flight from, resisted, and disproved the fiction of the authority of the plantation and its borders. By doing so, they threatened the very foundation of U.S. slavery. They were individuals and groups who fled to the woods and swamps and formed permanent and impermanent, independent, and resistant, self-governed communities.

The Dismal Swamp, extending from southeastern Virginia to northeastern North Carolina is thought to have contained tens of thousands of self-emancipated, self-sustaining individuals throughout the period of 1700-1865.⁴ The maroons triumphed

¹ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), xvii.

² Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Philip J. Schwarz, ed., *Gabriel's Conspiracy: A Documentary History* (University of Virginia Press, 2012). Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011). David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999). Thomas Gray, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA* (Baltimore, MD: Lucas and Deaver, print, 1831). It should be noted that Larry Eugene Rivers argues convincingly that the size, scope, and intensity of the Second Seminole War in Florida (1835-1842) makes it the largest sustained slave revolt in U.S. history. See Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in 19th Century Florida* (Chicago & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

³ David Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974, 1996).

⁴ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York University Press, New York: 2014), 210-212. Hugo Prosper Leaming, *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 221. Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," 168. Edmund Jackson, "The Virginia Maroons," *The Liberty Bell*, January 1, 1852. U.S.

through the muck and through the mire of the difficult and often perilous swampland and creatively survived there despite the tremendous adversity that lurked just outside the swamp's refuge. They established multi-generational communities, organized themselves into resistant networks with enslaved communities along the swamp fringes, and engaged in guerilla war tactics toward, and in demonstration of, greater freedoms until the end of the Civil War.⁵

Today, the dense swamp is just 200 square miles of the 2,000 square miles of swampland it was before 18th century draining and logging commenced.⁶ Cities and highways have encroached upon its edges. Whole areas of what was once part of the Dismal Swamp are now long established communities. What's left of the swamp is now a popular attraction for nature enthusiasts and those seeking outdoor recreation and leisure. Today, you can hike, kayak, hunt, and bike through the swamp with minimal to no reminders of the resistance and resilience of the Dismal Swamp maroons on the built landscape. Even at the very sites these histories of slavery and resistance were enacted in and around the swamp, representation and commemoration efforts of these events remain marginal and suppressed. Public history, or the way "an institution faces, preserves, or reconsiders its past for deeper understanding, for the meaning and use of its public image" and for public consumption, lacks the narrative of enslaved resistance and marronage as it occurred around the swamp.⁷ Today, just as both the enslaved and their living descendants are silenced and transgressed again by memorials to Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia and by other commemorative celebrations of the Confederacy throughout the country, the maroons of the Dismal Swamp are also subjects of erasure and marginalization through the lack of any monuments or statues, and the minimal and feeble attempt to commemorate this history even in the present-day swamp.⁸

These silences are directly connected to, and are in fact exacerbated by the fact that Black people around the swamp today continue to be the poorest with the least opportunities for socio-economic success. Racism and inequality both in knowledge production (public history) and in systemic oppression are part of the pervasive inheritance of slavery and Jim Crow. Suffolk, Virginia, with a 2016 population estimate of 89,273, is currently the largest and most densely populated city that currently borders

Fish and Wildlife Service, "The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad," Great Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge, Suffolk, Virginia. Retrieved May 2013 and March 2015.

⁵ Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (The Society for Historical Archaeology, 2014), 115. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943). Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 230-286. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 247-267.

⁶ William Byrd, "The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp," extract from the *Farmer's Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737. Leaming, *Hidden Americas*, 222. Charles Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 82.

⁷ David Blight, "If You Don't Tell it Like it Was, It Can Never Be As It Ought to Be," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 20.

⁸ In August 2017, white nationalists carried torches, chanted racist slogans, and marched against the city's decision to remove a bronze statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. Black people, and other supporters, fearlessly responded by steering what has become a more honest national conversation about American slavery, memory, and identity.

the Dismal Swamp.⁹ Like all of the Dismal Swamp neighboring cities and counties, its population is nearly half Black or African American at 42.6%, and half white at 52.5%, listed in the year 2016.¹⁰ Today, the parts of Suffolk that most immediately touch the perimeters of the swamp are on the surface, a landscape of Black disfranchisement and anti-Black inequality. Old and abandoned peanut factories litter the streets in the Black neighborhoods off East Washington Street, before the roads cut through endless cotton fields, turning into the swamp. In this Dismal Swamp neighboring city, nearly half of the total population of Black people, 19.4%, lived below the poverty level in 2016, while just 4.7% of white people there did. This is an improvement from previous years.¹¹ Historical silences about enslaved resistance, protest, opposition, and outstanding resilience grow louder in the reality that descendants of the enslaved continue to face a pervasive refashioning of the same anti-Black systems and structures that once worked to maintain slavery and Jim Crow laws.¹²

Bearing this, the history of marronage, organized Black resistance, and autonomy in the Dismal Swamp is most powerful and impactful to living communities when conceptualized as a story that does not begin and end with the dead. The history of the Dismal Swamp maroons is most importantly, a living, breathing history rooted in Black people's resilient spirit of resistance and freedom of action and choice.¹³ It is a history that is alive with autonomous Black power of the past and with the promise of a regeneration of such power in the present and in the future, when remembered and commemorated by Black people. It is a history that threatens to disrupt unequal opportunity and anti-Black racism as normal and commonplace and as a result, it is a history that is (un)represented in public history by narratives that too often work to minimize and erase the nuances of Black historical power in the present. And yet, the historical legacy of the Dismal Swamp maroons is also a living history about resilient Black community memory that endures in spite of the muck and mire of the metaphysical swamp – this entanglement of race, power, history, and memory – privileging whiteness and preserving and protecting its prevailing power.

This is a study of the living history of Black resistance and marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp. A rigorous examination of, on the one hand, the history of slavery and resistance, and on the other hand, the legacies of slavery and resistance in the United States south, reveals much about the cyclical and ongoing nature of racial violence, oppression, resistance, and resiliency over time. This study is a critical examination of both the history of the Dismal Swamp maroon communities and of the power politics of race and representation of slavery and enslaved resistance in public history and in local

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, July 1, 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. "Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months," 2016 American Community Survey.

¹² Michelle Alexander argues that slavery and Jim Crow lend themselves to the "New Jim Crow," or mass incarceration, through a social process of repetition of old racist paradigms in order to accommodate new and ongoing social, political, and economic contexts. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (NY, NY: The New Press, 2010).

¹³ Manning Marable defines the concept of "living Black history" as the ways our past is alive in the present, and therefore useful for "harness[ing] the living power of Black heritage and our narratives of resistance" that "[help] us to imagine new futures, and to use history as a critical force for change." Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Future Can Remake America's Racial Future* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), xx.

Black collective memory. Although producing a new historiography of the Dismal Swamp maroons is not my primary objective, documenting the historical actions and impact the maroons made is necessary for engendering a fuller, more complete understanding of the resistance of the enslaved and the overall significance of marronage in the U.S.

I begin by reconceptualizing flight and marronage in U.S. southern contexts as being part of a larger, hemispheric tradition of explicit Black resistance and independent, self-governed community in the midst of slaveholding societies. Situating the Great Dismal Swamp maroons within these broader contexts, I explore the internal dynamics of resistant and autonomous communities there, composed primarily of Black maroons by the late 18th and early 19th centuries.¹⁴ I investigate the influence maroon activities and the presence of the swamp itself held over the surrounding plantation world as networks of communication and resistance between enslaved and peripheral maroon groups rose throughout the region. Looking at insurgency with special attention to insurrectionary plots between maroons and the enslaved between 1792 and 1802, I argue that the Dismal Swamp presented a geographical opportunity for overt resistance that revolutionized possibilities for freedom in Tidewater Virginia and North Carolina.

The second part of this study argues that what is at stake in these remarkable histories of organized resistance and marronage in the swamp is not merely attaining richer and more nuanced historical understanding about U.S. slavery or about the enslaved, but the real life lessons both the history itself and the ways in which the history is or is not presently narrativized teach us about race and power as ongoing effects of slavery. I examine the present-day relationships between collective memory – the conscious remembrances of groups that provide “a sense of its past and [define] its aspirations for the future”¹⁵ – and the erasure or marginalization of the legacy of enslaved agency, marronage, and resistance in public history. I point to the defining role race plays in power struggles for historical representation and memory of slavery and marronage in current institutional representations made public throughout the Great Dismal Swamp’s surrounding Hampton Roads, otherwise known as the Tidewater region of Virginia and North Carolina. I question how and why the racially-shaped power politics of representation in local institutional representations of slavery, flight, and marronage work to silence and suppress both the histories of overt enslaved resistance and the way we collectively remember this aspect of the past.

From the outset, Black people have been at the vanguard of struggles for more honest and complete historical representation, the genesis of collective memory, and racial progress. Through our racial oppression, Black people have been forced to take “a stance toward history that is braced by the awareness that the past... has never really *passed*,” and thus our memory is a particularly crucial impetus and determinant for how to strategize, persevere, and navigate unfolding racialized experiences.¹⁶ Scholar-activists like Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Du Bois knew this, and “helped to launch the long attempt to rescue Black history in America from what many scholars have called a

¹⁴ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 3, 88.

¹⁵ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (University of North Carolina Press: 2000), 4.

¹⁶ Robert O’Meally and Geneviève Fabre, “Introduction,” in *History & Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Robert O’Meally and Geneviève Fabre (Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

‘structural amnesia.’¹⁷ Leaders like David Walker and Malcolm X vocally commemorated and “invoked the accomplishments of ancient Africa” as a way to instill racial pride and invigorate a sense of future purpose.¹⁸ Zora Neale Hurston “constructed a discourse of nostalgia” for Black kinship and resilient community practice in the rural south as a way to reimagine Black culture as intrinsically valuable and holistically sustainable amidst the “social contradictions and disruption of her contemporary moment.”¹⁹ Amy Jacques Garvey strove to promote racial solidarity and political coalescence through her “reconstruction of the African landscape” – including corrective versions of the histories of slavery and colonialism – intended to “inspire common understanding and mutual progress.”²⁰ During Reconstruction, Martin Delany urged Black people “to continue to defend their rights in the great tradition of those who had taken up arms to fight for freedom” in past struggles.²¹ Over time, countless other Black leaders “reviewed the horrors of slavery” and Black peoples’ endurance as a way to critique and revise contemporary notions of freedom and democracy.²²

In spite of this tradition of Black memory as uplifting and empowering, dominant society’s relationship to the power memory holds in dictating collective conceptions of purpose, identity, and how groups come to construct, reconstruct, or deconstruct present circumstance, remains a force to be contended. In the mainstream, public historical representations about U.S. slavery and resistance influence ideas about national identity, as well as possibilities for imagining future action. Representation, which creates meaning and knowledge, the building blocks of memory, forms the social and cultural conditions by which people engage in processes of self-conception and identification. Stuart Hall argues that “representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the differences between belongingness and otherness,” influencing individual and collective conceptions of choice, action, place, and belonging.²³ W. Fitzhugh Brundage has also pressed the idea that collective memory, a result of representation, “is inextricably bound up with group identity.” He explains that:

For individuals and groups alike, memory forms an essential component of their social identity... Remembering consequently becomes implicated in a range of activities that have as much to do with identity, power, authority, cultural norms, and social interaction as with the simple act of conserving and recalling information. Groups invariably fashion their own image of the world and their place in it by establishing an accepted version of the past, a sort of genealogy of identity.²⁴

¹⁷ David Blight, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory,” in *ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸ Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005), 9. See “David Walker’s Appeal,” and “Statement of the Organization of Afro-American Unity,” in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 23-35, 440.

¹⁹ Hazel Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” in *History & Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Robert O’Meally and Geneviève Fabre (Oxford University Press, 1994), 32.

²⁰ Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 185.

²¹ Clark, *Defining Moments*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

²³ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 445.

²⁴ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 3-4.

David Blight has said that historical memory, so tied to the ways we see ourselves in the present, “can both liberate and paralyze us.”²⁵ He reiterates that memory, grown from ongoing representational process of ordering and reordering the past, dictates our abilities to dream, aspire, and imagine. Without memory, or, by forgetting, there can be no action as “memory helps us understand both our capacity and our incapacity for action.”²⁶

Given that representation and memory form the basis of our individual and collective selves and thereby influence our abilities to choose and to act, the production of memory and historical consciousness wields great power. Those possessing the power to represent and narrate the past can decide which narratives to promulgate, and which to omit, depending on what best accommodates their agenda. Brundage cautions, “Historical memory, consequently, transmits *selective* knowledge about the past.” (my emphasis)²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm writes:

The history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.²⁸

Indeed, “stories about the past are really focused on the needs and power relations of the present.”²⁹ Collective memory and public memory “more reflects current political and social relations than a true reconstruction of the past.”³⁰ It “should not be mistaken for an ‘objective’ record of the past.”³¹ Public historical representations about the past, commemoration, and the memory they construct are all tied to hegemony and to the powerful.³² Memory reflects the aspirations, desires, and interests of the powerful. Brundage agrees, “Representations of history are instruments of, and may even constitute, power. Groups routinely sort the past in a particular way to legitimize their current power or aspirations.”³³ Those with the ability to publicly represent and commemorate the past “are those who have the money and political power to publicly remember a particular past.”³⁴

Historiography is a fundamental medium for the narration and representation of slavery and Black freedom struggle. The documentation of the past shapes and affects other forms of historical representation, such as public history, that directly influence collective memory. Memorials and museums “[reflect] the types of archival materials that survive, the intentions of their producers, and contemporary politics.”³⁵ For example,

²⁵ David Blight, “Southerner’s Don’t Lie: They Just Remember Big,” in *Where These Memories Grow*, ed. Brundage, 351.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 5.

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13.

²⁹ Patricia G. Davis, *Laying Claim: African American Cultural Memory and Southern Identity* (The University of Alabama Press, 2016), 8.

³⁰ Paul Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 11.

³¹ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 5.

³² Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, 13. Michel Foucault has written that the interpretation and representation of history is a conspicuous form of domination. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 150.

³³ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 11.

³⁴ Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, 13.

³⁵ Owen Dwyer, “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Place, Memory, and Conflict,” *Professional*

Quito Swan has written that the widespread idea that slavery in Bermuda was benign is a myth that was promulgated by prominent historians and dominant historiography throughout the 20th century. He calls to mind the great impact that historiography can hold in influencing public history by citing the “1994 United Bermuda Party (UBP) government-sponsored tourist brochure [which] boasted that Bermuda had a ‘relatively benign system of slavery.’”³⁶ The UBP brochure based its assertions about Bermuda history on dominant historiography and the desires of Bermudan white elites who strove to circumvent painful memories of violence, bloodshed, and the resistance of the enslaved. A similar example of the influence historiography has on public history is the perpetuation of “prevailing historical myths about benevolent masters and faithful slaves,” fallacies espoused by historians like Ulrich B. Phillips and Stanley Elkins, still evident in plantation heritage tourism throughout the U.S. south today.³⁷ Not unlike recent protests against Confederate monuments throughout the U.S., in Bermuda, it took the outcry of local Black people to ban the brochure and erect Bermuda’s first public monument commemorating an enslaved person. The Spirit of Freedom monument was erected by Bermuda’s first Black local government (the Progressive Labor Party) in 2009 to commemorate the life, death, and resistance of Sally Bassett, “a sixty-eight-year-old Black woman enslaved in Bermuda, burned to death for allegedly poisoning the masters of her enslaved granddaughter.”³⁸ The power of historiography to influence public historical representations and public narratives about the past can dictate individual, collective, local, and national identities, action, and movement.

In addition to historiography, there are myriad other ways that knowledge about the past becomes public, shaping our historical memory. Of course, historical museums and historical sites are responsible for interpreting and representing the past. The institutions and organizations that run them “have an advantage in building understanding” and historical consciousness, since it is their charge to “look back and describe what occurred [or not], find patterns [or not], examine cause and effect, evaluate choices, and make decisions about the future.”³⁹ Education, media, and colloquial discourse that informs, and is informed by, all practices of representation, are other primary means by which people derive ideas about the past and come to value particular versions of history over others.⁴⁰ Celebrations, national holidays, and commemorations help shape the ways individuals collectively acknowledge, remember, and honor the past.⁴¹ Architecture, markers, signs, monuments, and memorials form the built landscape

Geographer 52, no. 4 (2000): 661.

³⁶ Quito Swan, “Smoldering Memories and Burning Questions: The Politics of Remembering Sally Bassett and Slavery in Bermuda,” in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana Araujo (New York: Routledge, 2012), 79.

³⁷ Derek Alderman, David Butler, and Stephen Hanna, “Memory, Slavery, and Plantation Museums: the River Road Project,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11, no. 3 (2016): 211. Eddie Modlin, “Tales Told on the Tour: Mythic Representations of Slavery by Docents at North Carolina Plantation Museums,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 3 (2008): 265-287.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁹ Max van Balgooy, “Introduction,” in *African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max van Balgooy (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), xiv.

⁴⁰ John Gabriel, *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1998). bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: Southend Press, 1992).

⁴¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot discusses the “narrativization of history” and demarcation of meaning about the past through commemorations and celebrations such as Columbus Day he analyzes as important forms of

that serves as another key contributor to shaping how we think about and value selective historical accounts.⁴² Paul Shackel reminds us that:

public memory does not rely solely on professional historical scholarship, but it takes into account the various individuals and institutions that affect and influence the versions of histories that have become part of the collective memory.⁴³

He names “schools, amusement parks, art and literature, government ceremonies” and “landscape features designated as historical” as some of these institutions and individuals that shape public memory or the ways knowledge about the past become collective, dominant ideas.⁴⁴ It is important to note that all of these representational practices do not exist in isolation because they are linked and function dialectically to produce knowledge and memory.

As representation and memory function through contests of power, public history and collective memory are also inextricably tied to racism, that pivotal organizing element of hierarchical power in the U.S. and beyond. What links all of the aforementioned forms of historical representation and memory making is the privilege whiteness has in historical narration, the historical roles of marginalized and racialized groups, and thereby the ordering of present group identification and feelings of alienation or belonging. Local, state, and national museums, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the National Park Services are all examples of institutions that control this meaning making activity that uphold the interests of white privilege. Michael Omi and Howard Winant contend that “every state institution is a racial institution.”⁴⁵ They argue that “from a racial formation perspective, race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation,” where representation is linked to ongoing state efforts “to reorganize and redistribute resources [and power] along particular racial lines.”⁴⁶ Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small agree that racialization is the mechanism by which representations are constructed and promulgated by state institutions. They write:

...in the United States, economic and political institutions, ideological systems, and interpersonal relationships are all deeply impacted and shaped by racism. This means that most institutions are white-centric and more often than not work to maintain whites’ racial advantage.⁴⁷

Patricia Davis also points out that institutional historical representation, “propagated and assiduously maintained by white political and economic elites,” is not only inextricably tied to racism, but to sexism and gender bias. Too often, she writes, public historical narratives, “advanced by and through the state, its agents, and institutions... [ensure] the subservience of African Americans and women.”⁴⁸ The subjugation and underrepresentation of the historical experiences, knowledges, truths, and contributions of racialized groups and women, is therefore a political act that accustoms us to selective

historical representation. Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 108-140.

⁴² Catherine Bishir, “Landmarks of Power: Building a Southern Past,” in *Where Memories Grow*, ed.

William Fitzhugh Brundage, 139-168.

⁴³ Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-57. “Racial formation” is defined as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”

⁴⁷ Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 8.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Laying Claim*, 6, 8.

memory and strategic narratives of power, place, belonging, and identity as normative, correct, or accurate assessments of the world. Likewise, institutional representation of Black people's historical agency and resistance also reflect the politics of power in representation that affects the self-consciousness, awareness, identification, and sense of place in Black communities.

These troubling power dynamics continue to influence collective memory about slavery and enslaved resistance, group, and national identity, even though state institutions and mainstream representations are not the only contending agents of memory. As this dissertation will explore in the pages that follow, Black people continue to create their own private spaces of historical representation and memory in their homes, churches, and other everyday places, and Black communities continue to establish their own public history sites and agendas that challenge dominant epistemologies.⁴⁹

Do Black people in present-day Suffolk who live so close to the swamp hold memory of their ancestors who once transformed the swampy backwoods behind their communities into a landscape of Black power, independence, and freedom? In downtown Suffolk, East Washington Street is highly visible. It was named to honor and commemorate George Washington for his founding role in the establishment of the Dismal Swamp Company, a land development venture wholly dependent on enslaved labor to drain, develop, cultivate, and extract natural resources from the swamp.⁵⁰ The main street is only one of several signs, posts, and other efforts to commemorate Washington at this end of the swamp. But the historical roles of enslaved labor and marronage in the swamp continue to be rendered invisible. Today, descendant communities of the enslaved live in the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow right at the swamp's outskirts, but few remember the brave men and women who revolutionized the swamp not yet 200 years ago. There is scant public honoring or any form of commemoration of the Dismal Swamp maroons to help communities remember the self-empowerment and resilience of Black people in the region. As public history is about power, these absences point to a larger deliberate attempt to keep people in their places and avoid inspiring change through the collective memory of resistance, or that Black people have always fought to create ways of asserting dignity, humanity, and inherent freedom – even in the miry depths of a swamp. The urgency of what is lost through this erasure on the built landscape around the swamp where Black communities continue to struggle to survive systemic inequalities, is the reason that this study is oriented between the history of Black power and freedom struggle in the swamp and the ongoing power struggles for representation affecting present-day Black historical memory, conceptions of pride, self-hood, place, and belonging.

Slavery, Representation, and Memory

The field of U.S. slavery studies increasingly attends to the complexity of enslaved agency and resistance, including the motivations for and interrelationships

⁴⁹ See Mabel Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) for a detailed chronology of Black people's counter-historical narratives in museums, 1870-2000. Brundage's *Where These Memories Grow* also lists the role Black churches and other "religious organizations," "African American fraternal societies," "curriculum and pedagogy" in schools, music, literature, oral tradition, folklore, and dance have in shaping and disseminating social memories." See Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow*, 20-23, 57-77.

⁵⁰ Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company*, 147.

between gender, covert, everyday resistance, day-to-day survival, cultural resistance and adaptability, accommodation, flight, marronage, and overt insurrectionary activity such as open rebellion and revolt.⁵¹ But while the field makes important contributions to broader and deeper understandings about the experiences of the enslaved throughout U.S. slavery, there remains a considerable absence of new studies that focus on the extraordinary histories of overt resistance and marronage in particular. While there are undeniably several important studies that expand what we know about maroons in the U.S. south,⁵² there are only a small handful of studies that deal exclusively with exploring U.S. marronage,⁵³ and only one of these is a comprehensive study of North American maroon communities.⁵⁴

In his seminal anthology, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1996), Richard Price evidences the scarcity of United States maroon scholarship. He plainly admits, “indeed, many scholars of Afro-America [have] barely heard of marronage” and acknowledges that “the study of North American maroons has been so largely neglected.”⁵⁵ Hugo Prosper Leaming, one of the few historians to turn their attention to U.S. marronage, writes plainly: “There have been no (written) histories of maroon communities within the United States.”⁵⁶ He provides an endnote to credit the one exception that he could recognize at the time: Herbert Aptheker’s then unprecedented maroon survey.⁵⁷

In addition to the fact that scholars of slavery in the U.S. south have focused on forms of resistance that were more prevalent than marronage or revolt, marronage has been a devalued and understudied topic to some extent because of pervasive silences and attitudes about overt Black resistance. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s concept of the “unthinkability” of enslaved resistance points to the archive’s “contention that enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom – let alone formulate

⁵¹ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Edward Baptiste and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, (The University of Georgia Press, 2006). Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Hoffer, *Cry Liberty* (2010). Rasmussen, *American Uprising* (2011). Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways* (2012). Sergio A. Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (The University Press of Kentucky: 2016).

⁵² Rebecca Bateman, “Africans and Indians: A Comparative Study of the Black Carib and Black Seminole,” *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 1 (Winter, 1990), 1-24. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (1992). Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (John Hopkins University Press, 1996). Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*.

⁵³ Herbert Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 24 (1939). Leaming, *Hidden Americans*. Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas*, (1993). Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles* (2014). Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People* (2014). Nathaniel Millet, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville, Florida: The University Press of Florida, 2015).

⁵⁴ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles* (2014).

⁵⁵ Price, *Maroon Societies*, xi, 149.

⁵⁶ Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, xiv.

⁵⁷ Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” (1939). Herbert Aptheker, “Additional Data on American Maroons,” *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 32, 4 (October, 1947).

strategies for gaining and securing such freedom,” an assumption that explains the production of silences of African capability of independence, organized resistance, and essential humanity at the level of the generation of primary sources.⁵⁸ If it couldn’t be conceived, it could hardly be documented – at least without reductive framing or trivializing language. And, since “to acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system,” doing so would have compromised the preservation of slaveholders’ need to believe in their instinctive superiority and invincibility.⁵⁹ The ubiquity of Black flight coupled with the commonness of marronage in the U.S. south was a source of deep embarrassment and fear. Thus, beyond the urgency of controlling and containing these seeds of insurgency by way of reporting them, and taken with the fact that the maroons were masters of elusion to begin with, there was great incentive to leave them undocumented. Price writes that the maroons, as subjects:

... were, from one perspective, the antithesis of all that slavery stood for, they were at the same time everywhere an embarrassingly visible part of these systems... Throughout Afro-America, such communities stood out as an heroic challenge to white authority, and as the living proof of the existence of a slave consciousness that refused to be limited by the whites’ conception or manipulation of it.⁶⁰

As “history is a story about power, a story about those who won,” silences about marronage in the U.S. results from these processes of epistemic valuation and the politics of power in the production of knowledge.⁶¹ The lack of scholarly and popular attention to maroon histories in the U.S. is in part a consequence of these factors and the underlining Anglocentric epistemic hegemony that historically and presently maintains “uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives.”⁶²

Though some studies have questioned these silences and absences, and have grappled with the questions of overt resistance and marronage in the U.S., across the field, there remains a lack of scholarly consensus around the definition of marronage, who and what constitutes a maroon beyond Latin American and Caribbean colonial contexts, and the appropriate use of the concept of marronage to describe the phenomenon as it applies specifically to colonial and antebellum U.S. southern contexts. Although Prices’ anthology does utilize the comparative by placing historical documentation of maroon communities throughout the African diaspora, including the U.S., side by side, none of these works use comparative analysis of the specific cultural, political, and economic historical contexts of slaveholding societies as a tool to clarify and define what constitutes maroons and their communities both within their specific socio-historical contexts and the broader context of the African diaspora. Moreover, none of these studies use comparative analysis of the U.S. maroons and maroon communities at other locations in the diaspora as a way to specify and clarify who is a maroon, what is a maroon community, and the circumstances by which individuals and groups can be considered each.

Where these studies fall short, this dissertation gains insight from the use of comparative analysis as a way to define marronage as a hemispheric phenomenon, clarify

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁵⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 84.

⁶⁰ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 2.

⁶¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

the specificity of marronage as it occurred within the confines of the U.S. south, and ultimately, to connect the activities of the Dismal Swamp maroons and maroons in the U.S. more broadly to a hemispheric Black tradition not merely of flight, but of autonomously organized and often violent resistance efforts against slaveholding societies as freedom practice and self-defense. Through the comparative comes the insight that traditional definitions of marronage invoked by scholars like Michael Mullin (1972; 1992), Richard Price (1996), and Alvin Thompson (2006) which classify maroon communities as either *petit* or otherwise *grand*, or that restrict their analysis of marronage nearly exclusively to maroons in large plantation societies, limit our abilities to conceive of a kind of marronage that may exist in between this preoccupation with size and endurance.⁶³ In this grey space dwell the maroons of the U.S., most of whom have long been unidentified as maroons, and have instead been misnamed “lurkers,” “outliers,” “desperadoes,” and “runaways,” consistent with the objectifying language of the dominant archive.⁶⁴ Definitions of marronage that qualify maroons based on the size, scale, or endurance of maroon communities are rooted in Caribbean and South American colonial contexts, and do not account for geographical, demographical, political, cultural, and economic differences that set the paternalistic slaveholding settler society of the U.S. south apart from the rest of the slaveholding colonies throughout the western hemisphere. These differences created more constricted opportunities for sustaining large scale and overt resistance, and thus the need for a more expansive definition of marronage that includes the small scale, impermanent, and often assimilated, acculturated, or culturally accommodating maroons of the U.S. becomes evident.

From these insights garnered through comparative analysis, I argue that it is most useful to conceptualize marronage in the Dismal Swamp, the greater U.S. south, and beyond based on the ways the maroons navigated space and created alternative landscapes of freedom and power than it is to conceptualize marronage based on their size, duration, or scale, or, based on the assumption of Latin American and Caribbean contexts. I define marronage by maroon spatiality: the combined act of flight and resettlement in wilderness spaces outside of dominant society, or, if born into a maroon community, sustained autonomous life in the wild lands surrounding plantation spaces. This is the fundamental definition of marronage that unifies all gradations (from *petit* to *grand*), attributable to all maroons, regardless of differing opportunities for this form of resistance.

Similar to Sylvianne Diouf’s “hinterland” and “borderland” landscape conceptions of marronage and maroon mobility between the far removed or bordering reaches of the wilderness space surrounding cities, towns, farms, and plantations,⁶⁵ but specific to the unique landscape of the spherical Dismal Swamp and its immediate outreaches, I also offer the concepts of the “peripheral” and “interior” swamp maroons. Specific to the landscape of the Dismal Swamp, this spatial conception of marronage

⁶³ Michael Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (University of Illinois Press, 1992). Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (University of the West Indies, 2006).

⁶⁴ Many frustrated slaveholders sought to demean maroons by referring to them as bandits in official reports.

⁶⁵ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 10.

distinguishes between opportunities for resistance and marronage of maroons living inside the swamp peripheries, closest to repressive slaveholding society, and those larger and more permanent communities deep inside the swamp interior, the more elusive and removed refuges of the Dismal Swamp. Small and impermanent “bands of runaways” and “outliers,” which dominated in the U.S. south, are thus just as identifiable as are the more populous and enduring maroons, far more widespread in Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is through these comparative and geographical considerations of marronage that we are most able to locate and identify the maroons of the U.S. south as being part of a hemispheric legacy of overt resistance through flight and independence. In doing so, we dispel the notion that the slaveholding U.S. south is so exceptional that it was able to evade this form of resistance altogether. Through these expansive and inclusive concepts of marronage, we can begin to penetrate and understand marronage from the perspectives and experiences of Black people themselves as they located opportunities for freedom forging and community building in the wild and untamed recesses beyond the control of the slaveholding south.

Outside of the field of U.S. slavery studies, the fields of public history and collective memory ask important questions about race, power, and the representation and narration of histories relating to slavery in the U.S. and beyond. Analysis of the relationship between practices of historical representation and the consequences such practices have on our abilities to remember the past, and our roles in that past, is critical to the field of slavery since it exposes a direct correlation between history, our individual and collective historical memory, and racism as an enduring and persistent legacy of slavery. An interrogation of representation and memory of difficult pasts, like the history of slavery in the U.S., becomes necessary and important since “the exclusion of people and their misrepresentation is a political act, and it is a process that help(s) to reinforce a narrative that allow(s) for a white hegemony in the present.”⁶⁶ Studies on historical representation through public history and the ever-evolving construction of collective memory highlight the ways in which the histories of marginalized and racialized subjects are valued or undervalued, made visible or rendered invisible, and are represented or subjected to erasure as political and deliberate acts to preserve the distribution of power.

Recent studies on the relationships between race, representation, and memory at sites where meaning is contested read race and power through the public narration and representation of the histories of the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil War, the Underground Railroad, or slavery itself.⁶⁷ But to date, there are no studies on these

⁶⁶ Paul Shackel, “Foreword,” in Antoinette Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2012), 10.

⁶⁷ Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, eds., *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). Stephen Small, “Still Back of the Big House: Slave Cabins and Slavery in Southern Heritage Tourism,” *Tourism Geographies* 15, no. 3 (2013): 405-423. Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood, “Landscapes of Memory and Socially Just Futures,” in eds. Nuala Johnson, R. H. Schein, and J. Winders, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), 186-197. Robyn Autry, “The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenge of Representing National Conflict at ‘Identity-Driven’ Museums,” *Theory and Society* 42 (2013): 57-80. Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Antoinette Jackson, “Shattering Slave Life Portrayals: Uncovering Subjugated Knowledge in U.S. Plantation Sites in South Carolina and Florida,” *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 3 (2011): 448-462. Perry Carter, David Butler, and Owen Dwyer, “Defetishizing the Plantation: African Americans in the

subjects as they pertain specifically to the representation and commemoration of U.S. slave *resistance*, and marronage in particular. A large part of this is because the recognition and acknowledgement of U.S. marronage in historiography, and especially at the sites where it occurred, is relatively new, if it exists at all. The ethnographic research I conducted on race, power, and representation at public sites relating to the histories of slavery and enslaved resistance around the Dismal Swamp bordering cities and counties is consistent with leading studies in the finding that those with the power and the resources to dictate the narrative selectively value some versions of history in accordance with their own aspirations and desires.⁶⁸ Representation of flight, marronage, and other forms of Black resistance to slavery at historical sites like museums, state parks, and plantations in and around the Dismal Swamp demonstrates that the institutions doing the telling and producing the narrative prioritize the accommodation of white southern sensitivities around race, which work to suppress the idea of revolutionarily resistant, independent Black communities, through trivializations, minimalizing language, or blatant erasure. Unlike the leading studies grappling with questions of power, race, representation, and memory about U.S. slavery, I look deliberately at how acts of overt resistance such as violent self-defense, insurrection, and marronage is represented, remembered, or forgotten, and why.

This study of the politics of race and representation, public honoring, and commemoration of resistance and marronage expands past studies on race and representation of slavery by evidencing how making visible these specific aspects of the history not only threaten present distribution of power, but also resurrect the imminent threat of repeated resistance against racial oppression and pervasive inequality in the present. In fact, even the act of commemorating Black resistance through the concepts of independence, revolt, or marronage can be understood as a form of resistance against a power structure currently dependent upon the subjugation and disfranchise of persons of African descent. Representation and commemoration of resistance and marronage serve Black and white communities as reminders of both the practical and ideological range of possibilities for action against race based oppression in a society presently shaped by slavery's legacy of enduring structural and attitudinal racism. A more whole, unbroken, and equally integrated narrative of Black power and resistance in the Dismal Swamp that accounts for the resiliency of autonomous maroons and their varied forms of resistant actions (including their involvement in organized insurrection and anti-slavery violence) is a particularly threatening version of the swamp's past and continues to be constricted and suppressed. The mechanics of race and power in representation of Black resistance to slavery, organized opposition, and independence form a political quagmire – the muck and the mire – of silences and invisibility throughout the swamp landscape, paradoxically shaped by the living history of these self-empowering acts.

Methodology Towards Restorative and Transformative History

Memorialized South,” *Historical Geography* 39 (2011): 128-146. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History* (New York: The New Press, 2006). David Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (New York: First Smithsonian Books, 2006). Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2006).

⁶⁸ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 11.

This project is inspired by the insights of restorative history, the project of reconstructing and re-presenting the past as an effective tool for re-memory toward individual, local, national, and global change. I employ traditional and non-traditional methodological interventions for the recovery and narration of a fuller, thicker, and deeper understanding of the experiences of the enslaved and their significance to living people. In this study, I use comparative analysis of slavery and resistance across the hemisphere, I adopt interdisciplinary methodologies such as the application of multiple methods, reading the archive against the grain, and I rely upon unwritten and intangible sources. As an interdisciplinary project, this study benefits from the unrestricted use of methods and sources spanning from the archive, to ethnography, to archaeology, to oral history as a means of identifying, challenging, correcting, and restoring fuller and truer representations of historical Black resistance, agency, and survival. This restorative history of the Dismal Swamp maroons is necessarily situated between the past and the present, so that the knowledge produced about the swamp's current and historical significance, by way of these methodologies, may be relevant to living communities as tools for healing, remembering, and recovery from the aftermath of slavery.

Nathan Huggins has prescribed the need for "a revised master narrative which better inspires and reflects upon our true condition," in his article, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History."⁶⁹ He names "the deforming mirror of truth" the revelation of histories that force America's "master narrative," the racist, sexist, and elitist version of history upholding the purity of the American ideals of republicanism, democracy, and freedom, to deal with "the conspicuous fact of racial slavery."⁷⁰ Although he does not offer any methodological suggestions, his work is important to mention here since it compels scholars grappling with the difficult subject of slavery to view our work as restoring greater truth about our national history and as revising "the master narrative... that sustains our collective sense of national purpose and identity."⁷¹ Huggins suggests that this imperative to produce "restorative" and meaningful ways of thinking about U.S. history that confronts and challenges the limits of dominant ideology stems from our values and beliefs as historians (and as people in general). The value of restorative histories of slavery and enslaved resistance engenders new and counter knowledges toward social progress and change. It is not a project that can be confined to the limits of detached academic historical scholarship, since the continuing material and ideological consequences of slavery, including the distribution of power and resources, is ultimately at stake. These values are based on the belief in critical connections between the past, the power of our memory of the past to influence the present, and the present itself in the making of our individual and collective identities and current sense of direction.

As such, this restorative history of the resistance and resilience of the Dismal Swamp maroons values the voices and ways of knowing shared by living people connected to the history, and adopts multiple methods of studying the histories of slavery, flight, and marronage around the swamp to produce the fullest picture possible. Finally, I

⁶⁹ Nathan Huggins, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History," *Radical History Review*, no. 49 (Winter 1991): 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Huggins states that historians share an "unlimited capacity for expanding and extending democracy, our power to command the future, and the meaning of progress itself..."

read the dominant archive carefully with an eye toward troubling the white-male centered historical authority of the silences, gaps, and erasure of Black humanity, historical agency, and resistance.

Without a doubt, the dominant archive was written with the objective of upholding the fiction of the “master narrative.” Studies on slavery are at once challenged by a very one-sided record of primary source material and must also contend with generations of unrestrained racist secondary scholarship. But there are some key methodological strategies enabling greater understanding about the lived historical experiences of the enslaved and enabling new knowledge production about the institution of slavery itself. Saidiya Hartman points to alternative forms of knowledge that can be read as sources for theorizing the possibilities and capacities for the choices, actions, and survival of the enslaved through trying experiences and “scenes of subjection.” She proposes:

Because these documents are “not free from barbarism,” I have tried to read them against the grain in order to write a different account of the past, while realizing the limits imposed by employing these sources, the impossibility of fully recovering the experience of the enslaved and the emancipated, and the risk of reinforcing the authority of these documents even as I try to use them for contrary purposes. The effort to “brush history against the grain” requires excavations at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved, turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making and attending to the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts.⁷²

Hartman affirms that the lives of the enslaved can be rescued and reclaimed from the “violence of the archive” through the implementation of methodological strategies that excavate and uncover the humanity and lived experiences of the marginalized, silenced, and oppressed.⁷³

Tiffany Patterson also interprets marginalized histories “against the grain” and with the help of alternative “forms of knowledge and practice” that challenge and reinvent the dominant record. Like Hartman, Patterson turns to innovative methodological strategies she defines as “literary creations” or “imaginative sources” – nontraditional sources historians have disregarded as unacceptable, subjective, and unqualified such as autobiography, folklore, ethnography, music, art, and oral history – to conceptualize and reconstruct histories of the enslaved and the descendants of the enslaved.⁷⁴ These methodologies demonstrate that it is possible to navigate the line between the objective “truth” and the subjective, imagined experiences of the enslaved without romanticizing the past. When reading against the authority of primary source documentation that, for example, distorts the resistant activities of maroons as the “crimes” of fugitive “runaways,” “lurkers,” and other objectified and dehumanizing labels, or that altogether omits the leadership of maroon and enslaved Black women in organizing resistance efforts, it becomes possible to understand the maroons, and the enslaved alike, as people given a particular set of choices and constraints for creating alternative landscapes of knowledge, agency, independence, power, and freedom. It

⁷² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10-11.

⁷³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *small axe* 26 (June 2008): 1.

⁷⁴ Tiffany Patterson, *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of a Southern Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 24-25.

becomes possible to theorize the human nature of individuals and communities in this particular historical and geo-political context of the 18th and 19th century Dismal Swamp.

Methodologies of restorative history necessarily adjust and contest epistemological assumptions made within the master narrative. Patricia Hill Collins has posited an epistemological methodology designed to challenge “The Eurocentric, Masculinist Knowledge Validation Process” that stands as a good example of methodologies that work against the grain to challenge damaging dominant ideologies. Collins’ knowledge validation methodology demands that “epistemological choices about who to trust, what to believe, and why something is true” be based on applying the perspectives of Black women and marginalized people more broadly in daily life and history to dominant knowledges as critical contestation.⁷⁵ Similarly, I apply the knowledges and ways of knowing in everyday life shared by living Black people around the swamp while theorizing human behavior to rethink and reconstruct the histories of slavery, resistance, and resilience in the Dismal Swamp. Throughout this study, I make the conscious decision to avoid using objectifying and dehumanizing language such as “slave,” “runaway,” and “fugitive” as default so that I do not reproduce and reify dominant ideologies that risk re-transgressing the enslaved, and their descendants, by casting them as subhuman half-persons, criminals, or abstract objects. By referring to the maroons as maroons, as people, and as men and as women, I deconstruct and reconstruct the implication that they should be understood as fleeing criminals, inert and unmoving, unchanging victims, or as objects of the dominant record and its benefactors. This shift in epistemic valuation through language is a conscious methodological decision to give primacy to the perspectives of the enslaved and to encourage understanding of the enslaved as whole persons who were as complex and varied as any human being. Challenging the assumption that dominant epistemes are “true” through the valuation of marginalized knowledges recovers and restores the humanity of the enslaved and allows us to reconceptualize the agency and resilience of the maroons.

In her book, *Speaking for the Enslaved* (2012), Antoinette Jackson brilliantly suggests the methodological intervention of giving primacy to “descendant voices” and “descendant knowledges” in order to expand our understandings about the intricate and complex experiences of “people actively engaged in developing strategies for living and surviving” under slavery.⁷⁶ These are living sources of information about the enslaved that persist through their descendants.⁷⁷ Customs, traditions, memory, and the ways of knowing and thinking shared by descendants of the enslaved are vital non-traditional sources that aid in the recovery of silences and gaps in how we understand life during slavery. Jackson explains:

These chapters recast the history of slavery and the construction of community in America by consciously soliciting and using descendant voices to develop a rubric of knowledge privileging the complex and often underrepresented role played by majority African communities in antebellum plantation spaces. Descendants shed light on broader dynamics for characterizing plantations... telling a bigger story includes using descendant voices and descendant knowledge...⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000, 2009), 202-203.

⁷⁶ Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved*, 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

A fuller, more complete historical accounting comes without undervaluing intangible, unwritten, and untraditional sources of knowledge about slavery and the agency and resilience of the enslaved.

The voices of Black people living around the swamp today are central to this study for these reasons. Ethnography enabled the collection of oral histories serving these ends. Between January 2014 and August 2015, I met with thirty-two Black community members from six cities and three counties neighboring the Dismal Swamp. Most of these community members are descendants of the enslaved (two identify as being descendants of historically free Black communities), and the interviews and oral histories they provided about the past are valuable human archives that shed new light on the experiences and perspectives of the enslaved. Descendant knowledge is also important to this study because it enlivens and makes more meaningful the history of slavery as foundational to real and identifiable current circumstances. Descendant voices and memory not only help us to substantiate the history and recover what is missing from the archive, but they also help us identify and learn lessons from patterns of race and power affecting historical narration (what becomes dominant versus marginalized knowledge), collective memory, and community as legacies of slavery.

When writing a more comprehensive restorative history about oppressed people, it is imperative to apply a wider range of methods such as oral history, ethnography, and archaeology in addition to the archive.⁷⁹ Using mixed methods transcends the limits of disciplinarity and makes possible more ways to articulate and understand historical Black resistance, agency, and resilience during slavery. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork investigating the history and memory of the swamp, this study also benefits from the archaeological findings of maroon communities in the Dismal Swamp. Insights from fieldwork I conducted in 2013 at swamp digs in Gates County, North Carolina and Suffolk, Virginia led by the anthropologist Daniel Sayers are invaluable to recovering the history of slavery and resistance in this region.

Besides descendant voices, there are other important unwritten and intangible sources that benefit this study. Between May 2013 and August 2015, I made visits to twenty-seven historical sites and places that publicly inform the historical significance of the Hampton Roads, or Tidewater Virginia and North Carolina and the Dismal Swamp. I collected nine interviews with park managers, directors, superintendents, as well as with docents, guides, and other persons charged with the responsibility of publically representing the history of slavery around the swamp or of the swamp itself. These interviews, along with publically visible texts, plaques, and signs, tour narratives, and other forms of public discourse representing slavery and marronage are useful for determining how current institutional representational practices make visible historical Black agency and resistance. These sources, found in places like plantation museums, state parks, nature conservancies, and other museums around the swamp, are tools for studying the racial character of the distribution of power to narrate histories of overt Black protest and freedom struggle as ongoing legacies of slavery.

Landscapes are themselves archives about the past and the unfolding present. Both the built and the natural landscape can be critically understood as unwritten sources inscribed with the histories and experiences of the oppressed as well as of the oppressive.

⁷⁹ Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen, *The Dutch Atlantic: Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (Pluto Press, 2011), 5-6. Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved*, 30.

The spaces that the enslaved once lived in and navigated are a physical link to this history. In this study, landscapes are unwritten archives both for learning about history and for learning about how the past is presently represented, remembered, and why.

In an effort to reconstruct the history of the enslaved and the Dismal Swamp maroons, geographical considerations such as landscapes, space, and environment enrich our understandings of their mobility, opportunities for resistance, creative survival, and their conceptions of family, community, and freedom. Angel David Nieves contends that an attention to space is essential to the task of theorizing the historical experiences of the enslaved. He explains that the examination of “the physical, social, and intellectual spaces created by African Americans will offer us new forms of historical evidence, methodologies, and analyses.”⁸⁰ Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg argue that we cannot fully understand “slavery as a system based on power,” without looking closely at the ways landscapes shaped and were shaped by enslaved communities. They explain that the built landscape is an important indicator of “the ways slaves expressed their autonomy, restored their dignity, and even achieved their freedom... through manipulation of the very landscapes designed to restrict them.”⁸¹ Jackson has also written that reading the built landscapes traversed, inhabited, and created by the enslaved “make available knowledge that cannot be spoken – graves, building remains, tools... invite discussion about how people lived, labored, and organized themselves in places they considered home.”⁸² The natural environment is also a critical source for imagining the lives and perspectives of the enslaved. Swamps and forests tell stories of opportunity for resistance and survival but also the way the enslaved created alternative Black landscapes of knowledge, power, and freedom in spite of the oppressive and confining landscapes of white supremacy such as the plantation, the farm, town, city, and state.⁸³ This attention to geography enables the insight of that which is unwritten, and yet inscribed on the land as important sources for a fuller understanding of the opportunities and motivations for actions and choices made by the enslaved that might otherwise go unnoticed and unstated.

In thinking about the present legacy of slavery and the living history of both the enslaved and the Dismal Swamp maroons, landscapes are also sources that reveal much about race, power, and opportunity to publicly represent and commemorate the past.

⁸⁰ Angel David Nieves, “Cultural Landscapes of Resistance and Self-Definition for the Race: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Socio-Spatial Race History,” in *“We Shall Independent Be”: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, eds. Leslie M. Alexander and Angel David Nieves (Denver, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 2.

⁸¹ Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, “Introduction,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, eds. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010), 2-3.

⁸² Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved*, 30.

⁸³ M. Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone,” *The Modern Language Association* 123, 2 (2008). Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006). Megan Kate Nelson, “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamp: Slavery, Fugitive Slaves, and Swamplands in the Southeastern Boarderlands, 1739-1845,” in *We Shall Independent Be: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, eds. Leslie Alexander and Angel David Nieves. E.D. Blum, “Power, danger, and control: slave women’s perceptions of wilderness in the nineteenth century,” *Women’s Studies* 31 (2002): 247-265.

Power inequality in processes of representation by institutions that control land, space, and both the built and natural environment shape our collective memory, what versions of history we remember, and help us to determine what can be commemorated and what will most likely be forgotten. Institutional representations of enslaved agency and resistance (or lack thereof), influence our understanding of the narrative significance of U.S. history, the historical roles of marginalized and racialized groups, and also influence present group identification and feelings of alienation or belonging.⁸⁴ Marable has written, “our national memory is closely linked with geography, physical spaces, and material culture.” Landscapes “provide a firm grounding from which a meaningful interpretation becomes possible. This is particularly the case with sites marking a horrific event that represents a larger social reality, such as structural racism.”⁸⁵ The ways objects, signs, and structures are organized and built on the land as well as what aspects of the natural environment are preserved and conserved tell an important story about what is valued, and who is valued that is, through its racial basis, a legacy of slavery. Too often, institutional control of land and space means that the histories of Black people are omitted and rendered invisible on the land. Indeed, few national museums, parks, landmarks, or memorials commemorate histories of Black suffering, death, or resistance, nor do many commemorate this difficult past as it pertains to other racialized, non-white people.⁸⁶ Reading the ways institutions like the Smithsonian and National Park Service control land and space makes possible the insight that too often, the built landscape currently privileges the historical and present narrative of whiteness that minimizes, distorts, or erases histories involving white culpability as oppressors and the histories and experiences of the oppressed that challenge the status quo.

These interdisciplinary methodologies, multiple methods, and unwritten and intangible sources are used throughout this study as tools for empowering the fields of slavery studies, African diaspora, public history, and collective memory to reveal, contest, and restore representations of historical Black resistance and agency. Beyond studying the maroons and enslaved communities around the Dismal Swamp, my objective is to uphold “the deforming mirror of truth” toward knowledge production that influences social change through a fuller recovery and restoration of the difficult histories of slavery and racism and the insight of the inseparability between the past, the present, and importantly, the future.

