Freedom on the Move: Marronage in Martin Delany’s Blake; or, the Huts of America

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Maroons and the concept of marronage—broadly imagined as individual or collective flight from slavery into the relative security of woods, swamps, or mountains—have recently experienced a swell in critical attention by historians and social scientists studying slavery, freedom, resistance, and geography in the United States. While marronage has long been studied in the context of Central and South America and especially the Caribbean, its significance in British North America and the United States has until quite recently been downplayed or outright ignored.1 This is in large part because the Caribbean and Latin American models of marronage—most closely associated with places such as Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil, where large-scale maroon communities won autonomy from colonial control through military action—have dominated the critical discourse surrounding the practice since the 1970s.2 In his landmark study of enslaved resistance in the United States, for example, Eugene Genovese discounted the presence of US maroons precisely because their tactics and potential to instantiate widespread political revolution did not resonate with those of the famed Caribbean maroons: “[T]hey [US maroons] typically huddled in small units and may be called ‘maroons’ only as a courtesy” since “[t]hey occupied unfavorable terrain with only minimum security and rarely had an opportunity to forge a viable community life. Consequently, many degenerated into wild desperadoes who preyed on anyone, black, white, or red, in their path” (77).3

However, three recent works—Sylviane Diouf’s Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons (2014), Neil Roberts’s Freedom as Marronage (2015), and Daniel Sayers’s A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp (2014)—have sought to push back against the kinds of assertions exemplified by Genovese by definitively establishing the presence of maroons and marronage in British North America and the United States and by expanding the terms by which we apprehend marronage.4 Diouf and Sayers painstakingly detail, through archival/documentary history and cultural archaeology, respectively, the...
fact that marronage in various forms was indeed a feature of the landscape of enslaved resistance in North America from 1619 through the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865. Roberts builds on this work, along with that of Caribbean thinkers such as Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant, to argue for a conceptual heuristic through which we might comprehend freedom as marronage, where marronage is understood to be perpetual movement or flight that is “multidimensional, constant, and never static” (15).

These new broader, multidimensional understandings of maroons and marronage allow us to see what has been in front of us all along but which has been obfuscated by “restrictive definitions of marronage that do not correspond to the reality” (Diouf 4). Thus, Martin R. Delany’s *Blake; or The Huts of America* (1859, 1861-62) can be valuably understood as a work about marronage and the dialectics of black freedom, of which it is a part. At the same time, Diouf, along with others such as Martha Schoolman and Steven Hahn, have sought to break away from a one-to-one application of the Caribbean model of marronage to the US context. According to Hahn, “Perspectives on marronage . . . have for the most part been informed by rather limited and one-dimensional imaginations and understandings of what a maroon is” (26). Instead, these scholars favor an approach that attends more carefully to historical, geographical, and cultural particularities that differentiate the landscape of slavery and resistance in the United States from that in the Caribbean, even as they continue to recognize the hemispheric and circum-Atlantic nature of marronage as an African diasporic practice.

I examine the “quest for freedom” in *Blake* through the lens of marronage, arguing for Henry Blake as a maroon figure and suggesting that his peregrinations throughout the US South can be generatively understood as acts of marronage. Moreover, I contend that Henry’s marronage draws other varieties of resistant practices into a sharper focus that reveals their association with marronage according to the more expansive parameters of the phenomenon articulated by Diouf, Roberts, Hahn, and others and on which I wish to build even further. *Blake*, by being unfinished, the insurrection never yet begun, allows us a window into freedom in (perpetual) process, into an assemblage of self- and community-affirming resistant practices that can be valuably considered through the analytic of marronage. Despite the notable exceptions of work by Schoolman and William Tynes Cowan, little has been said regarding the relationship between marronage and US literatures, particularly those produced by African American writers during the period of slavery. Because of the preeminence of the slave narrative in considerations of African American writing on slavery and freedom in antebellum US literature, the quest for freedom is often aligned with the Underground Railroad, attached to which is a particular unilateral geography that positions the South as a place of unfreedom and the North as a place of freedom, with movement almost always occurring along this South-to-North directional axis.
Recently, Schoolman and others such as Eric Gardner, Katherine McKittrick, Stephanie M. H. Camp, and Judith Madera have begun to unsettle this commonplace sectional geography of freedom and unfreedom in ways that are further enhancing our ability to perceive marronage where it has been previously unacknowledged.8