Chapters

This study is divided into four substantive chapters. Chapter 1, “Identifying Marronage in British North America and the United States,” defines the concept of marronage and clarifies the specificity of U.S. marronage, distinct in prevalence, size, practice, material culture, and socio-historical context from the maroon societies of the Caribbean and South America. I posit through expansive but pointed definitions of

⁸⁴ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 445.

⁸⁵ Marable, *Living Black History*, 5-6.

⁸⁶ Gareth Hoskins discusses the role of California State Park Services and the Angel Island Immigration Station in the representational silencing of the difficult history of Chinese suffering and death through the ordeal of immigration in his chapter, Gareth Hoskins, “Poetic Landscapes of Exclusion: Chinese Immigration at Angel Island, San Francisco,” in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. R. Schein (London: Routledge, 2006), 95-111.

marronage and maroons, that the flight and autonomous relocation and settlement in wilderness spaces across the U.S. south evidences that Black people hemispherically engaged in this form of resistance to an extent that has not previously been comprehensively considered until very recently.⁸⁷ Here I broaden and deepen the concept of marronage through detailed comparative analysis between U.S. marronage and marronage in the Caribbean and South America, a task that no study has yet undertaken. In defining marronage and identifying marronage in a U.S. context, the distinction between mere flight or absconding into spaces inhabited by slaveholding society (or into otherwise settled territories like Canada or Mexico), and marronage, the specific and distinct act of creating free spaces in places uninhabited by dominant society, regardless of size, endurance, or cultural production, becomes clear. The primary objective of this chapter is to redefine marronage as a concept so that U.S. forms of marronage can be identifiable as being part of the larger phenomenon of this extraordinary form of resistance and self-determination, instead of losing sight of the agency of the enslaved through diminishing and objectifying labels such as “outliers” and “runaways.”

Chapter 2, “Community, Marronage, and Resistance in The Great Dismal Swamp,” explores the activities and community building of the Dismal Swamp maroons. Here I explain the stratification of the various communities living within and around the perimeters of the swamp (i.e. the enslaved dwelling in neighboring plantations, enslaved canal laborers, itinerant maroons moving in and through swamp borders, and the permanent interior maroon communities). Based on oral histories, folklore, letters, periodicals, travelers’ logs, other eyewitness descriptions of the swamp and its inhabitants, and archaeological evidence, this chapter looks at how the various maroon groups creatively survived in the swamp, and also looks at the complex and enduring relationships that existed between the enslaved and the Dismal Swamp maroons. Part of this investigation is an exploration of evidence of overt resistance and violent insurrectionary activity involving maroons in the swamp as well as organized, collaborative resistance networks comprised of maroon groups working in the swamp and the enslaved navigating the surrounding plantations. I look at the organized attempts at rebellion and the destruction of the Norfolk arsenal in 1792 and 1800-1802 orchestrated by Black people throughout the swamp region in what was then the lower parts of Norfolk, Virginia, or the outskirts of the upper swamp. I highlight the role of the swamp itself as a locus for making possible heightened resistance in colonial and early national Virginia and North Carolina, maroon leadership in insurgencies around the swamp, and the internal dynamics of self-governance, gender, family, and culture in both the deep interior swamp and peripheral swamp maroon communities.

Chapter 3, entitled, “Through the Telling – Public Historical Representation in the Hampton Roads,” theorizes the representational erasure, silencing, and distortion of the historical agency and resilience of the Dismal Swamp maroons as described and elaborated in Chapter 2. Public history narrated at museums and historical sites throughout the present-day Tidewater demonstrates how institutions control the narratives about the swamp and its interpretive significance so that slavery, resistance, and marronage are minimized or altogether erased from the spaces in which they occurred. Frequent site visits to the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Suffolk, Virginia ran by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Dismal Swamp State

⁸⁷ With the publication of Diouf’s, *Slavery’s Exiles* (2014).

Park in South Mills, North Carolina managed by the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, reveal how race and power in institutional representation of slave resistance interact in the interest of white emotional comfort and a white political agenda. Both of these institutions own the remaining swampland and maintain the responsibility of controlling the narrative of its historical significance for public interpretation. I find that institutional practices of public historical representation also largely under-emphasize and under-represent the histories of the agency and resistance of the enslaved by following a pervasive logic that distorts and erases historical narratives threatening white power in the present.

Chapter 4, “Remembering and Forgetting Black Freedom Struggle in Contemporary Dismal Swamp Communities” explores the collective memory of flight and marronage in and around the swamp held by local Black communities throughout the Hampton Roads. Here I provide a deeper examination of surviving oral historical accounts about the lives of the enslaved, the maroons, and the Dismal Swamp than is explored in Chapter 2. This chapter draws primarily from descendant knowledges about the history and legacy of the Dismal Swamp maroons and the descendant ways of knowing and thinking about the swamp. Through my conversations with community members about the swamp and its maroon inhabitants I found that (1) forgetting about histories rooted in slavery is more commonplace than remembering, (2) Black memory about marronage in the Dismal Swamp does exist in spite of the challenges surrounding remembering and is a vital source for restorative history, and (3) where remembering is most practiced, Black memory becomes a tool of community empowerment and social transformation. Part of the analysis supporting these conclusions is an investigation of the relationship between institutional representations explored in Chapter 3 and the shaping of the maroon legacy in Black memory. I argue that Black community memory about our historical resistance and struggle for freedom in and around the swamp does not have to become institutionalized in order for it to wield a kind of power much in the liberationist tradition of the Dismal Swamp maroons themselves.

I find that despite struggles for representation in public history and contested memory and commemoration in public spheres between Black community members and institutions, Black memory and historical knowledge about the Dismal Swamp maroons, flight, resistance, and independence perseveres in alternative, private spheres and continues to inform local Black identity, place, and belonging. While there remains a notable disconnect between Black communities and the institutions that publically represent or fail to represent Black history, resilient Black memory is self-validating, empowering, and possesses socially transformative potential in Black communities and beyond.

Chapter 1: Identifying Marronage in British North America and the United States

In 1827, a Black woman returned to her enslaver in New Orleans after an absence of sixteen years. Upon her return, she admitted she had been living eight miles north of the city, “between the Gentilly road and lake Pontchartrain.” There she lived on “a piece of firm soil... to which the approach is cut off by swamps resembling quick sand... sure to swallow up the inexperienced hunter, who ventures within their vortex.” This report, which raised alarms in a national paper, goes on to state:

... several blacks having discovered the means of passing those morasses, have sought for and fixed their homes, in those small tracts of firm ground, which are here and there discovered in their centre. The camp from which the aforesaid negress came, is said to contain fifty or sixty souls, who regularly plant corn, sweet-potatoes, and other vegetables, and raise hogs & poultry. Some, no doubt occasionally resort to fishing, but the object of their excursions generally, is to pillage by night in the environs of this city.⁸⁸

Not long after, the woman’s story “[roused] the vigilance of the constituted authorities of [the] state,” and the destruction of “another camp about the head of the bayou Bienvenu” was “imperiously” ordered.⁸⁹

Until recently, maroon communities such as the one this woman belonged to were routinely reduced to “runaway gangs,” “outlying gangs of Blacks,” “bands of runaways,” or were otherwise obscured as being maroons by restrictive definitions and conceptualizations of marronage.⁹⁰ This dismissal is old, as one 19th century abolitionist noted:

It is not, I think, generally known, however, that our Southern States contain many communities of greater or less numbers, very similar to those of Jamaica and Cuba, though not designated by the name of Maroons, but as “gangs of runaway negroes.”⁹¹

With the exception of Herbert Aptheker’s work on maroons in the U.S.,⁹² scholars have given the greatest attention to the historical significance of marronage when communities of escapees fortified themselves into “larger bands that were the most militarily formidable,” raided and waged wars against colonial authorities, forced colonists to negotiate peace treaties, or incited complete revolution.⁹³ This framing of maroon communities is based exclusively on Caribbean and South American colonial contexts, where the largest and most enduring maroon societies thrived, and thus fails to include variations of marronage that were unique to British North America and the U.S. south. The social, economic, demographic, and geographic contexts of the early national and antebellum U.S. south produced smaller, scattered, and often ephemeral maroon communities, but maroon communities nonetheless. The failure to recognize and include these forms of marronage within the hemispheric tradition stems from a failure to carefully weigh differing opportunities for resistance, autonomy, and freedom. These

⁸⁸ *New York Evening Post*, December 4, 1827.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford University Press: 1999), 86.

⁹¹ Edmund Jackson, “The Virginia Maroons,” *The Liberty Bell*, January 1, 1852.

⁹² Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” *Journal of Negro History* 24, 2 (April, 1939). Aptheker, “Additional Data on American Maroons,” *Journal of Negro History* 32, 4 (October, 1947).

⁹³ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 46.

shortcomings have resulted in the widely held assumption of “the almost complete absence of a maroon dimension and tradition to slave culture in the South.”⁹⁴

Indeed, Eugene Genovese partook in the dismissal of the historical significance of British North American and U.S. maroons in stating: “The slaves of the Old South... typically huddled in small units and may be called ‘maroons’ only as a courtesy.”⁹⁵ While on the one hand admitting that maroons in the U.S. did exist, Genovese also emphasizes that marronage in the south “rarely” forged “a viable community life,” and did not exist “on a scale that could affect the politics of the slave society.” Thus, for Genovese, U.S. marronage was more “the degeneration of some runaways into desperadoes.”⁹⁶ Most marronage in the U.S. south has been reduced to “bands of armed runaways” or “runaways” seeking temporary refuge “lying out.”⁹⁷ With very few exceptions,⁹⁸ the lack of serious inquiry into marronage in colonial, early national, and antebellum U.S. historical contexts further reflects this dismissal. Taken together, with the comparative abundance of studies on maroons in the Caribbean and Latin America, the common failure to identify marronage as it occurred further north is rooted in the way marronage itself is (un)defined. Without expansive, inclusive, definitions that assess the phenomenon through the possibilities of resistance that were directly proportional to it – the conditions, circumstances, and contexts from which it emerged – our understanding of the diversity of maroon experiences, and the extent of the impact marronage had on the Americas, will remain limited.

Instead, I offer that marronage is at its most basic and fundamental level first the flight and then the autonomous resettlement to destinations *outside* dominant slaveholding society, such as wilderness spaces and unchartered, un-colonized, or unpopulated territories. This definition describes the essential elements of marronage as it ubiquitously occurred across the Americas. Though varied in methods of survival, African cultural retention, form, size, mission, and endurance, marronage is always about the self-liberation, independence, active declaration and defense of the inherent freedom, power of will, and resilience of Africans and African descendants. Enslaved people in the U.S. south were unquestionably a part of this heritage.

In accordance with Caribbean and Latin American based valuations of maroon societies, the greatest attention to marronage in the U.S. has been given to the larger communities of Florida that fought in several battles against slaveholders and southern expansionists, including what one scholar has called “the largest sustained slave insurrection to befall the South prior to the Civil War,” or, the Second Seminole War of 1835-1842.⁹⁹ Deviating from this trend, I am principally concerned with the virtual invisibility of the overwhelming majority of maroons in British colonial North America and the slaveholding U.S. south that did not wage open war against colonial and state authorities, and that ranged in size from individuals to smaller groups, and survived through more flexible, less permanent intervals of practicing marronage in the woods,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-78.

⁹⁷ William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 100.

⁹⁸ See “Introduction: The Living History of Marronage,” notes 52 and 53.

⁹⁹ Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*, 133.

swamps, and other wilderness back parts of the plantation world. These less dramatic maroon communities in the U.S. still created resilient community alternatives while establishing a landscape of secret Black knowledge, autonomy, resistance, and self-empowerment in the very backyards of those intent to confine and enslave them.

Rethinking Marronage

Maroons in British North America and the U.S. south are manifestly a part of this hemispheric tradition and heritage of marronage, and should be recognized as such. But first, the underlining definition of *marronage* itself must be clarified and redefined so that it can expansively include all of its contexts and possibilities of form, direction, frequency, and measure without conflating it with mere flight or deflating the concept altogether. This reconceptualization of marronage is necessary in order to specify exactly how the U.S. maroons fit into the hemispheric tradition, and why it is important that they do.¹⁰⁰

Traditional conceptualizations of marronage have long assumed the universality of Gabriel Debien's two categories, the French designations of *petit* and *grand* marronage, or *cimarronaje pequeño* and *gran cimarronaje* in Spanish. Grand marronage was, "in the true sense, flight from the plantation with no intention of ever returning."¹⁰¹ It has come to be associated with the expectation of ongoing guerilla warfare, great populations spanning multiple generations, longevity, and the fortification of highly secluded and far removed self-governing settlements. In essence, grand marronage is usually understood as "synonymous with large, long lived, warring communities in the Caribbean and South America."¹⁰² It is generally afforded greater value, merit, and attention as marronage than the remaining category under this classification, or *petit* maroons. Despite scholarly consensus that maroons across the Americas "ranged from tiny bands that survived less than a year to powerful states encompassing thousands of members and surviving for generations or even centuries," *petit* maroons are often dismissed and taken for granted as common temporary truants, or are otherwise reduced to absentees.¹⁰³ Debien writes that *petit* maroons:

...did not go very far from the plantation from which they fled, but remained on its edges, or hid in the house of a relative or a friend from the neighboring plantation. They subsisted not by systematically pillaging crops, but by stealing small amounts of food and committing minor thefts, in a kind of symbiosis with the plantation.¹⁰⁴

As it has been shown, even grand scale maroons maintained "a kind of symbiosis with the plantation," although likely to a lesser extent than those maroons Debien describes here. The idea that *petit* maroons hid in the already established homes or plantation communities of kin confuses all that is specifically *maroon* with mere absconding. Furthermore, Debien's analysis of the significance of *petit* maroons, which explains that

¹⁰⁰ The insight for the need for such a reconceptualization has only been broached by two scholars, both working on United States maroons. See Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles* and Daniel O. Sayers, "Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States," *Historical Archaeology* 46, 4 (2012): 135-161.

¹⁰¹ Gabriel Debien, "Marronage in the French Caribbean," in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 107. First published in Gabriel Debien, "Le Marronage Aux Antilles Françaises au XVIIIe siècle," *Caribbean Studies* 6, 3 (1966): 3-44.

¹⁰² Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 4.

¹⁰³ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Debien, "Marronage in the French Caribbean," in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 111.

it was “impossible to stop,” hardly “considered out-of-the-ordinary,” and was thereby “inconsequential,” does not leave room for the consideration of how these so-called *petit* maroons contributed to the broader landscape of enslaved resistance and freedom struggle. Fouchard adds that this reduction of small scale, short-term marronage to “mere slave vagabondage” vis a vis “petit marronage” leads to “unwise... imaginary reservations about the spirit, the character and the importance of maroon absconding.”¹⁰⁵ Altogether, it is unclear how subscribers of this dichotomized classification of marronage define marronage as a whole, given the concurrent preferential regard for grand marronage as a separate and disconnected category in the identification and recognition of maroons.

In an effort to include maroons that do not neatly fit into Debien’s classification of marronage, one scholar has proposed a third category he calls *caudrillas de cimarrones*, which translates roughly to “maroon gangs” or “maroon bandits.”¹⁰⁶ These were maroons that lacked a permanent base, and instead moved itinerantly from place to place in small groups of usually no more than two-dozen or so. But even with this gesture toward more expansive and comprehensive conceptualizations of marronage, the unifying principle and fundamental aspects or elements of marronage remain unclear. Instead of trying to insert or force divergent forms and contexts of marronage into these classifications that are in fact conceived in response to the most dramatic and intense forms of the phenomenon that occurred in the contexts of South America and the Caribbean, it is imperative that the singular basis for all forms and contexts of marronage first be reconsidered and redefined. Before categories are thought up, distributed, and applied to various historical contexts, the essential meaning of marronage as it is applicable to all forms, variations, and contexts should be clarified so that the concept is prepared to identify and describe maroons that arose everywhere.

Marronage, beginning with, but distinct from flight alone, is fundamentally the autonomous individual or collective resettlement and self-liberation of African people and African descendants through their agency, resistance, and creative survival in wilderness spaces, outside of and often at the outskirts of slaveholding society. Maroons could be individuals operating alone, or they could form self-sustaining, self-governing communities. The act of marronage could be *petit*, or brief, excluding overnight absences, and usually took shape in the form of solitary flight and retreat before recapture or voluntary return to the plantation. Or it could be *grand*, collective, more enduring, and permanent self-determined survival in the wilderness, relatively secluded from the outside world. It also could be both, as individual maroons could be connected to larger groups, and solitary “outliers” or temporary absconders could act as go-betweens enslaved and moving or settled maroon communities. Individual maroons surviving on their own also became trusted members, if not leaders of more permanent outfits of maroons, as in the case of the “habitual recidivists” Macandal and Boukman Dutty of Haiti.¹⁰⁷ But the underlining point is that all forms of marronage are “essentially infractions against slavery, a breaking of the ban,” and all forms innately opposed that system regardless of their purpose, activities, or the extent to which they accommodated

¹⁰⁵ Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death* (Edward W. Blyden Press, 1981), 248.

¹⁰⁶ Gabino La Rosa Corzo, *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba: Resistance and Repression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 6-9.

¹⁰⁷ Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*, 249.

or rebelled.¹⁰⁸ All maroons were deemed “fugitives,” they were scouts, they were organizers of their own self-preservation, and they cunningly devised ways to both survive and thrive in wilderness spaces most found inhospitable. Above all, whether temporary or permanent, large or small, all forms of marronage are expressions of Black freedom and humanity in spite of a system that worked hard to deny both.

I find that it is most useful to conceptualize marronage based on the ways the maroons themselves navigated space and created alternative landscapes of resistance, freedom, and power than it is to conceptualize marronage based on its duration, scale, or activities. After all, everywhere that marronage existed, it was only able to take root because of the agency of enslaved choices to take flight, and because of the maroons’ movement and mobility between plantation spaces and the challenging and sometimes unfamiliar terrain of the wild. As marronage was shaped in large part by the ways individuals and groups perceived opportunity to move through space, geographical frameworks such as landscapes, space, and environment advance fuller understandings of both slavery and resistance from maroon perspectives while they also map the extent to which Black people were the creators and designers of their own lives. For example, Diouf’s reconceptualization of marronage distinguishes between the “borderland maroons,” or those maroons that occupied and moved through the “wild land” of the backwoods, swamps, and forests that bordered plantations and farms, cities and towns, and the “hinterland maroons,” or those who lived in highly secluded wilderness spaces that were most effectively removed from possibility of discovery.¹⁰⁹ As they navigated through the landscapes of the borderlands and the hinterlands, maroons defied the futile limits of the plantation and established what Stephanie Camp has referred to as “rival geographies,” a term borrowed from Edward Said and applied to the slaveholding south to describe “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space,” including quarters, outbuildings, woods, swamps, and neighboring farms and plantations “that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.”¹¹⁰ The ways the enslaved, those in flight, and the maroons saw, thought about, and experienced the built and natural environment has been referred to by other scholars as “the black landscape,” “slave geographies,” and the “black cognitive landscape.”¹¹¹ Through this approach, we are able to deepen and broaden a wider range of opportunities for enslaved and maroon action and choice, without losing sight of the fundamental qualities of marronage: agency, resistance, and the assertion of freedom.

Marronage is a unique form of opposing slavery not simply because maroons commanded space in ways that refused the system altogether, but because they created viable alternatives to the system in wilderness spaces where they could achieve a great deal of independence from the social, cultural, political, and economic drags of dominant society. These wild places were simultaneously Black refuge and white refuse, and the maroons are exceptional because of their creative abilities to transform rejected wasteland into spaces of autonomy and freedom. This separates maroons from others

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

¹⁰⁹ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Camp, *Closer to Freedom* 7

¹¹¹ Rebecca Ginsburg, “Escaping Through a Black Landscape,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, eds. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010), 52.

who took flight – though escape too reflects a great deal of self-determination and ingenuity.

In an effort to place the resistance and autonomy involved in basic flight in a conceptual categorization that reflects the “agentive *autoexousia*, self-determination, and cultural genesis” of the African diaspora better than the metaphoric, Black agency displacing Underground Railroad framework,¹¹² some scholars have quite problematically confused, obscured, and reduced marronage to flight and escape. For example, Thompson explains that enslaved people “[seeking] freedom through flight” in places where “the bush cover became more sparse, so Maroons had less space and cover in which to hide,” instead often “gravitated towards the towns, passing themselves off as freed persons, and working for whites, free Coloureds and free Blacks.”¹¹³ He refers to this as “urban marronage,” and posits, “urban maroons were prevalent in all slavery jurisdictions in the Americas.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, Sayers also suggests that marronage should be reconceptualized through two spatial dimensions: (1) intralimital marronage that remained within the “Capitalist Enslavement Mode of Production” (CEMP), or the colonial or national jurisdiction of the slaveocracy, which could have included both wilderness and urban spaces; and (2) extralimital marronage that occurred “outside the structural extent of the CEMP,” including places like Canada, Mexico, and “free” northern states.¹¹⁵ Sayers justifies the idea that extralimital maroons “formed communities within established and congested urban and maritime landscapes,” by arguing “*marronage* did not somehow magically disappear once a given maroon settled outside the CEMP proper.”¹¹⁶ Clinging to the framework of “the African- and African American-centered process of *marronage*,” he even goes as far as stating, “Harriett Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass were maroons in this view.”¹¹⁷

But the problem with these definitions and assignments of marronage is that they confuse all forms and methods of flight and escape with the distinct tradition of the maroons that remained, from the independence of their trackless wilderness retreats, a constant reminder to their slaveholding neighbors of their failed system. Marronage is significant because of how maroons were able to separate themselves, imagine, and create alternatives to being enslaved in the very midst of slaveholding territories. Through the component of flight, marronage is related to escape, freedom, and creative survival chartered in Spanish territories, Canada, the north, urban enclaves, or through ocean-going flight to other “free” spaces, but this is not what marronage is about. It is about disturbing the system from the wild and encroaching backcountry. Where Sayers and Thompson use the term *marronage* they are in fact describing *flight*, and more specifically, it’s end result, the very general outcome of escape. This risks the conflation and deflation of what it means to be a maroon in the absence of more appropriate frameworks for conceptualizing the agentive and resistant core elements of flight.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Sayers, “Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States,” 141.

¹¹³ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 103.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹⁵ Sayers, “Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States,” 139-140, 142.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ See Chapter 3, pages 107-108 for a description of the narrative and conceptual problems with the application of the most readily available framework, the Underground Railroad, to describe all flight and marronage.

The use of expansive and inclusive definitions and conceptualizations of marronage that do not dangerously confuse or reduce the distinct qualities of the maroons are valuable to the study of slavery and slave resistance for several reasons. The first has already been stated. This is the ability to recognize and identify difference in marronage as it occurred across the hemisphere. The United States is no exception to the hemispheric legacy of marronage. But beyond being able to give maroons in British North America and the U.S. south a name besides “outliers,” “lurkers,” or “gangs,” the currency of the term *marronage* is its explicit meaning of “radical action” taken by Black people that directly harkens an African diasporic tradition of resistance and resilience.¹¹⁹

The English word *maroon* is a derivative of the Spanish *cimarron*, a term that derives from “an Amerindian (Arawakan/Taíno) root, making it one of the earliest linguistic coinages” in the Americas.¹²⁰ Spanish colonists originally used the term to refer to wild cattle that escaped to the hills and mountains in Hispaniola, but then reapplied the word as a descriptive for first Americans who ran to those remote regions of the island. By the 1530s, *cimarron* had become a word used primarily to describe “wild” and “unbroken” Africans who followed suit. Etymologically then, *maroon* is a derivative of racist attempts to dehumanize insubordinate non-Europeans. Though historically and as a lived practice, *maroon* resonates on quite the opposite level.

Maroon is useful and necessary for framing the activities of borderland maroons, for example, because it undermines the language of objectification (i.e. “runaways”), fugitivity, and criminality that detracts or prevents the consideration of Black humanity, agency, autonomy, and organized freedom struggle. As Sayers points out, the term *marronage* denotes the “strength and power of African American *autexousia* and praxis across centuries... the word has a most powerful intellectual and political significant freight and weight in public, nationalist, and scholarly discussions and understandings of history throughout the hemisphere and world.”¹²¹ Neil Roberts, who views marronage as trans-historically applicable to political, artistic, and philosophical considerations of freedom, reconfigures the phenomenon as something that can be “real or imagined” – a “constant act of flight” achieved through individual and collective agency and independence, where “freedom is not a place,” nor a coveted object or aspiration, but “a state of being.”¹²² For Roberts, the very act of marronage, the strategic and determined flight and sustained creative evasion, is freedom in and of itself. Similarly, D.A. Dunkley argues that freedom is “indestructible,” it is “an internal belief, or a state of mind,” and as such, slavery is a fiction and the actions of the enslaved are “not actions taken against slavery, but assertions of the freedom that enslaved people knew that they still had.”¹²³ For Dunkley then, marronage should not be “viewed exclusively as resistance to enslavement,” or as “only an attempt to escape from this life either temporarily or permanently,” but should instead be viewed as “the assertion of the freedom that enslaved people always knew that they had, even in cases where they were truly enslaved.”¹²⁴ These ideations of marronage demonstrate its oneness with agency, power, and freedom

¹¹⁹ Sayers, “Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States,” 141.

¹²⁰ Price, xi-xii.

¹²¹ Sayers, “Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States,” 141.

¹²² Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9-11.

¹²³ D.A. Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved: Jamaica and the Culture of Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Lexington Books, 2013), 2, 8.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

and thus elucidate the value of using the word as a framing for this distinct form of resistance. *Marronage* empowers the African diaspora as an expression of white institutional and ideological failure due to the inherent power, freedom, agency, and humanity of Africans and African descendants.

‘The Many Headed Hydra’: Irrepressible Marronage as a Hemispheric Phenomenon

In the violent dispersion of African people to toil on the plantations of American colonies, nowhere did there exist a place that remained impervious to the ascent of marronage and the fortification of autonomous maroon communities.¹²⁵ Marronage is a hemispheric, in fact, an African diasporic phenomenon,¹²⁶ that speaks directly to the power and resilience of African descendants to not only resist, but also to organize, create new options, and ingeniously survive through one of the planet’s greatest human horrors. As Alvin O. Thompson has put it:

Marronage is the most extreme form of resistance, since it involved opting out of the system of oppression altogether and establishing a new kind of society in which the former enslaved persons took (or sought to take) control of their own lives and destinies.¹²⁷

Throughout the Americas, marronage “appeared to be the ‘chronic plague’ of New World plantation societies.”¹²⁸ Maroons “struck directly at the foundations of the plantation system” as they relentlessly presented everyday ideological inspiration for heightened enslaved resistance.¹²⁹ Especially in South America and the Caribbean, the activities of maroon societies were commonly felt as “military and economic threats that often taxed the [planters] to their very limits.”¹³⁰

From the perspectives of colonizers and enslavers, the permeating presence and influence of maroon communities on the enslaved world posed an unending and insurmountable danger. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh liken the constant surge and resurgence of subversive forces in the colonial Atlantic world to the Greek mythos figure of “the venomous hydra of Lerna.”¹³¹ The unremitting resistance of enslaved Africans, and their descendants, is symbolized through the relentlessness of “the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster.”¹³² Cutting off one of the hydra’s heads

¹²⁵ Throughout this study, my use of the terms “maroon” and “marronage” is restricted to this phenomenon as a ubiquitous inclination and tradition of resistance in response to enslavement within the African diaspora in the western hemisphere.

¹²⁶ However, marronage can be extended beyond the western hemisphere to the legacy of resistance to slavery and slave trade in Africa. Ismail Rashid highlights communities of Africans (the Bullom, Baga, and Temne) that resisted trans-Atlantic trade and enslavement through resistant strategies that included marronage and violent rebellion. See Ismail Rashid, “A Devotion to the Idea of Liberty at Any Price: Rebellion and Antislavery in the Upper Guinea Coast in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, ed. Sylviane A. Diouf (Ohio University Press, 2003), 132-151. Chapters on flight and marronage from captivity in West Africa’s coastal holding cells “pre-figured Maroon societies of the Americas” and are explored in two chapters in Gad Heuman’s edited volume, *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World* (Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1986): 2-3, 11-33.

¹²⁷ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 9.

¹²⁸ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Beacon Press, 2000), 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 4.

only led to the rapid growth of two more. The Herculean hero embodies the colonial project, its “imperial ambition,” and the “progress” of modernity (i.e. “the clearing of land, the draining of swamps,” and the development of “state, empire, and capitalism) that sought to control and suppress the unwaveringly insurgent heads.¹³³ Rediker and Linebaugh’s comparison is based on the expressed sentiment of slaveholders and colonists such as J.J. Mauricius, the governor of the Dutch colony of Surinam, home to “between a thousand and several thousand” sovereign maroons by the 1730s.¹³⁴ In 1749, after tenuous struggles to subdue the maroons there, Governor Mauricius offered one of several unsuccessful peace treaties proposed by the exasperated Dutch over the course of a century. Defeated by the Saramaka maroons’ fearsome guerilla warfare and refusal to cooperate with colonial interests, Governor Mauricius returned to Holland where he mused:

*There you must fight blindly an invisible enemy
Who shoots you down like ducks in the swamps.
Even if an army of ten thousand men were gathered, with
The courage and strategy of Caesar and Eugene,
They’d find their work cut out for them, destroying a Hydra’s growth
Which even Alcides [Hercules] would try to avoid.*¹³⁵

Indeed, the uninterrupted persistence of marronage throughout the Americas vitalized the insurgent tradition of the many-headed hydra.

As soon as Spanish Governor Ovando arrived to Hispaniola in 1502, set to right the struggling colony Columbus had left behind the year before, “a few Negroes... brought out by their masters... escaped to the Indians,” becoming the first Africans to maroon in the Americas.¹³⁶ It is impossible to know exactly how many maroon communities were established throughout the duration of slavery across the Americas, or how many maroons and their communities existed in any one place or time. As successful as they were at avoiding detection, countless numbers also evaded the capture of historiography. What is clear, however, is their existence since the inception of slavery and colonization, and that “no colony in the Western Hemisphere, no slaveholding area, was immune to the growth of such alternative maroon societies.”¹³⁷

Known variously as *palenques*, *quilombos*, *mocambos*, *cumbes*, *mambises*, *rancherías*, and *landeiras*, maroon communities ranged from small, short-lived collectives, to great, multi-generational sovereignties or states containing hundreds to thousands of men, women, and children. Maroons seized environmental and geographical opportunities for flight and the creation of self-governing, self-protected communities. They especially proliferated in wilderness spaces that were isolated, uninhabited, “seemingly impenetrable,” inhospitable, impassable, or inaccessible.¹³⁸ Wherever they could flee, jungles, swamps, mountains, and forests became their refuges. In Jamaica, the maroons used cockpits, or deep and cavernous gaps and holes in jagged rocky precipices,

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁴ Silvia W. de Groot, “Maroon Communities in Surinam and Jamaica,” in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World*, ed. Gad Heuman (Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1986), 174.

¹³⁵ J.J. Mauricius quoted in Rediker and Linebaugh, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 4.

¹³⁶ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 1.

¹³⁷ Kenneth Bilby and Diana Baird N’Diaye, “Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Culture in the Americas,” *Festival of American Folklife* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution), 54.

¹³⁸ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 5.

as a favorite defense strategy for concealing themselves and for executing surprise attacks on encroaching colonists. They developed ways to grow rice and grains, fruits and vegetables (spanning wild grapes and berries in northern climes, to corn, yams, cassava, and plantains), they raised animals, stored water, made butter and oil (from nuts and, in Surinam from palm-tree worms), and made wine (especially, from palm-trees).¹³⁹ Maroons creatively made use of their environments and the natural resources they provided, effectively transforming them into places they could thrive.

Maroons were extremely strategic in the defense of their freedom. They carefully disguised paths leading to their villages, devised false trails, created concealed traps to capture or deter invaders, and used camouflage for the benefit of surprise attack and keeping watch.¹⁴⁰ In Cuba, maroons protected their *palenques* by creating “a series of covered traps and all sorts of other obstacles that helped to camouflage these wilderness settlements.”¹⁴¹ In colonial Bahia, Brazil, “covered traps and sharpened stakes were used for village protection” in the *quilombo* of Palmares.¹⁴² Everywhere, maroons mastered the art of ambush and guerilla warfare. In Surinam, the Aluku (Boni) maroons ambushed and attacked with such agility and finesse that the Dutch soldier John Gabriel Stedman remarked how he “admired [their] masterly maneuvers.”¹⁴³ Larger maroon communities defeated whole armies and forced colonists to accommodate their declarations of independence and unfaltering refusals to be re-enslaved. After great colonial agitation, frustration, and distress, treaties were offered to maroons in Jamaica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Hispaniola, Colombia, Brazil, and Surinam. Treaties recognized the freedom and sovereignty of these societies and often arranged the provision of needed goods and crucial resources in exchange for ceasing attacks on plantation society and the apprehension of new maroons seeking to join them.¹⁴⁴ Smaller groups of maroons put no feeble pressure on authorities. With a constant building of organized attacks and steady assaults on the plantation world, smaller groups still “inspired desperate fear of mass nocturnal attacks, of whole towns in flames,” and of the imminent overthrow of white authority.¹⁴⁵ For example, throughout the 18th century, smaller bands of maroons in the densely forested Baboruco mountains of Haiti, carried arrows and firearms as they “pillaged, killed, and abducted Negroes,” despite costly repeated expeditions to suppress them and prevent further atrocities.¹⁴⁶ In the U.S., Aptheker has reported several incidents where small groups of maroons “in the daytime secrete themselves in the swamps and woods... at night committing various depredations on the neighboring plantations,” often injuring and killing whites as they “carried on a guerilla warfare for years.”¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴¹ Francisco Pérez De La Riva, “Cuban Palenques,” in *ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴² Stuart B. Schwartz, “The Mocambo: Slave Resistance in Colonial Bahia,” in *ibid.*, 220-221.

¹⁴³ Captain J.G. Stedman, “Guerilla Warfare: A European Soldier’s View,” in *ibid.*, 306. From, Stedman, *Narrative of a five-years’ expedition, against the revolted Negroes of Surinam... from the year 1772, to 1777* (London: J. Johnson and J. Edwards, 1796, Vol 2), 105-114.

¹⁴⁴ Price, *ibid.*, 3-4. Thompson, 308-315.

¹⁴⁵ Gabriel Debien, “Marronage in the French Caribbean,” in *ibid.*, 109.

¹⁴⁶ M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, “The Border Maroons of Saint-Domingue: Le Maniel,” in *ibid.*, 136. From Saint-Méry, *Description... de la partie française de l’isle Saint-Domingue* (Philadelphie: chez l’auteur, 1797-1798, Vol. 2): 197-503.

¹⁴⁷ Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Limits of the United States,” 167-184. See also Diouf’s chapters, “The Maroon Bandits,” and “Maroons, Conspiracies, and Uprisings,” in *Slavery’s Exiles*, 230-285.

The primary concern shared by slaveholders across the hemisphere was that maroons would rouse the enslaved and through their insistent defiance inspire them to join maroon ranks in numbers substantial enough to destroy the system of slavery. This is evidenced in the stipulations of treaties proposed by colonial powers “demanding that maroons deliver all later runaways into the hands of their former masters,”¹⁴⁸ as well as through the expressed concerns of slaveholders that maroons were “corrupting and seducing other slaves.”¹⁴⁹ These fears were valid. Across the hemisphere maroon and enslaved alliances were commonplace. Despite the fact that slaveholders desperately tried to prevent their collaboration, freedom struggles were often joined. Some maroons, like the Leeward and Windward maroons in Jamaica, generally “kept to the treaty article which made compulsory the handing over of runaways to the colonists.”¹⁵⁰ But others, like maroons in Surinam, “handed over as few runaways as possible and took in newcomers gladly.”¹⁵¹ As Richard Price has pointed out, members of enslaved communities, “who often included relatives and friends, were important allies of maroons in most areas.”¹⁵² In Cuba and Guadeloupe, for example, maroons maintained secret trade of goods they made with the enslaved in exchange for precious tools and the smuggling of much needed firearms.¹⁵³ Similar illicit dealings also occurred in the Dismal Swamp. In Jamaica, maroons carried out regular trade of foodstuffs with enslaved communities, and conditions for these exchanges were actually recognized in treaty provisions.¹⁵⁴ Other maroon and enslaved alliances took shape. “Black shots,” or enslaved persons recruited by the Dutch, English, Spanish, and French to assist and sometimes guide military expeditions against maroons, often deserted the colonists, “taking whatever military equipment they could seize” only to join the maroons.¹⁵⁵

All of these relationships, clandestine or otherwise, provided additional opportunities for maroon and enslaved collaborative conspiring and organizing against the system of slavery itself. Of course, overthrowing the colony or state was not always the goal of the maroons (or, of the enslaved), and not infrequently, both the maroons and the enslaved did not recognize the value of their solidarity, betrayed one another, and colluded with their oppressors. But this does not diminish the essential assumption of marronage – the outright rejection of the condition of being enslaved and the assertion of innate human will – which is fundamentally resistant and opposed to slavery. The maroons and the enslaved took control over their lives to the best of their abilities and defended their own inherent freedom and that of their respective communities.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 308.

¹⁴⁹ State of North Carolina. Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1846-47. (Raleigh, NC: Thomas J. Lemay, Printer, 1847), 109.

¹⁵⁰ Orlando Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, 1665-1740,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 266. De Groot, “Maroon Communities in Surinam and Jamaica,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 177.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Price, *Maroon Societies*, 13.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ De Groot, “Maroon Communities in Surinam and Jamaica,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 176-177.

¹⁵⁵ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 149-150. Price, *Maroon Societies*, 9. Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” in *ibid.*, 265-266.

¹⁵⁶ Werner Zips, *Black Rebels: African Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999), 11-12.

Moreover, maroon and enslaved collaborative freedom struggle did occur, as it will be shown in the case of the Great Dismal Swamp. In Jamaica, treaties were devised to quell maroon-enslaved unity in large part because throughout the 17th century, the enslaved “joined with the growing bands of rebels” so frequently, eagerly participated in several revolts, and were generally encouraged to rebel that in 1678, some took it upon themselves to attack the plantation where they were enslaved, “seriously wounding” their enslaver, and killing his wife, before attempting to join maroons on the leeward side of the island.¹⁵⁷ In Haiti, maroons helped launch what would become the only “successful” revolt in the hemisphere. In 1791, two hundred sugar mills and twelve hundred coffee plantations were destroyed at the same time, and thousands of white people were killed.¹⁵⁸ Jean Fouchard estimates that fifteen thousand maroons took up arms in 1791, and the following year, twenty-five thousand were fighting in the revolution.¹⁵⁹ The total enslaved population at that time was more than 500,000.¹⁶⁰ Pointing to the rise of marronage in Haiti leading up to the revolution, and to the fact that several “of the leaders of the 1791 revolt [were] seasoned Maroons and skilled leaders of Maroon bands,” Fouchard argues that “the linkage between marronage and the events of 1791 is a historic fact.” Further evidence of maroon and enslaved collaboration in the revolution includes the presence of nearby fortified maroon mountain settlements that served as bases for planning, strategy, and the collection and distribution of armament, and reports that “the armies of the Africans each day were enlarged by newly deserted slaves.”¹⁶¹

Slaveholders also feared Native American and maroon alliances, and often hired first Americans to help track maroon movement and settlement as well as to fight maroons once located. Records show that colonists and slaveholders employed natives in the United States, Guatemala, Surinam, Guyana, Dominica, Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela.¹⁶² Aptheker reports that slaveholders across the U.S. south employed “Indian hunters and militiamen... to blot out this menace.”¹⁶³ Diouf also points out that colonists in the U.S. south recruited Native American assistance since they “struck ‘terroure into the Negroes and the Indians manner of hunting render them more sagacious in tracking and expert in finding out the hidden recesses where the Runaways conceal themselves.’”¹⁶⁴ But, as Price notes, across time and space and in many of the same areas where hostilities dominated in different periods, Native-maroon relationships were cooperative, supportive, and mutually advantageous.¹⁶⁵ Across the hemisphere, maroon troops “committed all sorts of disorderly acts,” many of which were reported to have “included some Indians.”¹⁶⁶ In French Guiana, “one Indian man and five Indian women were captured” along with maroons in one settlement.¹⁶⁷ And in Brazil, “despite

¹⁵⁷ Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 256.

¹⁵⁸ Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*, 291.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 292, 294.

¹⁶⁰ David Geggus, “On the Eve of the Haitian Revolution: Slave Runaways in Saint Domingue in the year 1790,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 114.

¹⁶¹ Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*, 292-295.

¹⁶² Price, *Maroon Societies*, 9. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 96-97

¹⁶³ Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” 170.

¹⁶⁴ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 257.

¹⁶⁵ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 16. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 97.

¹⁶⁶ Debien, “Maroonage in the French Caribbean,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 108-109.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Portuguese attempts to turn the Indian into an ally against African resistance, a number of factors drew Africans and Indians toward shared behavior and common goals” – the biggest factor being shared opposition to European colonialism and the urgency of a ruthless common enemy.¹⁶⁸ Of course, in the U.S. south, the most famous Native-maroon alliance is that of the Seminoles of Florida and maroons (sometimes referred to as the Black Seminoles). The battles they fought together against imposing whites, and their “long history of close collaboration and intermarriage”¹⁶⁹ were so strong that, leading up to the First Seminole War (1817-1818) authorities grew confused as to who was “Indian” and who was Black, as it was reported, “they wear the same clothing and go painted.”¹⁷⁰

Across the Americas, maroon autonomy often grappled with the tension between dependence and accommodation of whites and their system of slavery on the one hand, and independence and noncompliance on the other. Indeed, “the maroons were almost never totally independent.”¹⁷¹ The reality is that most, if not all maroon groups maintained some degree of interaction with slaveholders and with plantation society. For example, Price notes that “trade with white settlers was common in most areas.”¹⁷² He points to trade between Cuban maroons and whites, Haitian maroons of Le Maniel and Spanish colonists across the border on the other end of Hispaniola, the plundering, “economically ‘parasitic’ *mocambos* around Bahia,” and the Dismal Swamp maroons’ “regular, if illegal, trade with white people.”¹⁷³ Thompson also states, “maroons carried on an extensive underground trade with all ethnic groups – Whites, Indians, Blacks, and Coloureds.”¹⁷⁴ De Groot states that maroons in Surinam traded “wood, live-stock and commodities” in plantation spaces.¹⁷⁵ Jamaican maroons engaged the plantation world in search of livestock, “coffee, cocoa, ginger, cotton and tobacco,” as well, as Price importantly adds, as the exchange of “crucial intelligence information.”¹⁷⁶ From raiding neighboring plantations, to their varied relationships and exchanges with Native peoples and the enslaved, to economic trade with whites, to negotiating treaties with colonials, maroon autonomy was far from fixed or absolute. Throughout the hemisphere, maroons made self-determined choices that were flexible, that best benefitted their needs, and that resulted in outcomes that preserved and protected their freedom and independence, and often, that of the enslaved.

Maroons born in Africa dominated in communities that took shape in colonial regimes, especially before 1700.¹⁷⁷ Everywhere, “newly imported Africans almost literally ran away as soon as their feet touched American soil.”¹⁷⁸ Heuman writes that across the board, “these autonomous societies initially [consisted] almost entirely of

¹⁶⁸ Schwartz, “The Mocambo: Slave Resistance in Colonial Bahia,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 215.

¹⁶⁹ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways*, 135.

¹⁷¹ Heuman, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 3.

¹⁷² Price, *Maroon Societies*, 13.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10. Schwartz, “The Mocambo: Slave Resistance in Colonial Bahia,” in *ibid.*, 218. Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” 168.

¹⁷⁴ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 257.

¹⁷⁵ De Groot, “Maroon Communities in Surinam and Jamaica,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 177.

¹⁷⁶ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 13. Mullin, *Africa in America*, 298.

¹⁷⁷ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 20.

¹⁷⁸ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.

African-born runaway slaves.”¹⁷⁹ Price posits that “only very rarely” did maroon leaders claim to be born in Africa after the beginning of the 18th century.¹⁸⁰ Genovese states plainly that “African-born slaves, rather than creoles, sparked the establishment of maroon communities.”¹⁸¹ Especially for those communities founded earlier in the colonial period that were further removed from the plantation world and contained great numbers of African people, language, worldview, spiritual practice and belief, marriage, medicine, food, and military technique all reflected diverse West, Central, and to some extent East African cultures.¹⁸²

Just as there were more opportunities for enslaved males to resist slavery through flight, and thus more enslaved men than women took flight across time and space, there were more male maroons.¹⁸³ Especially during the early colonial period, the ratio of enslaved males to enslaved females was extremely imbalanced with greater numbers of men being forced upon American shores.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, “this proportion was further increased among the original bands of runaways because a disproportionately large number of men successfully escaped from plantation life.”¹⁸⁵ Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that “almost all [maroon] groups had to live with a severe shortage of women,” particularly in the earlier colonial periods, until children were able to come to maturity and future generations persevered.¹⁸⁶ But before then, the more heavily populated and fortified maroon communities’ “most frequent crime was the abduction of Negresses,” at least in the French Caribbean.¹⁸⁷ The French colonist M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry describes the Haitian maroon leader Kébinda’s abduction of an enslaved housekeeper during one raid – she had to be “tied up and pulled along by force.”¹⁸⁸ And in Bahia, one scholar reports that “the most appealing women were forced to return to the *quilombos*” after plantation raids.¹⁸⁹ Both of these examples are in reference to the mid to late 18th century, well after the colonial project was underway. The point remains that any forcible abduction of women by male maroons violates Black women’s humanity and

¹⁷⁹ Heuman, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 20.

¹⁸¹ Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 53-54.

¹⁸² Mullin, *Africa in America*, 54-57.

¹⁸³ Heuman, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 4. Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (Heinemann Publishers, 1990), 64-65. Bush reports that over 60% of absconders in the Caribbean were men. Michael Mullin estimates that between the 1730s and 1805, female “runaways” made up 11% of all escapees in Virginia, 24% in Jamaica, 21% in South Carolina, 34% in Barbados, and 18% in Georgia. See Mullin, *Africa in America*, 290. Heuman shows that in Barbados, 63.5% of people running away were men and 36.5% were women between the years 1807-1834. Heuman, “Runaway Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Barbados,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 98. See Chapter 2 for an overview of causes and conditions of gendered opportunities for flight.

¹⁸⁴ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 4. Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 36. Paul Lovejoy estimates that the “eighteenth-century French trade displayed an overall sex ratio of 179 males per 100 females,” for example. See Paul E. Lovejoy, “Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A Review of the Literature,” *The Journal of African History* Vol. 30, no. 3 (1989), 381.

¹⁸⁵ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 19.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Debien, “Marronage in the French Caribbean,” in *ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸⁸ Saint-Méry, “The Border Maroons of Saint-Domingue: Le Maniel,” in *ibid.*, 137.

¹⁸⁹ Schwartz, “The Mocambo: Slave Resistance in Colonial Bahia,” in *ibid.*, 219.

stands in great contradiction to the ideas of freedom and autonomy marronage is supposed to exude. But there may be some inflation of the degree to which enslaved women were “carried off” and “abducted” due to white inability to believe in women’s willingness to engage in audacious insurgency in contemporary records, and especially given concurrent evidence that Black women across the hemisphere took flight, resisted, practiced marronage, and participated in revolts on a voluntary basis.¹⁹⁰

Women did run away with the intentions of permanent escape, and although childless women were more likely to run, enslaved mothers sometimes did take their children with them in flight.¹⁹¹ Fouchard cites several incidents in colonial Haiti where female maroons took “with them their very young children or babies still nursing at the breast,” suggesting that childrearing was not always an impediment for women’s flight.¹⁹² He argues that enslaved women escaped in the effort of protecting their children, sometimes “carrying them off into marronage from the very moment of arrival in port.”¹⁹³ Based on available sources, maroon gender composition varied across time and space, but in most times and places there were more men than women. These ratios often came very close to balanced, especially after the turn of the 18th century. Thompson shows that maroon women made up substantial numbers in many maroon societies in the Caribbean: in Colombia, a captured maroon conceded that there were 54 maroon men, 42 Black maroon women, and 3 mulatto women in the year 1693; in Le Maniel, Haiti there were 75 male maroons and 58 female maroons in the year 1785; and in Cuba numbers of maroon women may have exceeded men in one community in 1815, while “around the mid-nineteenth century the number of women at least matched that of the men” in another settlement.¹⁹⁴ In 1738, a British census reports that the Jamaican maroons in Trelawny Town were composed of 112 men and 85 women.¹⁹⁵

Black women maintained integral roles in maroon communities across the Americas. They served as leaders in community building, spiritual leaders, and were the co-organizers, strategists, and brainpower behind much insurgency. Maroon women were the bearers of life in maroon communities. But not only did they perform the crucial labor of childbearing, they “provided the stability for the community” through their creation and completion of the maroon family, and through their individual and collective intellect, ingenuity, and creativity.¹⁹⁶ In larger maroon societies where there were more proportional numbers of women and men, “women usually did most of the agrarian or field work,” cultivating and producing food for their communities.¹⁹⁷ But on the whole, most maroon communities lacked great numbers of women, so maroon men also raised crops and prepared food for their communities.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁰ Alvin O. Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 39, 2 (2005): 265-267.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 266. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Strategies and Forms of Resistance,” in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. Gary Okihiro (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 151. Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 65.

¹⁹² Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*, 178.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” 267.

¹⁹⁵ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 295.