According to John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, the reality is that “most runaways remained in the South, few were aided by abolitionists or anyone else, and many fled with a sense of terrible urgency” (xiv). Included among “aspects of the history of slavery” that “even today . . . remain shrouded in myth and legend,” Franklin and Schweninger include the idea that “the few who ran away struck out for the Promised Land in the North or Canada” (xv). Recent scholarship suggests—as Diouf, Hahn, and others have—that we move beyond and look in between commonplace interpretive binaries such as petit and grand marronnage (or short-term and long-term, respectively, with the second usually denoting a larger group with community-forming aspirations).9 Such scholarship also suggests that we disarticulate marronage from a teleology of insurrection or revolution and that we look in more nuanced ways at “rival geographies” and “marginal landscapes” of freedom and resistance.10 The time is opportune to examine the workings of marronage as a constellation of resistant flight and freedom-seeking practices in African American literature.

Blake was first published in a limited serial run in the Anglo-African Magazine in 1859 and then again in a more complete and somewhat modified run in the Weekly Anglo-African in 1861-62. Critics remain unsure as to whether the text is unfinished, as the issue in which its potential final installment would have been published is lost. Intentional or not, the ending we do have, wherein revolution is deferred, allows us to focus more closely on the elements of marronage and/as freedom that pervade the body of the narrative. Marronage emerges as a set of practices untethered from the extremes, from the codified poles of enslavement as totalizing unfreedom and freedom as emancipation through the fantasy of revolutionary actualization. Thus, Blake’s publication as a serial—a text in the process of realization, moving in different directions through each installment—mirrors the notion of marronage itself as freedom in continual process through movement, illegibility, and uncertainty.

In 1970, on the heels of the turmoil of the civil rights struggle in the United States, Floyd J. Miller edited the first version of Blake in book form. It was a fitting time for the text’s publication, as Blake deals heavily with the themes of black self-determination, self-reliance, pride, and militancy in the face of systemic white supremacy. Indeed, the text’s central organizing plot is the protagonist Henry Blake’s plan to initiate a general insurrection of the enslaved population throughout the US South and Cuba. While the 1970 publication spawned a steady stream of interest and criticism, Blake would not be republished until 2017, this time with
Jerome McGann tackling the text’s notoriously complicated publication history, printing, references, and orthography. The arrival of McGann’s heavily revised and corrected edition means that, like marronage, *Blake* is ripe for a new wave of scholarly reconsideration. Indeed, McGann insists that *Blake*’s “most ‘solemn responsibility’ is the quest for freedom” (xiv) and that Delany’s project depends on an unwavering commitment to the project of “black self-reliance” (xxvi). For McGann, the text’s incompleteness only adds to the sense of its transhistorical applicability, as its characters’ quest for freedom is one perpetually in process, always, for better or worse, in a state of becoming and possibility. In this sense, McGann echoes Miller’s earlier thoughts regarding “the novel’s inconclusiveness”: “[T]he rebellion in process . . . is perhaps more relevant today than anything Delany could have conceived” (Miller xxv).

**Rethinking Marronage and Imagining Henry Blake as a Maroon**

If marronage has been a constituent but unappreciated feature of Henry’s quest for freedom and of the landscape of enslaved resistance in *Blake* all along, I suggest that this is because we have been unable to fully recognize it thanks to the long-standing critical adherence in studies of US slavery to the Caribbean model of marronage, one that privileges its insurrectionary potential over its multidimensional project of interrelated resistant and life-affirming practices. Once again, Genovese exemplifies the former position: “[T]he question concern[ed] less the existence of *marronage*—it did exist—than of *marronage* on a scale that could affect the politics of the slave society, especially the politics inherent in any encouragement to slave revolt, in a manner comparable to that in Brazil, Surinam, or even Colombia or Venezuela” (76-77). *Blake* thus anticipates recent critical revisions of our understanding of marronage, especially in the US context, not only by disarticulating marronage from insurrection and direct resistance but also by revealing that marronage was in fact an ever-changing, multidimensional project and process of individual and collective resistance existing in the liminal space between the codified poles of “freedom” and “enslavement.” Such a project cannot simply be reduced to a process of self-exile, autonomous community formation, fugitivity, or a mere waypoint on the path to potential future revolt.