¹⁹⁶ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *In Resistance*, ed. Gary Okihiro, 199.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” 277.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

And though maroon women were often the “hearthstones” of their communities,¹⁹⁹ they were also fearless and fierce in the ways they protected and defended the freedom and independence of their communities. In the same indomitable spirit of freedom as Margaret Gardner, who ran from her enslaver in Kentucky in 1856, seized upon the fleeting initial moments of her discovery and capture to send her beloved children into the freedom and peace of the afterlife, rather than subject them to the horrors of slavery, some maroon women “would even kill newborn babies to insure that they would not be discovered by the babies’ crying,” in the order to protect the freedom and independence of the greater community.²⁰⁰ Writing about the Dutch wars against the Saramaka maroons of Surinam, Stedman noted that eleven captured maroons were brutally executed in 1730 – three of these were men, and eight were women.²⁰¹ The maroon women must have been seen as active participants in maroon defense of freedom or else serious threats to the colonial cause, since six of them were broken alive on the rack and two young girls were decapitated. Stedman affirms that in Surinam, entire communities of the enslaved – that is, men, women, and children – often rebelled against their enslavers, killed whites, attacked plantations, and fled to the rainforests together.²⁰² According to the British military officer Phillip Thicknesse, who observed how maroon children in Jamaica “could not refrain from striking their pointed fingers as they would knives” against his chest as they called him “*becara*,” a derogatory term for “white man,” young maroons were clearly raised to despise and detest white people.²⁰³ Maroon mothers were certainly instrumental in creating and sustaining this all-hands-involved community culture and spirit of resistance.²⁰⁴

Just as enslaved women were, maroon women were instrumental to freedom struggle and were active agents of insurrection. Across the hemisphere, “public outcries against slavery” were strategies Black women employed to encourage and abet community resistance and insurrectionary movement.²⁰⁵ “Ridicule,” a form of women’s resistance that included the criticizing and haranguing of enslaved and maroon communities toward a particular idea, action, or goal could “take the form of direct taunts, group pressure, or ritual satire.”²⁰⁶ The culture of ridicule as protest stems from complementary West African gender practices, and is a tradition meant to nurture community peace and balance.²⁰⁷ Citing Aptheker’s documentation of enslaved women’s

¹⁹⁹ Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance,” 199.

²⁰⁰ Delores M. Walters, “Re(dis)covering and Recreating the Cultural Milieu of Margaret Garner,” in eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters, *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 1-4. Cheryl LaRoche, “Coerced but not Subdued: The Gendered Resistance of Women Escaping Slavery,” in *ibid.*, 65-66. Francisco Pérez de la Riva, “Cuban Palenques,” in ed. Price, *Maroon Societies*, 53.

²⁰¹ John Stedman, *Narrative of a five-years’ expedition, against the revolted negroes of Surinam... from the year 1772, to 1777* (London: J. Johnson and J. Edwards, 1796, Vol. 1), 33-34.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰³ Phillip Thicknesse, *Memoirs and Anecdotes of P. Thicknesse, Late Governor of Land Guard Fort and Unfortunately Father to George Touchet, Baron Audley* (Printed for the Author, London, 1788-1791, Vol. I), 121.

²⁰⁴ Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 70.

²⁰⁵ Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance,” in *In Resistance*, ed. Gary Okihiro, 195.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Filomina Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, Inc., 1981), 33. See also Irene V. Jackson-Brown, “Black Women and Music: A Survey from

voiced positions on resistance in the U.S. south, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn points out that Black women in the United States and beyond “publically called for rebellion” through ridicule and community criticism.²⁰⁸ Certainly, the overwhelmingly undocumented private practices of enslaved and maroon women point to their even steadier, everyday contributions to freedom struggle. Moreover, a number of female maroon spiritual, political, and military leaders emerged that more directly influenced the insurrectionary activities of maroons. These include Zeferenia of the Urubu maroon settlement in Bahia,²⁰⁹ Romaine la Prophetesse, Marie-Jeanne, and Henriette Saint-Marc in Haiti,²¹⁰ Claire of “maroon rebels” in French Guiana,²¹¹ and Filippa Paria Aranha of the *quilombo* at Minas Gerais, Brazil.²¹² The most famous of these is Queen Nanny, or Grandy Nanny of the Windward maroons of Jamaica, who was the maroons’ chief strategist and “*obeah* woman” – at once wielding great spiritual, political, and military power as she directed her people in several successful battles against the British.²¹³ Finally, while documented evidence is scarce, it goes without saying that women in maroon communities were prepared to take up arms and fight in combat for the protection of their freedom and that of their families and communities.²¹⁴

In sum, marronage was an ever-present, powerful hemispheric tradition of resistance that rattled the core of the entire Atlantic world. Kevin Mulroy’s description of hemispheric marronage summarizes the character of its ubiquity. Maroon societies:

...included the building of settlements in inaccessible, inhospitable areas for concealment and defense; the development of extraordinary skills in guerilla warfare; impressive economic adaptation to new environments; substantial interaction with Native Americans; existence in a state of continuous warfare, which strongly influenced many aspects of their political and social organization; the emergence of leaders skilled in understanding whites; and an inability, because of various needs, to disengage themselves fully from the enemy...²¹⁵

Africa to the New World,” in *ibid.*, 396-397. Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Asante Queen Mothers,” in *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*, ed. Flora Edouwaye Kaplan (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997), 44. Stoeltje explains that “complementarity,” or the practice of “differences that mutually complement each other,” reflects a fundamental principle of African conceptions of gender, (i.e. gender parallelism vs. rigidly dichotomized gender roles).

²⁰⁸ Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance,” in *In Resistance*, ed. Gary Okihiro, 195.

²⁰⁹ Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” 275.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

²¹¹ Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 71.

²¹² Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance,” in *In Resistance*, ed. Gary Okihiro, 199.

²¹³ Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 262. Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” 274-275. Karla Gottlieb, “Queen Nanny of the Jamaican Maroons: A Study of Women’s Leadership in the Caribbean,” in *Women in Caribbean Politics*, ed. Cynthia Barrow-Giles, (Ian Randle Publishers, 2011), 3-13.

²¹⁴ Fouchard mentions that female “freedom fighters” fought in the Haitian Revolution alongside maroons. See Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons*, 352. Bush cites one episode where a fifteen-year-old captured maroon in French Guiana informed the French that “all the Negroes and Negresses” in his community were prepared to do battle with axes and machetes. See Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 70. Thompson states that Zeferina, upon being attacked by a group of whites, “fought fiercely,” using only a bow and some arrows as she heroically urged her comrades on “and keeping them on line.” See Thompson, “Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean,” 275. Another source describes a late 16th century account of Cuban maroons employing “150 Black women who fought more valiantly than men.” See *ibid.* Aptheker reports that upon attack, one “maroon community consisting of men, women, and children” in Mobile County, Alabama “made desperate resistance, ‘fighting like Spartans.’” See Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Limits of the United States,” 177.

²¹⁵ Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border*, 2.

The maroons were among the vanguard of the fiercest defenders of freedom. Unavoidable, they inspired material and immaterial insurgence through both their integral ideology of freedom and independence and through their direct action against the system. Time and time again, they creatively and resiliently cut down the colonialist, imperialist, and capitalist “Herculean” stronghold over Black bodies, resurrecting the menacing head of the hydra despite innumerable odds.

The Specificity of Marronage in the United States South

Across time, and in most places in the U.S. south, marronage was practiced by small (less than two dozen people), disconnected groups, if not by scattered individuals, who lived in the borderlands of the plantation world. These were the “woods, bayous, marshes, swamps, pocosins (palustrine wetlands), and creeks, some of which belonged to the farms and plantations; land still undeveloped that provided game, firewood, and timber and that could be cleared, dried, and exploited.”²¹⁶ Wherever available, maroons also inhabited hinterland spaces like the Blue Ridge Mountains in piedmont Virginia, the deep recesses of the Great Dismal Swamp in the Tidewater, the Florida Everglades, and the thick swamps and sprawling hills of South Carolina. It was from the protection of these more remote spaces that maroons enjoyed greater longevity and seclusion, but these ideal refuges were far from abundant. For the most part, maroons in the U.S. moved and settled in wilderness backparts that were within reach of populated areas, both urban and rural.²¹⁷

There is documented evidence that at least fifty different maroon communities existed within the confines of British North America and the U.S. south between 1672 and 1864.²¹⁸ This number is without a doubt a gross underestimation. There is no question that countless more maroons formed throughout this time, but, as Aptheker notes, “It appears that notice of these maroon communities was taken only when they were accidentally uncovered or when their activities became so obnoxious or dangerous to the slavocracy that their destruction was felt to be necessary.”²¹⁹

The U.S. maroons faced different geographical, demographical, political, cultural, and economic contexts than maroons in South America and the Caribbean. These differences created less opportunity for sustaining massive, overt resistance efforts, and instead resulted in a smaller scale, impermanent, and culturally negotiating, accommodating, or acculturated maroon majority.²²⁰ These contexts also shaped the nature of enslaved resistance in general, providing greater opportunities for the prevalence of everyday, covert resistance than the execution of uprisings capable of dismantling the institution of slavery in the south, though attempts were numerous. Maroons in the U.S. did not wage all out war against colonial and state militias that lasted throughout the course of centuries. They did not bring slaveholders to the point of drafting treaties honoring the sovereignty of maroon groups and acknowledging their rights to land. Instead, there was a preponderance of less dramatic maroon activity in the

²¹⁶ Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 7.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 131. Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” 167-184.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ With some exceptions, particularly, in the colonial period and in the case of the Florida Black Seminoles, U.S. maroons were predominately English speaking, American born, and culturally adapted to dominant cultural mores.

U.S. south. Nevertheless, U.S. maroons took full advantage of the opportunities and resources that were available to them – they raised families in the wild they transformed into home, they created resilient community alternatives to lives of bondage, and they established whole landscapes of secret Black knowledge, autonomy, resistance, and self-empowerment in the very backyards of those intent to confine and enslave them. For slaveholders in the U.S. south, maroons, an “ever-present feature of antebellum southern life... were seriously annoying, for they were sources of insubordination... offered havens for fugitives, served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations, and, at times, supplied the nucleus of leadership for planned uprisings.”²²¹ Despite the odds against them, U.S. maroons still committed a nearly endless stream of depredations against slaveholding society, and numerous maroon groups did organize freedom struggle and actively fought against slaveholders in an effort to either defend their own freedom, destroy their neighboring cities, towns, farms, and plantations, or both. The most notable of these groups are the Florida maroons and the maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp.²²²

The geography of the United States, while lacking impenetrable jungles and treacherous cockpits, provided the enslaved with a wide range of unique topographical opportunities for marronage. In addition to forests and hills, there were “large tracts of land, covered with heavy timber, containing not only deep and almost impenetrable swamps, but caves, holes, shelving rocks and banks.”²²³ Maroons secreted themselves in these refuges, and invented creative ways to survive on their own. For example, testimonies recorded by the “all-Negro unit” of the Virginia Writer’s Project in the 1930s accounted for similar enslaved survival in similar, and nearby, environments. One former enslaved man in Virginia shared that his half brother lived with his wife and children in “a hole cut in de groun.”²²⁴ After room-sized holes were dug into the ground, an undertaking this man suggests required more than one pair of hands, he helped his brother steal lumber under the cover of night to conceal the hole and form a roof.

Den dirt wuz piled up top of dis plank so dat hit won’t rain in dar. Den he has him some piping – trough-like – made of wood dat runned so many feet in de groun’. Dis carried smoke way away from dis cave. Fer fir used oak bark ‘cause hit didn’t give much smoke. He had him a hole to come up on lan’. Dar wuz sticks, pine beard, and trash on top to kiver de hole. Ha, ha, ha. Ya could stan’ right over dis hole an’ wouldn’t kno’ hit.²²⁵

Another man, Arthur Greene, enslaved in Virginia until he was 14, spoke of a man he knew who ran away to live “in a cave in de groun’ fer fifteen yeahs ‘fo’ Lee’s surrender.”²²⁶

²²¹ Aptheker, “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” 167.

²²² The insurrectionary activity of the maroons of Bas du Fleuve, Louisiana resisted French colonial slaveholders, and the heyday of their resistance took place before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. As such, they are not included in this study of maroons in British North America and the U.S. south.

²²³ Traveler’s log, 1852, cited in, Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 9.

²²⁴ Roscoe Lewis Papers, (April 23, 1937), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 209-210. See also Diouf’s description of borderland maroons dwelling in holes and caves, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 99-106.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ “Arthur Greene,” Virginia State Library, (April 16, 1939 [probably 1937]), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 123-125.

He made himself a den under de groun'; he an' his wife, an' raised fifteen chillun down dar. Ha! Ha! Ha! Had a chile for every 'ear he stayed in dar. Dis den slopped [sloped] back to keep water from coming in. Hit was near a crick what he could git water... Dey uster burn bark fur wood' cause hit didn't smoke. He got food by goin' 'bout nights an' steal a hog, cow, er anythin' an' carry down dar. No mam, de chillun an' wife neber came out de den... Dis den was er – I guess 'bout size of a big room, 'cause dat big family washed, ironed, cooked, slept and done ev'ythin' down dar, dat you do in yo' house.²²⁷

The U.S. maroons were incredibly resourceful and imaginative in their use of the natural environment as a means of greater freedom and independence. The abundance of wild land between farms and plantations or undeveloped, densely wooded and swampy land bordering cities and towns covered and protected their movement and the settlement of their communities.

In the paternalistic, small farm dominated settler society of the U.S. south, marronage usually looked like Arthur Greene's friend's life underground, or the aforementioned bayou community of the New Orleans woman who returned to her enslaver after a sixteen-year period. Geographically, there was no singularly concentrated or central wilderness refuge in the vastness of the U.S. that was able to harbor and collect massive numbers of those in flight. Maroons and maroon groups were as interspersed as the borderland pockets of woods and swamps spread between inhabited areas. Moreover, demography and specific political, cultural, and economic contexts in the United States were not conducive to highly populated maroon sovereignties poised most readily to overthrow slaveholding authority. In the U.S., with few exceptions (i.e. colonial South Carolina and early national Louisiana), population ratios between whites and Blacks and low rates of planter absenteeism very rarely favored overt resistance, and the economy of the cash crop and the labor demands of the south as a whole did not require the constant importation of people born in Africa, a factor that further reduced the likelihood of more intensive forms of marronage and restricted opportunities for revolt. Indeed, the general conditions favoring massive uprisings and maroon activities were rarely present in the U.S. They include: (1) perfunctory, depersonalized, and businesslike relationships between the enslaved and enslavers, as opposed to the close relationships, close quarters, and intimate terror of paternalistically organized domination in the south; (2) the prevalence of large slaveholding units versus small ones – “the great plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil averaged 100 to 200 slaves, not the 20 or so that marked the plantations of the South”²²⁸; (3) the presence of areas where there were any combination of higher ratios of African-born to American born enslaved people, Black to white people, and enslaved to free people; (4) the presence of areas where among the enslaved, a significant portion of them share a common ethnic origin; (5) a shortage of readily available military forces, typical in colonial regimes, especially early ones; (6) “a high incidence of absentee ownership,” also typical of colonial regimes²²⁹; (7) divisions in the ruling class and “weak cultural cohesiveness” amongst slaveholders, as in the case of both Haiti and Brazil.²³⁰ Resistance in the U.S. south is thus particularly distinguished because of these contrasts between slavery in a tightly controlled, highly repressive

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 591.

²²⁹ Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 288.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 591. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 11-15. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 214-215.

settler society with a white majority and colonial slavery, the imperial project pioneered by ambitious and detached profiteers, ultimately dictated by the political and economic measures and motives of a faraway European metropole.

Slavery, upheld through violence and terror wherever it existed, was horrific everywhere and at all times, and the question of whether one slaveholding colony or country was preferable to another is altogether unproductive as it misses the point and detracts from the underlining fact that slavery was a human atrocity. Enslaved people resisted and asserted agency and freedom with extraordinary bravery, resourcefulness, and resilience wherever they were bound, but the comparative here highlights proclivities for particular kinds of resistance given conditional limitations and opportunities for action. It is imperative to note that marronage in North America only rose against colonial slavery for a little over 100 years before the United States declared itself an independent nation. This is in sharp contrast to the other slaveholding territories across the Americas that remained colonial regimes for the duration of slavery, sometimes over the span of 350 years. Price writes:

It is important to keep in mind that maroon societies arose in reaction to *colonial* slavery, an institution significantly different from that of the antebellum South...²³¹

As it was the colonial regimes that set up the most favorable conditions for frequent and intensive overt resistance, the enslaved in the U.S., who nevertheless did maroon and revolt, “should be honored for having tried at all under the most discouraging circumstances.”²³²

The highly controlled, paternalistic U.S. system that strayed socially, economically, legally, and politically from the traditional colonial model manifested in the predominance of covert and acculturated responses to enslavement and forms of resistance. Even during its colonial period, slaveholding British North America functioned more like highly invested settler colonies than the detached “monopolistic enterprise” economies of other European colonies throughout the Americas.²³³ These factors directly influenced the occurrence of marronage in the U.S. south. For example, Mullin argues that the isolation and close monitoring of small “up-country” slaveholding units, common throughout the south, created an environment where the enslaved were most prone to direct their resistance efforts against the plantation itself, the site of their captivity, rather than creating wholesale alternatives to confined life within strictly enforced plantation parameters, and rather than acting against the totality of slaveholding white society. He writes:

... acts of defiance produced a satisfaction which, though often short-lived, was direct, and brought a quick and visible relief to immediate pressures. This inward-directed rebelliousness included attacks on crops, stores, tools, and overseers, as well as deliberate laziness, feigned illness, and truancy.²³⁴

Raymond and Alice Bauer also suggest that enslaved communities in the U.S. south most readily reacted to their enslavement through “day to day resistance,” or “inward-directed rebelliousness” defined here by Mullin.²³⁵ This could have included verbal cunning,

²³¹ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 4.

²³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 594.

²³³ Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” in *Maroon Societies*, ed. Price, 288.

²³⁴ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 81. See also Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 11.

²³⁵ Raymond and Alice Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance,” *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (October, 1942): 388-419.

literacy, song, dance, and embrace of Christianity as means to creatively and covertly assert agency and resistance. These forms of resistance were the most commonly practiced forms anywhere that slavery existed, but the ratio of covert resistance to overt resistance is highest in the U.S. south, what with the largest revolt in the U.S. being one of just six,²³⁶ and this only involving between 300 and 500 enslaved persons.²³⁷ Elsewhere, revolts were much more frequent, averaging “one significant slave revolt per decade,” and sometimes “virtually every year,” involving hundreds or thousands of insurrectionists in any one uprising.²³⁸

In addition to the isolation and outnumbering of most enslaved communities in the U.S. that led subtle and covert resistance to predominate over the more overt forms, Mullin explains that dominant society in the south produced a paternalistic culture of power that assuaged the lives of the assimilated and acculturated.

In comparing slavery in the Americas... the question is not so much why slaves here lost their heritage so much more readily, but why their acculturation, like many other processes of colonial settlement and growth in North America, progressed so much more rapidly than in Latin America. Our colonial societies, unlike the feudal regimes of New France and New Spain, consistently rewarded adaptability, achievement, and change... while in many ways punishing typically African characteristics. In the North American plantation societies assimilated slaves were among the chief beneficiaries of the English colonist's cultural chauvinism: they responded to language and occupational training and used this learning to make slavery more manageable.²³⁹

The enslaved in the U.S. were actively encouraged to respond to their bondage through the appearance of assimilation and accommodation by enslavers who were heavily invested in their cultural practices, even in the colonial period. This fact contextualizes the historical factors that resulted in the prevalence of largely acculturated maroons and maroon communities in the U.S., and the preponderance of highly skilled and usually literate leaders of insurrection.²⁴⁰ Very different from the slave holding colonies of the Caribbean and Latin America where the enslaved often lived in populous enclaves with Black and/or African-born majorities, enslaved communities in the U.S. that were physically confined to white spaces of rigid control had to practice marronage and act as insurgents (if they perceived an opportunity for these forms of overt resistance at all), not through the uprising of dozens or hundreds of African-born people or by way of diverse African language, ritual, or custom, but through broader, Americanized versions of African descendent worldviews and epistemologies. In most times and places, North American maroons were most likely to form communities that shared American-born views on white society, kinship, labor, life and death, common oppression and freedom.

The nature of labor demands based on particular crops and staple economies also affected resistance. Sugar, the most hazardous and labor-intensive cash crop, was

²³⁶ This estimation depends on how “revolt” is defined. Blassingame estimates nine major revolts occurred in the U.S., given his expansive definition of “revolt” which includes “any concerted action by a group of slaves with the settled purpose of and the actual destruction of the lives and property of local whites.” See Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 215.

²³⁷ See Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (2011).

²³⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, 588-589.

²³⁹ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 122.

²⁴⁰ Gabriel Prosser, Jemmy of Stono, and Nat Turner were all literate leaders of revolts. Charles Deslondes was a mixed-raced man brought to Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution began. While Denmark Vesey was not described as literate, he was a skilled artisan working with other “urban artisans – carpenters, harness-makers, mechanics, and blacksmiths; they were literate.” See Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 268-269. See also Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 157-159. Mullin, *Africa in America*, 275-276.

predominately grown in slave holding territories outside of the United States. The exception is Louisiana, a region that in its colonial, early national, and antebellum periods maintained the highest production of sugar in all of North America, though the end of trans-Atlantic slave trade in the U.S. in 1808 diminished numbers of directly imported African-born captives. As Thompson points out, “sugar was, of course, a much higher consumer of labor than other plantation crops.” Its cultivation required a constant influx of newly imported Africans due to high mortality rates, though, the profits it yielded “made the wastage of human life worthwhile to the plantocracy in financial terms.”²⁴¹ It is no coincidence that Haiti was the largest sugar producing colony of them all where at the beginning of the revolt in 1791, ⅔ of the enslaved were “unseasoned” Africans born in Africa and 40,000 whites were outnumbered by 500,000 enslaved Africans, and that it is also the only successful overthrow of any slave holding territory in the Americas.²⁴² Thompson writes:

The countries with the most brutal labor histories and the most Maroon communities were all sugar-producing ones; the relationship was fundamental, but this does not mean that only countries or regions producing sugar witnessed marronage.²⁴³

The labor of sugar provided highly favorable circumstances for overt resistance since large groupings and steady importation of predominately African-born enslaved people cultivated strong solidarity against the conditions of enslavement and slavery itself.

Indeed, there is a correlation between being born in Africa and the propensity for both flight and marronage.²⁴⁴ But again, this is especially applicable to colonial contexts of slaveholding regimes, where African-born enslaved majorities predominate. As it has already been stated, most maroons throughout the hemisphere were prone to have been born in Africa until the advancement of the colonial period after 1700. Moreover, it is generally agreed that across the Americas, “the least acculturated slaves were among those most prone to marronage,”²⁴⁵ and that “newly arrived Africans mounted the most dramatic thrusts” of resistance.²⁴⁶ Those born in Africa were also more likely to take flight in groups.²⁴⁷ For example, a 1727 report shows that fifteen “new” Africans fled a Virginia plantation and “attempted to reconstruct familiar social and political arrangements” after building huts and planting crops in an uninhabited area near Lexington, while in colonial South Carolina, advertisements for the return of four “new Gambia men,” three Angolans, “all short fellows,” or four men from the “Fullah Country” evidence the African/maroon connection in colonial contexts.²⁴⁸ Morgan also contends, “In the Lowcountry [South Carolina], more Africans, a black majority, and extensive swamplands were great encouragements to maroon bands.”²⁴⁹ A strong presence of those born in Africa is a characteristic of colonial slavery that is conducive to the rise of marronage and revolt.

²⁴¹ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 100.

²⁴² Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 13.

²⁴³ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 100.

²⁴⁴ Geggus, “On the Eve of the Haitian Revolution,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 115.

²⁴⁵ Price, *Maroon Societies*, 24.

²⁴⁶ Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 18.

²⁴⁷ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 232. Heuman, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 5. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 43.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 450.

But in British North America, where the importation of African people does not take hold until after 1619, does not become the major source of colonial labor until the dawn of the 18th century, only to be replaced by the domestic slave trade a short century later, and where a constant importation of enslaved laborers was not required to source the demand in most places and times, “the African predominance among the maroons” does not, for the most part apply.²⁵⁰ These factors do not, however, mean that there were no African-born U.S. maroons, and this is especially so during the south’s relatively brief colonial slaveholding period. In fact, because of the United States’ comparatively slower start to slavery, and due to the fact that in the northern British colonies there were no multi-generational, sizable, or enduring maroon communities founded in the 16th or 17th centuries to produce and stabilize new generations of American born maroons, a good number of maroons and the communities they formed in the U.S. would have been born in Africa until the end of the international slave trade in 1808. This is certainly the case in colonial South Carolina, where men and women born in Africa made up the majority of the enslaved population until the 1740s, and even after that, range from making up 23% to 42% of the total enslaved population there until 1800, when numbers drop to just 8%.²⁵¹ Likewise, in North Carolina, from 1748 to 1775, 54% of reported “runaways” were predominately born in Africa. In those same years, 42% of those in flight were born in the colony, and at least 3% were born in the Caribbean.²⁵² In Georgia too, where the rice economy created a demand for intense importation of Africans from the Senegambia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, the average of African representation among those in flight before 1775 was up to 75%.²⁵³ But elsewhere in colonial British America, “African numbers were never overwhelming,” and by the 19th century, there was a “virtual elimination of African-born blacks” among those in flight.²⁵⁴ Looking at five states (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana), John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger find that between the years 1790 and 1816, “there were 90 runaways among the 695, or 13 percent, who were Africans,” and between the years 1838 to 1860, only three people that took flight were African-born.²⁵⁵ Across the board, economic, demographic, cultural, and political contexts in the U.S. did not provide the best conditions for marronage and other forms of overt resistance to reach the scale that it did elsewhere across the Americas.

But in spite of the highly repressive nature of slavery in the U.S., maroons still established alternative landscapes of agency, resistance, and freedom. North American maroons transformed the borderlands into highways of autonomy, and the hinterlands became private sanctuaries for the protection of free kinship, family, and community, regardless of the unfavorable conditions set against them. As it will be seen, maroons and their communities in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina served as

²⁵⁰ Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 54.

²⁵¹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61.

²⁵² Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, ““They are Indeed the Constant Plague of Their Tyrants”: Slave Defence of a Moral Economy in Colonial North Carolina, 1748-1772,” in *Out of the House of Bondage*, ed. Heuman, 46.

²⁵³ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia: 1730-1775* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 173-187. Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁵⁴ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 449. Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 214.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

the inspiration and insurgent base of emboldened resistance, actively organized war and revolt against slaveholding society, and relentlessly stirred the makings of revolution in Virginia and North Carolina.

Chapter 2: Community, Marronage, and Resistance in The Great Dismal Swamp

The Dismal Swamp maroons and the inescapable presence of the swamp itself revolutionized the nature of Black resistance and struggle for freedom throughout the Tidewater. From the early 1700's until the end of the Civil War, the swamp trumpeted opportunity for heightened enslaved mobility, overt and often violent resistance, and passage toward the promise of greater freedoms through self-extrication from slaveholding society. In the Black cognitive landscape of the Tidewater, the Dismal Swamp became widely understood as a headquarters for organizing networks of resistance, and for establishing refuge, home, and autonomous community for countless men, women, and children.

Maroon communities in the Dismal Swamp were varied, numerous, constant, but not necessarily connected or united. The swamp's outreaching and encroaching topography established a stratified Black geography of freedom and power that formed opportunities for both "peripheral" and "interior" swamp maroon groups. This spatial classification is not unlike Diouf's "hinterland" and "borderland" reconceptualization of marronage, although here I conceptualize the swamp's deep interior and its peripheries to refer to the social geography of maroon activity that is specific to the landscape of the Dismal Swamp and its surrounding cities and towns. The swamp, which was its own sphere of secret and insurgent Black activity, harbored the most fortified maroons in its deepest interior folds, but along its peripheries emanated out some of the fiercest maroon resistance, pushing and pulling the outside world to confront the unhindered threat of mounting revolt. Peripheral and interior swamp maroons had very different methods of and motivations for flight and resettlement in the swamp – although all of these share the fundamental assertion of inherent freedom. For example, the maroons of the deep swamp interior were most protected by the density and acreage of the surrounding swamp and had little reason to venture out of their refuge or engage with the outside world. These highly elusive interior maroons established the largest and most enduring autonomous communities in the swamp and among the largest and most enduring maroon communities in United States history. On the other hand, the peripheral maroons used the swamp as a refuge while engaging enslaved communities and interacting with dominant society.²⁵⁶ But despite these differences between maroon groups in the swamp, there is evidence that from the late 17th century through the Civil War thousands of individuals lived inside the perimeters of the Dismal Swamp, whether along the peripheries or in the interior, although estimated numbers vary between hundreds and tens of thousands.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 105. Brent Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," in *Voices From Within the Veil: African Americans and the Experience of Democracy*, eds. William H. Alexander, Cassandra Newby-Alexander, and Charles H. Ford (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 85-105. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 278-280.

²⁵⁷ Diouf estimates hundreds of maroons lived in the swamp, with "certainty." See Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 210-212. Leaming states that "some two thousand" lived in the swamp over the centuries in question. See Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 221. Sayers assures us that "it makes perfect sense that thousands of maroons inhabited the swamp." See Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 88. Aptheker also estimates thereabout two thousand maroons. See Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," 168. The abolitionist Edmund Jackson received reports from a reputable Norfolk merchant that "the value of slave property lost in the swamp, at one and a half million dollars... would give near forty

While the interior maroons remained primarily concerned with the sustenance, self-governance, and defense of multi-generational self-freed societies outside of the visibility of slaveholders, the peripheral maroons certainly made their presence known in the Virginian and North Carolinian cities and counties that surrounded the swamp. With steadfast cunning, these maroons maintained a constant local pressure of ambushes, seizure of property, burning of plantations, carrying off of provisions and livestock, and inciting the enslaved toward flight and revolt.²⁵⁸ These are the groups that most directly demonstrated that the swamp could become a real and viable alternative to the plantation for enslaved communities throughout the Tidewater. By the turn of the 19th century, the Dismal Swamp had become a major attraction to the enslaved, and marronage was unquestionably affecting how enslaved communities resisted to the extent that large bodies of the militia were drawn up, the demand for and gathering up of nocturnal patrollers notably increased, curfews were enacted, and dominant white society “did not sleep without anxiety” over the course of centuries.²⁵⁹ Networks were secretly established across plantations, waterways, urban spaces, and the wilderness of the swamp between peripheral maroon groups and enslaved communities. The central location of the Dismal Swamp, its maroon inhabitants, and the influence of their activities throughout the region were integral to several organized insurrectionary attempts, including the 1792 conspiracy amongst maroons and the enslaved to blow up the Norfolk arsenal and revolt and the second attempt of 1801-1802 to destroy Norfolk.²⁶⁰

Geographical, Political, and Demographical Opportunities for Resistance in the Tidewater, 1650-1865

A huge morass of swampland straddling the Virginia/North Carolina border along the eastern seaboard, the Great Dismal Swamp stretched from what is today the James River in Virginia, to the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina, a space comparable to the state of Delaware at roughly two thousand square miles.²⁶¹ Through the 19th century, the swamp encroached upon its surrounding cities and counties even more than it does today at less than half that size, and perhaps as little as just 10% of its original size.²⁶² In

thousand as the population of the swamp, - an estimate, I apprehend, quite too large.” See Edmund Jackson, “The Virginia Maroons,” *The Liberty Bell*, (January 1, 1852), 149.

²⁵⁸ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 231.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 307. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 119-124. Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd., 1998), 225-226. State of North Carolina, *Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1846-1847* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Thomas J. Lemay, Printer, 1847).

²⁶⁰ “Letter from Petersburg, Virginia, May 17, 1792,” *The Boston Gazette and the Country Journal*, June 18, 1792. Thomas C. Parramore, Peter C. Stewart, Tommy L. Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries* (The University Press of Virginia, 1994), 119-131.

²⁶¹ William Byrd, “The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp,” extract from the *Farmer’s Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 222. Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company*, 82. N.S. Shaler, “General Account of the Fresh-Water Morasses of the United States, with a Description of the Dismal Swamp District of Virginia and North Carolina,” in *Tenth Annual Report of the United States Geological Society to the Secretary of the Interior, 1888-1889*, ed. J.W. Powell (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 255-339. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 105.

²⁶² Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 222. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 20, 92. Daniel O. Sayers, “Scission Communities and Social Defiance: Marronage in the Diasporic Great Dismal Swamp, 1660-1860,” in *The Limits of Tyranny*, ed. James A. Delle (The University of Tennessee Press, 2015), 185.

Virginia, the swamp is enveloped by the counties of Princess Anne (now known as the independent city of Virginia Beach), Norfolk (including the cities now known as Portsmouth and Chesapeake), Nansemond (now the independent city of Suffolk), Isle of Wight (including the towns of Smithfield and Windsor), and in North Carolina, the counties of Gates, Chowan (including the city of Edenton), Currituck, Camden, Pasquotank (including Elizabeth City), and Perquimans.

The Dismal Swamp is an overwhelming and consuming space. When I explored only a small fraction of the swamp interior with Dan Sayers and his team of archaeologists in 2013, I found it teeming with insects that are at once inescapable, including a million species of spiders – some as large as a human hand, swarms of harassing mosquitoes, biting yellow deer flies, and an abundance of menacing ticks. Where there is not sitting water, black in color and often deceptively deep, everywhere else there is thick vegetation and undergrowth that prevents any ease of movement. The earth is often so saturated that walking requires great calculation so as to avoid getting sucked into thick mud and uneven flooded ground. To add to these difficulties is the risk of encountering poisonous snakes, both on land and in water, such as the black moccasin or cottonmouth rattler. In the swamp's drier parts, black bears inhabit the forested elevated land. It is a place that is loud with life and the raucous of these creatures that have thrived there for centuries.

But before the construction of canals, draining, and industrialization of the swamp, which began in the canal era approximately 1763-1830, the physical conditions and reach of the swamp would have been even more intense.²⁶³ Moses Grandy, an enslaved man who worked on canal boats and drove lumber on the North Carolina side of the Dismal Swamp, wrote in 1844 that “the ground is often very boggy: the negroes are up to the middle or much deeper in mud and water, cutting away roots and baling out mud: if they can keep their heads above water, they work on.”²⁶⁴ Today, with the exception of the man made canals and the freshwater Lake Drummond in the center of the swamp (which at its deepest point is just 6 feet), the large extent of standing water throughout the Dismal Swamp is altogether shallower at between 1-3 feet in most places.

²⁶³ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 90-92. Morris suggests that the Dismal Swamp “appeared” even more encroaching prior to the completion of draining and development, as it was in fact a larger expanse, but perhaps it appeared even more encroaching particularly during times of enslaved uprising. See Morris, “‘Running Servants and All Others’: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 106. See Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company*, 82, 419-423, for a description of the canal era years.

²⁶⁴ Moses Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Press, 2003), 169.

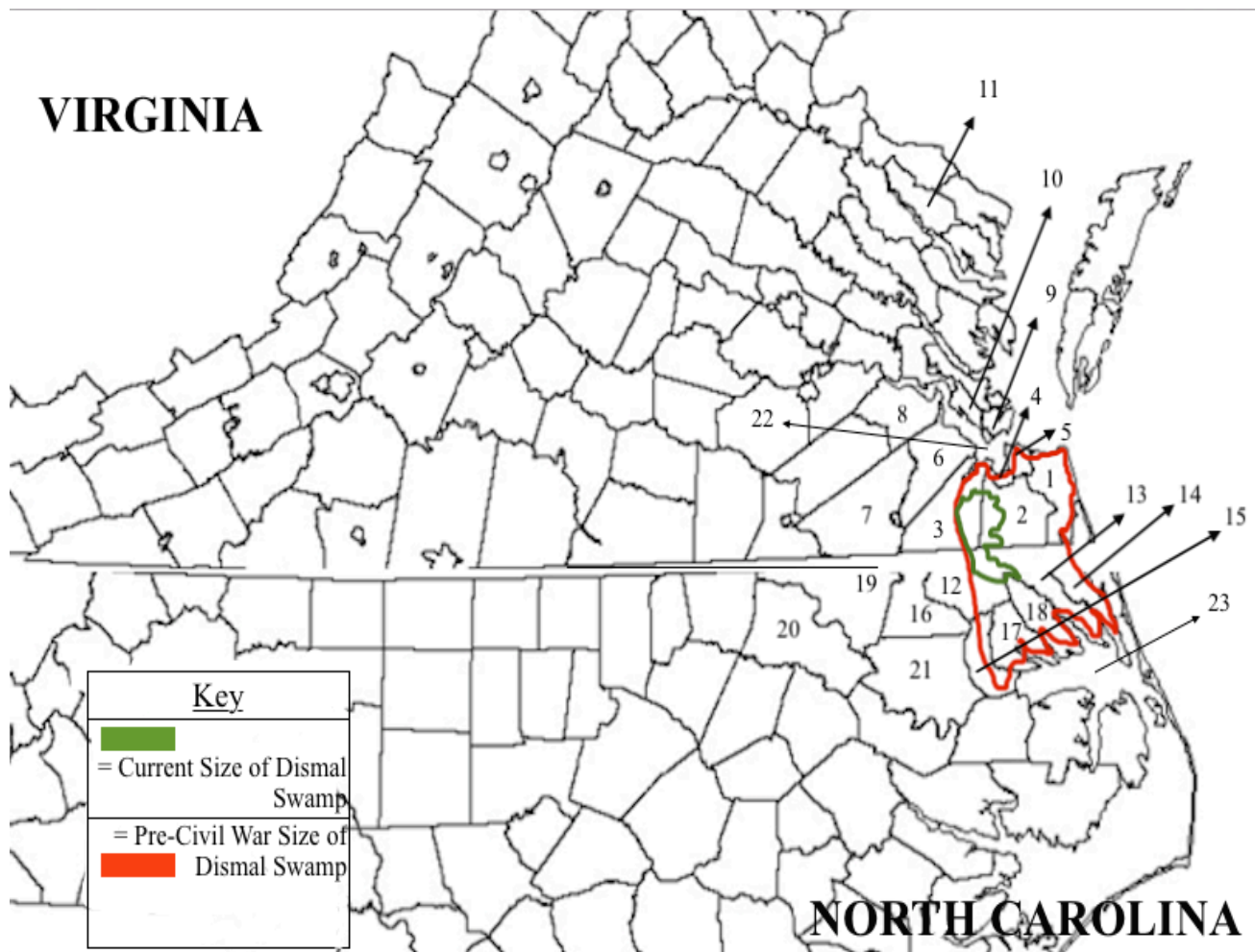


Fig. 1. The historical and present reaches of the Great Dismal Swamp with proximities to neighboring cities and counties. (Source: Map created by author, 2018).

Corresponding Dismal Swamp Counties and Independent Cities

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| 1 – Virginia Beach/formerly Princess Anne County, VA | 13 – Camden County, NC |
| 2 – Chesapeake/formerly Norfolk County, VA | 14 – Currituck County, NC |
| 3 – Suffolk/formerly Nansemond County, VA | 15 – Chowan County, NC |
| 4 – Portsmouth/formerly Norfolk County, VA | 16 – Hertford County, NC |
| 5 – Norfolk, VA | 17 – Perquimans County, NC |
| 6 – Isle of Wight County, VA | 18 – Pasquotank County, NC |
| 7 – Southampton County, VA | 19 – Northampton Cnty., NC |
| 8 – Surry County, VA | 20 – Halifax County, NC |
| 9 – Hampton, VA | 21 – Bertie County, NC |
| 10 – Newport News, VA | 22 – The James River |
| 11 – Richmond, VA | 23 – The Albemarle Sound |
| 12 – Gates County, NC | |

Unsurprisingly, the Great Dismal Swamp was detested and reviled by colonists, slaveholders, and the broader slaveholding society surrounding the swamp. It was viewed as impenetrable, inhospitable, and uninhabitable. In 1728, the wealthy Virginia planter and distinguished writer William Byrd II set out to survey the undetermined Virginia-North Carolina border within the Dismal Swamp. His account of the swamp is the first to be documented by a colonial authority. In a proposal to have the swamp drained to accommodate the cultivation of hemp, and to provide easier passage between the colonies, Byrd described “what mass of mire and dirt is treasur’d up within [the] filthy circumference” of the swamp²⁶⁵: a “horrible,” “dreadful,” “mere quagmire, trembling under the feet of those that walk upon it, and every impression instantly filled with water,” a “vast body of dirt and nastiness,” “overgrown with reeds, ten or twelve feet high... in which the men’s feet were perpetually entangled.”²⁶⁶



Fig. 2. The Great Dismal Swamp interior, approaching Dan Sayers’ Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study’s “nameless site” on foot, in Gates County, North Carolina. (Source: Author’s Photo Collection, 2013).

²⁶⁵ William Byrd, “The History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina Run in the Year of Our Lord 1728,” in ed. Kevin Joel Berland, *The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 109.

²⁶⁶ William Byrd, “The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp,” extract from the *Farmer’s Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737.

In 1784, John D. Smyth described the swamp as “indeed dismal far beyond description.” He wrote:

This Great Dismal is the principle of all those dreadful places, called swamps... all within being in a manner entirely covered with water out of which innumerable quantities of large straight and lofty cypress trees are growing in almost impenetrable closeness to each other throughout the whole extent... Throughout the whole of this truly dismal place, there is scarcely the least appearance of any kind of soil; for even where there is no water nothing can be discovered but cypress knees, closely intermixed with a matted body of strong fibrous roots, vines, and vegetative productions every where, in a dark and dreary shade altogether impervious to the rays of the sun... no noise, clamour, or hallooing... can be heard... for the woods are so close as to prevent the vibration of the air for any distance through them; even the report of fire-arms is smothered.²⁶⁷

Similarly, in 1805, an unknown author of *The Literary Magazine and American Register* reported that:

In relation to human purposes, this singular swamp justly deserves the expressive name commonly given to it, that of wilderness or *dismal*, no condition on the earth’s surface being more wild and irreclaimable than this. It is scarcely possible to penetrate or pass through it. The foot, at every step, sinks not less than twelve or fifteen inches deep into the soil. The trees... grow very thick together... and composed of such tenacious, perplexing, and thorny wood... the flesh wounded and torn at every point, and a path only to be made by the incessant use of the hatchet. The stinging insects are likewise innumerable, and extremely venomous, and the exhalations fatal to human life. On the whole, it would be difficult to imagine a situation on this globe less suitable for human habitation and subsistence than an American Dismal.²⁶⁸

In a manuscript published in 1962, the author maintains that dangers are rampant within the swamp’s interior, this nearly a century and a half later.

The jungle-like undergrowth in some places is so dense that man may become hopelessly lost a short distance from trails, canals, or roads. There is still real danger from poisonous snakes and wild animals. Some places are dangerous because of beds of quicksand. There are at times many dangerous cauldrons of smouldering peat. Each year some hunters or careless sightseers become lost, and often lose their lives.²⁶⁹

The Dismal Swamp has long been the subject of such fear, scorn, and trepidation.

For dominant society, disdain for the swamp exceeded these physical difficulties and annoyances. For colonials and slaveholders, the Dismal Swamp was fundamentally a dangerous and terrifying space because it represented an inherent threat to their authority and to the preservation of white supremacy, economic, political, and social power. Defiant of white domination and control, the swamp represents a wild and untamable space that “threatened subversion in its function as well as in its essence.”²⁷⁰ The peril of the swamp was rooted in its defense and embrace of “civilization’s exiles” and the incessant and unwavering threat of inverting the power of the dominant.²⁷¹ The swamp “not only represented a loss of labor and capital but also became a threat to the South’s carefully constructed social and racial hierarchy.”²⁷² The Dismal Swamp’s looming

²⁶⁷ John D. Smyth, “A Tour in the United States of America: Containing an Account of the Present Situation in that Country; The Population, Agriculture, Commerce...” (1784) Vol 2., 64, 147-148.

²⁶⁸ “Some Account of the Great Dismal Swamp,” *The Literary Magazine and American Register* Vol. III, no. 18, (March 1805), 170.

²⁶⁹ Hubert J. Davis, *The Great Dismal Swamp: Its History, Folklore and Science* (Richmond, VA: Cavalier Press, 1962), 17-18.

²⁷⁰ Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 10.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Megan Kate Nelson, “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamps: Slavery, Fugitive Slaves, and Swamplands in the Southeastern Borderlands, 1739-1845,” in *“We Shall Independent Be”: African*

presence endangered this delicate order of power and control that was the system of plantation slavery, encouraging the rebellion of the enslaved through its tireless representation of those who lived outside the system, safe in its refuge. Essentially, from a European American perspective and “ecolocal culture,” the swamp embodied a failure to “exercise control over nature and power over other people.”²⁷³ Furthermore, as “Anglo-Europeans believed that Africans were better able to manipulate this ecology than they were,” the swamp is intrinsically revolutionary, since it literally transforms the possession of power from white law, knowledge, and ability, to the agency and wherewithal of Black subversives.²⁷⁴ The knowledge and expertise of navigating swamplands that the maroons and enslaved garnered constantly reminded slaveholders “that their carefully ordered society was built upon the unstable foundation of swamp muck.”²⁷⁵

Conversely, for Africans and African descendants who were subjected to enslavement and the violence of racial oppression, the Dismal Swamp was a geography of opportunity, of agency, resistance, freedom, and power. Despite the physical danger posed in navigating its tangled and fearsome muck and mire, for the enslaved, a life in the swamp was preferable to a life framed by terror, violence, and domination on the farms and plantations outside of the swamp. Otherwise subjected to the constant imposition of violence, where Black bodies were tirelessly whipped into subservience, families were cruelly manipulated to accommodate the social whims and economic interests of slaveholders, and “blood run down like water,” Black people created safe spaces where they could live self-freeing and self-determined lives, and even build autonomous community in the midst of difficult and undesirable swamp.²⁷⁶ Moreover, the very environmental and topographical conditions that made the swamp loathsome and unwelcoming for slaveholders were the same conditions that simultaneously appealed to the enslaved. The swamp’s boggy “filth,” thick and uninviting underbrush and subsequent protection of noise and visibility, combined with the avowed avoidance and absence of white society made it an ideal interim or permanent destination for Black people throughout the era of slavery.

Fortunately, despite the physical difficulty and danger of human passage through the Dismal Swamp, it is ultimately a very habitable place, as evidenced by its abundant wildlife, and Black people took full advantage of its natural bounty. When visiting the swamp in 1856, the author and illustrator, David Hunter Strother – also known by his pseudonym, Porte Crayon – wrote that the “dark-colored water” of the Dismal Swamp was “healthful, pleasant to the taste, and, it is said, will keep pure for an unlimited time.

American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States, eds. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (University Press of Colorado, 2008), 266.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 252. Nelson defines “ecolocal culture” as the “constellations of ideas and images of local inundated lowlands (swamplands) that shaped community identity and action.” Black “ecolocal culture” views swamps as sites of refuge, autonomy, and freedom.

²⁷⁴ M. Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone,” *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March, 2008): 350, 353.

²⁷⁵ Nelson, “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamps,” 267.

²⁷⁶ “Arthur Greene,” Virginia State Library, (April 16, 1939 [probably 1937]), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 124.

Hence it is often used by vessels going on long voyages.”²⁷⁷ In addition to this ample supply of freshwater, there are raised ridges of forested dry land, or mesic islands throughout, some of which are quite large in size. Sayers’ Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study (GDSLS), which only surveyed 1% of the swamp’s totality, found that the islands within the study’s parameters in the North Carolina western part of the swamp range in size from “approximately one acre to thirty-nine acres,” and “come in clusters or groupings in which the distances between islands are relatively limited (anywhere from about 50 feet to 1,500 feet of swamp [water] separating two given landforms).”²⁷⁸ These islands are “topographical anomalies that are prime loci of human settlement.”²⁷⁹ As will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, settlements could be (and were) built, crops such as grains and rice grown, and the swamp’s abundant wildlife, including fish, bear, deer, otter, raccoons, possums, pheasants, partridges, and wild ducks, would have provided an almost endless source of subsistence.²⁸⁰

In the hundreds and thousands of years prior to the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and before the proprietary founding of the British colony of Virginia in 1665, members of the Tuscarora, Chesapeake, Nansemond, Powhatan, Susquehanna and other first American groups native to the Tidewater region undoubtedly settled and/or explored the Dismal Swamp. After all, the swamp “was a part of the local and regional indigenous American cultural landscape,”²⁸¹ and most assuredly, the first Americans were its first inhabitants.²⁸² But however habitable the swamp was, the hardship and potential peril of travel through the vast, unsteady, and uncertain quagmire meant that more desirable land could be identified and settled elsewhere. Especially after British colonization and occupation of the region was cemented in the decades after 1607, there is no evidence that the swamp’s inhabitants were anyone other than individuals in search of refuge.²⁸³ In this early colonial period, until about 1680, indigenous Americans comprised the majority of the swamp’s inhabitants and used the swamp as a space of safety from the culmination of colonial invasion, enslavement, destruction of native communities, genocide, and ensuing war.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁷ David Hunter Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” *Harper’s Monthly* 13 (1856): 450.

²⁷⁸ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 22-23.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸⁰ Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” 448. “The Game of the Dismal Swamp,” *Forest and Stream*, 38, 21 (May 5, 1892): 420. “The Dismal Swamp and its Occupants,” *Natural Science News*, 1, 31 (October, 1895): 146. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 223-224. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 107. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 222.

²⁸¹ Sayers, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 1, 87. Waverly Traylor, *The Great Dismal Swamp in Myth and Legend* (RoseDog Books, 2010), 55-56.

²⁸² Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 223.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 2, 87, 114. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 223-225.



Fig. 3. Raised wooded island in the Great Dismal Swamp interior at the “nameless site,” Gates County, North Carolina. (Source: Author’s Photo Collection, 2013).

By the latter half of the 17th century, the Dismal Swamp had become a cultural landscape of freedom and resistance for indigenous Americans, African and African Americans, as well as poor and “lawless” European Americans on the run. White people, no doubt entirely men, entered the swamp as debtors facing impossible “contracts”,²⁸⁵ indentured servants, pirates, illegal traders, and other persons fleeing persecution or the violence of draconian colonial Virginia law.²⁸⁶ North Carolina, a colony described in 1682 as “the sink of America” by one prominent Virginian proprietor,²⁸⁷ had acquired a reputation for being a haven for fugitives of all sorts.²⁸⁸ Until the mid-18th century, it

²⁸⁵ M. Campbell, “Social Origins of Some Early Americans,” in *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. J.D. Smith (Norton, New York), 69-71. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (University of California, Berkeley: 1997), 202.