Without question, Henry Blake’s “plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery” (Delany 40), looms large throughout the text, ostensibly acting as its organizing narrative impetus for Henry’s journey throughout the southern states and eventually Cuba, where he locates his wife and continues organizing his plan. However, as McGann observes, the story “involves much more than insurrection” (xiii). As he sees it, Henry’s quest for freedom is most significant, and “that quest has succeeded, has been
succeeding, from Chapter VI forward” (xiii). Viewing that quest for freedom and the successes it achieves through the lens of marronage, we become privy to an African diasporic world of resistant practices untethered from “a teleology in which,” according to Walter Johnson,

“African” forms of resistance are seen as “roadblocks” on the way to the elaboration of a properly revolutionary notion of slave revolt, one, that is, which recognized “the individual” as the subject of history and the language of rights as the only acceptable idiom of revolution, a teleology, that is, which ultimately reproduces the idea of a liberal agent as the universal subject of history. (117)

US maroons were never considered liberal agents in this sense and as such have never figured in Western conceptions of the universal subject of history, particularly as that subject pertains to the ideal of a right to revolution. Instead, maroons and marronage are distinctly African diasporic in nature, figuring throughout the hemisphere (even in western Africa) and the entire duration of the transatlantic slave trade as forces of multidimensional resistance, survival, self-determination, and autonomy.11

Blake, then, also reveals the ways in which marronage unsettles white-supremacist logics and the underpinnings of the system of chattel slavery itself, not only because maroons pose a potentially violent threat to the white population but especially because, as Roberts observes, they represent “a total refusal of the enslaved condition” (13) or a total refusal of the racial, social, economic, and political logics by which their enslavement is rendered ideologically coherent in the tradition of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century liberalism.12 Over the course of part 1 of the text, marronage challenges the ideological and operational logics of antebellum white-supremacist dominance in at least three specific ways: it facilitates the creation and sustenance of networks of affective, material, and familial support among the enslaved across varying geographical distances; it demonstrates singular evidence of black self-sufficiency and mobility while upending notions of slavery as a benevolent, paternalistic institution; and it reveals the existence of liminal spaces as part of the “black” or “maroons’ landscape” that exceed the market framework of 1850s expansionist capitalism. For these reasons, Blake may be imagined as a text that works to theorize marronage and freedom through its representations of multiple configurations of the practice as they endured in and against the landscape of US slavery, lending further credence to Angela Davis’s observation that “The history of Black Literature provides . . . a much more illuminating account of the nature of freedom, its extent and limits, than all the philosophical discourses on this theme in the history of Western society” (1). Indeed, if we wish to arrive at a broader sense of how marronage functioned in nineteenth-century dialectics of black freedom and unfreedom in the United States, early and antebellum African American literary texts provide a singular and generative archive.
An analysis of *Blake* through the optic of marronage extends the increasingly rich critical tradition on the text that, since Miller’s initial publication, has hailed it as an impassioned articulation of black nationalism(s); an expression of transnational and hemispheric pan-Africanist solidarity; and, more recently, as a sophisticated critique of the interlocking mechanisms of US imperialism and expansionist fantasy, among other things. *Blake*’s overlapping geographies, circuits of movement for bodies and/ as property, and treatment of diasporic resistant practices have anticipated the turns in American literary studies toward the transnational, hemispheric, Atlantic, and black Atlantic over the past three decades. While critics have not attended directly to marronage in *Blake*, some have emphasized features of the text that subvert an analytic of marronage. Rebecca Biggio has argued that the threat of “black community” rather than “black violence” is most unsettling about *Blake*, suggesting that the text enacts black community through “plotting, spreading, or protecting the knowledge of the black conspiracy, even and especially maintaining the illusion of conspiracy where there is none” (440). Jeffory Clymor privileges *Blake*’s fixation “with the political quandaries that arise as people and commodities move and are moved across borders” (710), making movement and mobility defining features of the way we interpret the landscape of slavery in the text.