²⁸⁶ William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 81-86. Morris, “‘Running Servants and All Others’: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 92-95.

²⁸⁷ “Lord Culpeper to Lords of trade and Plantations,” (December 12, 1681) in *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*, Vol. 11, *America and West Indies, 1681-1685* (H.M. Public Record Office: 1898), 155.

²⁸⁸ Morris, “‘Running Servants and All Others’: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 92-95. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 78. Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law*

remained sparsely populated,²⁸⁹ was subject to recurring leadership conflict, and was nearly wiped out by the Tuscarora several times providing unique political and demographic opportunities for resistance in the general unrest and confusion of the colony's early years. In 1711, Virginia's governor Alexander Spotswood remarked that North Carolina "has long been a common sanctuary to all our running servants and all others that fly from the due execution of the laws."²⁹⁰ In the first decade of the 18th century, the proprietors of Virginia grew loud in their agitation against North Carolina, "that gang of tramps and rioters."²⁹¹ And by 1704, political conflict intensified between the repressive Virginia colony and what would become the "Old Settlers Party" of North Carolina, a colonial regime largely influenced by the political and religious leadership of Quakers and other sympathizers of the plight of the poor, including that of Native Americans and Africans.²⁹² Following violent unrest between 1714-1715, the old faction was defeated and a new and more oppressive colonial order took its place.²⁹³ During this time, "the population of the Dismal Swamp grew sharply," and many white men, once harbored by the old North Carolina colonial faction, now facing defeat and the risk of capture, fled to the refuge of the swamp.²⁹⁴ Governor Spotswood declared in 1714, that "Loose and disorderly people daily flock" to this "no-man's-land" that is the Dismal Swamp.²⁹⁵ In fact, between 1736 and 1768, 40 out of 107 advertisements for servant and slave runaways in Virginia gazettes are referred to as Irish,²⁹⁶ and oral histories reveal that old trail names within the swamp included the Celtic names "Shallalah" and "Ballahack" roads.²⁹⁷ Today, Ballahack Road remains a well-traveled and maintained thoroughfare into the swamp along its eastern border in what is now the city of Chesapeake, Virginia.

But even before these early 18th century events, Africans and African descendants were most assuredly present and active in the swamp.²⁹⁸ Given the indomitable spirit of Black people throughout the diaspora in this crucial historical period, there is no reason to doubt that in the immediate decades following the arrival of 20 African men and women in Virginia in the year 1619, Black people fled into the Dismal Swamp and joined

and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas (Harvard University Press, 2001), 32-33. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 110-111.

²⁸⁹ Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 572. Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: P. Smith, 1966), 156.

²⁹⁰ Lieutenant Governor Spotswood to the Earl of Rochester, July 30, 1711, in *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, vol. 1, ed. Saunders, 798.

²⁹¹ Hugh Lefler and William S. Powell, *Colonial North Carolina: A History* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 195-197.

²⁹² Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 61, 179-182.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 179-207. Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 94.

²⁹⁴ Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 225. Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 94-95.

²⁹⁵ F. Roy Johnson, *Tales of Old Carolina: Traditional and Historical Sketches of the Area Between and About the Chowan River and Great Dismal Swamp* (Johnson Publishing, 1965), 41, 153.

²⁹⁶ Daniel Meaders, *Dead or Alive: Fugitive Slaves and White Indentured Servants Before 1830* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1993), 39.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41. John Hamilton Howard, *In the Shadow of the Pines* (New York: Easton and Mains, 1906), 39. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 224. Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 95.

²⁹⁸ Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 224. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 87.

the hemispheric tradition of marronage. The demography of Virginia and North Carolina throughout the 17th century indicates that the numbers of these first maroons would have been undoubtedly small. White Virginians heavily outnumbered Africans in 1625, but “during the last quarter of the seventeenth century the importation of slaves, both male and female, rose,” leaving significant numbers of Black people in the colony.²⁹⁹ By 1683 there were 3,000 enslaved people in Virginia, and 12,000 indentured servants.³⁰⁰ But after 1699, Africans were heavily transported to Virginia, and throughout the first decade of the 18th century, 7,700 African people were captured and brought to the colony.³⁰¹ The 1730s saw Virginia’s highest importation with 15,700 souls forced to its shores. By 1775, the war embarking colony’s total population was roughly half a million, “of whom 40% were slaves.”³⁰² In 1800, enslaved people made up 48% of the total population, and these numbers would never again be as high.³⁰³ Meanwhile, in North Carolina, because of its political unrest and uneven development discussed previously, there were only about 900 Black people in the entire colony by the year 1710, and by 1730 there was less than a sum of 30,000 white people and 6,000 Black people.³⁰⁴ By 1790 North Carolina’s overall population had grown dramatically, and the new state had 100,572 enslaved persons, and 4,975 free Black people. We can safely assert that moving through the 18th century and beyond, Black people were using the Dismal Swamp as a space of flight and marronage in much larger numbers and had become its primary human inhabitants.³⁰⁵

Through the antebellum period, Slavery in Virginia “looked more like a land of farms than a plantation landscape,” as labor demands, for the most part, did not require large forces of the enslaved.³⁰⁶ Tobacco, a crop that could be labored by “one to two, and certainly no more than ten” enslaved people,³⁰⁷ dominated until around 1793, when the invention of the cotton gin and the exhausted tobacco soil opened the way for the rise of cotton.³⁰⁸ Subsistence crops such as wheat and corn were also grown in both Virginia and North Carolina, in addition to indigo. In the few decades before the turn of the 19th century, “only 58 slaveowners kept more than 100 slaves in a single county,”³⁰⁹ and less than 30% of enslaved people lived on “plantations” with more than 20 total enslaved people throughout Virginia.³¹⁰ During this period and throughout the Civil War, North Carolina’s economy was dominated by the production of naval stores, including lumber,

²⁹⁹ Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 404, 420-423.

³⁰⁰ Herbert Aptheker, *The Colonial Era: A History of the American People* (International Publishers, 1959), 39.

³⁰¹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 58-59.

³⁰² Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 6.

³⁰³ James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58.

³⁰⁴ Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 105, 112. Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 32. Hadden estimates that in the 1720s, there were only 2,000 Black people in the colony while there were a total of between 4,000 and 5,000 whites.

³⁰⁵ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 2-3, 87, 114. Sayers argues that “after 1680 or so” the swamp’s population consisted of “mostly African American Maroons.”

³⁰⁶ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 28, 35-36.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰⁸ Tobacco soil could be worked for about three consecutive years before it had to be rested for another twenty. See Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 33, 45, 47.

³⁰⁹ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 6.

³¹⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 41.

turpentine, tar, and pitch.³¹¹ The hiring out of skilled enslaved men such as boatmen, fishermen, stevedores, canal laborers, and draymen, reflects the major labor demands through the Civil War.³¹² And, like Virginia, plantations were for the most part small farms where “only about 1 in 20 farmers had 20 or more slaves” even by 1860.³¹³ In both states, cotton production throughout the Tidewater region climbed throughout the 19th century, and the amount of bales produced by state increased throughout the antebellum period.³¹⁴ By 1860, North Carolina had a population of 331,059 enslaved people, and a white population of 629,932.³¹⁵ In the same year, 31% of the population in Virginia was enslaved.³¹⁶ Taken together, these factors suggest some conditions that were favorable to overt resistance, such as the slightly Black majority in North Carolina at the dawn of the Civil War and the mobility afforded to the Tidewater’s many watermen and skilled laborers. But on the whole, across time and in most places, Black people in Virginia and North Carolina were outnumbered by whites, and even if they happened to live in a place where they weren’t, most enslaved men and women found themselves on small cotton and tobacco farms, laboring in extremely overworked, “closely supervised gangs.”³¹⁷

In spite of and undoubtedly because of the difficulties they faced, enslaved men and women throughout the Tidewater did run away, their movement defying the spatial order of white power and control – the first step toward marronage, and certainly conducive to the stirrings of outright insurrection. By the end of the 18th century, most enslaved people in the Tidewater were born in the Tidewater,³¹⁸ and their familiarity with their environment would have been extensive. Runaway slave advertisements in the area suggest that the enslaved knew that greater freedom and independence could be enjoyed in the Dismal Swamp. In March of 1854, Martin Kellogg of Gates County, North Carolina placed an ad for the “apprehension” of Bev, a young man who had “been seen lurking around” and “is probably aiming for the Dismal Swamp.”³¹⁹ In April of 1852, Bonaparte of Isle of Wight County was reported missing as he “ran away last Christmas without cause or provocation,” but it was thought “that he is lurking about the Dismal Swamp.”³²⁰ In 1799, the *Edenton, N.C.: Herald of Freedom* advertised for the apprehension of 26 year old Aaron, who, “if he is not lurking thereabout” the vicinity of his wife, he has probably gone to “the Virginia side of the Dismal.”³²¹ And as early as

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48. Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 35. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 316.

³¹² See Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 139.

³¹³ Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 328.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 311. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 671.

³¹⁵ Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, 328.

³¹⁶ 1860 Census.

³¹⁷ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 671. To this last point, the gang labor involved in tobacco and cotton production stands in contrast to the task labor system employed in the production of rice, where after an arduous individual task was completed, enslaved persons were free to choose their own activities for their remaining time in the day. See Carney, *Black Rice*, 108.

³¹⁸ Morgan finds that in 1790 there were 4,740 African born enslaved people out of a total of 293,000 enslaved people. By 1800, Africans in Virginia were “almost nonexistent,” with 678 African born enslaved people out of a total of 346,000 enslaved people. See Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 61-62.

³¹⁹ “\$50 Reward,” Martin Kellogg, March 15, 1854, North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements Digital Collection (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro).

³²⁰ *The Daily Southern Argus* (Norfolk, VA), April 16, 1852.

³²¹ Untitled advertisement, Thomas Fitt, *Edenton, N.C.: Herald of Freedom*, March 27, 1799, North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements Digital Collection (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro).

1769, an ad was placed in the *Virginia Gazette* for the return of “a likely young Negro man by the name of Tom,” for “it is thought he is about the Dismal Swamp.”³²² The ad states that Tom “ran away from the subscriber in April 1768,” nearly a year before.³²³ Interestingly, in September of 1768, an ad written in the same newspaper by the same pursuer suggests that both Tom and Harry, “a very sensible artful fellow” and “a good waterman,” had gone missing at “about the same time” and both were still at large 6 months later.³²⁴ That Tom was again advertised for in April 1769 without mention of Harry, it is possible that the two were not long together, if they were together at all, but given their concurrent disappearance, the question of their ultimate togetherness should not preclude the possibility that Harry’s knowledge and command of waterways assisted both men in flight.

While the flight and resistance of Tom, Harry, Aaron, Bonaparte, and Bev certainly evidence that Black men took advantage of their physical environment and the swamp as opportunities to assert their freedom, it is important to note that so too did Black women. Although enslaved women had different and often more limiting opportunities for flight, they nevertheless did abscond, and as will be discussed in the pages to follow, Black women did practice marronage in the swamp and were most assuredly instrumental forces in the organization of insurrection there and throughout the region. Enslaved women lived in a racist world where patriarchy ruled, and as a result, their tasks were mostly confined to the plantation spaces of the domicile or the fields. For the most part, they were not given passes to “go on errands, drive the coach that took the slaveholders here and there or the cart that transported goods, or row the canoes or man the boats.”³²⁵ Thus, enslaved women often had less knowledge of, and experience in the outside world than did enslaved men, and they must have known that “their presence on the roads was more conspicuous, and [would have been] more readily questioned than men’s.”³²⁶ As Stephanie Camp has pointed out, the plantation “geography of containment did not hold women and men in the same ways, nor to the same extent,” and enslaved women “would leave their home plantations, with permission, extremely rarely.”³²⁷ These constraints were coupled with the fact that women were often place bound by their love for their children, and it “became difficult to contemplate either leaving them behind or taking them in an escape attempt.”³²⁸ For these reasons, less women took flight than men. Of those whose return was advertised in Virginia, between 1790 and 1816, 85% of people in flight were men, while 15% were women. Between 1838 and 1860, 91% were

³²² *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, April 13, 1769, The Geography of Slavery in Virginia Digital Archive (Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005).

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), Williamsburg, October 6, 1768, The Geography of Slavery in Virginia Digital Archive (Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005).

³²⁵ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 89. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 30-32.

³²⁶ *Ibid.* Cheryl LaRoche has called this lack of knowledge and experience, “spatial illiteracy” that Black women often overcome by escaping in groups. See Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, “Coerced but not Subdued,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 61.

³²⁷ Exceptions include permission granted to midwives, for example, or to enslaved women “for truly special occasions,” and in general were more commonly given in the upper south. See Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 31, 34.

³²⁸ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212.

listed as men, while just 9% were women.³²⁹ Mullin estimates that between 1730 and 1805, just 11% of escapees in Virginia were women.³³⁰ The numbers in North Carolina compare. Between 1790 and 1816, 18% were women, and between the latter period, 14% were women.³³¹

Still, none of this means that enslaved women were complacent, or that enslaved men asserted their freedom more fiercely or with more heart, tenacity, cunning, and resilience than enslaved women. Enslaved women creatively resisted at every turn, and found ingenious ways to control their own lives and defy the structure and limitations of the plantation world.³³² They were just as invested in freedom struggle as men. But as the opportunities for mobility and flight for women were different from men, women had to be highly flexible with how they chose to resist. When enslaved women did abscond, permanent escape was infrequently their objective. Instead, many women were perpetual truants and temporary absconders, “lying out” in places nearby loved ones.³³³ As a few historians remind us, relying exclusively on runaway slave advertisements to tell us who defied the bounds of the plantation distorts, “perhaps to a great degree,” the frequency of female flight and the quantity of enslaved women who resisted their bondage this way.³³⁴ Slaveholders were not as likely to go through the trouble of placing advertisements in newspapers for enslaved women, since it was enslaved women who were more likely to remain at large for short periods and then voluntarily return. But enslaved women in the Tidewater, as elsewhere in the south, moved outside of and between plantation spaces, as it will be seen. And though in the minority, enslaved women did run away permanently, sometimes taking their children with them or running “very big with child,” while others ran alone, or in the company of men, both Black and white.³³⁵ For example, Venus, of Isle of Wight county, a 32 year old “very smooth tongued” enslaved woman who had “been five years accustomed to the house,” ran away with Jack after being hired out in the Dismal Swamp for two years.³³⁶ Despite the fact that “most canal work camps were all male,”³³⁷ Jack and Venus were working for John Washington, George Washington’s

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

³³⁰ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 290.

³³¹ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211-212.

³³² Camp evidences enslaved Black women’s truancy and unauthorized mobility of pleasure and leisure, from their sartorial agency to their “secret parties” outside the plantation limits. This “everyday resistance” sheds light on possibilities for more overt forms of resistance and insurrectionary activity. See Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 35-92. Thovolia Glymph has documented the exceedingly clever and resourceful everyday ways enslaved women resisted the violence of the plantation household. See Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008). See also Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 77-79, 125.

³³³ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 39. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 103-104.

³³⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 304. Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina, 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), 240. LaRoche, “Coerced But Not Subdued,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters, 58-59.

³³⁵ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 212. *Virginia Gazette* (Parks), October 26 to November 2, 1739. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 104, 113-114.

³³⁶ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), Williamsburg, December 5, 1771, The Geography of Slavery in Virginia Digital Archive (Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005).

³³⁷ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 110.

brother and overseer of the construction of the first canal in the swamp.³³⁸ The advertisement, published in 1771 suggests that the two, who were “carrying with them several different kinds of apparel,” either used the Dismal Swamp as a means to escape elsewhere, but more likely flew into its more remote recesses.³³⁹ Regardless of where they fled, Venus read the swamp as a space of agency and resistance, took flight, and undoubtedly grappled with the risks and prospects of marronage. She is among the women who were prone to become the peripheral and the interior maroons of the Dismal Swamp.

Beyond the Tidewater’s unique geographical opportunities for resistance shaped by both its relatively close proximity to free northern states and the physical pull of the Dismal Swamp itself, the larger surrounding region also provided unique spatial opportunities for flight, marronage, and organized insurrection. Waterways, or what we might consider passages of freedom abound throughout the area, and the enslaved certainly knew this. In addition to the swampland, a largely connected web of rivers, straits, creeks, sounds, and the coastline shape much of the geography of the greater Tidewater. Enslaved and free Black watermen were expert pilots of these waterways, and this made their knowledge and navigations skills “indispensable” to the pursuit of escape as they moved about with “the mobility and independence necessary to conduct their business,” “potentially undermin[ing] Tidewater plantation society” at every turn.³⁴⁰ If watermen did not attempt their own escapes, their knowledge was certainly an asset to the enslaved as they pursued flight throughout the area. In 1830s Edenton, North Carolina, a town on the Albemarle Sound at the southern edge of the Dismal Swamp, Harriet Jacobs fled her master by appealing to her aunt’s “seafaring” husband for guidance. Jacobs wrote: “He took me into his boat, rowed out to a vessel not far distant, and hoisted me on board. . . . They said I was to remain on board till near dawn, and then they would hide me in Snaky Swamp.” Jacobs was “rowed three miles to the swamp,” where she was afforded some protection from discovery, and despite “the mosquitos and the constant terror of snakes,” she found refuge through the fact that those “venomous snakes were less dreadful to [her] imagination than the white men in that community called civilized.”³⁴¹ These conditions prime the opportunity for marronage throughout the Tidewater and in the communities surrounding the Dismal Swamp.

Indeed, the risk of flight by water was so serious that in 1804, Virginia whites complained about the inadequacy of the penalty for assisting absconders – “death without benefit of clergy” – since it “contemplates the punishment after the fact” that “a slave has gone to sea.”³⁴² Runaway slave advertisements in the area frequently warned against “vessels and others... harbouring or carrying off” the enslaved “at their own peril.”³⁴³ But

³³⁸ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 89. Edward Maris-Wolf, “Between Slavery and Freedom: African Americans in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1863,” Master’s thesis, Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA (2002), 43.

³³⁹ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), Williamsburg, December 5, 1771, The Geography of Slavery in Virginia Digital Archive (Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005). Sayers asserts that they “both fled to the morass.” See Sayers, 89.

³⁴⁰ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 138-139, 58.

³⁴¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (First Signet Classic Printing, 2000), 126-127.

³⁴² Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 152.

³⁴³ “Seven Dollar Reward,” December 1, 1801, in *Advertisements for Runaway Slaves in Virginia, 1801-1820*, ed. Daniel Meaders (Garland Publishing, Inc.: 1997), 6.

Paris, a teenager, was seen escaping at a ferry crossing; there was little doubt, said his pursuer, that he was bound for the interior port of Richmond, “from whence he may probably attempt to get off by water.”³⁴⁴

Richmond, well within an 80-mile radius of the Dismal Swamp, and Norfolk, at the northern border of the swamp, had become two of the biggest ports in the country, especially after the domestic slave trade took root following the end of the international slave trade in 1808. The ports of Hampton and Portsmouth, Virginia along the swamp’s northeastern perimeters, and Elizabeth City, North Carolina at its southeastern end were locally significant ports in the Tidewater. Throughout the 19th century, Black people were moved regularly through these ports to supply the expanding south with laborers.³⁴⁵ Bustling ports were major centers for the communication of ideas and exchange of news and information about the unfolding events in the outside world. One massively reverberating event was the Haitian Revolution. Throughout the 1790s and into the 19th century, “every vessel brought tidings of the slave revolution in Haiti.”³⁴⁶ In the water-clad landscape of the Tidewater, it would have taken extreme effort to suppress the revolutionary news of this successful slave revolt. The conjecture that “enslaved Virginians knew much about the Haitian Revolution,” is a likely one.³⁴⁷ The spread of the idea of a free Black state throughout the Tidewater would have fortified and assuaged the idea that preexisting opportunities for overt resistance and organized insurrection could become real and executable possibilities. It is no coincidence that some of the most impactful insurrectionary plots in Virginia and North Carolina occur at the turn of the 19th century and involve the leadership of enslaved communities in the Tidewater and peripheral maroons operating out of the Dismal Swamp.

The Peripheral Swamp Maroons: Violence, Community, and Networks of Freedom

By the mid 19th century, the Dismal Swamp had acquired a reputation as being a haven for so-called “runaway slaves,” but it also developed a name for itself as a space of Black freedom and active resistance in popular imagination. In 1842, the famous poet and nationally recognized literary figure, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his widely celebrated poem, “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp.” Although the poem depicts “the slave in the swamp” as “the poor old slave, infirm and lame,” or else, “hunted,” it gave the swamp national significance as a site of slavery and alleged Black “fugitivity.”³⁴⁸ A decade later, Frederick Douglass’ *The Heroic Slave* (1853) placed the Dismal Swamp on the cultural landscape of Black resistance as the hero of the short story lived in the swamp for five years in order to remain close to his wife. In the same year, William Wells Brown wrote *Clotel*, which imagines that Nat Turner and hundreds of his followers used the Dismal Swamp as an organizing space of revolt. Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), a revisionist narrative of her sentimental novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), casts the story of a rebellious and somewhat revolutionary swamp maroon, Dred, the fictive son of Denmark Vesey. And Martin R.

³⁴⁴ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 133.

³⁴⁵ Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 5-7, 215.

³⁴⁶ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 28-29.

³⁴⁷ Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 60.

³⁴⁸ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 174-175.

Delaney's *Blake: or, the Huts of America* (1859) tells the story of Blake, who runs to the Dismal Swamp and receives instruction from Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser who are already there, and who show him that the swamp can be used to gather up sufficient numbers in order to overthrow the oppressive country.

The basis of all of these ideas about Black people's resistance and the imminent birth of revolution in the swamp should be directly attributed to the historical actions of the maroons themselves. As it was the peripheral maroons that most visibly made their presence known to the plantation world at the swamp's outskirts, much more has been documented about their resistant activities. Repeatedly recorded as "lurkers," "runaways," and "outliers," the peripheral maroons were so obnoxious and menacing to slaveholders that their activities, which included violence, theft, and the rousing of organized uprising, were primarily documented with the hopes of quelling continued resistance.³⁴⁹ Violence, integral to the oppression and enslavement of Black people throughout the Tidewater and of course, throughout the African diaspora, was also integral to the freedom and survival of many of the peripheral swamp maroons.³⁵⁰ Like the interior maroons, these maroons were battle ready,³⁵¹ but unlike the maroons of the deep swamp, peripheral maroons relentlessly planned and executed daring attacks on plantation society that sometimes exceeded the causes of mere subsistence, survival, or other individual freedoms. Not only did these groups and individuals survive in the swamp through their own resourcefulness, they were also instrumental in organizing freedom struggle toward dismantling the slavocracy a real possibility. Through their flight, marronage, and use of the Dismal Swamp as an organizing space of illegal trading, "banditry," clandestine community networking, and revolt, the peripheral maroons created a landscape of Black power, resistance, resilience, and freedom in the swamp and extending Tidewater.

The first recorded incident of insurrection involving the maroons of the Dismal Swamp comes in 1709, with the leadership of several enslaved men, including Peter, once enslaved by a Mr. Samuel Thompson. The "late dangerous conspiracy, formed and carried on by greate numbers of ye said negroes and Indian slaves for making their escape by force from ye service of their masters," locates collaborative organized resistance in Surry, James City, and Isle of Wight counties, Virginia.³⁵² Importantly, these counties contain the most northwestern parts of the Dismal Swamp – a ready destination for peripheral marronage and the organization of rebellion. Though a number of the insurrectionists were captured and punished, Peter escaped and remained at large for at least one year. In 1710, a reward was offered for his capture, dead or alive. This reward was posted just as another "intended insurrection of the negroes" was discovered in the same counties.³⁵³ This plot was ultimately ruined by betrayal, and two

³⁴⁹ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 77-89. Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," 167.

³⁵⁰ Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 225.

³⁵¹ One author describes the case of an enslaved man in Bertie County, North Carolina, who's enslaver "knew that he had gone to the Dismal Swamp," upon capture was "shot at several times, but was little hurt. He had on a coat that was impervious to shot, it being thickly wadded with turkey feathers." See Robert Arnold, *The Great Dismal Swamp and Lake Drummond: Early Recollections and Vivid Portrayals of Amusing Scenes* (Norfolk, Virginia: Evening Telegram Print, 1888), 7-8.

³⁵² Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," 169.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 170.

insurrectionists were executed, though there is no record of Peter's capture. These early plots were undoubtedly encouraged by the presence of the Dismal Swamp and the peripheral swamp marronage of formerly enslaved people avoiding recapture.³⁵⁴ That the southern parts of these counties are connected by the seamless pull of the swamp's northern edge, it is logical to consider the role flight and marronage had in the planning of insurrection there, as well as the role the swamp itself had in Black people's mobility and ability to communicate and organize across the region.

In 1792, some 900 Black people living and moving along the northeastern ends of the swamp organized themselves into units and prepared to attack Norfolk.³⁵⁵ Enslaved communities along the northern ridge of the Dismal Swamp in Norfolk and Portsmouth, as well as from the region now known as Hampton, just north of the swamp across the Chesapeake Bay, were to "blow up the powder magazine, and massacre whites."³⁵⁶ The militia captain of Norfolk appealed to the Governor for arms to protect slaveholding society against "the lower parts of the County," which, notably, is the Dismal Swamp.³⁵⁷ Eight days later, a letter evidenced in Petersburg, some 50 miles west of the swamp, containing news of imminent insurrection. It reported:

Several alarming accounts have been received in town, of a very dangerous Insurrection among the Negroes in the Eastern shore of Virginia; – Reports state, That about two weeks ago, the Negroes in that part of the State, to the amount of about 900, assembled in different parts, armed with muskets, spears, clubs &c and committed several outrages upon the inhabitants... A barrel of musket balls, about 300 spears, some guns, powder, provisions, &c have already been discovered and taken; the spears, it is said, were made by a negro blacksmith on the Eastern shore. A considerable number of slaves have been taken up, and it is expected will be hanged... they had concerted a plan with the Negroes from Norfolk and Portsmouth to commit some violent outrages in and about those towns. Six hundred of them were to cross the bay, at a certain time in the night, and were to be joined by the Negroes, in that Neighborhood; then they meant to blow up the magazine in Norfolk, and massacre the inhabitants.³⁵⁸

This means that roughly 600 Black people thereabout Hampton conspired to cross the bay under the cover of night and join forces with some 300 persons waiting in Portsmouth and Norfolk, or the northernmost parts of the swamp. Soon after, the militia captain and mayor of Norfolk responded with requests for military support from the Governor. Patrol over the area increased and three of the insurgents were executed with the hopes that this would "be a sufficient terror, and teach them wisdom."³⁵⁹ The unavoidable encroachment of the Dismal Swamp in the "lower parts of the eastern shore" cannot be overlooked as bearing notable influence on these activities. From a Black cognitive landscape perspective, the fact that the setting of these insurrectionary plans extended both directly out of and into the Dismal Swamp must have enabled this kind of

³⁵⁴ Both Leaming and Morris assert that these early insurrectionary attempts were orchestrated by maroons and enslaved people moving in and out of the Dismal Swamp. See Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 225. See Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 95.

³⁵⁵ Parramore, Stewart, Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 123. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 211. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 248.

³⁵⁶ Parramore, Stewart, Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 123.

³⁵⁷ William Palmer, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers, 1777–1865* (New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1960–1969), V. 542, 546–47. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 251.

³⁵⁸ "Letter from Petersburg, Virginia, May 17, 1792," *The Boston Gazette and the Country Journal*, June 18, 1792.

³⁵⁹ Palmer, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, V. 555, 625.

mobility, organization, and collaboration. For resistant networks among Black communities to include so many, and to span such a wide space in the immediate vicinity of the swamp borderlands, it is inevitable that the swamp and marronage influenced the organization of these plans.

In 1800, Gabriel Prosser and other leaders strategized for months, maintained total secrecy, and carefully planned an attack on Richmond. Recruiters worked to collect more support from the enslaved in neighboring cities and counties. Court records show that Gabriel encouraged participants by proclaiming “he had nearly 10,000 men: 1000 in Richmond, about 600 in Caroline County and nearly 500 at the Tuckahoe Coal Pits, ‘besides others at different places.’”³⁶⁰ But on Saturday, August 30, the day planned for insurrection, a storm of torrential proportions flooded the roads and bridges thus preventing the attack from being carried out. The storm shattered the resolve of some participants, and several enslaved people then leaked the plan to slaveholders. Gabriel fled to Norfolk and was captured there nearly a month after the failed revolt. Testimonies made by participants of Gabriel’s Uprising indicate that this insurgent attempt was designed to signal other revolts that were planned to occur simultaneously throughout Virginia. Confessions of the culprits included statements like, “all the negroes in Petersburg were to join him [Gabriel] after he had commenced the insurrection,” and “as soon as the boys on this side made a brake, the boys from Manchester would come over and join them.” About 150 Black people from the Norfolk and Suffolk area gathered at Whitlock’s Mill just outside of Norfolk had waited days for the signal to strike until they were finally notified that Gabriel’s plan had failed. They were waiting in the northwestern shadow of the Dismal Swamp. Once captured and examined, they admitted that they remained stationed in the Norfolk outskirts “to do what those in Richmond were about to do.”³⁶¹ Furthermore, folklore amongst free and enslaved Virginians in the first half of the 19th century suggest that Black people remembered that maroons in the swamp were working with Gabriel and that the swamp itself remained their “primary mythic locus of Black freedom.”³⁶²

Not long after Gabriel Prosser’s execution in Richmond in 1801, Black communities continued to navigate the waterways and use the swamp as a space of autonomous collaboration toward the creation and endurance of new networks of resistance and freedom. In 1802, a maroon by the name of Tom Copper spread fear throughout the Tidewater and beyond. Copper led a substantial group of maroons from his base in the Dismal Swamp behind Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County, North Carolina at the southern end of the swamp, and planned to use the swamp as a headquarters for the killing of whites in that county, as well as to move north through the swamp to attack slaveholding society at the northern end. His ultimate goal was to destroy Richmond, Virginia and liberate the state.³⁶³ In June 1802, the *Norfolk Herald* reported that armed

³⁶⁰ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, 130, Endnote 28: From Prosser’s Ben at the trials of Gabriel, Solomon, Pharaoh, and John Holman’s Doby; William Burton’s Daniel at the trial of Mary Jones’ John. “Information” on Ned, the property of Judith Owen; see also, the trial of Philip Shepard’s Pharaoh.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 134-135, Endnote 41: (Lexington) *Kentucky Gazette*, November 3, 1800. *Epitome of the Times*, October 2, 1800.

³⁶² Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 264-265. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 251-252.

³⁶³ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* 230. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 250. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 259. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 103-104. Tommy Bogger, “Maroons and Laborer in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. J.H.

fugitives from North Carolina who had “a camp in one of the swamps” were the source of widespread insubordination.³⁶⁴ An extract from a letter from one very concerned citizen of Elizabeth City appeared in the *Eastern Herald*, that June:

We are all under arms – a negro plot was discovered ten days past, which had been very serious, and we find that there is a chain of those horrid savages running through this state and Virginia.³⁶⁵

After the plot was revealed, 32 men were jailed in Elizabeth City, and dozens more in other counties nearby. The letter from the concerned citizen reports that Copper was himself arrested, but managed to escape. A Norfolk paper reported that “six stout negroes, mounted on horseback” attempted to free the prisoners and must have been successful at freeing Copper, for no more than a day after his arrest his name no longer appeared on the jail register. Though, four men were arrested in this valorous mission.³⁶⁶ Copper’s rescue speaks strongly to the fierce companionship and loyalty that must have helped to fortify peripheral maroon communities in the swamp. After a series of violently coaxed testimonies made by enslaved persons divulged the plans for revolt, it became clear that Copper and the maroons were working together with enslaved communities in neighboring counties, as well as with some free persons of color, and intended to rouse even more, including, it was hoped, a number of poor white men.³⁶⁷ The authorities also became aware that the insurrectionists “could get gun, powder, and shot at any time” and “expected to get arms as they would slay the country,” as “the runaways [had] a case of guns and 2 kegs of powder which were hid in the swamp” and were said to be guarded there by “five or six negroes.”³⁶⁸ It would appear that at least Tom Copper did manage to avoid recapture, for there are no known records of his whereabouts or activities after these events.

Meanwhile, in the months of April and May of that same year, at the northern end of the swamp, in Princess Anne County (now Virginia Beach) and Norfolk, the enslaved organized another attempt to burn the Norfolk arsenal and take down the city.³⁶⁹ Two enslaved men, Ned and Jeremiah, were found guilty, Jeremiah executed, Ned sent out of state, though others were also tried and questioned. The plot to destroy Norfolk was foiled due to the coerced testimony of Will, who upon his capture on April 15, 1802, had been “a runaway for nine of the past twelve months.”³⁷⁰ That these events take place at both ends of the Dismal Swamp over the span of April, May, and June of the same year suggests that maroons and the enslaved established resistant networks using the swamp to maintain communication and organize over great distances. In fact by June, a report was published alerting white citizens that the enslaved were “embodied in large companies,

Kobelski (Portsmouth, VA: Portsmouth Public Library, 1982), 1-8. James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia & Miscegenation in the South 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 34-36.

³⁶⁴ *Norfolk Herald*, June 2, 1802. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 231.

³⁶⁵ “Extract from a Letter from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, dated May 12, 1802,” *Eastern Herald*, (June 7, 1802).

³⁶⁶ “From a Norfolk Paper of May 23. More about the Negroes,” *New-York Herald*, June 2, 1802.

³⁶⁷ Deposition taken by Charles Grice, in “From a Norfolk Paper of May 23,” *New-York Herald*, June 2, 1802. See also Letter from Enoch Sawyer, Camden, May 10, 1802, Perquimans County Slave Records 1759-1864, Insurrection among Slaves 1802-1803, North Carolina State Archives.

³⁶⁸ Slave Collection 1748-1856, Bertie County, North Carolina State Archives.

³⁶⁹ Henry W. Flournoy, ed., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (Richmond, 1884-1893), 287-298.

Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 119-121.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119, 129.

armed, in the Great Swamp.”³⁷¹ The coordination of both insurrections seems to be timed so that uprisings were simultaneous.³⁷² White society was distressed and alarmed by reports of uprising in Camden, Currituck, and Pasquotank counties in North Carolina at the same time local newspapers in Norfolk warned Virginia residents in Portsmouth, Norfolk, and Princess Anne counties “to be on constant alert, for the swamp was not very far from their homes.”³⁷³

In 1810, reports circulated that a maroon named General Peter of Isle of Wight County, led enslaved groups at both ends of the swamp in what appears to be one unified, solidified move toward self-emancipation.³⁷⁴ In a letter written in May of 1810, Richard W. Byrd of Smithfield in Isle of Wight County, Virginia begged Governor John Tyler for “unremitted vigilance” against an impending insurrection that was rumored would occur simultaneously in North Carolina and in his own neighborhood. The letter reveals that a “negro boy” after “receiving twenty lashes” stated “that the operations were to commence in Carolina... that they were to fight with clubs, spikes and axes, and, if necessary they would immediately come on here to help the Virginia negroes.”³⁷⁵ Mr. Byrd referred specifically to a “General Peter” of Isle of Wight who had long been in communication with enslaved communities in North Carolina.³⁷⁶ It is extremely unlikely, and improbable, that General Peter would have been able to move between Smithfield, bordering the swamp’s northwestern edge and any point in North Carolina without utilizing the swamp as a space of refuge, communication, and organization since the Dismal Swamp sat directly in the middle of these two regions. Flight through the swamp and the resistance and mobility of peripheral maroons would have influenced enslaved people’s thoughts, perspectives, and choices, so much so that they proclaimed themselves “entitled to [their] freedom, and would be damned, if [they] did not have it in a fortnight.”³⁷⁷

In 1811, a party of white men attacked a small peripheral maroon settlement in Chowan County, North Carolina. The small community consisted of three men and two women who were living in “Cabarrus pocosin,” a region in the southern swamp not far from Edenton. The *Edenton Gazette* reported that the maroons “had bid defiance to any force whatever, and were resolved to stand their ground.”³⁷⁸ Two of the men were killed in an exchange of gunfire and “a vast deal of plunder was found; together with a great

³⁷¹ *Norfolk Herald*, June 15, 1802.

³⁷² This insurrectionary plot included numerous Virginia and North Carolina cities and counties surrounding the Dismal Swamp. It has been referred to by some as the “Easter Revolt,” as Norfolk was to be torched and other cities were to be attacked come Easter. See Douglass R. Egerton’s *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). See also, Douglass R. Egerton, “Fly Across the River”: The Easter Slave Conspiracy of 1802,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 68 (April 1991): 87-110.

³⁷³ Bogger, “Maroons and Laborer in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. J.H. Kobelski, 3.

³⁷⁴ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 246. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 253.

³⁷⁵ MS Council Journal, 1809-1810 (June 2, 1810), 199. Library of Congress, Ac 5225 Broad sides: Virginia, May 30, 1810.

³⁷⁶ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 246.

³⁷⁷ MS Council Journal, 1809-1810 (June 2, 1810), 199. Library of Congress, Ac 5225 Broad sides: Virginia, May 30, 1810.

³⁷⁸ *Edenton Gazette*, March 22, 1811. “Domestic,” *Star*, March 28, 1811.

number of keys.”³⁷⁹ Both women were captured and the third man was wounded. Reports celebrated the discovering party for “breaking up that nest of robbers, who nightly infested our town.”³⁸⁰

In 1815, Pompey Little walked off of W.P. Little’s “Littleton” plantation in Plymouth, Washington County, just south of the Albemarle Sound. He took off toward Gates County, North Carolina, the southeastern edge of the swamp. From 1815 to 1822, Pompey operated from this corner of the swamp, “about 36 miles south of Suffolk,” and led a series of robberies, likely committed for his sustenance, as he was “remarkably fat in the face” upon his discovery.³⁸¹ Pompey worked in the swamp with at least two other maroons, and he masterminded attack and retreat with such skill that he evaded capture for seven years of active pursuit. Pompey was brazen, “brandishing a long two-edged knife” as he was approached by his pursuers in July of 1822.³⁸²

In 1818, a group composed of both peripheral maroons and poor white men collaborated in Black Water, in Princess Ann County, Virginia. The area shares its southeastern border with the northeastern parts of the Dismal Swamp. The *Norfolk Herald* reported:

Our informant states that the inhabitants in the neighborhood of Black Water, in Princess Ann county, have for some time past been kept in a state of alarm by a gang of desperate wretches, principally of white men and runaway negroes, who go about committing the most atrocious outrages and depredations on persons and property. This band of ruffians was said to be 28 in number, all armed and officered, and had openly proclaimed themselves at war with the inhabitants of Black Water. So bold had they grown in their villainess that they would enter enclosures and shoot down cattle, hogs or poultry at noon day.³⁸³

Though it was on the whole quite rare, white outlaws did join outlying groups of maroons in their various attacks on dominant society.³⁸⁴ The report does not elaborate the leadership of the sizeable group, but does mention that the group had a “captain” and that an “old woman” was among its most prominent members – both features of maroon leadership that are common throughout the Western hemisphere.³⁸⁵ Only the captain and the woman were killed upon discovery, while the rest of the group was reportedly captured and jailed. Some of this group’s activities are described as having taken place in “the woods” of Black Water, or, the wooded bogs of the upper Dismal Swamp. It is altogether impractical, though not impossible, that such a large score of people could have successfully retreated for so long elsewhere.

Mere months following this incident, in December of 1818, white citizens in Princess Anne County petitioned against the violent depredations of “the murderous

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Thomas C. Parramore, *Cradle of the Colony: The History of Chowan County and Edenton, North Carolina* (Edenton, N.C. Chamber of Commerce, 1967), 51-52. Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” 171. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 235.

³⁸¹ Johnson, *Tales from Old Carolina*, 155-156.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁸³ *Norfolk Herald*, June 23, 1818. See also *New York Evening Post*, July 7, 1818.

³⁸⁴ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 86.

³⁸⁵ *Norfolk Herald*, June 23, 1818. See also *New York Evening Post*, July 7, 1818. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn notes that “the leadership of older women” is among some of the “common characteristics shared by many... resistance movements” across the African diaspora. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Black Women in Resistance,” in *In Resistance*, ed. Okihiro, 190. Barbara Bush also notes that “women, especially older women... wield great power and influence” in the social organization of African and African descendant communities across the diaspora. Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 68.

Mingo” and his accomplices.³⁸⁶ Mingo, who was notorious for “the commission of many a heinous crime and deed of blood,” was a “free” Black man that joined and led peripheral maroons in the area of the northern swamp.³⁸⁷ The petition urges action to stop Mingo’s “open war against the property and even lives of our Citizens.”³⁸⁸ Following his capture and trial in 1819, Mingo was executed by white vigilantes on his way from Norfolk to the State Prison in Richmond.³⁸⁹

In 1823, the *Norfolk Herald* once again declared Norfolk to be in a state of emergency. The report explains under the heading, “A Serious Subject,” that white “citizens of the southern part of Norfolk County, Virginia,”³⁹⁰ which is the immediate northern periphery of the Dismal Swamp:

...have for some time been kept in a state of mind peculiarly harassing and painful, from the too apparent fact that their lives are at the mercy of a band of lurking assassins, against whose fell designs neither the power of the law, or vigilance, or personal strength and intrepidity, can avail. These desperadoes are runaway negroes (commonly called outlyers) ... Their first object is to obtain gun and ammunition, as well to procure game for subsistence as to defend themselves from attack, or accomplish objects of vengeance. No individual after this can consider his life safe from the murdering aim of these monsters in human shape.³⁹¹

These maroons killed several white men by the time this report was issued, and “one slaveholder received a note from these amazing fellows suggesting it would be healthier for him to remain indoors at night – and he did.”³⁹² Clearly, these maroons were strategically and deliberately selecting the targets of their violent resistance. Assisted by trained dogs, a large body of the militia was eventually dispatched to suppress the group, who had been successfully operating from and living in the Dismal Swamp for six years at the time of their discovery.³⁹³ Over the span of a few weeks, the *Norfolk Herald* made a few scattered claims that some of the maroons were captured or killed, including Bob Ferebee, their purported leader.³⁹⁴ Other maroons in this community avoided capture.³⁹⁵

On Sunday, August 21, 1831, Nat Turner and his followers killed 55 white men, women, and children some twenty miles west of the Dismal Swamp, in Southampton County, Virginia, a county that sits directly west of the Dismal Swamp county of Isle of Wight. In the first week or so following the infamous revolt, it is clear that many people believed that maroons from the Dismal Swamp carried out the uprising. The *Norfolk Herald* reported:

³⁸⁶ William S. Forrest, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakeston, 1853), 445-446.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 446. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 229, 276-277.

³⁸⁸ “Petition of Princess Anne County citizens,” December 1-11, 1818. Virginia Executive Papers, Letters Received.

³⁸⁹ Forrest, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity*, 446.

³⁹⁰ Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” 176-177.

³⁹¹ *Norfolk Herald*, May 12, 1823. See also *New York Evening Post*, May 15, 1823.

³⁹² Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” 176.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 177. Bogger, “Maroons and Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. J.H. Kobelski, 3-4. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 104. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 276-277.

³⁹⁴ *Norfolk Herald*, May 29, 1823. *Norfolk Herald*, June 5, 1823. *Norfolk Herald*, June 30, 1823.

³⁹⁵ Bogger, “Maroons and Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. J.H. Kobelski, 3-4. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 104.

It is now well ascertained, that the band of negroes who committed the horrid murders in Southampton, were composed chiefly or entirely of runaways, who have long infested the swamps of that county. Their object was probably to raise an insurrection among the slaves.³⁹⁶

Five days after the revolt, *The Constitutional Whig* alerted citizens:

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 quickly be suppressed.³⁹⁷

A week after this report, a Norfolk resident published a letter that appeared in several newspapers, insisting “the number of insurgents had reached fourteen hundred including six hundred and fifty who had organized themselves in the Dismal Swamp, but had not yet formed a junction with the others.”³⁹⁸ These assertions are unfounded, but demonstrate how the swamp had become a real manifestation of Black freedom and power that fueled white fear of imminent marronage and the threat of revolution. Given the activities of peripheral maroons of the previous decades, it is little wonder why white citizens had come to believe that marronage was a major impetus for insurrection. Other reports connected Turner’s revolt to the Dismal Swamp by alleging that he planned all along to retreat there to join preexisting maroon groups after the revolt, or that he planned to flee to the swamp should his revolt fail.³⁹⁹ One newspaper reported that Turner and his party were “probably making their way to the Dismal Swamp, in which they will be able to remain for a short time in security.”⁴⁰⁰ The *Petersburg Intelligencer* recounted, “The intention of the negroes was to reach the Dismal Swamp.”⁴⁰¹ Another paper warned:

If any have escaped, they will be too anxious to bury themselves in the recesses of the Dismal Swamp... It is believed that their gang consisted principally of runaways who have been for years collecting in the Swamp, and who are supposed to have amounted to a formidable number.⁴⁰²

In the two months after the revolt and before Turner’s capture, militias and “volunteers from several counties undertook expeditions to scour the swamp” in search of him and the insurgent maroons.⁴⁰³ Turner, however, was found hiding in a cave in his own neighborhood. Circumstances permitting, perhaps he planned to seek refuge in the Dismal Swamp, but in the end, he did not. But the swamp remained a fixture of Black self-empowerment, freedom, and resistance, and there is evidence, though not much, that some of Turner’s followers did reach its shelter after the insurrection.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁶ Quoted in “Southampton, Jerusalem, August 24,” “Richmond, August 28, 1831,” *Columbian Register*, September 3, 1831.

³⁹⁷ *The Constitutional Whig*, August 26, 1831, (Richmond, VA).

³⁹⁸ “The Insurrection and Massacre in Virginia,” *Rhode-Island American*, September 2, 1831.

³⁹⁹ J.H. Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst), 38. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” in *Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy*, eds. John B. Duff and Mitchell (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 56-57; 74; 81. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 307-308.

⁴⁰⁰ “Insurrection of the Blacks,” *National Gazette and Literary Register*, August 27, 1831. See also, “Insurrection of the Blacks,” *Edenton Gazette*, August 31, 1831.

⁴⁰¹ *The Petersburg Intelligencer*, August 26, 1831.

⁴⁰² “The Insurrection,” *National Gazette and Enquirer*, September 3, 1831. See also, “The Insurrection,” *New-Hampshire Gazette*, September 6, 1831.

⁴⁰³ Bogger, “Maroons and Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. J.H. Kobelski, 4. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 104, n19. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 280.

⁴⁰⁴ Diouf points to one obscure record, “General Anti-Slavery Convention,” *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London, 1843), 78. This entails the case of a man who, before reaching Canada, lived in the swamp for 6 weeks. This occurred in the year 1840. During his time in the swamp he met a

After Nat Turner's rebellion, the enslaved and peripheral maroons in the Tidewater faced greater odds for successful flight and marronage, as slaveholders tightened measures taken to suppress and control Black people's freedom of mobility. Stricter orders to patrol and keep guard were issued, day patrols were set up, the homes of the enslaved and "free" Blacks were searched, and meetings and congregations once regularly held were subject to special scrutiny.⁴⁰⁵ These precautions were now executed on a regular basis instead of in response to emergency need. Even worse, Black people were also whipped, jailed, and hundreds were outright lynched as retribution and prevention.⁴⁰⁶ In short, Black communities, both "free" and enslaved, were terrorized beyond what they had already experienced before August of 1831. This vigilance held, and it seems to have succeeded in suppressing the more audacious demonstrations of freedom and resistance carried out by the peripheral maroons and enslaved communities throughout the Dismal Swamp region. Over the next three decades, there are no known insurrectionary attempts involving maroons and enslaved communities around the swamp. Nevertheless, after Turner's revolt, the Dismal Swamp remained an attraction for Black people throughout the Tidewater, and flight and marronage continued until the Civil War. Evidence of this can be seen in the North Carolina State Assembly's passage of the "Act to provide for the apprehension of runaway slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp and for other purposes," in 1847. The expressed concern was that too many "slaves" "remain setting at defiance the power of their masters, corrupting and seducing other slaves, and by their evil example and evil practices, lessening the due subordination, and greatly impairing the value of slaves in the district of country bordering the said great dismal swamp."⁴⁰⁷

Though maroon and enslaved insurrectionary networks in the immediate vicinity of the Dismal Swamp did diminish after 1831, peripheral maroon-enslaved community relationships and collaborative resistance practices remained constant, prompting the passage of the 1847 legislature. Maroons at the swamp's edges conceivably maintained contact with loved ones who were enslaved nearby, and also engaged the enslaved in "clandestine slave economies" of illegal barter and trade.⁴⁰⁸ Even as the extent of these secret relationships and dealings will never be known, it is clear that the enslaved were certainly aware of the activities and whereabouts of many of the peripheral maroons, and

maroon who told him he had been involved in Turner's revolt, 9 years before. However, there are no records indicating any of Turner's insurrectionists were captured in the Dismal Swamp. Hadden writes that Gates County, North Carolina patrollers "scoured the Juniper and Dismal swamps, catching twelve long-term runaways but not Turner's conspirators." See Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 142. To this point, see also, Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 104.

⁴⁰⁵ Hadden, *Slave Patrols*, 146-147.

⁴⁰⁶ The *Southern Advocate*, October 15, 1831 states that over 100 Black people had been slaughtered in vengeance in Southampton County alone. Aptheker reports that it must have been "twice as many." See, Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 301. Historian Ashraf H.A. Rushdy agrees that at least 150 enslaved and "free" Black people were "presumably lynched," many innocent and altogether uninvolved with the revolt. See Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 54. See also Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 100.

⁴⁰⁷ State of North Carolina, *Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1846-1847* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Thomas J. Lemay, Printer, 1847), 109.

⁴⁰⁸ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 89-92.

that the peripheral maroons, in their secret communications with the enslaved, fueled and pressured a constant threat of escalating resistance.

In addition to the string of insurrectionary plots around the Dismal Swamp that demonstrate maroon and enslaved clandestine community, oral histories collected in the 1930s evidence some of the ways enslaved people and the maroons likely maintained secret relationships and fostered communities of mutuality, compassion, and support. In the 1930s, Sis Shackleford told the “all-Negro unit” of the Virginia Writer’s Project about her relationship with maroons in the swamp. She was born in 1854 and enslaved in Phoebus, which is now Hampton, Virginia directly north of the swamp across the James River:

When we was kids, we used to take care of cows ‘bout four miles from home. The runaway slaves used to come out from the Dismal Swamp and beg us for food. At first we was scared to death of them and just fly, but after while we used to steal bread and fresh meat and give it to ‘em. But they never would let you follow ‘em. They hide in the Dismal Swamp in holes in the ground so hidden they stay there years and white folks, dogs, or nothin’ else could find ‘em.⁴⁰⁹

Shackleford’s eyewitness description of enslaved people aiding and engaging peripheral Dismal Swamp maroons is unmatched, though her testimony is supported by oral histories passed down to Jane Lott of Suffolk, Virginia, shared with me in 2014.⁴¹⁰ Cornelia Carney, born in 1838 in Williamsburg, Virginia, about 50 miles north of the Dismal Swamp, explained:

Father got beat up so much dat after while he run away an’ lived in the woods. Used to slip back to de house Saddy nights an’ sometimes Sunday when he knowed Marse and Missus done gone to meetin’. Mama used to send John, my oldes’ brother, out to de woods wid food fo’ father, an’ what he didn’t git fum us de Lawd provided. Never did ketch him, though ole Marse search real sharp. Father wasn’t de onlies’ one hidin’ in the woods. There was his cousin, Gabriel, dat was hidin’ and a man name Charlie. Niggers was too smart fo’ white folks to git ketched.⁴¹¹

Though less clearly connected to the Dismal Swamp than Shackleford’s account, Carney’s statements attest to the plausibility of maroon-enslaved secret knowledge, kinship, and communication as commonplace. To this point, Rev. Ishrael Massie, born in 1849 in Emporia, Greensville County, Virginia, approximately 50 miles west of the swamp, spoke of one man who “had a vault in the woods, fixed just like this room, and he had a wife and two boys that he raised under there.” Rev. Massie explained that the man was his half brother, and that “all us slaves knew where he was. Yes, yes, I’ve eaten many a good meal of victuals in Bob’s den.”⁴¹²

These stories speak to the everyday propensity for enslaved people around the Dismal Swamp to assert their inherent freedom and agency as keepers of secret knowledge and creators of alternative landscapes of resistance. Enslaved people protected and actively supported the resistance of outlying maroons, participated in defying the

⁴⁰⁹ File 1547, University of Virginia Library (date of interview unknown), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 252.

⁴¹⁰ See Chapter 4, pages 127-128.

⁴¹¹ *Negro in Virginia*, MS version, draft no. 1, chap. 13, 8-9 (date of interview unknown), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 66-67.

⁴¹² Roscoe Lewis Papers, (April 23, 1937), in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 205-210.

ineffectual limits of the plantation and “geography of containment”⁴¹³ through their communications with maroons, and subsequently acted as resistant collaborators, without necessarily taking part in flight and marronage themselves. Writing about the maroons of Bas du Fleuve, the cypress swamps of lower French colonial Louisiana, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall documents the “powerful family network uniting maroons and plantation slaves and including free Blacks... most of whom, it was claimed, actively aided the maroons.”⁴¹⁴ Court records of the testimonies of captured maroons and enslaved witnesses evidence resistant networks of collaborative freedom struggle. Enslaved people’s statements demonstrate that “the witnesses were obviously protecting the maroons still at large,” in this case, “by undercounting the population there.”⁴¹⁵ These examples of maroon-enslaved alliances illustrate how enslaved communities could have found ways to resist plantation life in compliance and in support of maroon resistance. They ultimately evidence the roles the enslaved could have played in assisting, if not leading the organization and communication of plans for insurrection, along with the peripheral swamp maroons. Given the ubiquitous nature of flight and marronage around the Dismal Swamp, these examples also elucidate the everyday influence the resistant activities of the maroons could have had in the daily life choices of the enslaved, including but not limited to aiding and abetting revolt.

The secret economic exchanges between peripheral swamp maroons and enslaved canal laborers present further evidence that maroon-enslaved community relationships and collaborative resistance practices endured, regardless of efforts to suppress them. Peripheral maroons that lived in the Dismal Swamp along its canals, sometimes referred to as “canal maroons,”⁴¹⁶ maintained consistent communication with enslaved canal workers inside of the swamp, and, through illegal labor and trade, continued to engage the outside world of slaveholding society from within the swamp. As illegal trade and illicit trafficking of goods and services were the building blocks of more daring forms of resistance, these interactions “promoted ‘insubordination & a spirit of disobedience’” that “could easily lead ‘to insurrection & blood.’”⁴¹⁷

The canal era in the Dismal Swamp began in 1763, when the Dismal Swamp Company, led by George Washington, oversaw the excavation of several canals that would serve as intracoastal passages for the transportation of manufactured goods and raw materials such as cotton, tobacco, corn, and lumber.⁴¹⁸ The construction of the canals, in addition to the harvesting and shipment of juniper, cypress, cedar, and pine grown in the Dismal Swamp made up the bulk of the demand for enslaved labor inside of the swamp. These tasks continued until the Civil War, when companies like the Dismal Swamp Land Company (formerly known as the Adventurers to Drain the Dismal Swamp and the Dismal Swamp Company), the largest employer in the swamp, terminated all work due to the ensuing war.⁴¹⁹ The heyday of canal activity in the swamp, however, was

⁴¹³ Camp defines “geographies of containment” as the physical and temporal spaces that are dictated by “slaveholders’ power to define bondspeople’s proper location.” See Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 17.

⁴¹⁴ Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 220.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 101-105. Morris, “‘Running Servants and All Others’: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 97, 100-103.

⁴¹⁷ Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 92.

⁴¹⁸ Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp*, 82.

⁴¹⁹ Harriette Thorne Kent, *Swampers: Free Blacks and The Great Dismal Swamp* (H.T. Kent, 1991), x.

the first three decades of the 1800s, when most canals were completed.⁴²⁰ During this time and leading up to the war, thousands of enslaved people were hired out to dig canals and cut and log shingles, barrel staves, and other timber related products from the swamp's abundant woods.⁴²¹ A number of "free" Black people were also employed to supplement the workforce. For example, between 1847 and 1856, sixty-five "free" Black men were registered to work in the swamp in just one Dismal Swamp county.⁴²² And an untold number of peripheral maroons were illegally hired by companies and private landowners whose drive for profit outweighed their compliance with the law. This "rough set of traders, whose entire trade is with the maroons of the swamp," provided maroons, "for the most part, salted provisions, Indian corn, coarse cloths and tools; and what they [the maroons] furnish in payment are chiefly staves and shingles."⁴²³

Indeed, peripheral swamp maroons not only maintained illicit dealings with enslaved laborers in the swamp, but also capitalized on the struggles of poorer whites and the greed of companies invested in the extraction of the swamp's resources. Employers often looked the other way in favor of the readily available, cheap, and exploitable labor, instead of reporting maroons along the canals. Companies were routinely tempted to hire maroons. George Hicks had been "lurking about the Great-Bridge and Bell's Mills, and from thence to the Dismal Swamp" for eleven months when James White advertised for his delivery or confinement to jail. On account of "satisfactory evidence," James believed that George was "employed by a *White Person* [original emphasis] in procuring Shingles and other Lumber."⁴²⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted, visiting the swamp in 1853, wrote that maroons were sometimes illegally employed by "poorer white men, owning small tracts of the swamps," who were looking for more convenient and inexpensive ways to make a profit.⁴²⁵ Employers often asked no questions about the status of those they employed, and many peripheral maroons in the swamp got paid or incentivized work on the basis of forged free papers. For example, in 1799, the *Edenton, N.C.: Herald of Freedom* advertised for the apprehension and delivery of 26 year old Aaron, who "has probably got a free pass, and found employment as a shingle weaver, on the Virginia side of the

⁴²⁰ Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 106. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 90-91.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 97. Kent, *Swampers*, ix. The Dismal Swamp Land Company employed some 500 men in the 1830s. See Edmund Ruffin, "Observations Made During an Excursion to the Dismal Swamp," *Farmers' Register* Vol. IV no. 9 (January 1, 1837): 518. The Dismal Swamp Canal alone was built by "hundreds" of enslaved laborers between 1794 and 1805. See Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 106. Moses Grandy states that his overseer "had from 500 to 700 men under his control." See Moses Grandy, "Narrative of Moses Grandy," 170. Finally, it is also clear that in Gates County, North Carolina alone, over 400 enslaved men were employed in the swamp by various companies between 1847 and 1861. See Raymond Parker Fouts, *Registration of Slaves to Work in the Dismal Swamp: Gates County, North Carolina, 1847-1861* (GenRec Books, 1995).

⁴²² See Abstracts of Records, North Carolina State Archives: Gates County, C.R.041.928.1; Gates County, "Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions," C.R.41.301.12; C.R.41.301.11; C.R.041.928.2; C.R. 041.301.13.

⁴²³ Jackson, "The Virginia Maroons," 148-149.

⁴²⁴ James White, "One Hundred Dollars Reward," *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (June 22, 1818).

⁴²⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (Mason Brothers, 1861), 160. Cecelski, *Waterman's Song*, 131. Corroborated by Aptheker, "Maroons within the Present Limit of the United States," 168.

Dismal.”⁴²⁶ Aaron’s pursuer specifically appeals to three different contractors to apprehend him should he apply for work. Records describing “free” Black people working in the swamp in Gates County, North Carolina include several workers registered for hire with dubious claims to “free” status. Gary, Davey Smith, and Henry Faulkes, for example, are listed under the category, “said to be free.”⁴²⁷ The perks for the maroons included greater freedoms than in the outside plantation world, some tentative degree of protection through illicit economic exchange along the canals, food, clothing, and possibly meager wages.

Though far more common were the enslaved and peripheral maroon economic alliances that shaped much of the industrialization and development of the Dismal Swamp. These were the kinds of secret exchanges that directly contributed to the culture of Black resistance and autonomy throughout the swamp. “Free” Black and enslaved canal laborers and shingle-getters, as they were called, had ample opportunity to maintain independent interactions with peripheral maroons. Based on his observations of the swamp in 1856, Strother wrote, “a number of escaped slaves... live by woodcraft, external depredation, and more frequently, by working for the task shingle-makers at reduced wages.”⁴²⁸ In 1848, an anonymous author wrote in *The Non-Slaveholder* that, “hundreds of fugitives who have sought asylum” in the Dismal Swamp “receive their sustenance by laboring for slaves who have their tasks in parts of the swamp.”⁴²⁹ Enslaved in the swamp in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Moses Grandy recalled, “I undertook the lightering of the shingles or boards out of the Dismal Swamp, and hired hands to assist me.”⁴³⁰ Similar to arrangements made between company contractors and maroons, contracted laborers clandestinely hired maroons “lurking” in the vicinity of the canals in exchange for their assistance collecting shingles and staves.

In the swamp, companies distributed the work of shingle-getting to hired-out enslaved people and some manumitted Black people through the task system, where laborers were ordered to meet a production quota, and so long as it was met, little else was expected. Anything produced in excess of the quota would be recompensed through bonus provisions and supplies, or through actual wages. The enslaved workers and their maroon brethren took advantage of this system. Writing in 1903, Frederick Street explained:

... the logging and cutting of cypress shingles was done by the negroes who lived in huts along the outer edges of the swamp and were sent in to bring out so much wood or so many cypress shingles for a day’s wage. The runaways did the work for the paid negroes, or even worked regularly in the gangs with them, and earned in return food, and powder and bullets, and occasionally money enough, it is said, to buy their own freedom.⁴³¹

If this last point has any truth, the clandestine economies of the enslaved-maroon alliance must have been extensive. Grandy emphasized the fact that the enslaved “are paid nothing except for [their] overwork. Their masters come once a month to receive the money for their labour: then perhaps some few very good masters will give them two

⁴²⁶ Untitled advertisement, Thomas Fitt, *Edenton, N.C.: Herald of Freedom*, March 27, 1799, North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements Digital Collection (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro).

⁴²⁷ See Abstracts of Records, North Carolina State Archives: Gates County, C.R.041.928.1.

⁴²⁸ Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” 451.

⁴²⁹ “Slaves in the Dismal Swamp,” *The Non-Slaveholder*, 3, 1 (May 1848): 115.

⁴³⁰ Moses Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” 165.

⁴³¹ Frederick Street, “In the Dismal Swamp,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* (March 1903): 530.

dollars each, some others one dollar, some a pound of tobacco, and some nothing at all.”⁴³² Provisions, he remembered, were afforded to the enslaved “only by work done over his task.”⁴³³ If these are the prospects for individual profit amongst hired out enslaved people in the swamp, the additional labor force of the maroons must have been substantial enough to create a surplus under the task system that would enable the enslaved to pay the maroons enough “to buy their own freedom” upon occasion.

Hired laborers in the swamp:

often return[ed] greater quantities of work than could by any possibility have been produced by their own labor, and [drew] for two or three times the amount of provisions necessary for their own subsistence. But the provisions [were] furnished, the work paid for, and no questions [were] asked, so that the matter always remain[ed] involved in mystery.”⁴³⁴

Olmstead was told by one man⁴³⁵ in the swamp that the enslaved were able to offer peripheral maroons “enough to eat, and some clothes, and perhaps two dollars a month in money” for their labors.⁴³⁶ More often than not, companies were unopposed to these exchanges since “the added labor force often resulted in mammoth production counts; the number of shingles produced sometimes exceeded many times the number of authorized workers multiplied by the maximum production capacity of any single man.”⁴³⁷ On the whole, white investors in the swamp were amenable to these “wholly contraband” dealings,⁴³⁸ and even went so far as to disguise maroon labor in company records through descriptions such as, “extra lightering and other work done by hands this month.”⁴³⁹ Nevertheless, maroons needed to exercise caution in these illegal transactions with both white and Black employers, as one overseer simply didn’t pay maroons at all, since he wasn’t supposed to be aware of their existence.⁴⁴⁰

Despite white complicity in many of these illicit affairs, outside of the swamp and throughout its neighboring counties and cities, “the white populace most feared the swamp being used as a place of assembly from which the Negroes could strike out from their sanctuary and undertake extermination of the white settlers.”⁴⁴¹ That maroons and enslaved workers carried on these relationships and even traded “powder and bullets” would have been particularly alarming to neighboring white communities. In addition to the series of insurrectionary activities of Dismal Swamp peripheral maroons and Nat Turner’s rebellion, Black people’s continued use of the swamp as a locus for emboldening resistance led to increasing white fear and North Carolina State Assembly’s

⁴³² Moses Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” 169.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” 451.

⁴³⁵ This man is named Joseph Church, and while not much is known about him, it is believed that the Dismal Swamp Canal Company hired him in some capacity. He served as Olmsted’s guide during his visit to the swamp in 1853 and 1854. Given his insider knowledge of the clandestine activities of maroons and the enslaved, together with the dialect Olmsted quotes him as speaking, it is likely that Church was a Black man. See Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 102, n 16.

⁴³⁶ Olmsted, *A Journey*, 160. This is corroborated in James Redpath’s *The Roving Editor, or, Talks With Slaves* (Negro University Press, 1859, reprint 1968), 290.

⁴³⁷ Morris, ““Running Servants and All Others”: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 101.

⁴³⁸ Jackson, “The Virginia Maroons,” 149.

⁴³⁹ Dismal Swamp Land Company Records, in *Slavery in Antebellum Southern Industries*, ed. Charles B. Dew, on file in Swem Library, College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, Virginia).

⁴⁴⁰ Alexander Hunter, “The Great Dismal Swamp,” *Outing*, 27, 1 (October 1895): 71.

⁴⁴¹ Johnson, *Tales from Old Carolina*, 159.

subsequent passage of the “Act to provide for the apprehension of runaway slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp,” in 1847.⁴⁴² Part of this legislation mandated that detailed physical and personal descriptions be taken, much in the fashion of runaway slave advertisements, of each registered laborer in the swamp.⁴⁴³ This included both “free” and enslaved workers, in order to better control them and keep abreast of their whereabouts. Harsher and more violent punishment against complicit whites and Black people discovered without manumission papers were also measures included in the act that were ratified in the hopes of discouraging flight, marronage, and the constant threat of insurrection.

More research needs to go into Black women’s involvement in the resistance and clandestine economies of the enslaved and maroons in the swamp. Very few enslaved women were recorded as being employed in the swamp. While swamp laborers were overwhelmingly male, Black women may have had a small presence in the canal and shingle camps that hugged the swamp’s interior peripheries. We can recall Venus, who was sent to work in the swamp under the overseer John Washington in 1771.⁴⁴⁴ But further along into the canal era when construction and development had taken root and the demand for laborers multiplied, it is possible that enslaved swamp “inhabitants included at least a few women and children,” though company documents and traveler accounts indicate that “women were generally not employees of companies and there is no record of workers bringing women and families with them to [canal] settlements” in the Dismal Swamp.⁴⁴⁵ Several enslaved children, all boys, ages 10 to 17 are however recorded as registered to labor in the swamp.⁴⁴⁶ The insurgent activities of female peripheral maroons remind us that Black women did influence the culture of resistance throughout the swamp, and though uncommon, some women practiced marronage along the canals in search of greater freedoms and a way to survive.⁴⁴⁷

While evidence demonstrating enslaved women’s presence in the swamp is scarce, Henriette Thorne Kent suggests that many more “free” Black women registered for papers to work in the counties surrounding the North Carolina half of the swamp after

⁴⁴² State of North Carolina, *Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1846-1847* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Thomas J. Lemay, Printer, 1847).

⁴⁴³ See Fouts, *Registration of Slaves to Work in the Dismal Swamp* (1995). See also Kent, *Swampers*, (1991).

⁴⁴⁴ See the previous pages 61-62. *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), Williamsburg, December 5, 1771, The Geography of Slavery in Virginia Digital Archive (Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005).

⁴⁴⁵ Cecelski points to at least one canal work camp further south of the Dismal Swamp at Juniper Bay that did include a small number of women and families. See Cecelski, *Waterman’s Song*, 110. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 191.

⁴⁴⁶ For example, “Stephen the property of Archibald Brinkly of Nansemond County, Virginia hired by Willis S. Riddick of said county and by him registered as one of his hands in the Dismal Swamp. Stephen is dark brown about twelve years old high round forehead, scar on the left side of the forehead and two scars on the right. He stands without shoes four feet 3 ¼ inches.” Similarly, “Isaac the property of Mills Riddick deed of Suffolk Virginia and hired the present year by Willis S. Riddick of said county Nansemond Virginia and by him registered as one of the hands in the Dismal Swamp. Isaac is about ten years old without scars of any kind. Shows his teeth a little when his mouth is shut. Is four feet one inch high with shoes off.” Entries entered March 2, 1847, in Fouts, *Registration of Slaves to Work in the Dismal Swamp*, 11.

⁴⁴⁷ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 191.

the 1847 mandate. She argues that many of these women and even entire families would have looked for work in the Dismal Swamp.⁴⁴⁸ She contends:

Occasionally whole families moved from a community into the area of the swamp. They found work on the canals, jettys, and docks. They cleared the underbrush and felled the trees, helped in building the small stores and houses that dotted the canal banks, cut and trimmed out barrel staves and shingles. They kept the waterways clear, operated and repaired machinery, worked on the barges, locks and dredges, assisted the toll takers, and built the rough plank roads that laced the marshy land.⁴⁴⁹

These jobs required a large labor force in a state that long lacked major cities or commercial centers to provide other employment opportunities. In 1858, Harriett Burruss, “5 feet ½ inch high, of yellowish complexion, aged about 27 years,” sought work in Camden County, along the southern parts of the swamp. Mary Bow Price, 34, applied for employment in Pasquotank County directly south of the swamp. Polly Sawyer, 29, described as “yellow complexion,” issued her papers on October 13th, 1857 in Camden County. In 1848, two counties west of the Dismal Swamp in Halifax County, Lucy Locklayer, “45 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, dark complexion” set out to make a living. In the same county and year, Matilda Wilkins, 28 years old, bright, freckly complexion, 5 feet 2 inches tall” issued her papers in search of work.⁴⁵⁰ It makes sense that “free” Black people like these women living in the counties around the swamp would be inclined to seek the steady source of employment that the swamp offered since “employment opportunities were sorely needed in North Carolina” during this time.⁴⁵¹ Moreover, the 1847 legislature was principally enacted “in order to provide for the apprehension of slaves [read, Black people] in the Great Dismal Swamp,” which leaves us to wonder why men and women would be documented with such painstaking corporal descriptions if it was not believed that Black people meant to find themselves about the swamp. Granted, with such fear prevailing amongst whites, the detailed listings may have been mostly cautionary, and the registered “free” workers may have been hired for jobs outside of the swamp. In either case, the registration records describe the women who may have been in the minority of laborers working inside the swamp’s borders. These would have been among the few women inside of the swamp’s peripheries that could have inspired, bore witness to, assisted, and participated in both the secret and pronounced resistance of the peripheral maroons.

Networks of freedom struggle between the enslaved living in the plantation world around the swamp and the peripheral maroons at the swamp outskirts could have been aided and supported by both the peripheral maroons that labored along the canals and the “free” and enslaved canal laborers. This is best evidenced through the documented community practices of the enslaved and the maroons. According to Olmsted’s observations, the hired canal laborer, who, when his task is complete “lives measurably as a free man,” works “when it is sufficiently dry – usually early in February,” and continues to work in the swamp for five months until granted leave to visit neighboring towns.⁴⁵² In addition to seeking long deprived entertainments as their “first want,” hired out enslaved laborers would want to visit family and friends, “the separation from

⁴⁴⁸ Kent, *Swampers*, ii.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, v.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 3, 32, 34.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, iii.

⁴⁵² Olmsted, *A Journey*, 153-154.

families being one of their enduring afflictions.”⁴⁵³ Edward Ruffin, writing nearly twenty years earlier, similarly reported that enslaved shingle-getters “live plentifully... with too much leisure time,” for when their “heavy labors” are finished, generally in four or five days, “the remainder of the week is spent out of the swamp.”⁴⁵⁴ Enslaved laborers would have certainly taken advantage of this kind of space and time to reconvene with friends and loved ones. These community values, shared amongst the enslaved both inside and outside of the swamp, bled into the practices of peripheral maroons. When the formerly enslaved took flight into the swamp, they carried with them their relationships and upheld these kinship values as they became peripheral maroons. Take for example, Diver, “about 40 years of age, 5 feet 10 or 11 inches high, very black, stout well set, and has a very domineering manner of conducting himself when among those of his colour.”⁴⁵⁵ In an advertisement for his capture published in 1808, his pursuer explains:

I expect he has by some means procured a free pass, and is lurking about among his relations; having a mother in Nansemond County, Virginia, and a brother in Durant’s-Neck... or, in the lower part of Pasquotank County, near the shingle-Swamp.⁴⁵⁶

Dave, “who walked off” in July of 1828, “[had] a father living at Mr. Nathan Winslow’s in Perquimans County,” and so it was believed that “he is either lurking that neighborhood, or at work in the Shingle Swamp, on the Canal.”⁴⁵⁷ As these descriptions support the idea that the enslaved and maroon canal laborers actively worked to maintain kinship ties, they also indicate that there was a steady stream of ideas, information, experiences, and knowledge that would have been regularly transported by both men and women inside and outside of the Dismal Swamp. These exchanges reveal the ways insurrectionary plots and collaborative resistant networks were made possible across the expanse of the swamp.

Likewise, as it has already been stated, those who remained enslaved on farms and plantations neighboring the swamp would have maintained close ties with peripheral maroons. This included peripheral maroons engaged in illegal labor and trade along the canals. In 1859, James Redpath published an interview with a man who was a maroon living and working illicitly as a shingle-getter in the Dismal Swamp before he took flight to Canada, where the interview took place. The man, named Charlie, explained that at the prospect of being sold in Richmond, “I jest let my legs be ‘sponsible for my heels, till da bringed me and my heels to de woods,” where he ran all day and night until he reached where his brother lived, about 5 miles away from where his wife lived. He then walked 15 miles to his mother’s residence before visiting a friend who said “he knowed folks in de Dismal Swamp, and p’raps he might ‘ceed for me, an’ get me ‘casion to work dar.”⁴⁵⁸ Charlie was swiftly hired to make shingles “for two dollars a month,” an amount that, according to Olmstead, is consistent with the rate of employment by enslaved laborers.⁴⁵⁹ In the swamp, he found:

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 155. Cecelski, *Waterman’s Song*, 110.

⁴⁵⁴ Ruffin, “Observations Made During an Excursion to the Dismal Swamp,” 518.

⁴⁵⁵ *The Edenton Gazette and North Carolina General*, June 16, 1808, in ed. Freddie L. Parker, *Stealing a Little Freedom: Advertisements for Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1791-1840* (Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 342-343.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ November 11, 1828, in *ibid.*, 383.

⁴⁵⁸ Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 290-291.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 290. See Olmsted, *A Journey*, 160.

Dar are heaps ob folks in dar to work. Most on 'em are fugitives, or else hirin' dar time. Dreadful 'commodatin' in dare to one anudder. De each like de 'vantage ob de odder one's 'tection. Ye see dey's united togedder in'ividually wit same interest to stake.⁴⁶⁰

With daily survival and the protection of greater freedoms at stake, enslaved and peripheral maroon alliances throughout the swamp remained strong. Communication with the enslaved outside of the swamp was also constant, as news of family and friends reached the enslaved and maroons along the canals and in the shingle camps when new enslaved labor gangs or fresh maroons joined ranks.⁴⁶¹ Charlie's enslaved friend's insider knowledge and connection to unlawful dealings and marronage in the swamp further supports the argument that Black people, both enslaved and maroon, collaboratively created an alternative landscape of secret knowledge, self-empowerment, and resistance that was strategically connected and networked across the Dismal Swamp.

As all of these interrelationships suggest, undoubtedly, there are considerable links between peripheral maroons that lived and worked along the canals, the peripheral maroons that lived and worked along the swamp edges, marauding and pillaging nearby farms and plantations, and the enslaved both inside and outside of the swamp.⁴⁶² No one can definitively say that maroons working the canals and engaging enslaved canal laborers did not also move through the swamp and connect with the enslaved outside of the swamp or participate in marauding or insurrectionary activities. Likewise, peripheral maroons that were prone to plunder, that did not work along the canals, and that maintained regular contact with the enslaved outside of the swamp, could have also participated in illegal trade and communicated with enslaved laborers inside the swamp, and, if they didn't join them, with maroons working inside the swamp along the canals. With the promise of steady income and other incentives for "canal maroons" to stay along the canals, the former scenario is much less likely than the latter. Still, while there is no way to prove it, by the very nature of flight and marronage, it is entirely plausible that all peripheral maroons behaved itinerantly to some extent. Possibilities for the interconnections and communications between peripheral maroons and between peripheral maroons and the enslaved both in the swamp and out are endless.

Although no united, solidified maroon front ever manifested, and while the resistant networks involving the Dismal Swamp maroons did not actually result in open revolt, the secret exchanges between the maroons and the enslaved readied Black communities across the Tidewater for strategic action that recognized the necessity of violence and enabled the organization of revolutionary and insurgent plans. It was Black people's relentless reminders of the possibilities for this escalation of resistance that transformed the swamp into a cultural landscape of Black agency, freedom, and power.

⁴⁶⁰ Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 291.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 292. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 216.

⁴⁶² Sayers and Morris posit a set of "different constituencies" or distinctly separate categories of maroon communities in the Dismal Swamp (i.e. "scission" or deep swamp, interior communities, "canal maroons," "fringe maroons" or "perimetrical maroons") based on social and geographical opportunities and motivations. While these distinctions are important as they effectively demonstrate how marronage in the swamp remained diverse in purpose, method, and form, and are thus similarly employed throughout this study, without an exploration of possibilities for mutual freedom struggle and resistance, these categories discourage deeper consideration of the ways various maroon groupings could have conflated. See Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 105-108. See Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 97.

The Deep Maroons of the Swamp Interior

The maroons of the swamp's innermost enclaves "permanently removed themselves from the outside world" and took great precautions to avoid the swamp's perimeters altogether.⁴⁶³ These maroons are the elusive men and women of lore, the mysterious and "strange" and "wild" people of the depths of the Dismal Swamp.⁴⁶⁴ These deep maroons established the most enduring and fortified communities throughout the swamp, reached the greatest level of social stability, autonomy, and sustained the most sizable populations. They found permanent refuge in the middle parts of the vast swamp, roughly two thousand square miles, about the size of the state of Delaware.⁴⁶⁵ While there is some evidence that even the interior maroons interacted with maroons and the enslaved inside the swamp along the canals, these communications would have been minimal, or otherwise extremely cautious and secretive, and direct interactions with the world outside of the swamp altogether unlikely.⁴⁶⁶ Deep swamp maroons lived such intentionally secluded lives in a place "so inaccessible to the population, that many of its inhabitants have never seen a white man."⁴⁶⁷ Indeed, the primary goal of these communities was not insurgency against the slaveholding world, but the security and defense of independent and autonomous free Black societies in the heart of the swamp, surrounded by the slaveholding south – the belly of the beast.

Documented history of the deep maroons and deep maroon communities is imaginably scarce. In 1728, when William Byrd set out to survey the swamp, he encountered "a Family of Mulattos, that call'd themselves free, tho' by the Shyness of the master of the house, who took care to keep least in Sight, their Freedom seem'd a little Doubtful."⁴⁶⁸ During Charlie's time in the Juniper Swamp shingle camp in the Dismal Swamp, he came to learn:

Dar is families growed up in dat ar Dismal Swamp dat never seed a white man, an' would be skeered most to def to see one. Some runaways went dere wid dar wives, an' dar childers are raised dar.⁴⁶⁹

Indeed, one account tells of the discovery of a woman and her two children who had lived in the recesses of the swamp for seven years, undetected in part because she had thoroughly trained the children to stoop low when they walked, keep a hasty step, whisper when they talked, and carry on "with so much caution that not the least noise could be heard."⁴⁷⁰ Diouf cites another source entailing the Civil War encounter between a "family of nine negroes... the seven children of which had never looked upon the face of a white man before."⁴⁷¹ One observer, writing in Hyde County, North Carolina in 1817 noted that "a woman was discovered in the center of the Great Dismal Swamp. There she & her six children had lived for years."⁴⁷²

⁴⁶³ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 107.

⁴⁶⁴ Olmstead, *A Journey*, 161.

⁴⁶⁵ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 20, 92, 105.

⁴⁶⁶ Howard, *In the Shadow of the Pines*, 76.

⁴⁶⁷ "Slaves in the Dismal Swamp," *The Non-Slaveholder*, 3, 1 (May 1848): 115.

⁴⁶⁸ Byrd, "The History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina Run in the Year of Our Lord 1728," 89.

⁴⁶⁹ Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 293.

⁴⁷⁰ Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 298.

⁴⁷¹ Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 218.

⁴⁷² McLean, ed., "Yankee Tutor," 62, cited in Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 217.

Strother's 1856 visit to the shingle camp called Horse Camp led to one of, if not the most detailed first hand accounts of any of the deep maroons. Strother, who "had long nurtured a wish to see one of those sable outlaws who dwell in the fastnesses of the Swamp," followed the enslaved shingle-getters to the place where they were working as he explained, "to see what I could."⁴⁷³ He had been informed by an unnamed source that maroons "were often employed in getting out lumber by the Swamp hands."⁴⁷⁴ Upon questioning his men, Jim Pierce, "a tall wiry black, with his hair plaited into numerous pig-tails" with "an intelligent countenance, talks better than negroes usually do," and Ely Reed, "a turkey-egg mulatto" with "nothing about him sufficiently striking," Strother could find out nothing. Pierce and Reed "evaded the questions, and changed the conversation immediately."⁴⁷⁵ Dismissing them, Strother walked alone "a mile or more" off the causeway and into the thick, tangled undergrowth. At the sound of footsteps, he concealed himself in the brush:

About thirty paces from me I saw a gigantic negro, with a tattered blanket wrapped about his shoulders, and a gun in his hand. His head was bare, and he had little other clothing than a pair of ragged breeches and boots. His hair and beard were tipped with gray, and his purely African features were cast in a mould betokening, in the highest degree, strength and energy. The expression of the face was of mingled fear and ferocity, and every movement betrayed a life of habitual caution and watchfulness.⁴⁷⁶

According to Strother, the maroon soon disappeared into the thicket, and so he made his way back to Horse Camp, "with all haste." He then immediately drew a quick sketch of the maroon, and left the drawing out in plain view so that Pierce and Reed could see it.

As Jim Pierce passed it he uttered an exclamation, and beckoned to Ely. I fancied I heard the word Osman.

"Do you know that, Jim?"

"No, Sir," said he, promptly; "dunno nothin' 'bout um."

The men continued to converse together in low whispers, and with looks expressive of astonishment.⁴⁷⁷

There are some questions about Strother's account, as experienced maroons such as Osman would have presumably been well practiced at avoiding detection by outsiders. It is possible that Strother merely drew what had been described to him, though given the determined secrecy shared by Pierce and Reed, it also seems doubtful that this would be the case. The 1856 description of the maroon as being well aged, as well as the name "Osman" itself, a Muslim name remarkably similar to Usman dan Fodio, leader of the Islamic Holy War from 1804-1812, give some weight to Strother's story.⁴⁷⁸ But whether Strother truly did encounter Osman, "a feared leader of the deepest maroon community,"⁴⁷⁹ or if he gained knowledge of him some other way, this accounting of the maroon and the purported reaction of the enslaved upon hearing about him from a white man is strong evidence of clandestine supporting relationships between deep maroons and Black people living and working along the canals.

⁴⁷³ Strother, "The Dismal Swamp," 452.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 446, 452.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 452-453.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁴⁷⁸ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 68.

⁴⁷⁹ Morris, "'Running Servants and All Others': The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp," 98. Davis, *The Great Dismal Swamp*, 57.



Fig. 4. “Osman.” By “Porte Crayon,” or David Hunter Strother for *Harper’s Monthly* (1856).

Without a doubt, if deep maroons were going to interact with anyone, they would most likely do so with peripheral maroons and enslaved laborers inside of the swamp near the canals. Osman’s possession of a gun places into question the source of his acquiring ammunition, though with accounts of illegal trade of “powder and bullets” between maroons and enslaved canal laborers,⁴⁸⁰ accounts of peripheral maroon communities in the swamp being discovered with guns,⁴⁸¹ as well as the presence of

⁴⁸⁰ Street, “In the Dismal Swamp,” 530.

⁴⁸¹ For example, the account of Tom Copper’s peripheral maroon settlement in, Slave Collection 1748-1856, Bertie County, North Carolina State Archives. See another account of maroons in the Dismal Swamp

munitions left in the archaeological record of the deep maroons,⁴⁸² this is further evidence of communication with Black people along the canals. Taken together, these clues also provide insight on the meaning of independence and autonomy for deep maroons, which didn't necessitate absolute self-extrication from the outside world, as indicated by their maintaining some interaction and interdependence with trusted enslaved laborers or peripheral maroons inside the swamp's fringes. Though whether or not the deep swamp maroon communities sought ongoing relationships with these groups beyond trade for crucial resources may never be known, the question of how deep maroon societies received new members suggests that their connections with Black people outside of the interior swamp exceeded mere economic relationships.

Enslaved canal laborers and shingle-getters had ample opportunity to tempt the fates of marronage by joining interior communities, or by helping other enslaved people join. As some enslaved people in the swamp and some peripheral maroons would have known about interior communities, they could have directly or indirectly acted as liaisons to the enslaved in the plantation world outside the swamp, and to new peripheral maroons looking for a more stable and permanent autonomous life after flight. Sayers agrees, "swamp edge dwellers may have on occasion become trusted traders or informants for the communities... that developed in the interior of the swamp."⁴⁸³ While the extent to which these possibilities were real and lived experiences may never be known, there would have been ample opportunity for these communications to occur, assuming deep maroon interest. Enslaved and peripheral maroons tasked with cutting wood and getting shingles out of the swamp ensured "these laborers had to go into the undeveloped swamp, away from [company] settlements, oftentimes at great distances."⁴⁸⁴ Despite, and perhaps because of the relative freedom of mobility offered through the task system and the nature of the task itself, shingle-getters may have been drawn toward more enduring and fortified forms of marronage since they certainly had plenty of occasions to come into contact with deep swamp maroons. Although these swamp workers were not supervised in the same ways and with the same level of strict management that other enslaved persons were,⁴⁸⁵ they were nevertheless enslaved, oppressed, and with the regular force of physical violence. For example, Grandy recalls horrific scenes of corporal violence against laborers who were not successful at accomplishing the day's task. His overseer flogged the enslaved workers, "with his own hands, till their entrails were visible," then applied "brine to their bleeding backs," leaving the sufferers tied all day, "thus exposed and helpless [to] the yellow flies and mosquitoes [which] in great numbers would settle on the bleeding and smarting back."⁴⁸⁶ Witnessing "the sufferers dead when they were taken down" was not an unusual sight.⁴⁸⁷ Charlie also affirms the ubiquity of violence

discovered "armed with pistols," in "Slaves in the Dismal Swamp," *The Non-Slaveholder*, 3, 1 (May 1848), 115.

⁴⁸² Sayers unearthed munitions artifacts such as lead shot, and fragments of British and French gunflint on the raised dry islands in the swamp interior, in the southwestern portion of the swamp interior (in Gates County, North Carolina). See Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 129-130, 138, 148, 178, 185.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁸⁵ Olmstead, *A Journey*, 161. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 99.

⁴⁸⁶ Moses Grandy, "Narrative of Moses Grandy," 169-170.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

along the canals after relaying the harrowing tale of the capture and murder of his friend Jacob:

Dreadful scenes, I tell ye, ‘sperienced in de Dismal Swamp, sometimes, when de masters comes dar. Dey shoot down runaways, and tink no more sendin’ a ball t’rough dar hearts...⁴⁸⁸

In addition to the autonomous relationships between interior maroons and other Black people in the swamp, these horrors of slavery inside the swamp would have added encouragement for the growth of the deep maroons.

Built on the dry, firm, forested islands that rose and spread many acres above the watery muck and mire of the deep swamp, the interior maroons established self-sustaining, full-fledged societies. These dry islands were completely surrounded by miles of densely wooded and completely submerged, swampy wetlands – optimal for near complete isolation and secrecy. Communities were comprised of families and individuals that worked collaboratively to survive in the swamp, not through fear or desperation,⁴⁸⁹ but through resilience, mutual resolve, and the prospect of creating new and independent alternative and self-freeing lives. While some interior maroons may have been individuals or individual families that lived isolated lives unconnected to any developed maroon community, the archaeological record serves as the strongest evidence showing “a substantial number of people” built cohesive communities through “intensive occupation” of the swamp’s most protected recesses.⁴⁹⁰

Dan Sayers, an archaeologist who led an extensive study of the swamp (2003-2013) and the excavation of several interior swamp sites, has found that the deep maroons he calls “scission communities,” those who are cut off from the outside world: (1) were self-governed and had established their own methods and practice of community organization, including “social expectations, dispute resolution, community safety and defense systems, and daily subsistence practices”; (2) were multigenerational; and (3) like maroons in South America and the Caribbean, “did not necessarily exist in fear of agents of the outside world... given their large populations and familiarity with the swamp interior.”⁴⁹¹ These maroons established ingenious ways to survive and potentially thrive in the swamp requiring minimal contact with the encroaching outside world. Sayers found evidence that deep maroons constantly reworked and reused available material objects left behind by indigenous people such as 3,000 year old spearheads or projectile points they recovered and then put to use as knives, scrapers, or other utensils and tools in the period dating 1700-1800.⁴⁹² He unearthed artifacts not likely to have been produced by the outside world such as burnt clay and hand made ceramics.⁴⁹³ He also found fragments of a white clay pipe, glass shards, fire cracked rock, lead shot, and gunflint, all dating before the period of the Civil War.⁴⁹⁴ Across his excavations, which only covered some of the ground of 1% or less of the swamp’s entirety,⁴⁹⁵ Sayers discovered the soil features of five structures believed to have been cabins in one area of the “nameless site,” three “large depressions... likely water-catchment pits,” and at least

⁴⁸⁸ Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 294-295.

⁴⁸⁹ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 116.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118, 120.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 115-116, 128-129.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129, 148.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

ten separate structures in another area of the island.⁴⁹⁶ These included six different structures thought to be cabins, one fire pit located near structure features, two more pits or post molds (features in soil evidencing presence of a hole for a presumably wooden post), and what looks to be a “community defense structure” of some sort.⁴⁹⁷ Overall, this evidence suggests continuous intensive human occupation from the seventeenth century until “well into the nineteenth century.”⁴⁹⁸ It also confirms that deep maroons “relied heavily on materials found or acquired in the swamp,” and were generally self-reliant.⁴⁹⁹

The interior maroons learned to subsist by farming rice, grain, and vegetation natural to the swamp as well as by keeping gardens and hunting the abundant animal life found throughout.⁵⁰⁰ Edmund Jackson reported that maroons cultivated, “to the best of [their] very limited means, patches of corn and sweet potatoes.”⁵⁰¹ The maroons were able to hunt raccoon, deer, possum, goat, duck, partridges, pheasant, and fish.⁵⁰² There was also “a number of wild cattle” and wild hogs that were hunted.⁵⁰³ Supported by oral history explored in Chapter 4, Diouf notes that “some Black sharecroppers who lived by the swamp also ate muskrats, opossums, frogs, turtles, and snakes, a diet probably similar to that of the maroons.”⁵⁰⁴ Smyth also wrote of subsistence in the Dismal Swamp:

Runaway Negroes have resided in these places for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves in the swamp upon corn, hogs, and fowls, that they raised on some of the spots not perpetually under water, nor subject to be flooded, as forty-nine parts out of fifty of it are; and on such spots they have erected habitations, and cleared small fields around them; yet these have always been perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around, even to those nearest to and best acquainted with the swamps.”⁵⁰⁵

William Aitchison and James Parker’s account book also elucidates what life in the deep swamp maroon settlements must have been like. They document the case of one maroon who lived in the swamp “by himself” in the 1730s and 1740s, and for thirteen years “rais’d Rice & other grain & made / Chairs Tables &c. & musical instruments.”⁵⁰⁶ This maroon’s claims to a solitary life in the swamp are rendered especially dubious by his subsequent admission that he made multiple pieces of furniture (for whom?) and musical instruments, valuable and distinctly social items.

After the Civil War, the Dismal Swamp maroons abandoned these communities and blended into the outside world.⁵⁰⁷ Sayers has found no evidence of settlement at his

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121, 127, 131.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 131, 133-134, 140, 153.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 107. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 223-225.

⁵⁰¹ Jackson, “The Virginia Maroons,” 145.

⁵⁰² Strother, “The Dismal Swamp,” 448.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.* Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 292.

⁵⁰⁴ Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles*, 223. Bea Ridley’s discussion of hunting muskrat in the swamp supports the idea of a long tradition of resilient subsistence and cultural practice in and around the Dismal Swamp. See Bea Ridley’s discussion of hunting in the swamp in Chapter 4. Private interview with Bea Ridley, May 26, 2015, page 126.

⁵⁰⁵ Smyth, “A Tour in the United States of America,” 65.

⁵⁰⁶ William Aitchison and James Parker, Account Book, 1763-1804 (Original unpublished manuscript is housed at Bookpress Ltd., Williamsburg, Virginia), 51.

⁵⁰⁷ Morris, “‘Running Servants and All Others’: The Diverse and Elusive Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp,” 104. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 286.

sites in the swamp interior dating after the 1860 period of the Civil War.⁵⁰⁸ Additionally, there is documented evidence that former maroons remained in the Dismal Swamp until the war. One maroon, Davy, a former enslaved carriage driver in Gates County, North Carolina, lived in the Dismal Swamp after accidentally killing a white man in self-defense, from before 1817 until the war, or, at least 43 years. According to this source, Davy stated that he had “been living in the lower parish since the breaking out of the war.”⁵⁰⁹ The existence of oral histories about maroon life in the swamp also suggests that maroons made lives outside of the swamp and produced descendants and new generations that were not maroons after the war.⁵¹⁰ There are no indications of any hidden Dismal Swamp communities within the last one hundred and fifty or so years, but the spirit and energy of maroon resilience, resistance, and autonomy is a lasting force inscribed in the land itself, and in the local memory of a few. It continues to encourage descendants of the enslaved to feel empowered to defy, oppose, and consider the creation of alternatives to sustained race-based oppression, despite persistent attempts to capture, defeat, and control the maroon in history and in memory.

⁵⁰⁸ Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 118-119.

⁵⁰⁹ Arnold, *The Great Dismal Swamp and Lake Drummond*, 37-41.

⁵¹⁰ See interview with John Winston about his great-aunt’s great-grandfather, Jimmy, who was a maroon in the Dismal Swamp in Chapter 4, page 133.

Chapter 3: Through the Telling – Public Historical Representation in the Hampton Roads

Throughout the Hampton Roads, the waterways and surrounding region encircling the Dismal Swamp and connecting southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, there are at least a dozen historical sites and museums dedicated to preserve, conserve, and commemorate the histories of the region.⁵¹¹ Historical representation of the Dismal Swamp as a space shaped by the legacy of slavery, Black freedom struggle, community, or marronage is only made visible, however, at a very small number of these sites. The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Suffolk, Virginia and the Dismal Swamp State Park in South Mills, North Carolina are two of the most important sites throughout the Dismal Swamp and the surrounding Hampton Roads region that publically narrate and represent the historical and present significance of the swamp. Of particular importance to the question of the politics of power in institutional representation of U.S. marronage are the practices employed at these sites by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the refuge in Suffolk, the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources at the state park in South Mills, and the National Park Services. These state institutions lay claim to the swamp and maintain the authority and responsibility of controlling the narrative of its historical significance for public consumption and interpretation within the confines of the swamp itself.

Interviews with Great Dismal Swamp Wildlife Refuge and Dismal Swamp State Park managers, directors, superintendents, and rangers, as well as with docents, guides, and other persons charged with the responsibility of publically representing the history of the swamp or of histories of slavery in institutions such as local plantations and museums help to evidence how slavery, resistance, and marronage are valued and represented (or not) at historical sites throughout the swamp region. Site visits, pamphlets, websites, and observation analysis of representational practices such as historical narration through tours, signage, and curating also assist greater understanding of the valuation of historical Black resistance and resilience, along with the relationship between these values, representation, race, power, commemoration, and a present effort to preserve and protect the status quo.

Between May 2013 and August 2015, in addition to visiting the Dismal Swamp State Park and National Wildlife Refuge, I made visits to twenty-five historical sites and sites informing the historical significance of the Hampton Roads and the Dismal Swamp. These included museums, plantations, visitor's centers, and historical walking trails in three counties and eight independent cities that form the most populated communities in the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Statistical Area that surrounds the Dismal Swamp, also known as Tidewater, Virginia.⁵¹² See Appendix I for a complete list of the historical sites I visited throughout the region, reflecting the major attractions for public interest.

⁵¹¹ One study estimates that “approximately thirty plantation museums and historic houses” in the entire northeastern corner of the state of Virginia, or the James River region (which includes the northern half of the Hampton Roads), publically represent “antebellum and colonial pasts.” See Meredith Stone, Ian Spangler, Xavier Griffin, and Stephen P. Hanna, “Searching for the Enslaved in the ‘Cradle of Democracy’: Virginia’s James River Plantation Websites and the Reproduction of Local Social Memories,” *Southeastern Geographer* 56, 2 (2016): 204. See also, Appendix I.

⁵¹² In addition to incorporating the independent cities of Suffolk, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Newport News, Williamsburg, and Isle of Wight County in Virginia, the Hampton Roads MSA includes

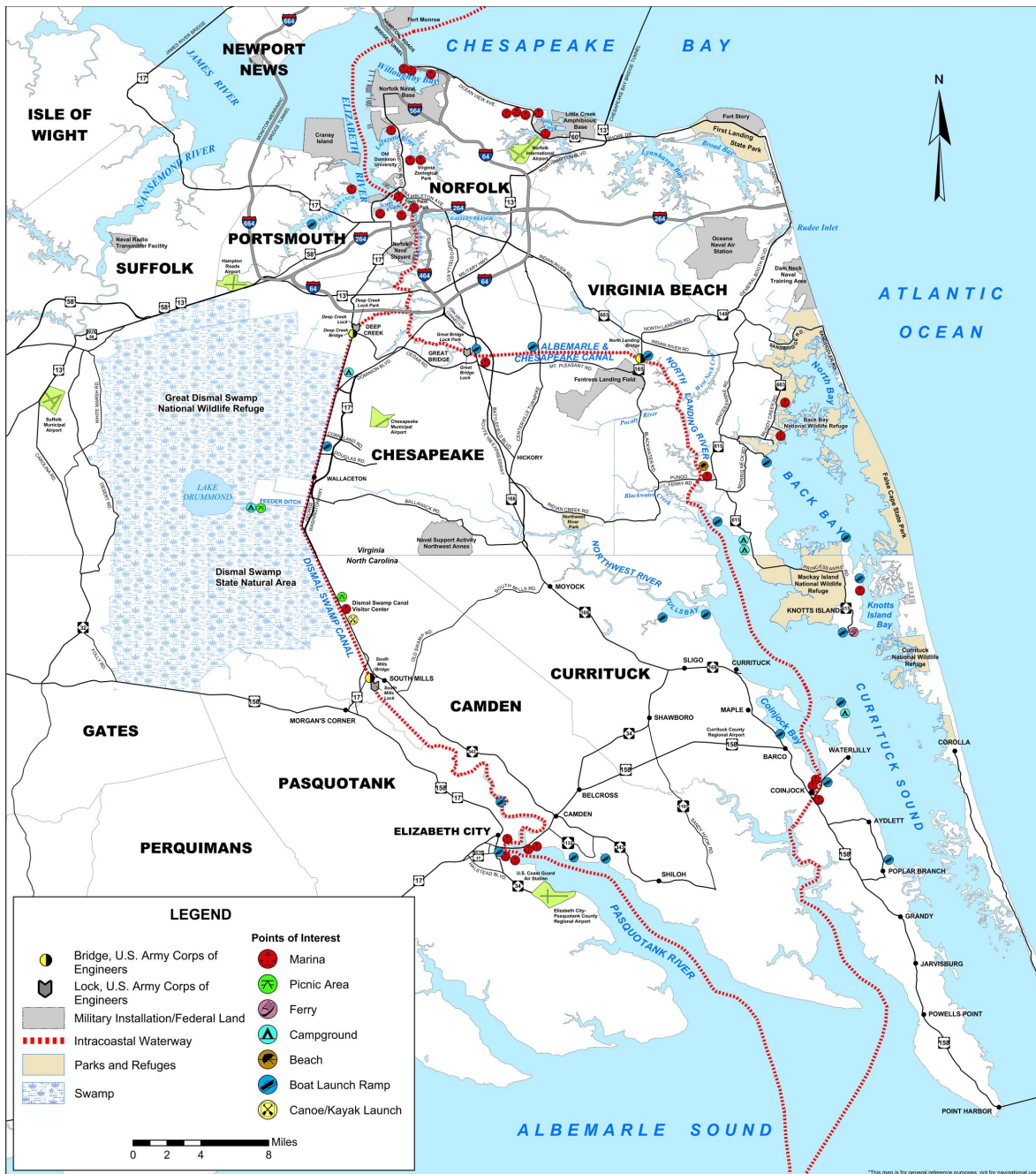


Fig. 5. The present-day Great Dismal Swamp in proximity to the surrounding Hampton Roads cities and counties. (Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District).