Additionally, Jean Lee Cole has examined the ways in which the extraordinary mobility of the protagonists in *Blake* and “Theresa—A Haytien Tale” (1827) contrasts with the delimited notions of enslaved mobility that have arisen from the primacy of the slave narrative in considerations of antebellum African American quests for freedom. Following Jo-Ann Marx’s earlier work on black language as “a tool for ordering and giving meaning to a black world . . . and for affirming a vision of freedom and nationalism” (19), Andy Doolen and Gregory Pierrot have demonstrated the ways in which *Blake* breaks from the ideological traditions of the American and Haitian Revolutions, respectively, in order to establish a distinct tradition of black radicalism emerging out of the political developments of the 1850s. Britt Rusert employs *Blake* in part to recover what she calls “fugitive science” as a genealogy of “practices and actors” with a “role in the construction of a critical imagination of black freedom” (801). Katy Chiles draws on Delany’s idea of a “nation within a nation” to argue that *Blake*’s seriality “performs the logic of the ‘nation within a nation’ as a textual phenomenon,” insisting that Delany “presents a nation-state in which local, regional, national, and transnational figurations overlap and permeate each other.” Chiles’s notion that *Blake* “explores how individuals could be positioned within and without the nation” (325) prefigures the unique subject position of the maroon, who in Henry Blake’s case remains within slaveholding territory but without its regulatory mechanisms of control and domination, troubling the stability of white-supremacist logics through which slavery was folded into the identity of the emergent US nation-state. More recently, Sharada Balachandran Orihuela engages piracy as an analytic to perform what she calls a “piratic reading” of *Blake*, contending that it
uses the liberal logic of attaching personhood to property to counter the US state’s exclusions of slaves from citizenship and recognition” (273). Orihuela argues that Henry Blake’s “fugitivity is . . . a piratic act because it contests both the private property of the slave owner as well as the state reliant on the slave trade” (275), a claim that can be made as well for Henry’s marronage, whereby he liberates himself and proceeds to move freely about slaveholding territory participating in and initiating a series of subversive acts that undermine the slave system both directly and indirectly.¹³

My choice to deploy the analytic and vocabulary of marronage rather than that of, for example, fugitivity, and to privilege Henry Blake’s mobility and illegibility rather than the fantasy of revolution or a protonationalistic “nation within a nation” formation, signals a departure from previous scholarship chiefly because marronage represents a possibility for black freedom that does not require white intervention in the realm of the material or white mediation in the realm of the discursive. Fugitives run away from slavery while maroons run toward freedom, opening up along the way possibilities for alternative formations of freedom that can be foreclosed by the language of state-sanctioned criminalization of black bodies, including terms such as fugitive or outlaw. Marronage rejects the “stand still and see the salvation” (Delany 22) position that Henry criticizes for its reliance on the ostensible future benevolence of slaveholders or the state. The essence of Henry’s plan for large-scale black self-emancipation is quite simple: it begins psychologically, with the enslaved rejecting their assigned (non)subject positions as chattel and recognizing their individual and collective potential for autonomy and self-determination. In this sense, Henry—as a mouthpiece for Delany himself—offers a framework for understanding the quest for black freedom that resonates closely with the self-reliance arguments made by Henry Highland Garnet in “An Address to the Slaves of the United States” (1843) and David Walker in David Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles (1830). Like Garnet, who implored the enslaved to “arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered” (51), Henry rejects Daddy Joe’s advice to “‘[s]tan still an’ see de salbation’” (Delany 22), instead declaring that the day is now, and “I’ll “stand still” no longer” (23). Movement—along with the ability to slip in and out of legibility, to exist in liminal psychic and material spaces, and to stand still only as part of his movement-based maneuvering—becomes the cornerstone of Henry’s tactics as a maroon.

## Into the Maroons’ Landscape

Henry’s marronage begins even before he takes flight from the Franks plantation in Mississippi. After learning that his wife was sold in his absence to a plantation
owner in Cuba, Henry openly defies Colonel Franks’s orders to take a morning ride alongside him, telling him “‘You may do your mightiest, Colonel Franks. I’m not your slave, nor never was, and you know it! and but for my wife and her people, I never would have staid with you til now. I was decoyed away when young, and then became entangled in domestic relations as to induce me to remain with you; but now the tie is broken!’” (21). This scene illustrates what Roberts describes as the “imagined” dimension of flight or marronage and “bolsters a central maxim of the theory of marronage: Freedom is not a place; it is a state of being” (11). On Henry’s defiance, Franks fears the worst, running into the house to grab a revolver, exclaiming to his wife that this must mean “‘a rebellion! a plot’” (Delany 21). However, where Franks sees a simplified, paranoid correspondence between verbal disobedience and violent revolt—where one must logically lead to the other—Henry’s actions reveal a more nuanced understanding of enslaved resistance as a spectrum of interrelated behaviors, practices, and activities that can be both psychic and material in nature and often both at once. Henry has taken the first step, in accordance with the spirit of Garnet and Walker, making it clear that he considers himself psychologically emancipated from Colonel Franks. This moment sets in motion the remainder of the narrative, in which Henry is continually on the move, making his way in almost fantastical maroon style between plantations and slave quarters, legible and illegible spaces, in every slaveholding state.