Institutional representations of slavery and resistance at these sites continue to marginalize and minimize the histories of U.S. slavery and resistance. The silencing and rendering of marronage as marginal or ancillary in institutional representations of the

the Elizabeth City, North Carolina Metropolitan Statistical Area, comprised of Pasquotank, Perquimans, Gates, Currituck, and Camden Counties, North Carolina. “Current Statistical Area Lists and Delineations,” Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Bulletins, U.S. Census Bureau, February 2013.

swamp happens because of a generally absent narrative of slavery in Virginia and across the U.S. south, and because of an actual effort to maximize the environmental significance of the swamp and minimize the social and cultural significance. But above all, it happens because the dominant agenda, which works to protect white power, persistently deprecates, obscures, and attempts to erase reminders of Black resistance, especially historical Black self-defense through violence, autonomous and alternative Black community, and perseverance through the tremendous and vicious constraints of enslavement.

The Absent Narrative of Slavery

Before the absence or marginalization of institutional representation and public commemoration of resistance and marronage is first the absence or marginalization of critical discourse on slavery itself, including its implications and repercussions. Throughout the Hampton Roads, and indeed, throughout the country, there remains a paucity of representations commemorating the legacies of slavery in public spaces. Although U.S. slavery has recently aroused new interest in popular culture as represented in film and media,⁵¹³ there remains a concerted effort to suppress, erase, and forget this unfortunate and uncomfortable event in American history.

In 1984, Tom Mack, a civil rights activist and Washington D.C. business owner, founded the National Council for Education and Economic Development (NCEED) to lobby for a national museum dedicated to telling the country's story of slavery on the National Mall. His efforts were thwarted, however, by "strong opposition from both Smithsonian officials and national politicians" who felt that "it seemed wildly inappropriate to foreground such an ugly episode at the heart of the nation's capital and on the sacred ground of the Mall."⁵¹⁴ Meanwhile, after a unanimous vote by the United States Congress in 1980, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened to the public on the National Mall in 1993. And in 1989, Public Law 101-185 passed, establishing the National Museum of the American Indian, which was opened to the public in 2004. After decades of political struggles to establish a museum that would narrate and represent the legacy of slavery and the histories of African descendants in this country, a national slavery memorial was proposed again during a Congressional session in 2003. Yet still, the legislation was not adopted, but the National Museum of African American History and Culture Act was instead passed toward the establishment of a new Smithsonian museum dedicated to celebrating Black history and culture (opened in September, 2016), rather than commemorating and memorializing the history and legacy of U.S. slavery.⁵¹⁵

Efforts to ignore, suppress, or forget slavery are especially strong even, and perhaps especially on the very ground where it occurred, not very long ago. Eichstedt and Small's seminal study, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern*

⁵¹³ *Django Unchained* (2012), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), WGN America's new TV series "Underground," (2016), The History Channel's *Roots* TV mini-series (May 2016), and *The Birth of a Nation* (October 2016), are some examples of recent popular interest in slavery.

⁵¹⁴ Robyn Autry, "The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at 'Identity-Driven' Museums," *Theory and Society* 42 (2013): 63-64.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.* See also John B. Hatch, *Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 11. Blain Roberts and Ethan J. Kytly, "America Needs a National Slavery Monument," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2015.

Plantation Museums (2002), points out that hundreds of surviving plantations visited annually by tourists are run by organizations that steadfastly avoid almost any discussion of slavery as integral to the operation of these estates, of slavery at all, or of the enslaved themselves. Consistent with institutional representational silences following the “historical logic of whiteness,” they find that of the 122 plantation tourist sites studied across eight states including Virginia, 55.7% “engage in symbolic annihilation as their primary strategy” of representation of these historic spaces.⁵¹⁶ Symbolic annihilation, representations of slavery and the experiences of the enslaved ranging from complete erasure to extreme minimization, refers to one of four primary representational approaches plantation museums employ that Eichstedt and Small identify as the “rhetorical or organizing strategies [positioning] discussion of enslavement and enslaved people in different ways.” Symbolic annihilation or outright erasure is the typology of representation that is furthest from “relative incorporation,” “segregation and marginalization of knowledge,” and closest to “trivialization and deflection.”⁵¹⁷ They also find that “nearly 83 percent of all plantation sites in this study have symbolic annihilation as one of their primary strategies in relation to slavery” (their emphasis).⁵¹⁸ The study affirms the contention that institutional representational practices “construct narratives of U.S. history that valorize whiteness and mystify the experience of enslavement,” all the while making public damaging representations that “contribute to a very particular collective memory and, by extension, collective identification that legitimates contemporary inequalities.”⁵¹⁹

Plantation tourism across the south represents these historic sites through narratives that “marginalize the stories of the enslaved and whitewash history at the expense of those who through their toil made these landscapes and homes possible.”⁵²⁰ Plantation heritage tourism tells and sells tales where “the planter-class legacy takes primacy over the legacy of the enslaved,” and “mythic representations of slavery, the enslaved, and the planter-enslaver” dominate.⁵²¹ Such mythic narratives include “the faithful slave” and “the good master,” commonly woven together to produce “a positive image of the planter and his family.”⁵²² Along the James River in Virginia, northwest of the Dismal Swamp, plantation museums describe “a guiltless and romantic past – by featuring their beautiful architecture, rich family histories and period furnishings” in support of a dominant narrative where “slavery is either ignored or sanitized.”⁵²³ Here, “democratic ideals are strongest,” and plantation museums throughout the state of Virginia, many of which were once the homes of this country’s “Founding Fathers,”

⁵¹⁶ Marable defines the “historical logic of whiteness” as racism that repeatedly minimizes and erases historical narratives threatening white power in the present. See Marable, *Living Black History*, 20. Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 108.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵²⁰ Amy E. Potter, “‘She Goes Into Character as the Lady of the House’: Tour Guides, Performance, and the Southern Plantation,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11, 3 (2015): 250. David L. Butler, “Whitewashing Plantations: The Commodification of a Slave-Free Antebellum South,” *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration* 2 (2001): 163-175.

⁵²¹ Eddie Modlin, “Representing Slavery at Plantation-House Museums in the U.S. South: A Dynamic Spatial Process,” *Historical Geography* 39 (2011): 147–173. Modlin, “Tales Told on the Tour,” 265-287.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵²³ Stone, et al, “Searching for the Enslaved in the ‘Cradle of Democracy,’” 204.

pride themselves as having a place in “the birthplace of democracy,” all the while brushing slavery and all of its implications aside.⁵²⁴ All of these representations are shaped by “uneven power” and a dominant culture of eagerness to “selectively remember (and forget) racialized violence and dispossession.”⁵²⁵

Across the six plantations I visited in the Tidewater, all of which are located thereabout the mouth of the James River, closest to the northernmost edge of the remaining Dismal Swamp, representation of slavery is consistent with these findings. Five of these engaged in trivializing, minimalizing, marginalizing representational practices or a combination of these, while the other plantation demonstrated outright erasure. Throughout the Hampton Roads there are few plantations open to the public. According to information made available to the public at visitor’s centers throughout the region on both sides of the Virginia-North Carolina interstate border, Ferry, Chippokes, Endview, Smith’s Fort, Lee Hall Mansion, and Bacon’s Castle are the only plantations operating as museums as of 2015.⁵²⁶ At all of these plantations, docents, directors, and guides I encountered were mostly white women, although I took note of a few white men. During each tour, strongest emphasis was evidenced through narrative representations about the lives and lifestyles of the white families who owned and lived at these estates over time. Additionally, the greatest weight in representation across these plantations, and across the Tidewater’s museums in general, reflects the patriotic dominant narratives of the area’s colonial splendor as the birthplace of American democracy, freedom, and independence, or of the area’s military struggles, triumphs, and general glory of the Civil War years. All of these plantations exhibited written, spoken, or spatial representational practices that segregated slavery from the dominant narrative of the plantation, marginalized, minimized, reduced, and/or erased the significance of slavery as fundamental to the economy, culture, and life of the plantation and beyond.

At Lee Hall, the tour began, like all the others, inside of the plantation home. The docent began to discuss the Lee family history and followed this by adding, “12 slaves lived at Lee Hall in 1859, including one 60 year old kitchen cook who lived in the brick kitchen.”⁵²⁷ Soon after, she pointed out Richard Lee’s beautiful Italianate bedroom windows overlooking what were once crop fields and stammered hesitantly, “He could see all of his, his – workers.”⁵²⁸ Similarly, a docent at Endview acknowledged the ownership of “slaves” and also included the number that lived on the plantation at two particular and distinct times. But later, she stated, “The servant’s entrance would have

⁵²⁴ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 6, 144-145.

⁵²⁵ Alderman, Butler, and Hanna, “Memory, Slavery, and Plantation Museums,” 209.

⁵²⁶ Smith’s Fort Plantation is among the James River plantation museums explored in this study that is furthest away from the Dismal Swamp. It is roughly 45 miles northwest of the current swamp’s northernmost edge. There are no other plantation museums in a 50-mile radius of the Dismal Swamp either in Virginia or North Carolina. As Eichstedt and Small (2002), Modlin (2008) and Stone, et al (2016) point out, other plantation museums are available to the public in these states, but these fall outside of the Hampton Roads cities and counties and are much further away from Dismal Swamp communities. Carter’s Grove Plantation in the northern Hampton Roads city of Williamsburg, Virginia, is now privately owned and no longer open to the public. It was open to the public for most of the years between 1969 and 2007 and was locally famous for its historical reenactments and slave quarter tours. See Susan Svrluga, “Colonial Williamsburg sells Carter’s Grove Plantation After Bankruptcy,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2014.

⁵²⁷ Site visit, Lee Hall, Newport News, Virginia. June 5, 2015.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

been downstairs,” when referring to the separate entrance the enslaved were forced to use in order to perform their duties.⁵²⁹ Narrative representations of slavery were also substituted for reductive and silencing terms at Ferry Plantation. The guide there, who is also the Executive Director, used the labels “servants” and “nannies” to describe the six “trusted” or faithful enslaved individuals who lived and worked in the house. She did, however, also refer directly to specific tasks that “slaves” had to do at Ferry Plantation, and volunteered that during the Civil War, the Walke family “had 83 slaves to mind.”⁵³⁰ It is important to note that at each of the six plantations I visited, with the exceptions of Bacon’s Castle and Smith’s Fort Plantation, the enslaved were only ever mentioned in order to explain who performed what work and to represent and commemorate the lives the white plantation owners led in order to “oversee the slaves” and run the plantation. Again with the exceptions of Smith’s Fort and Bacon’s castle, no other comments were offered about slavery or the enslaved at any of the remaining four plantations I visited unless I asked direct questions.

Smith’s Fort Plantation is the only site that never once mentioned slavery or the enslaved at all, despite the fact that it is publicized and represented as a “plantation.” During the tour, tobacco farming was mentioned as the primary crop grown at the plantation during the 17th century, but there was no discussion about slavery or the enslaved labor force that grew it. Instead, visitors can expect to learn exclusively about Captain John Smith’s fort and the other colonists and their descendants who owned and lived on the plantation throughout history.

Representation of slavery at Bacon’s Castle can best be understood as marginal, but not trivializing or absent. Before the tour there even begins, visitors have the chance to tour the gift shop and welcome center, which features several books on slavery and enslaved experiences. The tour itself, however, is primarily focused on representing and commemorating Nathaniel Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, Jacobean architecture, and the numerous families that occupied the plantation into the 19th century. The docent did mention the number of enslaved persons bound to labor the tobacco plantation, but did not elaborate any more about slavery or the lives and experiences of the enslaved throughout the guided tour. At the tour’s end, the guide directed visitors to the exit leading to the grounds, where we were invited to take a self-guided tour of the gardens, fields, one remaining original slave cabin, and smokehouse. In an interview with this docent, I was given information about the cabin, its enslaved inhabitants, and an elaboration of information about slavery and Black history at Bacon’s castle in general, all of which was not included in the guided tour. She stated that visitors have “mixed interests between slavery and early national history,” as if the two are somehow separate, and continued that “discretion” is used to gauge group interest and narrate the tour accordingly.⁵³¹

An interview with the Executive Director at Ferry Plantation reveals that there too, representation of slavery is acceptable only when marginal and split from dominant narrative representations of white, colonial or “national” history. After I prompted her with questions asking for clarity around the lives of the enslaved at Ferry, she explained that there are 4 poster boards about slavery and some original slave tags worn by the

⁵²⁹ Site visit, Endview Plantation, Newport News, Virginia. May 14, 2015.

⁵³⁰ Site visit, Ferry Plantation. March, 17, 2015.

⁵³¹ Private interview with docent at Bacon’s Castle, Surry, Virginia. May 22, 2015.

enslaved in an upstairs room not included on the guided tour. She then took me to this room and stated plainly, “I only take people to see the slavery stuff if they’re interested. Some people don’t want to talk about slavery.” She confirmed that tours at Ferry are “very individually based.”⁵³² When asked what information she provides to visitors interested in slavery, she replied that she shows them the loom room, poster boards, slave tags, and mentioned a brick “slave memorial” she was directing. She included that she tells visitors that Anthony Walke, one of the slaveholders at Ferry, “was very good to his slaves, as was George Washington.”⁵³³ It is doubtful that visitors would become aware of the memorial dedication of 83 bricks for each of the enslaved if they did not first ask about slavery at Ferry, as the tour does not include a walk through the back yard of the house where it is located. It is even more doubtful that the visiting public would ever come to know that “William Walke’s Ned” was one of the enslaved leaders of the 1802 attempt to burn Norfolk discussed in Chapter 2.⁵³⁴ William Walke, Anthony’s brother, saw that Ned was sold away for his involvement in the insurrectionary plot, but only after Jeremiah, enslaved by John Cornick, was hung from a tree the Executive Director informed me was on the property of Ferry Plantation.⁵³⁵ This information was only made evident after I expressed interest in the history of the enslaved at Ferry. While histories of overt enslaved resistance are altogether rendered invisible, representations of slavery at Ferry is both marginal and trivial, both segregating and minimalizing.

Signs, plaques, pamphlets, and exhibits themselves are other important ways narratives are told and represented, and often mirror the kinds of representation about slavery that is evident (or not) on site tours. Besides the brick memorial to the enslaved behind the house at Ferry Plantation, there were no signs or plaques about slavery that were made visible to the public on site. Pamphlets visitors can take to read about the significance of the plantation also omit any discussion of slavery or of the enslaved. The same can be said of representation of slavery at Smith’s Fort. A pamphlet from Lee Hall provides a striking example of the kind of silencing dominant narrative that is subsequently produced from these reductive or absent representations of slavery:

This antebellum home, an architectural gem on Virginia’s Lower Peninsula, has been restored and decorated to reflect its pre-war splendor. The mansion also features an 1862 Peninsula Campaign exhibit gallery. Join us and experience the myths and realities of the ‘Old South’ and learn of the conflict that was to destroy it forever.⁵³⁶

At Chippokes, Bacon’s Castle, Endview, and Lee Hall, signs, markers, and pamphlets provide the public with little to no information about slavery, and maintain marginal or trivializing representations of the enslaved through separate or else extremely minimal and dismissive mentions of “chores,”⁵³⁷ cabin life, or through the Civil War concept of

⁵³² Private interview with docent and Executive Director of Ferry Plantation House, Virginia Beach, VA. March 17, 2015.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁴ Parramore, Stewart, and Bogger, *Norfolk: The First Four Centuries*, 119, 129. See Chapter 2, pages 67-68.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.* Private interview with docent and Executive Director of Ferry Plantation House, Virginia Beach, Virginia. March 17, 2015. Walke family papers, “Walke Chart,” compiled by Sue Wilson (retrieved July, 2015, housed at Ferry Plantation, Virginia Beach, Virginia).

⁵³⁶ Pamphlet entitled, “Lee Hall Mansion,” retrieved May, 2013 and June, 2015.

⁵³⁷ A sign located outside of the free-standing kitchen at Chippokes evades discussing slavery. It is entitled, “Kitchen Chores,” followed by an explanation that “kitchen laborers” planted, weeded, harvested, etc.

“contraband slaves.”⁵³⁸ Representations at Chippokes, Endview, and Lee Hall focus instead on the architectural styling of the plantation homes, the plantation owners themselves, the Civil War, vacant of the implications of slavery, or the valorization of Confederate “heroes.”⁵³⁹

Other museums throughout the Hampton Roads also fail to represent the historical significance of slavery, or only do so marginally and minimally. The Suffolk Seaboard Station Railroad Museum, Riddick’s Folly house museum, and the Isle of Wight County Museum each maintain completely absent narrative representations of slavery despite it being instrumental to the foundation of the region. The Museum of the Albemarle, established to represent and commemorate the history and culture of Elizabeth City and the Albemarle Sound, does marginally represent slavery through depictions of the historical contributions of enslaved communities through labor. However, there is no signage, exhibits, or literature made available to visitors about the institution of slavery itself as culturally, economically, or socio-historically fundamental to the development of the region. Nor is there, unsurprisingly, any representation of the history of marronage despite the fact that there are several displays exhibiting the history of trade, commerce, and travel through the Dismal Swamp canals.⁵⁴⁰

Riddick’s Folly, the only house museum in Suffolk, was once the home of Mills Riddick of the very prominent Riddick family. From at least 1716 to the end of the 19th century, the Riddicks owned four plantations throughout the Tidewater area (2 of which were directly adjacent to the Dismal Swamp’s western border), hundreds of enslaved souls, and were primarily rich because of the lumbering of Dismal Swamp cypress, a venture only made possible through enslaved labor.⁵⁴¹ However, none of this information is made available to visitors at the museum. The Riddick Ditch, dug by hired out enslaved labor, first opened in 1816 and ran south into North Carolina from Lake Drummond toward the center of the Dismal Swamp.⁵⁴² It was one of several major waterways in the swamp that enabled transportation and the extraction of coveted resources such as shingles made from juniper and cypress trees, abundant in the swamp. In fact, on tours through Riddick’s Folly, the Riddicks’ reliance on slavery was indirectly represented only once, when the guide mentioned that the “nannies” lived with and cared for the children on the third floor of the house. Civil War history and Union occupation of the house is heavily represented at the site, along with no reference to slavery or of the enslaved in the tour narrative or in any of the museum signage or literature.⁵⁴³

Another sign posted nearby entitled, “Plantation Life,” does, however minimally discuss the historical reliance on slave labor at Chippokes. Site visit, Chippokes Plantation, Surry, Virginia. May 29, 2015.

⁵³⁸ Endview and Lee Hall both make brief mentions of the enslaved as Union “contraband of war.”

“Contraband slaves” are briefly discussed at both sites and are represented primarily in order to halfheartedly address the issue of southern loss of property and power.

⁵³⁹ A Lee Hall exhibit entitles Confederate General John Bankhead Magruder, “The Hero of Our Times,” in commemoration of the southern victories he led. Site visit, Lee Hall, Newport News, Virginia, June 5, 2015.

⁵⁴⁰ Site visit, Museum of the Albemarle, Elizabeth City, North Carolina. May, 2013 and July 29, 2015.

⁵⁴¹ William Turner Jordan, *A Record of Farms and Their Owners in Lower Parish of Nansemond County, Virginia, 1835-1922* (Suffolk, VA: Suffolk-Nansemond Historical Society, 1968). *The Great Dismal Atlas: A Virginia Canals & Navigations Society River Atlas Project* (The Virginia Canals and Navigations Society, 1998), 22, 32, 61.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁴³ Site visit, Riddick’s Folly, Suffolk, Virginia. May, 2013.

The Hampton History Museum and the Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe do incorporate representations of the legacies of slave trade, slavery, and the experiences of the enslaved. These representations are integrated and included within the dominant narrative presented as the area's historical and present significance.

Staff at each of the aforementioned visitor's centers pointed to pamphlets and tourist literature about the six local plantations when asked for information about slavery or African American history. The only exception was that all of the Virginia visitor's centers offered the pamphlet entitled "Waterways to Freedom" which provides useful and important information about the Underground Railroad in the city of Norfolk and in the Hampton Roads at large. The pamphlet was written and initiated by Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, professor and scholar of History and Director of the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Center for the African Diaspora at the Historically Black College/University, Norfolk State University.⁵⁴⁴

The visitor's center and welcome center staff at Colonial Williamsburg, once renowned for their controversial but important live historical reenactments of scenes from slavery,⁵⁴⁵ presently offer a meager selection of public history representing slavery or its legacies. According to one staff member at the visitor's center, there's "not much" there in the way of slavery.⁵⁴⁶ I was advised to attend "Papa Said, Mama Said," a showcase in "African storytelling traditions," "A Public Audience with Edith Cumbo," a dramatic monologue by a free Black woman, and "African American Music" at Great Hopes Plantation, a recreated small colonial Virginian farm, all of which offers no critical discussion about slavery or its historical significance.⁵⁴⁷

Throughout the Hampton Roads, it seems that the predominately white historical societies, historical foundations, state departments of historic preservation, and private parties that own and manage these historical sites are not altogether very eager to talk about slavery and its legacy. Although American history cannot be fully understood or understood at all without thinking about the event that shaped the country's economy, politics, culture, and most fundamental principles of democracy, freedom, and liberty, slavery remains "the tough stuff on American memory" as it is very much so unfinished business.⁵⁴⁸ Trouillot agrees:

That U.S. slavery has both officially ended, yet continues in many complex forms – most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural denigration of blackness – makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living

⁵⁴⁴ Private interview with Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Virginia, July 21, 2015.

⁵⁴⁵ On Colonial Williamsburg's controversial historical representation a slave auction through live reenactment, see James Oliver Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," *The Public Historian* 21, 4 (Autumn, 1999): 19-38. On representing slavery's legacies of race and miscegenation at Colonial Williamsburg's George Wythe House, and on the "Other Half Tour" walking tour about Black Codes in the 1990s, see also Eric Gable, "Maintaining Boundaries, or 'Mainstreaming' Black History in a White Museum," in *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers), 1996.

⁵⁴⁶ Site visit, Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Virginia, June 5, 2015.

⁵⁴⁷ "Create Memories to Last a Lifetime: Colonial Williamsburg Vacation Guide," 2015. "Colonial Williamsburg Map & Program Guide Friday," June 5 and Monday, July 20, 2015. "Colonial Williamsburg Next Week at a Glance: Monday, June 1 to Sunday, June 7, 2015."

⁵⁴⁸ Horton and Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History*, (2006).

presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not.⁵⁴⁹

Slavery is a living history with a prevailing legacy that produces and reproduces anti-Black attitudes and race based structural inequality in the spheres of education, wealth, income, housing, and criminal “justice.” The wounds of this history are raw and unhealed. Indeed, “slavery is ground zero for race relations.”⁵⁵⁰ It is safer, easier, and more comfortable for many holding the power to open public dialogue about slavery to instead minimize its past and present importance, or to avoid it altogether.

Talking about slavery as historically and presently foundational to our local and national identities in public spaces is also unsettling for many white Americans because it risks disrupting historical and ongoing white power as normative. The trivialization or outright erasure of representations of slavery in public spaces “is more a reflection of present political and social relations than a true reconstruction of the past,” where institutional representations and interpretations of the past at museums and other public historical sites reinforce social inequalities and power hierarchy privileging white values and interests.⁵⁵¹ For example, Joanne Melish has written that “many institutions as well as individuals whose histories connect them with slave trading and slaveholding fear that to acknowledge involvement is to court litigation.”⁵⁵² In many cases, fear of empowering Black people through reparations or through the reparative acknowledgment of slavery and its living history, seen as synonymous to reducing white power, motivates the silences in public history concerning slavery. There are real, lived present stakes involved in the telling of history, so much so that the telling itself is an act of political power possessing the ability to influence current distribution of power, resources, and opportunity.⁵⁵³

Institutions responsible for publically representing sites implicated by slavery also suppress and resist full and integrated representations of this history because of the contradiction to American national identity it threatens to expose. Horton and Horton have referred to this great paradox as “the nation’s most enduring contradiction: the history of American slavery in a country dedicated to freedom.”⁵⁵⁴ Institutions and individuals with the authority to publically represent the historical and present significance of sites throughout the Hampton Roads may feel conflicted by what Nathan Huggins has termed, “the deforming mirror of truth,” or the revelation of histories that force America’s “master narrative,” framed by narratives of the purity of American ideals of republicanism, democracy, and freedom, to deal with “the conspicuous fact of racial slavery.”⁵⁵⁵ All of these reasons speak to the pervasive silencing and marginalization of

⁵⁴⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 147.

⁵⁵⁰ Ira Berlin, “Coming to Terms With Slavery,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (The New Press: NY, 2006).

⁵⁵¹ Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, 11.

⁵⁵² Joanne Melish, “Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (NY: The New Press, 2006).

⁵⁵³ David Blight, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for the American Historical Memory,” in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68.

⁵⁵⁴ James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “Introduction,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (NY: The New Press, 2006).

⁵⁵⁵ Huggins, “The Deforming Mirror of Truth,” 27, 44.

slavery through institutional, public historical representation throughout the Hampton Roads and beyond.

(In)visible Black Power in the Dismal Swamp

As the dominant narrative about slavery around and among the communities surrounding the Dismal Swamp is one of erasure, avoidance, or minimization, it is little wonder that the politics of race and power in representation of Black resistance to enslavement and particularly marronage are also reflected in institutional representational practices within the Dismal Swamp itself. The Dismal Swamp Canal Trail, managed by the City of Chesapeake Parks, Recreation and Tourism, the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Suffolk, and the Dismal Swamp State Park in South Mills comprise the three points of public access into the swamp in both Virginia and North Carolina. The Canal Trail presently offers no public representation about the significance of the swamp as a site of U.S. marronage or as a space deeply implicated by the history of U.S. slavery. Both the Refuge and the State Park however, do integrate representations of the Dismal Swamp as a space that is significant in the history of the Underground Railroad and throughout the period of U.S. slavery. Representations of maroons at these sites are visible for public viewing, but do not represent a full narration of the power and historical agency of individual maroons and maroon communities to incite enslaved communities surrounding the swamp to resist differently or of the swamp itself as a locus for Black revolt, overt resistance, and violent freedom struggle. Moreover, while representations of Black flight, resistance, and marronage are integrated into the dominant narrative and made visible to the public at both the Refuge and the State Park, they remain marginal and thereby unequal, as they are primarily backgrounded by representation and narration of the swamp as a space of ecological and environmental significance, or as a space of recreation.

The Dismal Swamp Canal Trail runs along the eastern border of the swamp, or the well-traveled Interstate U.S. 17. The City of Chesapeake Parks, Recreation and Tourism opened the 8.5-mile multi-use trail to the public in April of 2006. The trail was paved over Old Route 17, once used to ferry the barges along the Great Dismal Swamp Canal. Beginning in 1793, this intercoastal canal was hand dug by enslaved laborers. Both the canal and the causeway road, or Old Route 17 running parallel to the canal, were constructed by enslaved young men, many of whom were barely teenagers.⁵⁵⁶ Construction was completed in 1805. The current U.S. 17, also running parallel to Old Rt. 17 and the canal, was constructed in the 1920s for automobile travel. The canal trail now offers biking, birding, photography, picnicking, fishing, boating, horseback riding, rollerblading, and dog walking. Since 2006, the City of Chesapeake Parks, Recreation and Tourism also sponsors the Dismal Swamp Stomp, a marathon race attracting hundreds of runners from across the Hampton Roads to the Dismal Swamp annually.

The Dismal Swamp Canal Trail lacks any commemoration of the enslaved canal laborers whose lives were sacrificed for the commercial enterprise of intercoastal trade and travel. In bolder, truer terms, the canal trail lacks a single form of representation made visible to the public commemorating the enslaved laborers who hand dug and toiled

⁵⁵⁶ Fouts, *Registration of Slaves to Work in the Great Dismal Swamp: Gates County, North Carolina, 1847-1861* (1995) offers descriptions of enslaved men hired out to dig canals in Gates County, NC. There are approximately 16 canals. See *The Great Dismal Atlas* (1998).

at the threat of the lash in snake, mosquito, and biting fly infested swamp water often three to six or seven feet deep.⁵⁵⁷ Today, visitors to the swamp at the canal trail can enjoy recreation without once thinking about, honoring, or remembering the suffering, survival, freedom, or resilience of those who built the space. However, visitors can collect pamphlets about recreational activities, the various mammals, reptiles, and amphibians living in the swamp, or even pause to read historical markers about the Civil War erected by the Virginia Department of Historical Resources and Virginia Civil War Trails – none of which represent the swamp’s significance as a site of Black resistance and historical agency.

The Dismal Swamp Canal Trail Parks Manager for the City of Chesapeake admitted that the trail offers the public lots of information about the swamp’s ecology, but “nothing about its people” or history, yet. Although the trail has been open to the public for more than a decade and despite the fact that it was even designated as a part of the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom by the U.S. Department of Interior’s National Park Service in 2004, there remains no indication at this site of the swamp’s historical significance. The Parks Manager did, however, explain that the city is working on ten interpretive signs to be erected along the canal trail, five of which would narrate the swamp’s ecological importance and five of which would represent the swamp’s history and cultural significance. Part of the historical component of this plan would include narrative representation of Black flight through the Dismal Swamp and the surrounding Hampton Roads framed through the history of the Underground Railroad, as well as some scant information about the Dismal Swamp maroons. I was handed a tentative draft of some literature that I was told could be included in the interpretive historical signs. Troublingly, the only mention of maroons came in the statement, “After the Civil War, thousands of ‘maroon’ colonists, now no longer slaves, left the Dismal Swamp...”⁵⁵⁸ Missing the significance of marronage altogether as an act of resistance, freedom, and independence, the statement unquestioningly adopts the perspective of antebellum law to suggest that the Dismal Swamp maroons somehow remained enslaved even while living in free and autonomous communities within the swamp. I was offered no definitive insights into the expected time frame for completion of this project.⁵⁵⁹

The two other sites that permit public access into the swamp are the Wildlife Refuge managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Dismal Swamp State Park managed by the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources. In 1974, after a century of logging and continued canal development after the Civil War, The Union Camp Corporation, a paper company based in Franklin, Virginia, donated 49,097 acres of swampland to the Nature Conservancy. This land was in turn transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior, which signed The Dismal Swamp Act of 1974, authorizing the swamp’s current boundaries and establishing the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, now a little more than 112,000 acres, as well as the 14,000 acre Dismal Swamp State Park in North Carolina. Some estimate that the swamp’s current acreage is less than half of the swamp’s original size prior to draining, logging,

⁵⁵⁷ Moses Grandy, “Narrative of Moses Grandy,” 169.

⁵⁵⁸ Untitled document compiled by Gerald Rogers, City of Chesapeake. Retrieved April 8, 2015.

⁵⁵⁹ Private interview with the City of Chesapeake Parks Manager office of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, Chesapeake, Virginia. April 8, 2015.

and canal construction.⁵⁶⁰ But recent estimates place its current size at perhaps 10% of its original size.⁵⁶¹ As mentioned in Chapter 2, the colonial and pre-colonial swamp stretched from what is today the James River in Virginia, to the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina, a space comparable to the state of Delaware at roughly two thousand square miles.⁵⁶² Indeed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has written that estimates of the original swamp “exceeded one million acres.”⁵⁶³ By 2008, the State Park in South Mills, North Carolina opened to the public, while the Refuge in Suffolk, Virginia has been open to the public since the 1970s.

After a “ground swell of community support,”⁵⁶⁴ the U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service mandated the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998 as Public Law 105-203 “to commemorate and preserve the history of the resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, through the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program” (URNF).⁵⁶⁵ Through the extensive leadership efforts of Black individuals invested in the history of the swamp and a small community of scholars in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Dismal Swamp was accepted by the Park Service’s URNF Program as a site “making significant contributions to the understanding of the Underground Railroad in American history,” in December 2003. By 2004, the Refuge as well as the then uncompleted Dismal Swamp Canal Trail and State Park were each designated as sites within the URNF.

In 2008, The Dismal Swamp State Park opened to the public, offering nature trails, ecological education, and a wide array of recreational activities such as picnicking, kayaking, and canoeing. At the park, visitors can visit the Welcome Center and the Visitor Center, both opened in 2008. The Welcome Center houses pamphlets and other tourist literature about attractions in the surrounding Hampton Roads and throughout the Tidewater region. The natural environment of the swamp is represented here through books, cased displays, literature, and signs, while the social history of the swamp is only minimally represented within guides and brochures. It is the Visitor Center that offers integrated representations of the swamp’s social, cultural, and ecological significance. Inside, visitors will find an exhibit hall entitled, “The Changing Face of the Dismal.” This exhibit includes two displays that wrap around as you walk through to form a circle. Visitors can begin with “Denizens of the Dismal,” which focuses on the social, human history of the swamp, or “Web of Life,” which emphasizes the swamp’s ecological and environmental importance. In sum, the exhibit integrates the history of the enslaved canal laborers, Black flight and escape through the Dismal Swamp, and marronage with

⁵⁶⁰ Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 222. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 20, 92.

⁵⁶¹ Sayers, “Scission Communities and Social Defiance,” 185.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.* Byrd, “The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp,” extract from the *Farmer’s Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737. Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company*, 82.

⁵⁶³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge: The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad.” <http://www.fws.gov>. July 2001.

⁵⁶⁴ Diane Miller, “The Places and Communities of the Underground Railroad: The National Park Service Network to Freedom,” in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: First Smithsonian Books, 2006), 279-280.

⁵⁶⁵ National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, “Network to Freedom,” <http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr>. Pamphlet retrieved July 2015.

representations of the swamp as a natural environment teeming with flora, fauna, and animal life. Two signs currently stand outside the Visitor Center along the canal there, both commemorating the swamp canals as spaces built by the “grueling,” “treacherous,” and “brutal” labor of the enslaved, and both representing the narrative of slavery as significant to our understanding of the Dismal Swamp.⁵⁶⁶

Scenes in the “Denizens of the Dismal” display feature signs that read, “Maroon Colonies: A Hiding Place in the Swamp”:

The Dismal Swamp maroon colonies were home to slaves attempting to escape slavery. Some lived there until they could find passage on a northbound ship. The slaves gathered in remote wilderness areas to avoid capture. Historians believe that the Dismal Swamp may have once harbored one of the largest maroon colonies in the United States.⁵⁶⁷

Similar to the document handed to me by the Parks Manager for the City of Chesapeake Parks, Recreation and Tourism, this representation of marronage misses what makes the history of the maroons so powerful. Maroons are not “slaves” at all – they are not enslaved, nor could they be, since the act of marronage meant choosing an alternative to enslavement and the system of slavery altogether. It meant asserting freedom through flight and autonomous, resilient resettlement and survival in a wilderness space, outside of and by definition in resistance to dominant society. The other discussion of marronage in this display is entitled, “The Dismal’s Face: A Refuge From Slavery,” and states:

Thousands of enslaved African Americans worked on the swamp canals and in the timber industry. Some fled captivity via the Underground Railroad. Others lived in “maroon colonies” deep within the swamp’s forests.⁵⁶⁸

These reductive and trivial mentions of the historical significance of the Dismal Swamp maroons represent enduring, resistant communities as if their primary objective was merely a reactionary escape attempt. Marronage is represented as being motivated by individuals who sought to “flee captivity” or “avoid capture,” rather than represent a fuller depiction of maroons as calculating, organized, agentive individuals and groups who resisted captivity through flight and the forging of new possibilities for freedom, independence, and community against extreme odds.

More minimalizing representations of Black resistance and marronage are found both on site and in tourist literature. Erected by the National Park Service and the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the “Pathways to Freedom” sign outside of the Visitor Center informs visitors that:

From the earliest times, some enslaved people attempted to escape their bondage. The Great Dismal Swamp provided a number of these freedom seekers a place of refuge. Some made homes deep in the swamp where they lived in communities known as “maroon colonies.” Others used the swamp as a temporary hiding place on their journey to freedom.⁵⁶⁹

There is only one brochure among the various pamphlets and guides made available at the park that expands upon the swamp’s history of Black flight and resistance beyond the information provided on site. Although the Welcome Center’s “Underground Railroad Network to Freedom” leaflet does not mention the term “maroons” nor does it include the history of the swamp’s maroon communities within the narrative representation of the

⁵⁶⁶ Site visit, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, NC. May 2013, January 2014, and March – April 2015.

⁵⁶⁷ Site visit, Visitor Center, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, NC. May 2013, January 2014, and April 2015.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

swamp's relationship to flight in general, it does reiterate that "The Great Dismal Swamp was a known route for runaway slaves" through its elaboration of escape through the network known as the Underground Railroad.⁵⁷⁰ Nowhere are representations of fierce and self-determined freedom struggle; representations of maroons as guerilla warriors or as inciters of flight or revolt throughout the Dismal Swamp and its surrounding cities and counties are rendered invisible within and throughout the swamp landscape.

Interviews with the Dismal Swamp State Park's Park Superintendent in 2014 and her replacement superintendent in 2015 clarify that above all, the park itself exists for the purposes of: (1) natural resource management, (2) environmental and cultural education, and (3) to provide recreational opportunities.⁵⁷¹ In fact, the North Carolina state parks system mission statement "is to conserve and protect representative examples of the natural beauty, ecological features, and recreational resources of statewide significance."⁵⁷² The historical significance of sites has not traditionally been an institutional priority. The former Park Superintendent, who had worked at the park for 8 years at the time of our interview, stated, "We tend to focus on the environmental issues – you know, we're not trained historians but working with the cultural history of the swamp is a goal, and we're optimistic."⁵⁷³ She admitted that she welcomes Eric Sheppard's leadership in the area around the park's human history. Sheppard, the President of Diversity Restoration Solutions, a cultural heritage awareness initiative, is a descendant of the enslaved canal laborer Moses Grandy, and has been instrumental in the representational inclusion of narratives on slavery and Black historical agency and resistance in the swamp at the State Park Visitor Center and on the grounds. While the park offers regularly scheduled interpretive nature programs, the superintendent explained that Sheppard's tours about enslaved canal labor and the Underground Railroad through the paved trails at the park are the only historical tours offered to visitors. Nevertheless, she expressed her commitment to building up the history of the maroons. "We have one of the largest maroon communities in the country – that's important to share with people... the more we can get out there about the swamp the better for making people value this history," she said.⁵⁷⁴

The current Park Superintendent is less enthusiastic. Regressing back into the older tradition of institutional representation of sites at state parks, he demonstrated very little interest in continuing his predecessor's work on developing stronger cultural education about the social histories of the Dismal Swamp. His goals for accommodating park visitors center almost entirely around the swamp's natural history and environment, "to restore and replenish the swamp's ecology" by planting more trees, to "undo water control structures," and to provide new recreational activities to bring visitors in.⁵⁷⁵ One

⁵⁷⁰ Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center, "Underground Railroad Network to Freedom," Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. Retrieved July 2015.

⁵⁷¹ Private interview with the former Park Superintendent, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. January 15, 2014.

⁵⁷² "Park Purpose: State Parks System Mission Statement," Dismal Swamp State Park, November 1, 1994. Retrieved April 24, 2015.

⁵⁷³ Private interview with the former Park Superintendent, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. January 15, 2014.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Private interview with the present Park Superintendent, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. April 13, 2015.

of the few African American staff at the park shared her belief that the new superintendent is in fact “trying to stop the historical tours,” but was evasive as to what specific indications led her to believe this.⁵⁷⁶ Another African American affiliate of the park, working on the cultural significance of the swamp, stated that the present superintendent “wants us (Black people and Black history) to fit into a box – and I’m not doing it.”⁵⁷⁷

While the State Park’s on site representational practices of the Dismal Swamp as a space that is historically and presently significant because of the histories of slavery, flight, and marronage are in fact integrated into the dominant narrative represented to the public, this history remains marginal through minimalizing, trivializing language, persistent devaluation and silencing about the magnitude of resistance and marronage, and through the overall marginalization of the swamp’s social significance by the ecological and recreational. Narrative integration does not necessitate equal narration nor does it guarantee equal valuation. Representations of the swamp’s significance as a space implicated by Black suffering, violence, overt resistance, independence, and resilience are minimal, or do not exist.

In Suffolk, Virginia, U.S. 58 is a major thoroughway leading into downtown from Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Norfolk. It runs directly parallel to the northern-most tip of what is now recognized as the Dismal Swamp. Traveling in either direction on the highway it is impossible to miss the boggy mire and dense woods that thicken and form the swamp along the eastbound shoulder. From 1948 until an unknown date in early 2015, a historical marker erected by The Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) stood along the left-hand side of westbound U.S. 58 entitled, “The Great Dismal Swamp.” The DHR reported that the sign “was damaged beyond repair at some point and was removed” without specification as to what happened to it, or when the marker came down.⁵⁷⁸ The text mentions the history of prominent white men in the development of the swamp for canal building and resource extraction, but mentions nothing about the swamp’s significance to the history of slavery or to Black people’s historical agency, resistance, and resilience in the swamp. The marker, once standing just 13 miles north of the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, despite all of its absences and silences is noteworthy because it’s visibility and textual representation of the swamp’s past helps to shape public memory, commemoration, and recognition of the swamp’s present social and historical significance.

⁵⁷⁶ Private interview with Dismal Swamp State Park staff member, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. April 24, 2015.

⁵⁷⁷ Private interview with Dismal Swamp State Park affiliate, June 20, 2015.

⁵⁷⁸ Personal correspondence with staff at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. July 27, 2015.

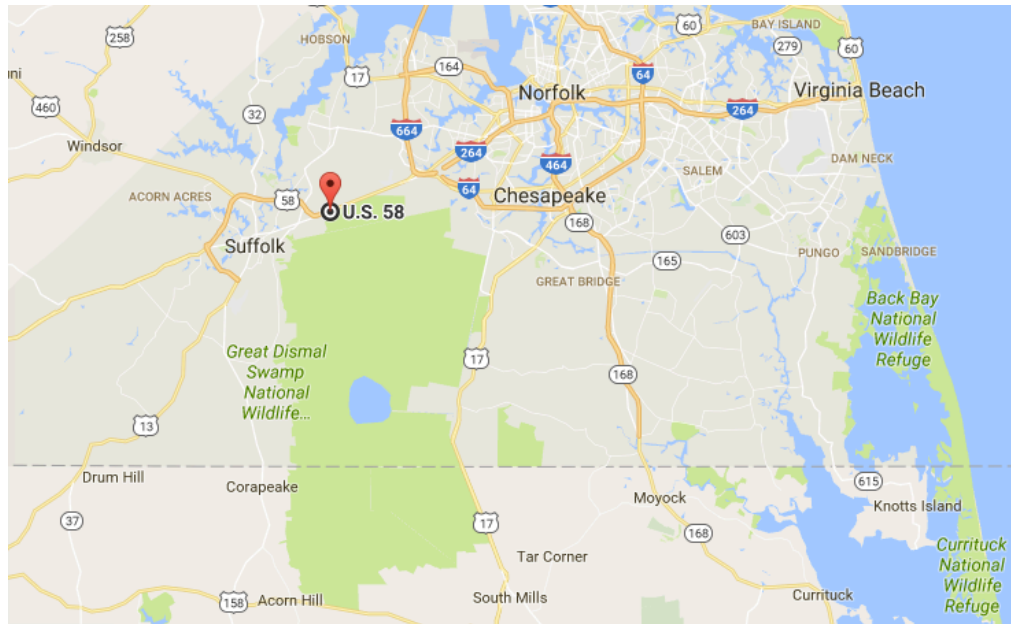


Fig. 6. U.S. 58 in proximity to the Dismal Swamp and the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. (Source: Google, 2017).



Fig. 7. “The Great Dismal Swamp” marker as it once stood along U.S. 58. (Source: MarkerHistory.com, 2017).

Once traveling south on White Marsh Road from downtown Suffolk toward the refuge along the westernmost edge of the swamp, three other historical markers stand as travelers make their way closer and closer to the Great Dismal Swamp Wildlife Refuge in Suffolk. These are entitled, “Jericho Ditch,” “Washington Ditch,” and “Dismal Town.” All three are erected and maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The “Dismal Town” sign marks George Washington’s headquarters along the swamp’s outskirts but mentions nothing about his enslaved labor force hired out from nearby plantations to work on the canals. However, the other two markers do recognize the enslaved laborers by stating they built Washington Ditch alongside a 4½ mile canal and Jericho Ditch alongside a 9 mile canal. These are the first representations of the swamp’s significance as a space implicated by slavery as visitors approach the refuge.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began the construction of the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion at the refuge. By February 2012, the pavilion opened to the public offering what is by far the most extensive narrative representation about the Dismal Swamp maroons, their significance within the broader history of U.S. marronage and marronage within the African Diaspora, their resistance, and their creative survival and resilience within the swamp. The display within the pavilion, entitled “Resistance and Refuge,” highlights information about motivations for flight into the swamp (temporary escape, permanent independent community building, freedom), how the maroons survived once in the swamp, how the swamp’s natural and cultural landscape changes at the dawn of the 19th century – the era of canal digging, and how this effects the maroons.⁵⁷⁹ This information is also represented in one of the Refuge’s tourist pamphlets entitled, “The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad,” which adds that “as many as 50,000 maroons may have lived in the swamp,” emphasizing the great historical impact of marronage in the swamp and throughout the Tidewater.⁵⁸⁰ The pavilion is the only onsite representation of the swamp’s historical and cultural significance.

Beyond the acknowledgement that the Refuge is a designated site in the URNF, there is no information about the Underground Railroad or the swamp’s relationship to the Underground Railroad in on site or printed literature representations. Besides noting the fact that Black people escaping enslavement took flight into the swamp either temporarily or permanently, neither the pavilion nor its accompanying pamphlets mention how marronage in the Dismal Swamp is historically connected to the Underground Railroad, or why the site’s representations of the maroons are framed by the idea of the Underground Railroad and appear under the label, the “Underground Railroad Education Pavilion.” Instead, the pavilion is entirely about flight and marronage as resistance to enslavement, and life and labor in the swamp. In fact, this is the only site throughout the Dismal Swamp Tidewater region that represents the social history of the swamp as significant because of Black historical agency, freedom struggle, and resilience, without the use of trivializing language or minimalizing representations of marronage as a fundamentally resistant and self-determined act.

So, beyond the site’s designation by the URNF, why isn’t the pavilion ultimately framed by one of these concepts or themes? Certainly, there could be any number of

⁵⁷⁹ Site visit, The Great Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge, May 2013 – July 2015.

⁵⁸⁰ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad,” retrieved May 2013 and March 2015.

reasons, including the fact that the overwhelming majority of the public in this country do not identify the term “maroon” or “marronage” but are more familiar with the history of flight and escape through the Underground Railroad. And, it is through the National Park Service’s URNF Program that the Refuge established the education pavilion as an initiative to bring greater awareness to the swamp’s historical significance as a site implicated by slavery and the efforts that led to its abolition. But despite the Refuge’s attentiveness to Black resistance and marronage as integral aspects of the swamp’s history, the dominant narrative about the swamp’s historical significance is not primarily shaped by the site’s representations of the legacy of marronage and independent Black resistance, but by the vague and nebulous notion of the Underground Railroad.

Throughout the Hampton Roads, the sites that publically represent the history of the Underground Railroad include the Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge, the Dismal Swamp State Park, and the Waterways to Freedom: The Underground Journey from Hampton Roads walking tour in Norfolk, Virginia, also sponsored by the URNF Program. The leading representation of the Underground Railroad across the region follows that the network “was not underground nor was it a system of tracks, but an informal network of secret routes and safe houses used by black slaves” and orchestrated by “conductors” who “came from various backgrounds and included free-born blacks, whites, former slaves (either escaped or manumitted), and Native Americans.”⁵⁸¹ A common representation about the Underground Railroad throughout the Hampton Roads follows that:

The network provided an opportunity for sympathetic white Americans to play a role in resisting slavery, and brought together, however uneasily at times, men and women of both races to begin to set aside assumptions about the other race and to work together on issues of mutual concern.⁵⁸²

The Waterways to Freedom walking tour pamphlet also states that the Underground Railroad was organized by “conductors” who “were often skilled slaves, free Blacks, or Whites.”⁵⁸³

These representations, especially as they are made visible on the very swampland that was once the setting of untiring autonomous Black resistance against enslavement, risk obscuring our abilities to publically commemorate and represent the history of independent and self-governing networks between and among the enslaved, the manumitted, and the maroons. It is within the wide and varied range of actions of the enslaved to assert and procure their own freedom throughout the history of slavery, autonomous actions that formed countless networks to freedom across the U.S. south and across the African diaspora, that the Underground Railroad should be understood, not the other way around. Emphases on the Underground Railroad “has amplified white abolitionists’ role and unfairly relegated the real heroes – the runaways – to supporting

⁵⁸¹ Direct citations from the pamphlet entitled: Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center, “Underground Railroad Network to Freedom,” Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. Retrieved July 2015. This information is also reflected in The City of Norfolk’s walking tour guide, “Waterways to Freedom: The Underground Journey from Hampton Roads,” by Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Professor of History, Norfolk State University. Retrieved June, 2015.