Henry does, however, remain on the Franks plantation for several more days following his pronouncement of defiance, but at this point I would suggest that we may imagine him as a maroon figure on the plantation itself. Psychologically emancipated and having declared that he will die before allowing himself to be whipped for disobedience, Henry becomes a vehicle through which readers may be privy to what Rebecca Ginsburg calls “the black landscape,” or “the system of paths, places, and rhythms that a community of enslaved people created as an alternative, often as a refuge, to the landscape systems of planters and other whites” (54). Ginsburg also emphasizes the idea that “enslaved workers knew the land through a different set of cognitive processes than did whites” (52), which here may serve to deepen our understanding of what imagined freedom as marronage means for Henry and might have meant for other maroons. Although physically present on the plantation, Henry moves about as he pleases, dictating his own activities and mobility without imposed proscriptions from outside or above. As a result, clandestine affective and material networks of sociality, communication, and planning emerge into focus, enabled by and acting in support of Henry’s marronage.14

For example, learning that he has been covertly sold in a private transaction as punishment for his insubordination, Henry secretly convenes with the elderly Mammy Judy and Daddy Joe to ask if they will join him in ferrying his son Joe north to Canada. When they decline, Henry devises an alternate plan,
announcing, “Then from this time hence I become a runaway. . . . When I leave the swamps, or where I’ll go, will never be known to you. Should my boy suddenly be missed, and you find three notches cut in the bark of the big willow tree, on the side away from your hut, then give yourself no uneasiness” (Delany 33). While it is true that Henry henceforth becomes a runaway, his activities from this point forward are more suggestive of the behaviors of a maroon. Maroons simultaneously run away and refuse to leave. In the eyes of the slavocracy, they possess a sense of both unruly mobility and ominous stasis, as they have fled toward freedom from enslavement but continue to remain in slaveholding territory. At this point Henry enters the phase of his multidimensional resistant project that can best be described as literal marronage, reminiscent in many ways of the historical maroons who sought freedom by and while remaining in the South. Here, Diouf’s description of what she terms the “maroons’ landscape” provides a useful framework through which we might apprehend the nature of the material and psychic world Henry navigates once he takes flight from the Franks plantation, initiating a maroon’s life of constant, adaptable movement and secrecy in order to both escape detection and, in this case, spread the word about his insurrectionary plan. According to Diouf, the “maroons’ landscape” was

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

By imagining Henry Blake as a maroon and his activities as acts of marronage within and between the contours of such a contested landscape, and by considering the text as-is—with the revolt never actually begun—we arrive at a sense of a multifaceted, networked landscape of defiance and survival that is inclusive of but not overdetermined by the anticipated teleology of insurrection.

Henry’s psychic marronage enables his entrance into the maroons’ landscape, which serves as an illuminating optic through which to view the various settings, activities, and movements that make up the quest for freedom in part 1 of the text. At the same time, readers are granted access to a world of alternative freedoms, socialities, and networks that are generally illegible to outsiders and have remained largely absent from thought in the United States about black freedom during a time of radical unfreedom. During the first of what will become many “seclusions,” or secret meetings between Henry and trusted enslaved compatriots in every state, we witness Henry explaining to his friends Charles and Andy how
the plan for insurrection should be spread. That plan ultimately appears simple: activate the same maroon consciousness in others that Henry adopted after his wife was sold, thus preparing the enslaved population throughout the South to strike for material freedom on their own terms once psychological freedom has already been accomplished. In order to spread the plan, Henry instructs his friends as follows: “All you have to do, is find one good man or woman . . . on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion to impart the secret to them, and make them the organizers for their own plantation, and they in like manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on. In this way it will spread like smallpox among them” (Delany 42). The basis of the plan, then, hinges on the maroon’s tactics of secrecy and movement: the clandestine movement of enslaved people between and among plantations, the movement of ideas from one person to another, and the movement of individual enslaved consciousness to collective self-emancipated consciousness. All these movements are encapsulated in what Roberts suggests are the various “domains” of “flight” in his definition of marronage: “physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical” (9). Movement and the ability to limit or expand one’s mobility at will thus become fundamental to Henry’s resistant maroon project and structure the progression of the narrative itself.

Henry’s strategy for throwing Colonel Franks and other would-be pursuers off his tracks once he departs further engages with practices of marronage. He declares to Charles and Andy that “I now go as a runaway, and will be suspected of lurking about in the thickets, swamps, and caves,” the solution for which is to ensure that those suspicions are maintained. “[T]o make the ruse complete,” the two men are to periodically kill animals and steal foodstuffs from the plantation, always leaving evidence to make the pilfering appear hasty and half complete. This way, Henry will be suspected as the culprit of the thefts, a suspicion that he instructs the men to contribute to by overtly laying blame on him: “Everything that is missed do not hesitate to lay it upon me, as a runaway, it will cause them to have the less suspicion of your having such a design” (Delany 42). The success of Henry’s venture, then, depends on the maroon’s need for illegibility, which, as James C. Scott contends, “has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy” (54). Henry must remain not just hidden or unseen but illegible in the sense that he is unable to be deciphered, unable to be known or understood. Such a feat is accomplished through a combination of communication and deception that will allow Charles and Andy to act on their “design”—that is, their plan to keep all eyes on Henry while they go out and spread the word regarding the insurrection. If we operate under the assumption that “marronage was political action on the part of enslaved persons” (Thompson 13), then we can understand the acts of marronage themselves as political acts in the ongoing quest for black freedom, not just as vehicles for bringing about large-scale political action via insurrection or revolution. When the fantasy of
insurrection is removed or at least deferred, as it is at the conclusion of Blake, possibilities for imagining new forms of maroon freedom emerge.

Such sustained and protean illegibility defies Colonel Franks’s claim to ownership of Henry in a profound way and, in its specifically maroon manifestation, undermines claims to slavery’s paternalism. As Frederick Douglass observed,

One of the most telling testimonies against the pretended kindness of slaveholders, is the fact that uncounted numbers of fugitives are now inhabiting the Dismal Swamp, preferring the untamed wilderness to their cultivated homes—choosing rather to encounter hunger and thirst, and to roam with the wild beasts of the forest, running the hazard of being hunted and shot down, than to submit to the authority of kind masters. (334)

Within these liminal spaces of “untamed wilderness,” places that Stephanie LeMenager has called “marginal landscapes” or “environmental features that defied all usages associated with property value in the antebellum United States” (50-51), Henry in fact establishes contact with maroons, or what he calls “the much-dreaded runaways of the woods, a class of outlawed slaves, who continually seek the lives of their masters” (Delany 111). Here, as narrator, Delany plays on fears similar to Colonel Franks’s at the beginning of the text, wherein the paranoia of enslavers leads them to believe that violent revolt or vengeance is the aim of maroons rather than radical and novel modes of freedom. Just as criticism on slave resistance has elided marronage in the US context, Diouf argues that Southerners during slavery “reserved the terminology maroons for the people of Jamaica and Suriname . . . [and] were precursors to the denial of the American maroons’ existence. They called the people in their midst outliers . . . or runaways and banditti” (3). Then, as now, the term maroon is loaded with connotations of freedom-seeking behaviors that slaveholders not only did not want to assign to runaways but also could not imagine as freedom-seeking behavior in the first place. When Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs’s pseudonym) in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) goes missing for seven years and is holed up in the garret above her grandmother’s shed, everyone believes her to have of course fled north, never to have remained in the South; she thus defiantly claims a version of maroon freedom by hiding in plain sight. Ironically, Linda is safest when she is in the South, nearer those who wish to re-enslave her but benefitting from a network of familial, material, and affective resistant support that resembles maroon collectivity.