⁵⁸² Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center, “Underground Railroad Network to Freedom,” Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. Retrieved July 2015.

⁵⁸³ Cassandra Newby-Alexander, “Waterways to Freedom: The Underground Journey from Hampton Roads,” The City of Norfolk’s Visitor’s Center, Norfolk, Virginia. Retrieved June, 2015.

roles.”⁵⁸⁴ John Michael Vlach agrees that it is the agency of the enslaved themselves that should be the framework by which we understand the Underground Railroad. But yet:

... the heroism of African Americans is diminished by the use of railroad metaphors that divert most of the attention to “conductors” and their “stations.” The Underground Railroad of popular legend casts blacks mainly as the passive “customers” who were fortunate enough to receive a “ticket” allowing them to ride on the “Liberty Line.”⁵⁸⁵

While the Underground Railroad is undoubtedly an essential part of U.S. history and the histories of slavery and abolition in this country, there was never one sole network of flight to freedom at any time or in any place throughout the course of history. Framed by the idea of one singular “network to freedom” or “Underground Railroad,” it is difficult to fully represent the extent of Black historical agency and self-empowerment in the Dismal Swamp without obscuring and reducing the historical significance of Black autonomy, marronage, and the organization of innumerable resistant communities.

Trivial, minimal, integrated yet unequal, and nonexistent representations of the Dismal Swamp’s historical legacy throughout the Hampton Roads, and the Dismal Swamp Refuge and State Park’s representational use of the Underground Railroad as a framework for narrating the swamp’s history of flight, resistance, and marronage are all representational practices that reflect the perspectives and priorities of the institutional actors who authorize and control the narrative representation of the swamp’s past and present significance. Priorities are often based on funding, but are also influenced by the positionalities, interests, and perspectives of the people who operate and manage these sites. As the priorities at the Canal Trail in Chesapeake and the State Park in South Mills are recreational, the priority at the Refuge is above all, nature conservation. The U.S. Congress funds the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service to “protect and manage the swamp’s unique ecosystem,” so it is little wonder that representations of the swamp’s historical and cultural importance are marginalized by ecological representations and the recreational priorities of birding, hiking, and wildlife observation.⁵⁸⁶ But when federal ownership and use of land is implicated by the history and cultural heritage of any group, and especially when implicated and called upon by historically and presently marginalized or oppressed groups, institutions have an ethical responsibility to represent the history and honor the knowledge and memory that groups possess about the land and its past. This was the motivation for the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion, according to the Dismal Swamp Refuge’s Visitors Services Specialist. She explained that the Refuge was first contacted by a local Black researcher and historian of flight and resistance in the swamp in 2001, followed by an African American artist who was working on U.S. marronage, and was then put into contact with a small community of scholars, including American University archaeologist Dan Sayers, each of whom were instrumental in the shaping of new historical imperatives at the Refuge.

⁵⁸⁴ Link, *Roots of Secession*, 100.

⁵⁸⁵ John Michael Vlach, “Above Ground on the Underground Railroad: Places of Flight and Refuge,” in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: First Smithsonian Books, 2006), 98.

⁵⁸⁶ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Great Dismal Swamp: National Wildlife Refuge,” Great Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge, Suffolk, Virginia. Retrieved May 2013, and March 2015. Private interview with the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Services Specialist, March 25 2015.

But when plans began to recognize the cultural history of the Dismal Swamp in 2001, Refuge staffs were initially against moving in the direction of historical emphasis. By the end of 2003, once the swamp had been approved and officially acknowledged by the National Park Services' URNF Program, the Refuge also received negative responses from their traditional funders and supporters. At the time, there were no definitive plans to construct the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion, but the Refuge was working with scholars who compiled a document about the swamp's history that was not well received by "old friends."⁵⁸⁷ The Visitors Services Specialist, having worked at the Refuge since 2001, admitted, "There was backlash about the word 'maroon' – we didn't know what that word meant – you know, what is a maroon and why is it called that?"⁵⁸⁸ The six page document is filled with primary source evidence of Black flight into and through the Dismal Swamp and, while it never actually defines marronage, also includes expansive material about the overt and often violent resistance of the maroons so much so that "the North Carolina State Assembly passed the Act to provide for the apprehension of runaway slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp and for other purposes."⁵⁸⁹ In addition to explaining how the maroons wreaked havoc on the swamp's surrounding plantation society, the document even includes the 1847 Preamble of the Act in question, evidencing the tremendous impact the resistance of the maroons had throughout the Tidewater region through the great fear of the planter class expressed therein.

The idea of marronage and this fuller representation of the extent of Black agency and resistance included in the document did not sit well with the traditional supporters and private donors, many of whom are descendants of people who owned property around the swamp during the time of slavery.⁵⁹⁰ The visitors specialist explained that most of their "friends" are "southern whites who did not appreciate the language of the literature," because, she gathered, the document highlighted the freedom and freeing of the enslaved, a history that is accompanied by the demise of the Confederacy. She continued that backlash from the friends and supporters stemmed from their feelings that the Refuge's new historical emphasis meant "a celebration of Confederate failure."⁵⁹¹ By 2012, when the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion opened to the public, neither the pavilion nor any other public representation of the swamp at the Refuge included any of the crucial information about the impact of the maroons' resistance throughout the swamp communities. In 2016, there are no further changes to the site.

Similarly, staff at the Dismal Swamp State Park shared that many of the park rangers were "scared and uncomfortable" with the new emphasis on the swamp's social histories of slavery, canal digging, and resistance. The African American staff member previously mentioned continued that in addition to the "uncomfortable" staff at the park, an organization she described as being "95% white," many of the park's neighboring

⁵⁸⁷ Private interview with the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Services Specialist, March 25 2015.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge: The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad," The Great Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge, Suffolk, Virginia. Written and released in 2003, retrieved March 25, 2015.

⁵⁹⁰ Private interview with the Great Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge Visitors Services Specialist, March 25 2015.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

friends and white community members also expressed distaste at some of the new emphasis on slavery and resistance in and around the Dismal Swamp.

White people are scared to have their ancestors' actions exposed and are scared to have to recognize this. They don't want their names being connected to slave owning – they don't want who owned who to come out to light.⁵⁹²

Institutional representations of slavery and resistance reflect the priorities of site staff, almost always influenced by money, perspective, experience, and personal or group desire.⁵⁹³ But the challenges involved in representing and commemorating histories rooted in slavery and especially resistance to enslavement are deeper and more complicated than this. Fully integrating representation and commemoration efforts of Black resistance against enslavement would require site to: (1) persuade and retrain administrative, curatorial and educational staffs to rethink their interpretations to incorporate Black resistance, independent opposition, and autonomy, (2) convince trustees, members, friends, subscribers, and donors to accept new interpretations that not only decenter the untroubled, heroic narratives of patriots, founding fathers, and Confederates, but that also actively challenge these celebratory narratives, and (3) radically acknowledge the most “uncomfortable” of American subjects, race as a rationale for difference, wealth, resource, opportunity, and power.⁵⁹⁴ Each of these steps would require staffs and supporters alike to embrace a shift in power enabling greater equality and inclusion through the telling of Black agency, resistance, and the refusal of African descendants to accept ongoing racial oppression then and now.

The representation of Black resistance and marronage through the conceptual framework of the Underground Railroad can be understood as reflecting institutional aspirations to selectively remember anti-slavery freedom struggle involving white aid and leadership, as a way to, either consciously or unconsciously, suppress the memory of the ever-present freedom struggles experienced by, led by, and carried out by Black people themselves. The National Park Service's definition of the URNF Program is defined as one that:

... extols the historical significance of the Underground Railroad in the eradication of slavery and the evolution of our national civil rights movement, and its relevance in fostering the spirit of racial harmony and national reconciliation.⁵⁹⁵

It may be easier and more comfortable for many to confront representations of resistance that include or depend upon interracial collaboration than it is to confront representations of freedom struggle that thrive independently and in spite of white people and dominant society itself. The latter may invoke fear about the potential for Black people to rise up and again attack or actively organize opposition against an oppressive system independently of white means, methods, and agenda. To a sizeable extent, the history of the Underground Railroad is used as a way to bandaid race relations in the present, rather than to truly work toward an equal and just society by naming the atrocities against Black

⁵⁹² Private interview with Dismal Swamp State Park staff member, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. April 24, 2015.

⁵⁹³ David W. Blight, “Introduction,” in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: First Smithsonian Books, 2006), 4. Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 11. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, xv.

⁵⁹⁴ Melish, “Recovering (from) Slavery: Four Struggles to Tell the Truth,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff on American History*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, 103-104.

⁵⁹⁵ National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, “Network to Freedom,” <http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr>. Pamphlet retrieved July 2015.

people, their resistance against them, and their resilience in spite of them so as to articulate how and why such crimes cannot be repeated in any form. It is used as a platform to ease institutional discomfort by sustaining the proximity of white experiences to the center of the narrative, assuaging white guilt of complicity throughout slavery and Jim Crow through the assurance of interracial freedom struggle, and by proclaiming the sites' benevolent aspiration of "racial harmony" and "reconciliation" instead of true healing and progress, made possible through full interpretation and radical, honest telling.

Public history is not produced separately from the politics of power, almost always tied to race as the center of struggles to create and control meaning. The history of the Dismal Swamp maroons is not only marginalized, obscured, and silenced throughout the Hampton Roads because it historically challenged dominant white society, but it remains marginal or absent because even the very act of representing this history and commemorating the brave and heroic actions of "subversives" is viewed as an act of resistance that threatens the distribution of race-based power today. Brundage has noted this as an important pattern of representation in commemoration efforts on sites with contested histories. He writes, "Southern whites, like all dominant groups seeking to claim unanimity among themselves and consent among subordinates, purposely sequestered black dissent out of their sight." Stories about Black resistance and the representation of counternarratives to dominant versions of the past are thus often "cryptic, muted, and veiled," or else "regularly obscured."⁵⁹⁶ Calling attention to acts that historically disrupted the status quo in the past also disrupts the status quo in the present, especially if present power politics are sanctioned by and through those of yesteryears.

⁵⁹⁶ Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 12.

Chapter 4: Remembering and Forgetting Black Freedom Struggle in Contemporary Dismal Swamp Communities

Despite the contemporary devaluation, marginalization, and silencing of Black resistance in public representation throughout the Hampton Roads, memory of these histories has survived within local Black communities. Even as there have been ongoing attempts to erase, disregard, or forget the histories of slavery and its social consequences, descendants of the enslaved living in the Dismal Swamp counties continue to remember and tell stories about their ancestors' flight from slavery in the refuge that once was the swamp, independently of institutional public history. Through the resilience of Black people throughout the Tidewater region across time, Black memory recalls these histories in private spaces such as the home, the yard, or the church, while they remain overwhelmingly untold in dominant, public spaces. Less commonly, Black people also establish their own avenues of public history to inspire truer, fuller, and stronger memory about Black experiences, though these counternarratives are not the focus of this chapter.⁵⁹⁷

Memories, voices, and perspectives of the descendants of the enslaved are among the most important sources of knowledge recovering and uncovering the histories of U.S. slavery and those histories in the wider African diaspora.⁵⁹⁸ Descendant memory and ways of knowing and thinking about the living history of slavery give breath and pulse to studies of U.S. slavery and its resistance where the violence of archival silence or the abstraction of human experiences by the written record otherwise risk re-transgressing the dead.⁵⁹⁹ It is through the felt history, through the voices, memories, and inherited perspectives of the descendants of the enslaved, it is through the surviving stories of those who cannot speak on their own that we may come closest to understanding a fuller and more complete account of the history of slavery and its resistance.

Above all, this restorative history methodology brings us closer to coming to terms with the undeniable links between the past and the present. By valuing Black memory and oral history as a methodology and placing descendant voices at the center of this study of the history and legacy of the Great Dismal Swamp, the insights of how contemporary historical representation, race, power, and the event of slavery itself all impact our abilities to remember the past come to light. Validating memory or felt history can in turn impact contemporary representation of the past, our conceptualization of racial meaning, and the distribution of power. Black memory becomes a tool by which healing, change, and empowerment become possible in communities founded on the legacies of slavery and social death.

Black memory of enslaved resistance, marronage, and slavery throughout the Hampton Roads underscores Black peoples' insider knowledge about these histories, and subsequently their ideas about self-preservation and protection, historical ownership, and

⁵⁹⁷ Examples include Eric Sheppard's tours at the Dismal Swamp State Park, public tours commemorating the enslaved at the African Methodist Episcopal Church Portsmouth, Virginia, The Portsmouth Colored Community Library Museum in Portsmouth, Virginia, The Smithfield Schoolhouse Museum, Project 1619, and the The Khalifah Kujichagulia Village in Drewryville, Southampton County, Virginia.

⁵⁹⁸ Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved*, 14.

⁵⁹⁹ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," (2008). See also the concept of "violence of abstraction," or the archival reduction of the human as a violation of Black historical subjectivities in Marcus Rediker, *Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking Penguin, 2007), 12.

community identity. The ways local Black communities remember these histories also reveals important insights about their relationships with public historical institutions, or lack thereof. Forgetting remains a crucial aspect of Black memory for a variety of reasons, the most compelling and significant of which relate to the ongoing and unhealed nature of slavery and its legacies.

Between January 2014 and August 2015, I met with thirty-two Black community members from six independent cities and several smaller cities and towns from three counties neighboring the Dismal Swamp. The majority of the people I spoke with were either born, raised, or both in Virginia cities and counties, while just four share roots in North Carolina. All four of these individuals are from Elizabeth City in Pasquotank County, North Carolina, directly south of the remaining Dismal Swamp and just twenty miles southeast of the Dismal Swamp State Park in South Mills, North Carolina. This area is so near the swamp, that prior to digging and draining throughout the canal era, Pasquotank County was itself subsumed by the Dismal Swamp.⁶⁰⁰ The other twenty-eight community members I met with are from the independent cities of Suffolk (10), Norfolk (6), Portsmouth (5), Newport News (1), Chesapeake (1), and Franklin (1), and towns located in Isle of Wight (3) and Southampton Counties (1), Virginia.⁶⁰¹

During this time I worked with two different churches: Christian Home Baptist Church in Windsor, Isle of Wight County, Virginia just northwest of the swamp, and Faith Deliverance Christian Center in Norfolk, Virginia directly north of the swamp. I visited Christian Home irregularly throughout this time, was given the opportunity to share with the congregation my interest in discussing local Black histories relating to the Dismal Swamp, attended church, and met with six people that were interested in talking with me about the swamp. I visited Faith Deliverance Christian Center regularly between April, 2015 and August, 2015. I attended Bible study there on a weekly basis, attended church, and met with seven people who expressed interest in discussing the swamp and its history with me. The other nineteen participants were individuals that I met through Black museums, historic sites relating to local Black histories, or were connected with me through persons I met at the churches or other historically focused networks.

Of the thirty-two people I talked with, twenty-nine of these were born and raised in the above cities and counties, and twenty-five were born in the Hampton Roads and have parents or grandparents also born and raised in the counties surrounding the swamp. While all twenty-five of these latter individuals said their ancestors are rooted in the area as far back as they could remember, only ten can and have traced their ancestors back to slavery around the swamp. Only three of the thirty-two were not born in Dismal Swamp surrounding counties but have lived in the Hampton Roads for more than ten years.⁶⁰² Of these three, one has researched and traced his ancestry back to the period of slavery in the North Carolina Tidewater. As many as ten of the people I spoke with shared that while

⁶⁰⁰ Byrd, "The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp," extract from the *Farmer's Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737. Leaming, *Hidden Americans*, 222. Royster, *The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company*, 82.

⁶⁰¹ While Franklin and Southampton County, Virginia are not incorporated in the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Statistical Area, Franklin is only 25 miles from the Dismal Swamp Fish and Wildlife Refuge in Suffolk and is directly east of Isle of Wight County, just northeast of the Dismal Swamp. Southampton County is 35 miles east of the refuge, or 35 miles east of the current swamp's easternmost border.

⁶⁰² Two out of these three have lived in the Hampton Roads for more than thirty years.

they may be “from” the cities and counties listed above, they have also lived or currently live in other cities and counties throughout the Hampton Roads.

Of the thirty-two community members I met with, twenty-two are women. All except two are older than fifty, and thirteen are over 70 years of age. The oldest person I spoke with was 81 in 2014. With the overwhelming majority of folks that I met with being well into their 50s, 60s, and 70s, the experiences of Jim Crow anti-Black violence, disfranchisement, and racial segregation emerge as recurring themes shaping the memories and perspectives of most of these Dismal Swamp community members.

It is important to note that the sample of community members that shared with me their knowledge and memory is limited by age, gender, and class. Most of the people I met with were college-educated women older than 50. Younger people across class and gender, as well as the less formally educated and poorer older men and women who live closest to the swamp, are disproportionately represented. Time, as well as the alienation, divisiveness, and stress of poverty did not permit me to foster these connections. Longer, future study must take on this task as the perceptions of the groups I have left out here are invaluable to a fuller understanding of the legacy of the swamp and the history of flight and marronage there.

Yet from my conversations with the thirty-two men and women I was able to meet with, I find that: (1) forgetting about histories rooted in slavery is commonplace and is influenced by many factors, most notably dominant practices of historical representation and a pervasive culture of trauma that is a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow; (2) Black memory about marronage in the Dismal Swamp does exist and is a vital source for restorative history; and (3) where remembering is most practiced, Black memory, rooted in resilient and self-sustaining historical narration, becomes a tool of individual and community empowerment. Through the muck and mire of race and representation in public history in and around the swamp, Black memory in the Tidewater promises untold possibility for self-empowerment and forward movement.

Forgetting, Fear, and Trauma

The overwhelming majority of the people I spoke with across the Hampton Roads had never heard of a maroon community and did not know what marronage is. Prior to my interview, twenty-one of the thirty-two individuals I met with admitted they had never heard of the term as associated with the nearby Dismal Swamp, with slavery in the U.S., or with slavery elsewhere in the African diaspora. This is significant because it means that most people I met with were completely unaware of this form of resistance as an omnipresent phenomenon during slavery, hemispherically and throughout the diaspora. Of these twenty-one participants, eleven were also completely unaware that the Dismal Swamp was a locus for Black flight from enslavement and independent, self-freed individuals and communities. This means that while twenty-one participants were completely unfamiliar with the terminology of marronage, maroons, and maroon communities as a way of describing Black flight, autonomous resettlement, and resistance, only ten of these knew and remembered stories about the swamp’s historical significance as a place implicated by slavery, flight, and the freedom making we now refer to as marronage. However, a different tally of twenty-one participants out of the thirty-two, including these ten who also did not know what marronage is, did have some knowledge or memory about Black flight and resistance in the swamp. Additionally,

there were eleven individuals out of the thirty-two I spoke with who did know what a maroon or a maroon community is. Each of these individuals also knew about the history of flight and marronage in and around the Dismal Swamp. In sum, a total of eleven people out of the thirty-two participants stated they knew absolutely nothing about the social and historical significance of the swamp.

While my sample of community voices indicates that more people in the Hampton Roads share in some memory of Black flight, independent community, and marronage in the Dismal Swamp, it is most likely that forgetting and lack of knowledge about the elusive maroons is more widespread than remembering. First, I must reiterate that I was connected with most of the participants because they were believed to be able to provide historical knowledge and were known in their communities as local historians or were individuals who came to me with stories of interest for digging deeper into the swamp's past. This means that a majority of the community members I spoke with were already familiar in some respect with the swamp's history, prior to our interview. A larger study with a wider demographic range of participants would most likely demonstrate less remembering and less knowledge about the swamp's historical and social significance.

A second indication of probable widespread forgetting is that ten community members voluntarily shared with me their frustration with their community's lack of interest and regard for historical knowledge and remembering their ancestral past. I did not ask any direct questions about participant perceptions on forgetting history and heritage, and yet five community members shared their belief that "Black people don't know this swamp history," as Daisy Saunders, 74 of Smithfield, Virginia put it.⁶⁰³ Akin Baker, 60 also stated that Black people in his community in Suffolk, Virginia "don't know," and "people don't have an interest and aren't doing the research."⁶⁰⁴ Dot Robinson, 80, of Elizabeth City, North Carolina agreed, "Local people don't have an interest because they haven't been taught. Nothing has been given to them to spark their interest in the swamp. Younger people don't have any interest and even older people don't."⁶⁰⁵ This perception was also shared by five other participants who made similar statements about their community's overall disinterest with Black history, beyond the history of the swamp. Parker Morris, 62, of Suffolk said, "I feel that white people are more knowledgeable about our history than Black people."⁶⁰⁶ Larry Porter, 59, of Newport News, Virginia disclosed, "There's a large chasm – a very large disconnect Black people have to our history."⁶⁰⁷ In fact, only three participants volunteered their belief that Black people do remember the histories of the Dismal Swamp, and all three of these participants were referring to knowledge and memory held by community elders.

Third, in addition to the elusiveness of the maroons and the historical fact that those men and women who undertook the work of absconding, flight, and marronage did not want to be discovered, it is reasonable to conclude that after the Civil War, many of the former maroons and persons who used the swamp as a space of freedom making through flight did not freely disclose that they were once considered fugitive outlaws. This information was likely often suppressed or withheld from even friends or family

⁶⁰³ Private interview with Daisy Saunders. January 12, 2014.

⁶⁰⁴ Private interview with Akin Baker, April 28, 2015.

⁶⁰⁵ Private interview with Dot Robinson. March 5, 2015.

⁶⁰⁶ Private interview with Parker Morris. March 13, 2015.

⁶⁰⁷ Private interview with Larry Porter. June 20, 2015.

members as people tried to start anew and create socially acceptable lives as legally recognized free citizens. While many do know and remember that Black people used the swamp as a freedom-making space, stories and memories about the perspectives and experiences of the maroons themselves kept alive generationally are almost certainly rare.

A fourth indication of forgetting as commonplace within local Black communities (and within local non-Black communities, for that matter) is the historiographical and socio-cultural contexts of the marginalization, obscuring, and silencing of the histories of slavery and Black resistance throughout the Hampton Roads as detailed in Chapter 3. The Hampton Roads, a landscape strewn with historical markers, monuments, and historical sites commemorating dominant histories and versions of the past, has few visible reminders of Black historical importance and fewer reminders of Black resistance and resilience in the built landscape. Most community members I spoke to throughout the Hampton Roads across the swamp expressed apathy toward the presence of the swamp despite their close proximity to it and the fact that they live near it, drive by it, see it, and know that it is close by. Out of the thirty-two people I spoke with, twenty-two said they do not or never have given the swamp much thought at all. Akin Baker, 60, of Suffolk said, “We know it’s there but we just don’t think about it ‘cause it’s been here so long. If you ask other people who live here my age, they’ll probably tell you the same thing.”⁶⁰⁸ Laura Claiborne, 68, of Windsor in Isle of Wight County regarded the swamp in her daily life by stating, “It’s just a thing you drive by.”⁶⁰⁹ Lemont Hall, 48, of Norfolk agreed, “I never considered it.”⁶¹⁰ While street names, signs, and historical markers in Suffolk and Chesapeake, the most populated cities nearest the swamp, represent the swamp’s natural and ecological splendor or commemorate the Civil War, George Washington, and William Byrd for their historical significance in and around the swamp, the scarcity of any of these to commemorate and assist the remembering of Black historical actors facilitates community forgetting of the swamp’s importance as a space of Black flight, marronage, freedom, and power.⁶¹¹

While I must concede that history books, museums, historical monuments, and other historical markers are not Black people’s primary interest, concern, or way of learning, nor do these representations of the past form the most imperative indications of the quality of Black people’s lives, I also assert that they still bear significant impact on our collective consciousness and are still relevant, influential, and of importance. This is particularly true because these vehicles of memory are representations of the past that produce knowledge about ourselves and our society that influence our social and cultural ethical values, our schools through educational curricula, the media, the law through ideology, and can thus directly influence the distribution of material resources and ideological power. As conduits of historical representation, these vehicles of memory are also relevant and important because they reveal much about how knowledge production is both shaped by the politics of power and *is* power itself. Representations of the past

⁶⁰⁸ Private interview with Akin Baker, April 28, 2015.

⁶⁰⁹ Private interview with Laura Claiborne. January 12, 2014.

⁶¹⁰ Private interview with Lemont Hall. August 1, 2015.

⁶¹¹ According to the United States Census Bureau, census data collected in 2014 shows a total population of 86,806 in the city of Suffolk, Virginia and a total population of 233,371 for Chesapeake, Virginia in the same year. South Mills, North Carolina had a total population of 454 in 2010.

produce knowledge, which dictates memory, consciousness, and ideology, which influence choice, action and finally shape individual and collective identity.⁶¹² Representation produces knowledge, and knowledge, in shaping memory and identity, begets power. The more knowledge you have, the greater the ability and foresight to act in your best interest, which is holistically empowering. Reciprocally, the empowered and the powerful are the producers of knowledge through representation and the power to produce knowledge, which influences remembering and thereby forgetting. Public history thus compels our attention because it significantly impacts what we know, how and why we remember or forget, and ultimately, how and why we individually and communally identify.

Bea Ridley, 57, of Suffolk affirmed this importance of historical representation on the built landscape in stating that, “Historical markers mean a great deal. I think they are the most important thing you can put up to remind people of what was there and who we are.”⁶¹³ Anne Carter, 56, who fought for a marker to commemorate her ancestral home, the historically free Black village of Hobson of Nansemond County, now in the city of Suffolk, offered, “Historical markers are important because they educate our future generations about our history and what we’re capable of.”⁶¹⁴ Yet, “the abuses of memory are made into abuses of forgetting,” and “the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history” on the built landscape in and around the swamp helps to establish “a devious form of forgetting... stripping the social actors of their original power.”⁶¹⁵

Community members expressed resentment about the absence of commemoration and the silences surrounding the Black history of the Dismal Swamp. Several perceived these silences and absences as a deliberate injustice to prevent knowing and block memory. Malcolm Barham, 74, of Southampton County said, “Physical resistance to captivity is the least known history of Black history. ‘Cause the victors are the ones who are telling the stories, they don’t want it to happen again.”⁶¹⁶ Charlotte Christian, 57, of Suffolk, Virginia grew up right along White Marsh Road heading toward the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, with the Dismal Swamp literally in her backyard. She shared memories of playing in the swamp water with her siblings as a child. Until the end of our conversation, she had never known the historical import of the space that was her home. Charlotte freely displayed her hurt and outrage at not knowing and exclaimed, “Our ancestors went through this, for us! I think of my ancestors when I see the swamp now. They went through all of that, to get to freedom and I’m just now hearing about it.”⁶¹⁷ Dot Robinson, 80, of Elizabeth City, North Carolina plainly stated, “It’s enough to make you angry, but I’m too old to be angry. We didn’t have the type of learning – we don’t know very much about the Dismal Swamp. That makes me angry, not knowing.”⁶¹⁸ Lemont Hall, 48, of Norfolk, Virginia was remorseful, “If I had known growing up it

⁶¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1972, 1975, 1976, 1977. Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in Ed. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: The Open University, 1997).

⁶¹³ Private interview with Bea Ridley. May 26, 2015.

⁶¹⁴ Private interview with Anne Carter. June 26, 2015.

⁶¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 448.

⁶¹⁶ Private interview with Malcolm Barham. June 7, 2015.

⁶¹⁷ Private interview with Charlotte Christian. January 16, 2014.

⁶¹⁸ Private interview with Dot Robinson. March 5, 2015.

would have interested me – it’s a missed opportunity.”⁶¹⁹ But whether local communities know it or not, the absence of historical markers and other visible reminders commemorating and celebrating the swamp’s remarkable histories of freedom struggle is damaging. Forgetting does not empower deeper pride, self-consciousness, the insight of action or movement, or stronger and fuller individual and collective senses of purpose and belonging.

Besides what’s missing from historical sites and the built landscape in and around the Dismal Swamp, forgetting is also assuaged by fear of the swamp space and respectability politics rooted in deep-seated shame. A fifth reason forgetting is commonplace is because most Black community members accordingly avoid the swamp to begin with. Community members expressed a definite reluctance to be associated with the swamp and fear of the swamp as a space of danger, lawlessness, and backwardness. Out of the thirty-two men and women I spoke with, twenty-one had never been to any of the three public access points used to enter and explore the Dismal Swamp. Of the eleven that had been to the swamp, only two had gone there for nature observation and recreation. The other nine were all drawn to the swamp because of an interest in its history, after having learned about it initially from other Black community members. Staff at the Dismal Swamp State Park, the Wildlife Refuge, and at the Dismal Swamp Canal Trail affirmed a lack of Black visitors to the swamp. The Canal Trail Parks Manager for the City of Chesapeake stated, “I couldn’t guess numbers, but from observation of visitor demographics its only whites.”⁶²⁰ The Visitor’s Services Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Refuge in Suffolk told me that when it comes to Black visitors, “the numbers are very small.”⁶²¹ The former Park Superintendent at the State Park in South Mills, North Carolina shared that the park struggles with “relevancy,” while the current Park Superintendent stated that visitors are “heavy on Caucasians.”⁶²² As most Black people are generally uninterested in going to the Dismal Swamp, Black communities miss learning opportunities as well as opportunities to represent Black knowledges and impact knowledge production and memorialization at the swamp, assisting more forgetting.

Among the thirty-two people I spoke with, fourteen voiced negative associations with swamps in general and eighteen voiced negative associations with the Dismal Swamp in particular. Participants articulated their distaste for swamps and the Dismal Swamp by very commonly listing snakes, bears, mosquitoes, and “creepy crawly things” that make them perceive swamp spaces as “nasty,” and “not inviting at all.”⁶²³ Jane Lott, 70, born and raised in Suffolk, Virginia expressed her distaste for the Great Dismal Swamp in particular when she said, “I don’t know if it’s great – but it is dismal.”⁶²⁴ Ruby

⁶¹⁹ Private interview with Lemont Hall. August 1, 2015.

⁶²⁰ Private interview with the City of Chesapeake Parks Manager office of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, Chesapeake, Virginia. April 8, 2015.

⁶²¹ Private interview with the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Services Specialist, March 25 2015.

⁶²² Private interview with the former Park Superintendent, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. January 15, 2014. Private interview with the present Park Superintendent, Dismal Swamp State Park, South Mills, North Carolina. April 13, 2015.

⁶²³ Quoted statements are taken from private interviews with John Winston (February 13, 2015), and Ruby Brown, (August 3, 2015).

⁶²⁴ Private interview with Jane Lott. May 10, 2014.

Brown, 61, of Elizabeth City, North Carolina quipped, “You know its really messed up if you call it The Dismal Swamp!”⁶²⁵ Lemont Hall, 48, of Norfolk said, “As a child driving by it the name ‘dismal’ was all we had to go by – it was a negative, spooky place.”⁶²⁶ Now a resident of Norfolk, Alice Landy, 63, born and raised in Chesapeake, Virginia described the Dismal Swamp as “something dark, something dreary.”⁶²⁷ Laura Claiborne, 68, of Windsor in Isle of Wight County said, “The Dismal Swamp is scary. There’s snakes, its full of scary stuff – something I don’t want. I wouldn’t have gone in there.”⁶²⁸ Betty Harris, 76, of Norfolk, Virginia explained, “Growing up, I’m like, I *never* want to go in there. You know, we heard all kinds of stories. Wolf man, everything will get you. Yes, so I never wanted to go in there.”⁶²⁹

In addition to the prevalence of these negative sentiments amongst community members, it was common for participants to disassociate themselves from the Dismal Swamp and from any swamp because they perceived these spaces as backward and unrespectable. Black people’s disavowal of the swamp could be explained by the fact that they historically “labored to define themselves in ways that would legitimate their claims to citizenship” and used their memories as “critical forums for constructing collective African American identities” around the ideas of “respectability and progress.”⁶³⁰ Alice Landy shared that growing up in Chesapeake along the eastern edge of the Dismal Swamp “was very rural – snakes were everywhere and we had basic, basic activities.”⁶³¹ Alice was eager to move to Norfolk where she currently lives and works in Human Resources for Housing and Urban Development, where things are faster, urban, there are more opportunities, and less snakes. Similarly, Jane Lott moved from her hometown of Suffolk to Portsmouth, Virginia where she has lived for over thirty years because she felt, “Suffolk is too rural – I wanted to be able to go places and do things.” When discussing the proximity of where she grew up in Suffolk to the swamp, she added, “The swamp isn’t for me. I’m a modern woman. I’ve never stepped foot in it.”⁶³² While Alice’s comments seem rooted in shame of proximity to the swamp and pride in proximity to the city, both Alice and Jane’s statements suggest the common perception of the swamp as being the opposite of upward mobility. To this point, Lemont Hall plainly stated, “As a child I thought of the swamp as real backwoods, and white, first of all – if anybody was in there they were white – Black people wouldn’t go in the swamp,” suggesting that swamp spaces are backward spaces Black people cannot afford the racial privilege of casually traversing.⁶³³ And Charlotte Christian, 57, of Suffolk, who grew up with the swamp at hand’s reach behind her home, told stories of her mother’s strict warnings to her and her siblings “not to go in there or else we would get a beating.” Perhaps Charlotte’s mother, born and raised in the city of Newport News, Virginia, was merely concerned for the safety of her children. Or, proud of her urban upbringing, perhaps

⁶²⁵ Private interview with Ruby Brown. August 3, 2015.

⁶²⁶ Private interview with Lemont Hall. August 1, 2015.

⁶²⁷ Private interview with Alice Landy. July 17, 2015.

⁶²⁸ Private interview with Laura Claiborne. January 12, 2014.

⁶²⁹ Private interview with Betty Harris. May 27, 2015.

⁶³⁰ Clark, *Defining Moments*, 2-3.

⁶³¹ Private interview with Alice Landy. July 17, 2015.

⁶³² Private interview with Jane Lott. May 10, 2014.

⁶³³ Private interview with Lemont Hall. August 1, 2015.

Charlotte's mother also did not want the children she was raising at the tail end of the Jim Crow era to be reared in a swamp.⁶³⁴

Indeed, the swamp in traditional southern culture is "set apart from the civilized South," and is thought of as a place that "precludes human development."⁶³⁵ The swamp is a symbol of social menace; it is a space teeming with society's rejects, "typically either Black or criminal-class white men" in popular imagination.⁶³⁶ The recent and living histories of slavery and Jim Crow shape Black people's rejection of swamp spaces in light of the lived experiences of freedom struggles for agency, human dignity, citizenship, equality, and civil rights. There is a disavowal of the swamp rooted in shame, an unwillingness to associate oneself with "backward" or "uncivilized" spaces, let alone to willingly enter the swamp, that breeds forgetting of the swamp as a space of potential power.

But Black communities fear and avoid the swamp for reasons much more imperative than dislike of the snake and mosquito infested backwoods. A sixth challenge of remembering Black power in the swamp is the trauma that haunts and invigorates terror and dread to engage the swamp's natural environment. Fear of the Dismal Swamp is tangled in entrenched generational trauma stemming from the violence and horror of slavery and Jim Crow. Joy DeGruy Leary defines trauma as "an injury caused by an outside, usually violent, force, event or experience" that "if severe enough can distort our attitudes and beliefs."⁶³⁷ She argues that Black peoples' behaviors "are in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression."⁶³⁸ Ron Eyerman conceptualizes trauma as a cultural process that is "linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory." According to Eyerman, trauma is:

... rooted in an event or series of events... but direct experience of an event is not a necessary condition for its inclusion in the trauma process. It is through time-delayed and negotiated recollection that cultural trauma is experienced.⁶³⁹

Communities inflicted with cultural trauma use the way they remember traumatizing past experiences, or their collective memory, to orient and guide them in the present, regardless of whether or not individuals and groups have directly experienced the original traumatic event. These communities rework and adjust how they remember the past to fit a particular desired set of values, beliefs, and behavior in the present. Suffering and forgetting is thus situated in this cultural process of survival and resilience. Black people remember violence, terror, and death in and around the swamp, even as they may also remember flight and resistance in the swamp. Often, one memory takes precedence over another, ensuring group survival. As a result, many, though certainly not all, commonly associate the swamp as a racialized space of anti-Black violence, danger, and as a place to avoid. From these insights, we can reimagine Black peoples' disinterest, disavowal,

⁶³⁴ Private interview with Charlotte Christian. January 16, 2014.

⁶³⁵ Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter*, 8.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶³⁷ Joy DeGruy Leary, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Uptone Press, 2005), 14.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁶³⁹ Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory," *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-12.

and avoidance of the Dismal Swamp and the forgetting of the swamp as a space of Black power and freedom.

It should be stressed that the practice and institution of slavery in this country was abolished just 152 years ago, which, for the eldest members of our society, is only two or three generations into the past. Many of the men and women I spoke with had grandparents who were born into slavery. Daisy Saunders, 74 of Smithfield in Isle of Wight County, Virginia had a grandmother born in 1857 from Nansemond County, incorporated as the independent city of Suffolk in 1974. Daisy shared that her grandmother, Amelianne, had a master in Nansemond County that “buried people in the swamp – he dumped them,” she said. Daisy’s father, Amelianne’s son, was a sharecropper in Holland, Nansemond County, Virginia, now Suffolk. “Don’t be going in the Dismal Swamp,” her father warned her. Daisy described her father as “an Uncle Tom because he helped those white folks do their dirty work.” She remembered:

One day, me and my siblings hid behind a shed and listened to the white folk and him making dirty plans. He was helping them fill holes in the swamp to bury bodies. I guess he was trying to stay in good favor because he did everything the white man asked him to do.⁶⁴⁰

As a teenager in the 1950’s, Daisy worked in the kitchen of a truck stop in Driver, a small sub-town in Suffolk known for Ku Klux Klan activity. She told the story of a racist white man who threatened her and her co-workers by taunting, “It won’t be the slave master putting them in the swamp it will be the KKK,” simply, as she put it, “just ‘cause we’re Black!” Daisy described the swamp as a place where, “Some people died trying to escape slavery but other people were killed there or dumped there. People got killed in the Dismal Swamp.”⁶⁴¹ For Daisy, the Dismal Swamp was first remembered as a space of fear and danger through memories of Black suffering, terror, and death in the wake of slavery and Jim Crow.

Ruby Brown, 61, of Elizabeth City, North Carolina had also grown up hearing about the swamp as a space of Black bodily disposability. She explained that she had heard from elders that people “lost a number of people in the swamp,” and that “the deaths were always suspicious.” She stated that, “bodies would end up in the swamp – they’re always finding bodies. The swamp is just a place where people would die.”⁶⁴² Akin Baker, 60, of Suffolk also said he was warned as a child not to venture near the Dismal Swamp. “Growing up as kids the elders would always say, ‘Don’t go in that swamp ‘cause ‘them people’ gonna get you.’ All I heard about was ‘them people.’ But they’d never name them – who these ‘people’ were.”⁶⁴³ While Akin may never know exactly who was to be feared and avoided, for both Ruby and Akin, the swamp once again becomes a space of trans-generational Black danger and fear contextualized by slavery and Jim Crow violence, terror, and segregation.

Other community members I spoke to voiced disinterest in physically visiting the swamp as a direct rejection of the swamp’s natural environment rooted in cultural trauma. Ruby Brown was very clear about her relationship to nature and the outdoors. She stated that “Blacks – we don’t want to be in a wood with trees and bugs – I’d never do activities on nature trails in the Dismal Swamp because there’s always been a very negative

⁶⁴⁰ Private interview with Daisy Saunders. January 12, 2014. May 7, 2014.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Private interview with Ruby Brown. August 3, 2015.

⁶⁴³ Private interview with Akin Baker. April 28, 2015.

association between the Dismal Swamp and people.” She explained that she learned of such an association from “community talk” and continued, “As an adult, I’m just simply not interested. I’m not going to recreate in the Dismal Swamp.”⁶⁴⁴ James Pitts, 62, of Smithfield in Isle of Wight County remarked, “We don’t like swamps.”⁶⁴⁵ When discussing the swamp’s refuge and state park, Sandra Porter, 77, of Portsmouth, Virginia declared, “I’m not a woodsy person.”⁶⁴⁶ Yvette Green, 59, of Portsmouth, Virginia shared her aversion to the swamp landscape by stating that going there is “not something people would choose to do. Because for the most part we’re not outdoor people,” referring to Black people in her community.⁶⁴⁷

While Black community collective memory of the swamp as a space of imminent danger rooted in generational trauma does not guarantee that community members collectively forgot the swamp as a space of safety, freedom, and power, the memories stemming from generations of ongoing trauma from violence, terror, and exclusion significantly influence Black people’s perspectives, choices, actions, and sense of place and identity. The living trauma from generations of slavery and its aftermath shapes the collective memory that serves as a roadmap for navigating space and environment. In her study on the relationships Black people have to the Great Outdoors, Carolyn Finney has written that the eras of slavery and Jim Crow “both resulted in explicit environmental practices by African Americans” often leading to “the avoidance of some places (e.g. the woods).”⁶⁴⁸ In addition to exploring the contemporary problem of racial inequality in visitorship, staff, and agenda in national parks and environmental management organizations and institutions, Finney explains how remembering racially motivated violence endures and discourages many Black people from venturing into wilderness spaces. Ruby Brown’s aversion to trees, Yvette Green’s dislike of the outdoors, and Sandra Porter’s aversion to woods can be reimaged and contextualized by Finney’s point that:

A tree became a painful symbol for many people, reminding them that the color of their skin could mean their death... Arguably, lynching succeeded in limiting the environmental imagination of Black people whose legitimate fear of the woods served as a painful and very specific reminder that there are many places a Black person should not go.⁶⁴⁹

Daisy Saunders’ weariness about the wooded swamp as a space where Black bodies are violated and “dumped” is very well measured when considering James G. Lewis and Robert Hendricks’s point that:

Whereas once forests provided substance and sanctuary, after the Civil War they became something to be feared. The Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations that opposed Black freedom took advantage of forest cover to mask their movements, and forests became the venue for lynchings.⁶⁵⁰

The commonness of Black community members’ refusal or rejection of approaching the Dismal Swamp and the commonness of remembering the swamp as first an appalling space of death and danger impacts community memory and forgetting of the swamp as a

⁶⁴⁴ Private interview with Ruby Brown. August 3, 2015.

⁶⁴⁵ Private interview with James Pitts. January 12, 2014.

⁶⁴⁶ Private interview with Sandra Porter. June 29, 2015.

⁶⁴⁷ Private interview with Yvette Green. May 12, 2015.

⁶⁴⁸ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 52.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁵⁰ R.L. Hendricks and James G. Lewis, “A brief history of African-Americans and forests,” *International Programs* 25, <https://www.fs.fed.us> (2006).

space of Black freedom, resistance, and resilience. Not only are many community members less likely to gain knowledge about Black history in the swamp at the state park and the refuge, the only places in the Hampton Roads where there are actually some public representations of the history (albeit minimal and marginal), but, among other reasons,⁶⁵¹ those community members who do remember the histories of flight and marronage in the swamp are also less likely to seize possible opportunities to contribute important insider knowledge to assist greater remembrance and public commemoration. Of course, this contributes to forgetting as commonplace.

There is also a reluctance of sharing insider knowledge about the swamp, contributing to forgetting, because of distrust, discomfort, and self-protection, each rooted in generational trauma and collective memory. A final cause of forgetting the potentially empowering histories of the Dismal Swamp as commonplace is Black people's unwillingness to talk about and dredge up memory of slavery. Throughout my time in the Hampton Roads, several people I was told had memories about people who had used the swamp as a way to attain greater freedoms during slavery or who had important knowledge about the socio-historical significance of the swamp declined to meet with me, despite my best efforts. Other community members I did speak with shared with me that "people are afraid and ashamed to talk about slavery... it's hard to get people to start talking about slavery and the Dismal Swamp."⁶⁵² Yvette Green, 59, of Portsmouth, Virginia shared: "I think for the most part people want to forget. God said we have to rehearse the past – but that past is sometimes so painful that we don't want to rehearse it. We try to block it. For Blacks its very painful – the same people who stuck their dogs on us are still alive."⁶⁵³ Parker Morris, 52, of Suffolk said, "We haven't gotten over the shame of our history – that our ancestors were slaves. Lots of Black people interpret that as being stupid – that we were stupid or inferior."⁶⁵⁴ Mary Carver, 75, of Portsmouth, Virginia elaborated: "Many of the elders had this thing, 'I'm not going to tell you anything.' Slavery wasn't pretty. It was not a happy life for a person to be enslaved. But it happened. And I think the closure that older people had is that, 'I don't want anybody to know that this was in my background. I'm not talking about it. I don't want anybody to know.' They wanted to keep the skeleton in the closet – and it stayed there."⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵¹ The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources at the Dismal Swamp State Park, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Wildlife Refuge, and the National Park Service have never sought out "oral histories, ethnographic interviews, and observation and participation by people, particularly descendants of enslaved Africans, with a vested interest in the representation and interpretation of their communities" as "important ways of gaining new knowledge and expanding ways of talking about Africans in plantation spaces," or spaces shaped by histories of slavery. Jackson has explained that the National Park Service has, however, done so in managing and directing the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, in order to preserve and protect the history and culture of the Gullah Geechee. Staff at both the refuge and the state park have admitted that there is "a real disconnect" (interview with Visitors Services Specialist at the Wildlife Refuge, March 25, 2015) between local Black communities and their institutions managing the swamp sites, but they maintain no plans to bridge a stronger connection with African descendants and descendants of the enslaved. See Antoinette Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved*, 30.

⁶⁵² Private interview with Dot Robinson. March 5, 2015.

⁶⁵³ Private interview with Yvette Green. May 12, 2015.

⁶⁵⁴ Private interview with Parker Morris. March 13, 2015.

⁶⁵⁵ Private interview with Mary Carver. June 20, 2015.

For many, the histories of slavery and Jim Crow are too recent, too resonant, and too alive in everyday life that there is a great deal of pain associated with remembering and speaking about this part of the past, even though restoring the crucial connections between past and present circumstance facilitates healing. Part of our trauma means that we are a wounded and unhealed people, even as we create ways to make our healing possible. Many elders lived and died suppressing, hiding, and quieting their memories and stories about the enslaved members of their family, how they lived, the social degradation and violence they faced, and most importantly, their creative survival, resistance, and resilience during slavery. It is not uncommon for older Black folk to not even know who their grandparents were, let alone carry stories about their lives since, “Mama didn’t talk about that,” as my own grandmother has said in an effort to explain why she doesn’t know much at all about her own grandmother, born into slavery in Arkansas in the 1850s. Be it from pain, shame, and trauma involved in remembering and talking about slavery or from the close guarding and protection of insider knowledge as sacred memory only to be shared very carefully and selectively, many stories have been lost and many go without remembrance.

As a descendant of the enslaved speaking with other descendants and inheritors of the legacies of slavery – including pervasive structural inequality and racial trauma – compassion and mutuality foregrounded conversations I had with community members about slavery, race, and the swamp. When people I spoke with expressed reluctance or discomfort in speaking about and remembering slavery and its aftermath in and around the swamp, I listened. As dredging up traumatic pasts can be a trauma in and of itself, I took any hesitation very seriously. Just as importantly, I accepted community disinclination to remember and discuss slavery and read it “as an experience of endurance rather than of victimization,” where trauma operated “not as a destructive force, but rather as a productive one that allows individuals to see themselves as a collectivity for whom a shared ordeal is the solidifying experience.”⁶⁵⁶

In sum, while there are many reasons forgetting the memories of Black flight, independent community, and marronage in the Dismal Swamp is commonplace in local Black communities throughout the Hampton Roads. But this forgetting has not precluded everyone from sharing in resilient memory of these histories. It remains important to emphasize where remembering and memory do exist.

Resilient Community Memory

Black community memory of flight and marronage in the Dismal Swamp tells us two things: (1) the extent to which memory and what is actually remembered is influenced by dominant representation, and (2) how the resilient knowledge, memory, and voices of descendants of the enslaved that does exist can begin to restore and recover a fuller and richer understanding of the human history and living history of the swamp.

Black people’s memory and ability to remember and commemorate enslaved resistance, Black agency, flight, or marronage in the swamp ultimately does not require, nor does it depend on institutional representation and commemoration of these histories. Certainly, there are missed opportunities of sharing and learning to make possible less forgetting and greater remembering of these histories. As I have shown, this is primarily due to politics of race and power in dominant representational practices, compounded by

⁶⁵⁶ Davis, *Laying Claim*, 13.

Black community fear, distrust, and trauma. But these losses have not stopped Black people from creating our own independent and unassisted spaces of knowledge and surviving, resilient memory. While some Black people remember the legacy of slavery in the Dismal Swamp because of institutional representations in dominant spaces like the Dismal Swamp Wildlife Refuge or the State Park, others remember from oral histories and historical narration passed down and kept alive in Black family and community spaces.

Of the twenty-one community members I spoke with who had some knowledge and memory of the histories of flight and marronage in the Dismal Swamp, only three reported that they learned this history from visiting the state park or the refuge. The other eight people who had been to these sites in the swamp either visited before the relatively recent establishment of the Visitor's Center at the park in 2008 and the Underground Railroad Educational Pavilion at the refuge in 2012 or did not recognize visits to these sites to be the primary way they learned of and came to remember the historical significance of the swamp. There were a total of ten out of these twenty-one who said they learned of the histories of flight and marronage in the swamp from the research and scholarship of Dan Sayers (4), Cassandra Newby-Alexander (1), Eric Sheppard (4), and Imtiaz Habib (1). This is largely because eight of these ten were themselves considered local historians who had met with these researchers because of a shared interest in local Black histories. A total of twelve individuals shared that they came to remember the histories of flight and marronage in the swamp through personal research. Of these, eight had studied the Underground Railroad, not the history of marronage. None of these twelve had exclusively learned about flight and marronage in and around the swamp through their own research; eight had first learned from the above-mentioned researchers, and four had first learned from elders in their families. There were a total of nine people out of the twenty-one who gained knowledge and shared in the memory of flight and marronage through elders in their family. Despite the difficulties surrounding remembering, most Black people commemorate and remember these histories outside of dominant spaces of knowledge and memory.

Although twenty-one people were aware of the Dismal Swamp as a place of refuge for "runaway slaves," and eleven of these twenty-one people remembered the existence of the permanent and impermanent maroon communities in the swamp, there were only nine people out of the total thirty-two who had stories about the maroons and those in flight through the swamp from oral histories passed down generationally. Such a small number may seem discouraging, but it nevertheless proves that there are private spaces of resilient descendant knowledge, Black family and community memory and commemoration of the swamp's history.

Laine Willis, 55, from Chesapeake, Virginia, shared that her parents, both born and raised in Chesapeake, Virginia, and northeastern North Carolina to the south of the swamp, taught her that "the swamp was a place of refuge from slavery." She explained that as a result, she looks at the swamp and remembers "bloodhounds – Harriet Tubman – and hideouts." She said, "I know that the Dismal Swamp was a pathway to escape, but I have limited knowledge."⁶⁵⁷

Yvette Green, 59, of Portsmouth said that her mother, born and raised in Mount Airy, North Carolina, almost 300 miles west of the Dismal Swamp, came to Norfolk,

⁶⁵⁷ Private interview with Laine Willis. July 7, 2015.

Virginia, in 1940 where she raised her children. Yvette, having lived in both Norfolk and Portsmouth, but having lived in Portsmouth the longest, said that her mother told her “people ran away and lived in that swamp – people went through there. Slaves were running through from their masters and the slave masters would chase them with dogs.”⁶⁵⁸ Yvette did not know how her mother came to share in the memory of flight through the Dismal Swamp.

Sara Haywood, 57, of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, shared that her father, born in the 1920s, who had learned from his own mother and father, born at the turn of the 20th century, and grandmother, born into slavery in Elizabeth City, told her stories about the swamp whenever they would drive along Interstate U.S. 17. “Look over there,” he’d say, as he’d share stories with her and her eight siblings about Black labor and freedom in the swamp. According to Sara, he said, “Many of our people lived over there and built that canal.” In an effort Sara identified as “instilling pride and purpose in us about our ancestors’ accomplishments,” her father told her and her siblings “the swamp was a place of freedom, travel, and escape.” Sara also remembers her father sharing that “many slaves died building the canal and it wasn’t worth it; the canal laborers were treated very poorly.” Now, Sara says that whenever she sees the swamp, she “feels something.” She said, “It’s as if someone is standing right there and watching you. I can feel my ancestors.”⁶⁵⁹

Bea Ridley, 57, was born and raised in Suffolk, Virginia after her parents, both born and raised in Scotland Neck, North Carolina, about 40 miles southwest of the swamp, migrated north in the 1950s. Bea said that her family is rooted in that area as far back as her great-great grandparents. She remembered:

Growing up we used to hear about how slaves used to live in the Dismal Swamp, and how Black people used to survive. Based on my father and them talking it was always in reference to Black people staying in there as slaves. They used to say it was a hard place to live. I always heard them talking about the Dismal Swamp in reference to Black people, slavery, runaway slaves, and freedom. It was a place to hide.⁶⁶⁰

As we continued to talk, Bea shared that her father and other older people she knew growing up used the swamp for its natural resources and essentially lived (in part) off of the swamp. She explained:

People used to come back in the old days and sell muskrats and squirrels and I used to say, “Who eats that kind of stuff?” But they were great, I mean – these older people used to go out in the Dismal Swamp and catch these things! And they’d come around on the weekends with it and sell it like it was a delicacy! I remember the muskrat man, they would call him the muskrat man. And people used to cook them things like rabbits! My father used to make ashtrays out of turtle shells from the turtles in the swamp, and he would make helmets for the boys. They were just so creative!⁶⁶¹

Bea had affirmed Black community creative survival and resourcefulness in the swamp as a longstanding practice from slavery through the end of Jim Crow. Her memory of the ways in which her family and friends used the swamp creatively for community building, for sustenance, for income, and for pleasure, makes the ways in which maroons lived and creatively survived in the swamp even more imaginable. Bea continued:

⁶⁵⁸ Private interview with Yvette Green. May 12, 2015.

⁶⁵⁹ Private interview with Sara Haywood. April 24, 2015.

⁶⁶⁰ Private interview with Bea Ridley. May 26, 2015.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

When I think of the Dismal Swamp I think about slavery, and how Black people used to have to live in the swamp and it just amazes me, the conditions they lived in. To look at it now I think about the things our people went through in order to survive or to be able to make a living. It just makes me very humble to even imagine that our forefathers stayed in those conditions. I have great respect for the swamp.⁶⁶²

Bea's attitudes and perspectives about the swampland, built by the generational memory and community valuation of Black people's agency and resilience in the swamp, are an important source of insider knowledge validating the ways Black people have regarded the swamp over time and beyond fear and aversion. Her descendant knowledge about the swamp expands upon the specific ways Black people's relationship with the swampland has been shaped by opportunity, independence, mobility, self-sufficiency, and self-empowerment.

Larry Porter, 59, raised in Newport News, Virginia was born in Edgecombe County, North Carolina, some 80 miles southwest of the swamp. His parents and grandparents were born and raised in Halifax County, North Carolina, about 70 miles west of the swamp and only one county directly west of Gates County surrounding and comprising the swamp's easternmost border. Larry said that growing up, his family took many trips to Halifax County to visit with family and friends. He shared:

Every time we went to North Carolina we had to go through parts of the Dismal Swamp. As a child, traveling back and forth from Virginia and North Carolina I would hear stories from my parents and grandparents about Black people who had to run into the swamp for survival. Stories about Black people – slaves who had to live in the swamp under the challenging conditions at that time.⁶⁶³

Larry said that he considered the eastern parts of Halifax County where his family lived to be bordering the Dismal Swamp. He described his relationship to the swampland in these borderlands and his regard for the Dismal Swamp itself.

When I was growing up and we'd be in North Carolina, there were swamps everywhere. You know we fished in the swamp, we hunted in the swamp, trapped in the swamp. But these swamps couldn't compare to the Dismal Swamp. It's different from any other swamp because it was a part of the Underground Railroad. When we talk about the Dismal Swamp we talk about freedom. We think of it as the biggest and the most dangerous of all swamps. Our people have always found a way.⁶⁶⁴

For Larry, swamps meant family, sustenance, and self-sufficiency while the Dismal Swamp meant these things but distinctly Black survival in difficult, dangerous times and spaces. In short, the swamp is a space of ongoing Black community practice, autonomy, and freedom making by way of independence, self-determination, and creative survival.

Jane Lott, 70, born and raised in Suffolk, Virginia, is a descendant of Joe Skeeter, who came to Virginia from either France or England in 1776, made claim to land in the Dismal Swamp borderlands, is believed to have served as George Washington's guide through the swamp, and worked as a shingle counter for the Dismal Swamp Company. Either his daughter or granddaughter married a free Black man and set up a home where they raised children in the fringes of the swamp in the area now known as the historically free Black town of Skeetertown.⁶⁶⁵ Skeetertown, a small community in Suffolk, is four

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ Private interview with Larry Porter. June 20, 2015.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ It is said that Joe Skeeter was a "thoroughbred swamper and fisherman." See Kermit Hobbs and William A. Paquette, *Suffolk: A Celebration of History* (Virginia Beach, Virginia: The Donning Company Publishers, 2006), 45.

short miles away from the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. During the days of slavery it would have been found inside of the swamp's northwestern edge. Jane said that her grandmother told her stories that "the Skeeters passed along" about "runaway slaves in the swamp." She said her grandmother told her "runaway slaves dug out holes in the swamp and had children there. They were living in a camouflaged hole."⁶⁶⁶ This oral history supports the narratives of formerly enslaved persons documented by the "all-Negro unit" of the Virginia Writer's Project in the 1930s, accounting for similar survival in similar, and nearby, environments.⁶⁶⁷ Jane's oral history expands how we might imagine peripheral maroons, those that would be most likely to make themselves known to the outside world, and those most likely to have hidden away underground.

Jane explained that the Skeeters, all of whom were historically free Black people, "gave clothing and food to enslaved communities and assisted runaways who were hiding out in the swamp."⁶⁶⁸ Certainly, this not only affirms the ever-presence of Black people asserting their freedom in the swamp, but it also confirms the relationships free Black people, enslaved people, and maroons had as they built networks and created alternative landscapes of Black power, freedom, and mobility. Although Jane grew up hearing these potentially empowering stories about Black collaboration, community, and resistance, the manner by which her grandmother narrated them did not emphasize the agency and resilience of the self-freed maroons. Instead, Jane's grandmother emphasized the distance between "runaways" and the Skeeters based on the fact that, "We've never been slaves. We've always been free." Jane said she took great pride in having descended from people who were free-born, a memory that separates her from the destitution of "runaway slaves" who dug holes in the swamp. Throughout Jane's life, her primary regard for the swamp remained one of fear, aversion, avoidance, and negative associations. Jane's stories help to deepen and enliven our understanding of varied and textured community knowledge and memory, and the history and living historical legacy of the Dismal Swamp.⁶⁶⁹

Anne Carter, 56, born and raised in the historically free Black village of Hobson of Nansemond County, now a small community incorporated in the city of Suffolk, describes herself as a seventh generation waterman descending from a long line of oyster fishers living and working along the James and Nansemond Rivers, the northernmost border of the historically pre-drained and pre-developed Dismal Swamp.⁶⁷⁰ According to Anne, Hobson was recognized as being settled after the Civil War; in part, it was a refuge for those escaping lynching and other racially motivated acts of violence and disfranchisement. But prior to the war, the land once known as Barretts Neck was both a Quaker asylum and a self-protected community of free Black people and "runaway slaves."⁶⁷¹ Anne told me that as a seventh generation waterman who learned a way of life from those before her, and those before them, the elders of Hobson bestowed upon her

⁶⁶⁶ Private interview with Jane Lott. May 10, 2014.

⁶⁶⁷ See Sis Shackelford and Rev. Ishrael Massie's accounts, referred to on page 73. See also Diouf's description of borderland maroons dwelling in holes and caves, *Slavery's Exiles*, 99-106.

⁶⁶⁸ Private interview with Jane Lott. May 10, 2014.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid. See also Jane's aforementioned comments on her distaste for and avoidance of the swamp, pages 118-119.

⁶⁷⁰ Byrd, "The Earliest Passage Through the Dismal Swamp," extract from the *Farmer's Register* 4, 10: (February 1, 1837), originally written between 1728 and 1737.

⁶⁷¹ Private interview with Anne Carter. June 27, 2015.

the knowledge and memory of enslaved friends seeking refuge in her own village and throughout the swampland that surrounds it to the immediate east and south. Anne spoke with her elders persistently seeking knowledge in an effort to preserve and carry on the history and the memory of the history. She collected “hundreds of tapes of oral history” and guards it fiercely.⁶⁷² As watermen, she learned, Hobson’s ancestors “knew about the Dismal Swamp just like weathermen know about the weather. They knew about the Dismal Swamp – they knew where to go and where to navigate.”⁶⁷³ She informed me that “Slaves would run and they would hide in the Dismal Swamp. Cause nobody could find them there. White folks were scared of the Dismal Swamp.”⁶⁷⁴

Although Anne was one of the twenty-one people out of the thirty-two participants in this project who did not know what a “maroon,” “marronage,” or a “maroon community” is, after I explained the meaning of the terms to her, she nodded and said:

And you can identify us as maroon. I identify with what you’re saying. That’s what we were in the Dismal Swamp, because when the white people came, that’s where we ran to. Because we knew they didn’t know nothing about the Dismal Swamp where they could survive. But we could.⁶⁷⁵

I do not push the idea that because of their heritage as freedom loving watermen Anne and her community of descendants of free Blacks and “runaways” are now to be considered maroons. But these statements are significant in demonstrating that through her memory of freedom struggle in the swamp, Anne *presently* rejects the valuation of inclusion in an oppressive dominant society through this continued ancestral tradition of resistance. Her memory of Black “ecolocal culture” in the swamp that fostered creative survival, subversion, resistance, freedom, and power contrasts starkly with her memory of white “ecolocal culture” in the swamp that sustained fear, disorientation, attempts to control the land and labor of the land, and domination and capture of Black people in flight.⁶⁷⁶ Such remembrance, coupled with the insistent use of the pronouns “we”/“us” and “they” to situate the living Hobson community with the maroons in opposition to white people defies white power in the past and in the present and is thereby in and of itself an act of power and resistance. Through resilient memory, Black people do recognize the Dismal Swamp as a space of empowerment.

Anne impressed upon me that the community of Hobson, banked on the northern stretch of land at the intersection between the James and Nansemond Rivers that once formed the crown of the swamp, is in fact still a part of the Dismal Swamp. In fact, today Hobson is only 15 miles north of the Dismal Swamp’s northeastern-most edge, across the

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ This supports and is supported by Cecelski’s description of the “collective knowledge” of watermen as “indispensable” to the enslaved and those in flight in his study, *The Waterman’s Song* (2004). Black watermen and boatmen, with their great knowledge of local waters, could have had “regular interaction” and worked to assist enslaved persons, those in flight, and maroons “in the far reaches of coastal waters, well distant from public scrutiny.” See Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 81, 139.

⁶⁷⁴ Private interview with Anne Carter. June 27, 2015.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Nelson defines “ecolocal culture” as “constellations of ideas about and images of local inundated lowlands that shaped community identity and action.” She argues these constellations inform and are informed by racialized experiences. The idea of “ecolocal culture” is a useful framework for conceptualizing how Black people have historically created their own alternative landscapes and spatial narratives for freedom, power, and survival. See Megan Kate Nelson, “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamps,” 251-272.

Nansemond River. She held, “Black people were the ones here before all this stuff came! We’re here in the swamp now!” By “stuff,” Anne was referring to land development, suburbanization, and inequitable growing white ownership and control of formerly Black owned Hobson land – land now owned more and more by white people who work with the city of Suffolk to devalue Hobson homes and boldly encroach upon the present day outskirts of the diminishing independent Black community. Anne stated:

White people want to control the swampland because they don’t respect it. All they see is money. They want to build new homes and develop the land, but little do they know that it’s on top of the Dismal Swamp! But we know that this is sacred ground. And in that swamp, slaves are buried there and have died there. Why would we build on top of that for? No.⁶⁷⁷

Her view that the swamp is hallowed and spirited ground and her association with the swamp fringes as home are interchangeable. Today, Anne struggles on behalf of her community with race based environmental injustice, disputes over land acquisition, and historical recognition. These perspectives and Anne’s decision to “fight fearlessly” for her community and the land she proudly identifies as swamp are guided by her knowledge and memory of her ancestors in Hobson and their historical involvement in Black freedom struggle and autonomy.⁶⁷⁸ She defends the swamp as she knows it and has experienced it because she remembers its historical significance and values its living history as heritage. Her words are also important because they reveal the ways in which some local Black communities, like the maroons before them, continue to create spaces of Black knowledge and resilient memory and action that defy dominant delineations of spatial boundaries and geographical limits. For Anne, the Dismal Swamp is not contained by the bounds mapped out by the city of Suffolk, the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources or by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Dismal Swamp is not the State Park nor is it the Wildlife Refuge, (though she has visited the refuge). Rather, the swamp is freedom, community, and Anne’s ancestral home.

⁶⁷⁷ Private interview with Anne Carter. June 27, 2015.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 8. Hobson, directly north of the Nansemond River and directly west of the James River, in proximity to the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. (Source: Google, 2017).

Anne shared with me that there is another village south of Hobson experiencing similar issues of racial inequality, socio-historical devaluation, and resource deprivation along the southern banks of the Nansemond River, only about 5 miles north of what is now recognized as the Dismal Swamp’s northeastern-most edge. That village, located in the Suffolk community of Driver, is known among Black community members throughout this area as The Swamp, though it is not listed anywhere in any formal capacity. Anne said:

Oh yes it is a part of the Dismal Swamp! It’s just that they – The Swamp – they just found a piece of dry land where they could develop. Everything else around them was marsh and what not, you know. And people live down there. People are still thriving. It ain’t like – it’s not like – it’s just like if you come here, there’s houses there. There’s a lot of people who are descendants of the first Black people here that live in The Swamp now.⁶⁷⁹

It is unclear as to whether or not The Swamp was another community of “runaway slaves,” but both communities on either side of the Nansemond River are known to have

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

historically been home to Black watermen who made their living fishing, farming, trading, and serving as guides in the wetlands that are the Tidewater. Anne explained that both communities were founded through Black people's self-establishment, self-organization, and resourceful relationship with the land. She prided:

We were totally self-sufficient, independent – that's how this house was built, that's how the church was built, that's how the schools and the stores we had were built. We helped each other to develop our gifts and talents by serving one another, that's how this all came about.⁶⁸⁰

Anne's descriptions of life, community building and morale in the dry land of the swamp offer new meaning to possibilities for imagining daily life and community in the Dismal Swamp exterior and interior communities. Her memory, stories, attitudes, and perspectives about the swamp open new opportunities for interpreting the swamp's history and its significance as being a space of home, family, community, independence, and freedom.

Daisy Saunders, 74, of Smithfield in Isle of Wight County, Virginia was not afraid of the Dismal Swamp. Although she expressed her view of the swamp as a place where Black people were subject to the terrors and violence of slavery and Jim Crow and were killed and disposed of in its miry depths, she nevertheless visited the refuge to go fishing on one occasion in 1967.⁶⁸¹ Daisy may have first shared memories of how the swamp has historically posed danger to Black people, she also shared strong memories of the swamp as a place of safety – a refuge for “runaway slaves.” One day at Christian Home Baptist Church in Windsor, Isle of Wight County, Daisy brought me a newspaper article from the *Daily Press* that she had saved dated February 27, 1994 entitled, “Runaway slaves found freedom in the Swamp.” When I asked her why she had saved it for over 10 years, she explained that her grandmother Amelianne, born into slavery, told her stories about the Underground Railroad in the Dismal Swamp. She continued, “My grandmother told me they used to breathe through reeds and submerge under the water to try to hide from the masters.”⁶⁸² She explained that hearing these stories from her grandmother made her realize that “slavery is important; we need to see it.” For Daisy, the swamp could also become a positive and empowering place to view, to visit, and to remember how “Black people left out of slavery and escaped the white people, the old masters, in that swamp.”⁶⁸³ Daisy also remembered a time when she was in her 30s in the early 1970s, “an old man” told her how his uncle, who had been enslaved, told him how he survived in the Dismal Swamp. She told me that the old man, a friend of her family, said his uncle made a bed in the trees he called a “cocoon” and pillaged to survive and eat for a few weeks. These stories deepen our understanding of the normalcy and commonness of historical Black perspectives of the swamp as a refuge and space of freedom that is in fact generational knowledge. As oral histories, they supplement other sources of historical narration to enable a fuller understanding and a richer imagination of life in the swamp for the maroons. Of course, they also evidence the existence of resilient Black memory, despite the difficulties involved in remembering histories of slavery and marronage throughout the Hampton Roads.

In May of 2014 I happened to meet John Winston, 24, of Franklin, Virginia, with no prior connection, at a hotel in Suffolk where I was lodging as I continued my field

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ For an account of Daisy's negative associations with the Dismal Swamp, see page 121.

⁶⁸² Private interview with Daisy Saunders. January 12, 2014.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

research. He was with a group of Old Dominion University students who had just graduated, as was made apparent by their regalia. I congratulated them and as we began to talk I shared that I was working on a project involving the Great Dismal Swamp. Having no real idea about the nature of my work, John then volunteered, “Oh no not the Dismal Swamp. My great-aunt always forces us to sit around and listen to her stories about her great-grandfather Jimmy who used to live in the swamp. Whenever the family gets together we have to hear about Jimmy having to go and live in the swamp.” John said he didn’t remember hearing the details surrounding Jimmy’s life in the swamp, but that he would put me in contact with his great-aunt. He warned me, “between us, sometimes she doesn’t like to share.”⁶⁸⁴ After several attempts to follow up with John about meeting his great-aunt, also in Franklin, Virginia, including a more formal visit with John in February, 2015, he finally disclosed that she did not want to talk about her family relationship to the Dismal Swamp, even by phone. Perhaps distrust, protection of insider community knowledge, or hesitation to discuss the topic of slavery even when framed by flight, escape, and resistance helped thwart our meeting – or perhaps there was a degree of shame or embarrassment involved in the prospect of sharing with an outsider the personal family history of how John’s great-grandfather Jimmy laid out in the swamp. Whatever the exact reason I could never arrange to speak with her, I understood that the story may be most useful and powerful remaining in the family, and John’s story about his great-aunt who tells tales of an ancestor surviving in the Dismal Swamp would have to be sufficient evidence that there are in fact spaces of Black community knowledge and generationally resilient memory about flight and marronage in the swamp.

These stories and memories passed down across time tell us that plenty of local Black communities create spaces where Black people narrate and control the way the past is represented and remembered. They instruct us to consider the ways in which Black memory and what is actually remembered about the swamp may be influenced by dominant representation through its absences and silences or through the culture of trauma that is the legacy of slavery, but that these obstacles have not and do not prevent Black people from remembering and commemorating the swamp as a positive space of resistance, power, and freedom. For that matter, resilient Black memory should be regarded as no less important, if not *more* important, than dominant historical narrations and public representations, from a Black community centered perspective.

Interrogating remembering and forgetting in the Dismal Swamp counties reveals that there is a tension between Black community knowledge and memory and institutional representation and commemorative efforts (or lack thereof) of the swamp’s history and historical significance. Black people in large part want little to do with the swamp and are hesitant to discuss slavery, while institutions continue to marginalize and silence the histories of Black resistance and power in the swamp, and continue to devalue and ignore the voices, knowledges, and memories of living descendants of the enslaved living around the swamp. Though resilient Black remembering in non-dominant spaces happens without requiring Black people to visit the swamp or engage the institutions that represent its histories, stronger, closer relationships and institutional *listening to* and *learning from* Black people’s memories and ways of knowing is a first step toward achieving a more equitable historical representation of the swamp’s importance in local

⁶⁸⁴ Informal meeting with John Winston. May 2014. Private interview with John Winston. February 13, 2015.

and national collective memory. The resilient memory that does exist and the voices of descendants of the enslaved that can be accessed need to be valued by institutions toward the restoration and recovery of fuller and richer understandings of the human history and legacy of the swamp. Institutions should prioritize working with Black local historians and other community leaders so that descendant knowledge can inform, enliven, enrich, and make possible new memory and understanding of Black agency, survival, and resistance in the swamp.

The voices and memories of community members who shared their perspectives of the swamp as a space of community, freedom, independence, and Black power are encouraging. Despite the hardships they face in a dominant culture of historical silence and forgetting, Black people keep alive memory of resistance and marronage in the swamp through the sheer resilience of their agency and will – indomitably powerful legacies Black communities continue to embody in the aftermath of slavery.

Conclusion: Empowering Legacies of Resistance

The living history of the Dismal Swamp maroons tells a story about race, space, and power across time. The maroons themselves radically transformed the swamp muck and mire into a space of Black freedom and independence, and through their use of the swamp as a locus of resistance, transformed the swamp and the surrounding Tidewater into a landscape of Black knowledge and power. Into the 20th century, Jim Crow segregation, anti-Black violence, and terror recreated the Dismal Swamp as a fearful space of Black death, or, as a space to be associated with the social death of Black respectability and upward mobility. Through the ensnaring muck of anti-Black racism from slavery to Jim Crow, and through the sinking mire of present-day silencing and erasure of Black historical agency and *resistance* in public history, a blatant ongoing accommodation of whiteness, resilient Black community memory uprises. Much in the liberationist tradition of the Dismal Swamp maroons themselves, who, by way of their own ingenious design creatively identified ways to resist and rise against the forces that kept them oppressed, Black people in the Tidewater commemorate and remember their historical agency around the swamp in order “to imagine new futures, and to use history as a critical force for change” through memory and consciousness, a radical act in current political climes in and of itself.⁶⁸⁵ Independent of institutional representation that too often denies the freedom to publically memorialize representations of the past reflecting Black desires, interests, and aspirations on the sacred ground where Black people were enslaved, or where they broke their bonds, Black people (and too, the institutions that silence these aspects of the past) recognize the usable past of historical Black resistance.⁶⁸⁶ By creating their own spaces to honor it, Black people in the Tidewater, the very moment they memorialize, remember, and commemorate enslaved agency, marronage, or revolt around the swamp, empower themselves and their communities with the promise of reviving the spirit of resistance to combat prevailing anti-Black racism, tapping the power of past freedom struggles to motivate present action, and pride in Blackness itself.

Though few remember or memorialize the historical impact of marronage in the Dismal Swamp and throughout the Tidewater, today, this history is most visibly etched in the cultural landscape of self-taught and multigenerational Black memory. Minimally and marginally represented or made visible to the public at the historical sites where it occurred, most Black people immaterially forge their own spaces of historical representation and knowledge production in their living rooms, at their dining room tables, in their churches, and in other everyday places. Others, like Eric Sheppard, Sandi Stigers, Mae Breckinridge-Haywood, and H. Khalif Khalifah create their own venues for making local Black historical experiences visible and accessible to the public. They represent the history of slavery and resistance at their own museums, cultural centers, and libraries, through their own tours and brochures, from the vantage point of their own perspectives and values. In doing so, they create their own fountain of self-sustaining memory that is self-validating, empowering, and potentially socially transformative.

⁶⁸⁵ Marable, *Living Black History*, xx.

⁶⁸⁶ Henry Steele Commager conceived a “usable past” as a way to describe the state’s selective narrative of aspects of national history in the construction of national memory and a desired national identity. Cited in J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Blackwell, 1992), 129.

Sheppard, president of Diversity Restoration Solutions, a “social business entity” based in Suffolk and Newport News, Virginia, founded the initiative to create “mutually beneficial social and economic restoration” to Africans and African descendants in Virginia and Gambia.⁶⁸⁷ He raises money toward Black social and economic uplift by offering historical tours, a “Homecoming Pilgrimage” to the Gambia, and other public events rooted in heritage building and the narration of Black history in the Hampton Roads. Sheppard’s tours, called “The Underground Railroad Experience,” are certified by the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. The tours take visitors to sites of Black flight from enslavement in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Hampton, and in the Great Dismal Swamp at the State Park in North Carolina. As mentioned previously, Sheppard’s tours are the only historical tours offered to the public at the State Park,⁶⁸⁸ and it was at Sheppard’s insistence (along with the attention to Dan Sayers’ work) that the histories of Black flight, enslaved labor, and marronage in and around the swamp are ultimately represented and commemorated there, albeit minimally and marginally so. For Sheppard, the most important point of his work is “to share with people so that we [Black people] can find out who we are – to define ourselves, ourselves.”⁶⁸⁹ Sheppard’s tours help fill the gaps and silences in public history around the swamp, an effort he says mediates “healing from slavery.” He continued to say that his underlining goal is “to tell our own stories like only we can, because it is our inheritance – there’s power in that.”⁶⁹⁰

Organized by the late Sandra Stigers of Portsmouth, Virginia, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Portsmouth offers public tours commemorating the “undaunted courage” of the enslaved and the free Blacks that built the church with their own hands, in “rebellion against the increasing restrictions of segregation” and social control “that [was] imposed upon their right to worship.”⁶⁹¹ The tour includes a visit to a hiding space underneath the front podium once used to conceal enslaved people fleeing to safer destinations. Stigers said the goal of her tours is to keep the history alive so that “people will have pride in what our people have accomplished here.”⁶⁹²

The Portsmouth Colored Community Library Museum, directed by Mae Breckinridge-Haywood, preserves Portsmouth’s history of segregation, and segregated public education in particular. The museum is housed in the original structure of a “colored” public library, “where African Americans could freely enter, borrow books, improve their reading skills and their knowledge during the 1930s.”⁶⁹³ It remains an important landmark commemorating Portsmouth Black history more generally, and features exhibits on slavery showcasing chains and other instruments of bondage, Black flight and resistance, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, Black businesses, schools, and other facets of life Black people experienced in historic Portsmouth. But Breckinridge-Haywood assured me that preserving the library and

⁶⁸⁷ <http://www.diversityrestoration.com>

⁶⁸⁸ See Chapter 3, page 103.

⁶⁸⁹ Private interview with Eric Sheppard. January 15, 2014.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Private interview with Sandra Stigers. June 29, 2015. “The Church Then... Reflections on a Historical Monument,” Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, tour brochure retrieved June 29, 2015.

⁶⁹² Private interview with Sandra Stigers. June 29, 2015.

⁶⁹³ Pamphlet entitled, “Forever Free: Portsmouth Stories of African American Strivings and Successes,” retrieved June 20, 2015.

memorializing Black history in a museum was no easy task. A member of the African American Historical Society of Portsmouth (AAHS), founded in 1996, she and the other members “stayed vigilant” once they heard that the city was “ready to tear down prominent historical African American sites,” so they tirelessly insisted that the city preserve the original buildings, until they reached an agreement. After tremendous efforts to gain the city’s support, raise funds (the AAHS published a book and sold a series of cookbooks), collect artifacts, and set up exhibits, the Colored Community Library Museum’s inaugural exhibit finally opened in 2013, despite the fact that the city mandated the museum be set “off the beaten path,” “resegregated,” and separated from all the other museums in the Portsmouth Olde Town District.”⁶⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the opening of the museum could not have, and would not have been accomplished without the urgency of Black people’s leadership in Portsmouth. The museum is now widely recognized as a staple community resource and a “historic treasure” within the Black community. Breckinridge-Haywood said that the museum attracts predominately local Black community members who are “very surprised and proud,” she said, “that we were able to collect our history and have it here in this building to show.”⁶⁹⁵ The work of Black people like Breckinridge-Haywood to publically commemorate Black historical agency and perseverance moves locals to feelings of pride and invigorated sense of place, belonging, community and kinship.

The Khalifah Kujichagulia Village in Drewryville, Southampton County, Virginia is an African-centered “agro-tourist destination” set on 123 acres of “sacred ground” – the birthplace of Nat Turner.⁶⁹⁶ The Swahili word “kujichagulia” means “self-determination,” and this site, founded and directed by H. Khalif Khalifah, locates its purpose in the “special emphasis of the philosophy of Self-Determination and “Do For Self” principles of independence, autonomy, and freedom. The Kujichagulia Village offers a primarily Black following the opportunity to “assist in harvesting or cultivating food crops” toward holistic health, participate in the “Man Up Rites of Passage Camp” for Black boys and young men, visit the Nat Turner Library (containing “5,000 volumes of books... featuring the most comprehensive profiles on the depth and breadth of historic and contemporary Black Leaders”), and take the Nat Turner Trail Tour, a two hour “living history tour” featuring sixteen sites following the chronology of the infamous revolt.⁶⁹⁷ Like Nat Turner, who’s purpose, according to Khalifah’s tour narrative, “was to free every Black man, woman, and child,” the Kujichagulia Village uses the history of Black autonomy and overt enslaved resistance to effect the exact same aims.⁶⁹⁸ The Village was established as a safe-space for Black people “during natural or manmade crisis,” the latter a concern Khalifah validates given the continuing history of anti-Black racial violence.⁶⁹⁹ His primary mission is to defend Black history and “to tell

⁶⁹⁴ Private interview with Mae Breckinridge-Haywood. June 20, 2015.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Flier entitled, “U.B. & U.S.C.S. is Celebrating 40 Years of Independent Black Publishing,” retrieved May 6, 2015. Pamphlet entitled, “The Khalifah Kujichagulia Village (The Self-Determination Village),” retrieved May 6, 2015.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid. Tour brochure entitled, “The Nat Turner Trail: Standard Tour,” H. Khalif Khalifah, August 24, 2013. Retrieved June 7, 2015.

⁶⁹⁸ Private interview with H. Khalif Khalifah. June 7, 2015.

⁶⁹⁹ Pamphlet entitled, “The Khalifah Kujichagulia Village (The Self-Determination Village),” retrieved May 6, 2015.

the truth” about it, to “inspire young folks to not hold back – that we don’t have to bend our backs to make our truth palatable to white folks,” but also to use history and memory about the past as tools that educate and empower “revolution, resistance movement, and liberation struggle” in the present.⁷⁰⁰ Khalifah frames the Nat Turner Trail Tour around the ideas of Black resistance and freedom, and even includes reference to marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp “in relation to the Black liberation army’s struggle for freedom in 1831.”⁷⁰¹ This is a sharp deviation from Rick Francis’ tours on the history of the Turner revolt in Courtland, Southampton County. Francis, the great-great-grandson of the enslaver Nathaniel Francis, who happened to be away from home at the time of Nat Turner’s revolt (a circumstance that spared his life), is the Clerk of Circuit Court of Southampton County and the Chairman of the Southampton County Historical Society’s Rebecca Vaughan Project.⁷⁰² The goal of Francis’ tours is to attract tourism to Southampton and to “give accurate information based on primary source documentation about a historically significant event.”⁷⁰³ According to Khalifah, Francis, who later informed me that he and his father had been giving tours since the 1980s, asked Khalifah to collaborate with the Historical Society once Khalifah’s tours began in 1992. Khalifah refused, preferring the freedom of independence to represent and commemorate Black resistance and freedom struggle through decidedly uplifting frameworks that also plainly denounce the institution of slavery and its lingering aftermath as criminal and unjust.

Other Black-led public history initiatives in the Hampton Roads, include the African American Schoolhouse Museum set in Historic Downtown Smithfield in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, and Project 1619, based in Hampton, Virginia. The Schoolhouse Museum, like the Portsmouth Colored Community Library Museum, commemorates and “honors the legacy of the individuals who contributed to the education of Black children” in the early 20th century, Black men and women who together overcame the hardships of poverty and Jim Crow.⁷⁰⁴ The non-profit organization Project 1619, who’s mission is to promote public awareness of the roles trans-Atlantic “slave” trade and slavery played in the founding of this country, was instrumental in the Virginia Department of Historic Resources’ 2015 decision to erect a historical marker commemorating the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to British North America at Fort Monroe in Hampton. Project 1619 is also raising funds to erect a National Monument at Fort Monroe by 2019 to memorialize the 400 years enslaved Africans and their descendants have persevered in this country.⁷⁰⁵

Though the objective of all of these initiatives and organizations is not to represent the nuances of marronage in the Dismal Swamp in particular, Black-led public history work around the swamp is exemplary of the potential for fuller and more

⁷⁰⁰ Private interview with H. Khalif Khalifah. June 7, 2015. Private interview with H. Khalif Khalifah. May 6, 2015.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Private interview with Rick Francis. August 5, 2015. The Rebecca Vaughan Project is the preservation of Rebecca Vaughan’s home, “the last house on the Insurrection Scene in which anyone was killed.” Quoted from the Southampton County Historical Society’s sole display sign outside of the original structure in Courtland, Virginia, visited on January 12, 2014.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Brochure, “The Schoolhouse Museum, Smithfield, Virginia,” retrieved March 20, 2015.

⁷⁰⁵ <http://www.theschoolhousemuseum.org>

<http://www.project1619.org>

equitable representation of the historical significance of slavery, Black agency, and resistance in the Tidewater and less fractured collective memory overall. Moreover, these efforts contribute to the landscape of memory through the leadership, agency, and self-determination of Black people, who bring margin-to-center representations of Black resistance and resilience to the fold that would otherwise go unseen, untold, and unheard. Representation at Black-led sites, or as Eichstedt and Small put it, Black counternarratives, “demonstrate in an immediate, palpable, and practical way an alternative perspective on slavery, southern history, and African Americans.”⁷⁰⁶ They refuse their own exclusion from the dominant commemorative landscape, which through its “writing out” Black people, would otherwise seamlessly promote the idea “that Black lives do not belong in either that place’s past or present.”⁷⁰⁷ Black counternarratives and the memory they produce also expose how sometimes the exact same historical events “can be presented in fundamentally different ways” reflecting “a different set of priorities and concerns,”⁷⁰⁸ crediting Khalifah’s provocation, “Is it the same story when you tell it like that?”⁷⁰⁹ These counternarratives commemorate versions of history that instill pride, purpose, and belonging or place in present-day Black communities. Black-led efforts have socially transformative potential as more honest and full representations about slavery, Jim Crow, and Black historical agency and freedom struggle empower not just Black communities, but all communities, given the commemorative historical lessons about humanity and morality that they imbue.⁷¹⁰

But in a country where forgetting slavery and ignoring ongoing racial injustice constitutes the state’s agenda, national memory, and identity, Black memory of enslaved agency and resistance, especially in the form of public commemoration, is an act of resilience, but is also an act of defiance and resistance itself. Because Black alternative narratives about the past and the memory they inspire challenge and contradict the distribution of power privileging whiteness, these acts stand in resistance to a nation that does not authentically *desire* racial justice and equality on all fronts. Indeed, in a country where “the obliteration of the Black past is absolutely essential to the preservation of white hegemony” and hierarchical power, both “the suppression of evidence of Black resistance, and the obscuring of any records of white crimes and exploitation committed against Blacks as an oppressed group” are crucial.⁷¹¹ Deviations from this are dangerous. Black memory will thus remain in resistance until remembering and memorializing Black resistance, perseverance, and freedom struggle does not inherently threaten to disrupt state interests, which are still steeped in upholding and sustaining racist or anti-Black systems and attitudes.

⁷⁰⁶ Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 235.

⁷⁰⁷ Stone, et al, “Searching for the Enslaved in the ‘Cradle of Democracy,’” 206.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

⁷⁰⁹ Private interview with H. Khalif Khalifah. June 7, 2015.

⁷¹⁰ The efforts of social justice activist Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative to establish The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is a prime example of Black-led counter-narration against silences about historical anti-Black violence, Black suffering, death, and white culpability. The memorial, opened in Montgomery, Alabama in April of 2018, is the nation’s first national museum and memorial dedicated to difficult histories of slavery, lynching, and segregation. It demonstrates possibilities for social transformation and national healing through honest recognition, confrontation of ongoing racial injustice, reflection, and commemoration.

⁷¹¹ Marable, *Living Black History*, 20.

In this regard, Virginia, the rest of the U.S. south, and the nation as a whole, would benefit from the example set by post-war Germany. Germany has designed a landscape of memory “based on open acknowledgment of past crimes,” with the express purpose of confronting the Jewish Holocaust, addressing it, the state’s role in it, and preventing their nation from repeating, in *any* way, the atrocities of Nazi Germany and “[reverting] to the state of barbarism” witnessed in the Second World War.⁷¹² Indeed, there is constant conversation and recurrent debate on the Nazi legacy in Germany because the German state is demonstrably invested in correcting and justifying their national identity through reconstructing their “forward-looking memory” and reforming their moral record.⁷¹³ This is evidenced by the prevalence of state sanctioned Holocaust museums, markers, memorials, and monuments honoring the mourning and memory of those that fell victim to and those that survived the great evil and injustice of the Third Reich. Germany has also reserved a “Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism” to be observed on January 27, the date Auschwitz was liberated.⁷¹⁴ The country has worked determinedly at designing its landscape of memory so that the public cannot avoid confronting the places Jewish people were kidnapped or slaughtered and so that forgetting these injustices or failing to commemorate the humanity and resilience of the Jewish people is altogether impossible. There are no memorials in honor of the Nazis, as there are so many (un)contested Confederate monuments in the U.S. south, and concentration camps are not memorialized as neutral, or even positive places void of the racist and ethnocentric violence, domination, and human captivity that produced them, as the plantations of the U.S. south continue to be. As “a sense of shared national memory, however artificial, is essential for the cohesion of a nation” and for “providing a sense of national identity or national image,” Germany commits to confronting and acknowledging the criminal nature of its difficult past and to commemorating the humanity of those it has wronged because doing so enables the country’s present and future *desired* self.⁷¹⁵ But in the Tidewater, and throughout most of the south, the landscape of memory remains uncommitted to confronting and acknowledging its past. It is contested between commemoration that both embraces and resists the paradigm of the Old South, because holistic healing and the eradication of all remnants of slavery remain antithetical to current state interests and the *desired* state orientation to capitalism.⁷¹⁶

Instead of working to dismantle the racist systems and ideologies left behind by the institution of slavery, the state proves that it would prefer to forget, marginalize, or trivialize its history of racially motivated violence and injustice, including, and perhaps especially, Black people’s resistance to the crimes set against them. In the Tidewater, it is Black people’s memory, voice, and demand that contests the silences and gaps in public historical representation and that subsequently challenge the assumptions of southern memory. At the very least, Black contestation of representation and memory in the

⁷¹² Caroline Pearce, *Contemporary Germany and the Nazi Legacy: Remembrance, Politics and the Dialectic of Normality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 50, 232.

⁷¹³ “Forward-looking memory” is a concept that suggests that the past is used as a method for producing desired outcomes in the present and future. Cited in *ibid.*, 31.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷¹⁶ Blight, *Passages to Freedom*, 4. Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow*, 11. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, xv.

Tidewater forces a sorely needed conversation about this country's foundation and about the legacies of slavery. Descendants of the enslaved, much like many of their ancestors, resist their erasure or suppression, resolving instead to be heard and to be seen, or to create their own self-validating spaces of healing, pride, and self-empowerment through memory. Black people lead in the clamor to remove symbols of pride honoring the orchestrators of slavery and institutionalized racism, and Black people, not the state, are the leaders and organizers of initiatives to erect or preserve symbols of pride honoring enslaved peoples' resilience and resistance.

Institutional representations of slavery and enslaved resistance in the Dismal Swamp and the surrounding Tidewater are scant to begin with, but when marronage is made visible to the public in the landscape of memory, its representation is dominated by controlled narratives that tame memory (i.e. the Underground Railroad), or otherwise repress it through silencing and erasure. In short, the usable past of the Dismal Swamp maroons is one that is primarily denied by institutions that operate through the preservation and protection of the assumption of unchecked white interests, privilege, and power. That the memory of the maroons and the organization of enslaved resistance in and around the Dismal Swamp could be used as a learning tool to empower and move descendants of the enslaved, still suffering from the aftermath of slavery and cyclical institutional racism, or other oppressed groups, to follow suit, is particularly threatening. Memory of the historical activities of the Dismal Swamp maroons instructs and makes possible the imagination of possibilities for independent resistant organization, political self-determination and self-defense, for violent self-preservation when mercilessly and persistently violated, for self-extrication, and for the creation of ingenious and resourceful alternatives to continued (race-based) oppression.

Unlike in Virginia, North Carolina and the greater United States, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean use their memory of the maroons to inspire social transformation, or, to honor these legacies of resistance as foundational to their national identity and the ideals of freedom and self-liberation from colonial power. Annual carnivals and festivals, holidays, naming practices, monuments, and memorials commemorating the legacy of marronage and enslaved resistance more broadly are seen in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Haiti, Brazil, Jamaica, Venezuela, Surinam, and other countries.⁷¹⁷ Of course, these countries have a more obvious heritage of marronage than the U.S. does, and present-day maroon communities in these countries continue to persevere in their ancestral lands – a crucial difference from the U.S. – making legacies of marronage and enslaved resistance much harder to forget. But the maroon past has been widely used by African descendants in the Caribbean and South America as a narrative of resistance bearing “significance for the ongoing struggle against neo-imperialism and the construction of a post-independence national identity.”⁷¹⁸

Outside of the U.S., examples abound.⁷¹⁹ In 1968, the former Haitian president François Duvalier erected “Le Marron Inconnu de Saint-Domingue,” “The Unknown Maroon,” also known as “Le Nègre Marron,” or “The Black Maroon,” a magnificent

⁷¹⁷ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 3.

⁷¹⁸ Kenneth Bilby, “Maroon Autonomy in Jamaica,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly: World Report on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities*, vol. 25, number 4 (2002), 26.

⁷¹⁹ Alvin Thompson notes that, “The United States stands virtually alone in not recognizing the... Maroons, and enslaved persons generally.” Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 318.

memorial that now stands on the “Square of the Heroes of Independence” at the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. The memorial was erected in honor of the country’s legacy of marronage and enslaved resistance “that overthrew slavery and colonialism.”⁷²⁰ It was commissioned at the pivotal moment of anticolonial independence struggles and the rise of ideological movements like *Négritude*, Pan-Africanism, and Black Nationalism. Shortly after, in 1975, the newly independent Jamaican government declared Queen Nanny, or Grandy Nanny of the Windward maroons, a national hero.⁷²¹ Her image appears today on the Jamaican \$500 bill, while Samuel Sharpe, the enslaved leader of the Baptist War Rebellion of 1831, is on the \$50 bill. After great outcry from Afro-Brazilians against pervasive racial injustice and inequality, in 1978, the Brazilian government appointed the maroon leader Zumbi of Palmares the national symbol of the country’s history of resistance to racism and colonialism by declaring an annual National Black Consciousness Day on November 20, the recorded date of Zumbi’s death.⁷²² Zumbi, who in the 17th century defended the freedom of the *quilombo* by refusing to negotiate through treaties with the colonial state, is memorialized as the organizing principle of resistance “against the racism, hypocrisy, and the... perpetuation of the racism and rapaciousness of the state directed against the Afro-Brazilian population.”⁷²³ In 1995, 300 years after Zumbi’s decapitation, 40,000 Afro-Brazilians marched in the March for Zumbi of Palmares, now an annual tradition celebrating Black life and demonstrating for racial justice and citizenship.⁷²⁴ Monuments stand to commemorate Zumbi and his resistance, and in 1999, the Campo dos Palmares International Airport was renamed the Zumbi dos Palmares International Airport. The usable past of marronage in Brazil “[makes] the racial question visible in national politics,” and points to present-day “alternative directions” for ongoing freedom struggle and the onset of change.⁷²⁵

These uses and lessons of memory in the legacies of marronage and resistance should empower Black people in the Tidewater in similar ways – as “a cause for great pride, a foundation of collective identity and a source of strength and confidence as they face the future.”⁷²⁶ Instead, maroons are not viewed as freedom fighters (or viewed at all) “in a country that continues to honor slaveholders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, and Indian-killers like Andrew Jackson, as national heroes.”⁷²⁷ Most Black people (and most people in general) do not remember or commemorate marronage in the Dismal Swamp, or in the wider United States. But many, and perhaps more than we know, privately protect and pass on resilient memory about the maroons, while others publically challenge current silences and assumptions about slavery and enslaved resistance in the swamp and throughout the Hampton Roads. Black people in the Tidewater do not wait for the state or its various institutions to commemorate their historical agency. And, in the spirit and legacy of resistance and resilience, they forge their own spaces of memory, sometimes forcing those who would prefer to forget, to

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷²² *Ibid.*

⁷²³ Luiza Bairros, “A Community of Destiny: New Configurations of Racial Politics in Brazil,” *Souls* 10:1 (2008), 53.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.* Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 3-4.

⁷²⁵ Bairros, “A Community of Destiny,” 51.

⁷²⁶ Bilby and N’Diaye, “Creativity and Resistance”, 59.

⁷²⁷ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 318.

remember instead the promise of persistent opposition until the state legitimizes its claims to liberty and justice for all. Without a national imperative to honor Black resistance and humanity as integral to this country's progress, the usable past of the maroons and the empowering legacy of resistance – that the pure seizure of freedom and transcended injustice is possible in the face of tremendous adversity – is left in the hands of descendants of the enslaved.

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Appendix I

This list reflects a complete accounting of the historical sites throughout the Hampton Roads that I visited from May 2013 to August 2015. It is comprised of the major attractions for public interest and visitation to sites narrating colonial or antebellum histories restricted to the Hampton Roads region.

Museums

Museum of the Albemarle, Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County, NC
Riddick's Folly Historic House Museum, Suffolk, VA
Suffolk Seaboard Station Railroad Museum, Suffolk, VA
Hampton History Museum, Hampton, VA
The Casemate Museum, Fort Monroe, Hampton, VA
Isle of Wight County Museum, Smithfield, Isle of Wight County, VA

Plantation Museums

Ferry Plantation House, Virginia Beach, VA
Chippokes Plantation State Park, Surry, Surry County, VA⁷²⁸
Endview Plantation: A Living History Museum, Newport News, VA
Lee Hall Mansion, Newport News, VA
Bacon's Castle, Surry, Surry County, VA
Smith's Fort Plantation, Surry, Surry County, VA

Visitor's Centers

Norfolk, VA
Edenton, Chowan County, NC⁷²⁹
Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County, NC
Smithfield, Isle of Wight County, VA
Newport News, VA
Virginia Beach, VA
Suffolk, VA
Chesapeake, VA

Historical Walking Trails

Bayside History Trail: Legacy on the Lynnhaven, Virginia Beach, VA
Historic Downtown Suffolk Walking Trail, Suffolk, VA
Waterways to Freedom: The Underground Journey from Hampton Roads Walking Tour, Norfolk, VA
Dismal Swamp Canal Trail, Chesapeake, VA

⁷²⁸ Surry County was historically a part of the Hampton Roads communities, but was removed in 2013 as a result of the 2010 census. Gates County, North Carolina was substituted in its place. I include Surry County sites here as an important part of a holistic understanding of representation and the historical significance of the Tidewater region. Jeff Hampton, "Hampton Roads Loses Surry Co., Gains Gates Co., N.C." *The Virginia Pilot*, March 17, 2013.

⁷²⁹ Chowan County, North Carolina is not considered a part of the Hampton Roads MSA. However, it is located adjacent to and directly southwest of Perquimans and Gates Counties in North Carolina, counties that outline the southernmost border of the Dismal Swamp.

Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, VA