During Henry’s sojourns between states, and particularly between and within those such as “haughty South Carolina,” where “the most relentless hatred appears to exist against the negro” (Delany 110), he employs survival strategies consistent with what Diouf, Sayers, and others have identified regarding US maroons and maroon communities. He conceals himself inside fallen logs, sleeps out of sight in high tree branches, dexterously fends off wild creatures and slave
catchers’ dogs alike, and uses the inhospitable landscapes of swamps and marshes all in service of his project of heading further south and in horizontal movements from plantation to plantation, from slave quarters to woodland seclusions, extending the networks of his plan and elucidating alternate versions of freedom in the slaveholding South. These interactions and exchanges expand what we are to imagine, if Charles and Andy have followed the plan as well, is an ever-increasing web-like network of maroon consciousness and resistant black solidarity across cities, counties, and states. Even if the insurrection never comes to pass, as it indeed does not in the text, Henry’s marronage—and in turn, Charles’s and Andy’s as they sneak away to visit other plantations—enables affective support and solidarity that is crucial to the survival of the enslaved and potential maroon. The psychological marronage or maroon consciousness and acts of short-term marronage necessary to ensure its dissemination thus work to form a constellation of self-, community-, and life-affirming practices in the face of a system of white-supremacist authority designed to stamp out just such praxes. Through the liminal woodland and swamp spaces traveled during acts of marronage, the systems and rhythms of the “black landscape” (Ginsburg 54) pulsate with greater life, infused with the energy of psychic emancipation and offering radical visions of freedoms that exceed a liberal framework.

When Henry does make it to Dismal Swamp in North Carolina—a famed retreat for US maroons for as long as slavery existed on the continent—he encounters an actual maroon community where

a number of the old confederates of the noted Nat Turner were met with. . . . Many of these are still long-suffering, hard-laboring slaves on the plantations; and some bold, courageous, and fearless adventurers, denizens of the mystical, antiquated, and almost fabulous Dismal Swamp, where for many years they have defied the approach of their pursuers. (Delany 113)

Considering marronage via the Caribbean model, we might see similarities here in the sense that the High Conjurers’ Dismal Swamp community contains many members, is largely self-sufficient, and is prepared to defend itself from attack. It contains “secluded hut[s], underground room[s], and cave[s]” (115), such as those Diouf describes in her research on US maroon communities. However, considering the community simply as a band of refugees from a failed attempt at large-scale revolt obscures the multimodal axes of resistance and survival that are ongoing among this group. Most significantly, the men live in the liminal spaces of the maroons’ landscape, having achieved a sense of freedom, autonomy, and safety, even as that freedom stands decidedly outside liberal conceptions and defies the hegemonic spatial ordering of the plantocracy. Gamby Gholar, one of the noted High Conjurers (the eldest, most experienced of the conjurers, as compared to the Low Conjurers) among the maroons, is said to have been “more than thirty years secluded in the Swamp” (113), thus arriving even before Nat Turner’s
Southampton Revolt in 1831. These maroons have staked a claim to freedom in a way that has not been sufficiently analyzed or understood in the United States, whereas marronage has featured in dialectical conceptions of freedom in places such as Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname, and Brazil for hundreds of years. These undertheorized, alternate versions of freedom in the interstices of plantation society and the maroons’ landscape enable, even as they are also the result of, Henry’s multidimensional resistant project.

The elderly men of the maroon council have a significant role to play in expanding Henry’s plan, propagating his ideas, and enlarging the scope of maroon consciousness among those already imbricated in practices of marronage in the world contained in and adjacent to the Dismal Swamp. As the High Conjurers note, their maroon world is not one entirely disconnected from the plantation landscape that abuts it and often invades it. However, here, proximity to the enslaved population functions positively for the maroons and for the still enslaved, as it provides the maroons opportunities to go out as “ambassadors from the Swamp” to “create new conjurers, lay charms, take off ‘spells’ that could not be reached by Low Conjurers, and renew the art of all conjurers of seven years existence” (115). Their marronage enables other forms and acts of marronage that radiate outward from the autonomous swamp encampment they have established. In this sense, freedom, too, radiates outward from this marginal, liminal space of the swamp. This freedom is embodied, psychic, and metaphysical, and it defies the notion of freedom defined as legal emancipation or freedom granted by external (white, state) actors. By extension, it also defies the unfreedom of chattel slavery as the codified legal opposite of freedom. Here, marronage as freedom can be understood variously as movements, speech acts, thoughts, and all manner of resistant behaviors initiated by the enslaved themselves. In the case of maroons and marronage, existence is resistance, but it is also solidarity and survival, psychic and material. Marronage thus troubles totalizing conceptions of both freedom and unfreedom, drawing attention to the ambiguous realm of what lies between.

Marronage as Freedom and Freedom as Marronage

All of Henry’s peregrinations between and through the slaveholding states of the US South, along with the networks of support and resistance brought into focus because of those peregrinations, expand our sense of maroons and especially of marronage, making it appear as an interrelated spectrum of behaviors, activities, and processes constellated around flight and the indefatigable desire for freedom on the part of the enslaved. Marronage works to center the relative agency of the enslaved and to position freedom as something for which they strike out rather than something they may be granted from the outside. In other words, marronage centers black self-determination and, by extension, decenters and delegitimizes
the white-supremacist structures that make marronage necessary in the first place. In this sense, reading *Blake* through the lens of marronage contributes to our understanding of the text as a black nationalist project while expanding our sense of what black nationalism(s) in the form of black self-reliance and self-determination might have meant for Delany. Writing in the *New York Review of Books* in 1970, Miller emphasized that Delany “serves as the ‘father’ of several black nationalisms” (Titcomb et al.; emphasis added), a point worth remembering when Delany is still so often invoked as a black nationalist writer without clarification of the intricacies of that nationalism, which grew, transformed, and expanded over the course of his writing career. What emerges from an examination of Henry Blake as a maroon and of practices of marronage in *Blake* is a sense of a multifaceted resistant project wherein freedom, as opposed to emancipation, is the unifying feature. Considered this way, we may still identify significant connections between US and Caribbean marronage and freedom-seeking practices throughout the hemisphere without collapsing their important distinctions or privileging one form over another.

Ultimately, we can imagine *Blake* as a literary text that performs considerable work to theorize marronage as freedom and freedom as marronage in ways that have been illegible in the genealogy of liberal thought on freedom from the 1850s into our present moment. These theorizations of freedom via marronage, considered alongside interdisciplinary critical interventions on the subject, offer scholars of *Blake* and of African American literature more broadly a means of thinking about freedom that is dislocated from the teleology of revolutionary fulfillment and the hindrances of deferred action perceived as stasis. Henry Blake’s marronage asks us to consider the social and political potentialities of radical forms of freedom and of interstitial subject positions that defy the hegemonic geospatial imaginary of nineteenth-century US liberal democracy, in the process revealing forms and methods of freedom-seeking that assume no recourse to the state or its institutions.

**Notes**

1. The study of marronage in the United States begins with Herbert Aptheker’s work, which positions it in the tradition of the better-known maroon communities in the Caribbean. See Aptheker (“Maroons” and “Additional”).
2. There is a long and well-developed tradition of historical, anthropological, sociological, and archaeological scholarship on marronage in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Richard Price offers a salient overview and bibliography. For a more recent synthesis of maroon scholarship in the Americas and the Caribbean and an updated bibliography, see Alvin O. Thompson. In the scholarship, maroon communities or societies are, depending on location, variously referred to as “quilombos, palenques, mocambos, cumbes, mambises, racherryas, ladeiras, magotes, and manieles” (Roberts 4).
3. See Eugene Genovese (From and Roll).
4. See also the recent work of Matthew J. Clavin, Ted Maris-Wolf, and Timothy James Lockley.
5. Neil Roberts’s characterization of marronage best captures the expansiveness I reference here: “Marronage is a flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the sphere of positive activity and human freedom. Flight is multidimensional, constant, and never static” (15).
6. See Steven Hahn.
7. See Martha Schoolman and William Tynes Cowan. To date, Cowan’s is the only book-length consideration of marronage in US literatures. However, it should also be noted that Houston A. Baker, Jr., deploys marronage as an analytic for interpreting African American cultural formations in a white-dominated artistic and publishing landscape.
8. See also Paul Gilroy as a precursor to this type of thinking regarding geography, resistance, and culture.
9. The petit marronage / grand marronage binary was first formulated in 1966 by Gabriel Debian. It has since become a standard way of interpreting flight from slavery throughout the Western hemisphere in studies across various disciplines.
10. Rival geographies is Camp’s term, and marginal landscapes is Stephanie LeMenager’s term.
11. Gad Heuman includes chapters on practices of marronage in Africa.
12. David Kazanjian usefully explores varieties of freedom that emerge from resistant practices and do not necessarily comport with Western, liberal conceptions.
13. Piracy and marronage have been compared by critics such as Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh.
14. The women on the Franks plantation (and, we must imagine, on surrounding plantations), especially Mammy Judy, are active participants in the network of subversive and dissembling speech acts that assist in the runaways’ marronage.

Works Cited


Davis, Angela Y. *Lectures on Liberation*. N.Y. Committee to Free Angela Davis, [circa 1971].


