Northward bound: Slave refugees and the pursuit of freedom in the Northern US and Canada, 1775-1861

Kennedy, O.P.

Introduction
Here on Freedom's Soil

Since he was a young boy, Henry Bibb yearned for freedom. Born in Shelby County, Kentucky, to Senator James Bibb and an enslaved woman named Mildred Jackson, he experienced the physical, emotional, and psychological traumas of slavery firsthand. Bibb later recalled in his memoir, "I was brought up in the Counties of Shelby, Henry, Oldham, and Trimble. Or, more correctly speaking, in the above counties, I may safely say, I was flogged up… I received stripes without number, the object of which was to degrade and keep me in subordination. I can truly say, that I drank deeply of the bitter cup of suffering and woe."[1]

At eighteen years of age, Bibb married his first wife, Malinda, with whom he fathered a daughter. But he was still determined to escape from slavery with his new family. "In the fall or winter of 1837," he wrote, "I formed a resolution that I would escape, if possible, to Canada, for my Liberty. I commenced from that hour making preparations for the dangerous experiment of breaking the chains that bound me as a slave." On Christmas Day, Bibb fled from his enslaver and sought liberty across the Ohio River. He secreted himself aboard a steamboat to Cincinnati, where he met a black man known as 'Dundy' who recommended that he escape to Canada, "over which waved freedom's flag, defended by the British Government, upon whose soil there cannot be found the foot print [sic] of a slave." The freezing winter presented numerous challenges but Bibb journeyed to Perrysburg, Ohio, "where I found quite a settlement of colored people, many of whom were fugitive slaves." The following spring, Bibb returned to Cincinnati, with the plan of liberating his enslaved wife and daughter at a later date. Before he could put his plan into motion, however, Bibb was recaptured and taken back across the Ohio River to Kentucky.[2]

Not long after, Bibb escaped once again and quickly made his way to Detroit, Michigan. After a brief stay in the city, he crossed the Detroit River into southwestern Ontario.[3] In 1851, Bibb founded an independent black Canadian newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive*, and became a prominent abolitionist in the province. At a local anti-slavery meeting, he declared:

> we are happy to meet you here on freedom's soil, we congratulate you, we rejoice with you, and some of us can sympathise [sic] with

[1] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself with an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack* (New York: Published by the Author; 5 Spruce Street, 1849), 13-14. accessed Sep. 1, 2016. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html.
[2] Bibb, *Narrative*, 46 (first quote), 51 (second quote), 55 (third quote).
[3] Afua Cooper, "Ever True to the Cause of Freedom – Henry Bibb and the Black's Freedom Champion, 1814-1854," *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal* 3 (2005-6), 22.

> you from experience. I can image [sic] that I see you traveling by night through the dark swamps, some with their little children on their backs, and their wives and others by their side, guided by the North star; and in the distance I seem to hear the slaveholder and his bloodhounds. But you are now in Canada, free from American slavery; yes, the very moment you stept [sic] upon these shores you were changed from articles of property to human beings. You are here entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens of Canada so long as you obey her laws. All I have to say to you now is go to work, dig for your bread; you have a right to the products of your own labor, you have a right to worship God according to the dictates of your consciences, you have a right to your own wives and children – no man can sell them here on the auction block.[4]

Between the American Revolution and the US Civil War (roughly 1775-1861), thousands of African American slave refugees escaped from the US South to the northern United States and British Canada. Both regions emerged as contrasting spaces of freedom for people of African descent. Subject to US federal law, the northern states were formally required to recognize the institution of slavery and the rights of southern enslavers to reclaim 'fugitives from justice.' Yet northern state governments approved various laws and policies designed to restrict slavery's extraterritorial influence. Moreover, African Americans, Quakers, and white abolitionists protected self-emancipated refugees. At the same time, African Americans were denied equal rights and citizenship across the northern states.

In Canada, the situation for slave refugees was markedly different. From the late eighteenth century, the British and colonial governments gradually abolished slavery. In 1833, the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act (also known as the Emancipation Act), which officially outlawed black enslavement throughout the empire from August 1, 1834. Although primarily directed at the British West Indies, the Slavery Abolition Act signaled the formal demise of slavery in Canada. Additionally, the Canadian provinces embraced a policy of formal free soil. By escaping to Canada, freedom seekers shed their enslaved status. Over time, the British and Canadian governments provided lands to slave refugees, shielded them from extradition and re-enslavement, and extended to them the rights and privileges of

[4] Bibb quote found at '"Here on Freedom's Soil" A Welcome to Canada Henry Bibb, ca. 1850," *NationalHumanitiesCenter.org*, accessed Aug. 14, 2019. http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text8/bibbcanada.pdf. Bibb's speech is also referenced in Jacqueline L. Tobin, *From Midnight to Dawn: The Last Tracks of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 84.

British subjecthood.[5] *Northward Bound* re-examines the self-emancipation and escape of African American slave refugees between the American Revolutionary War and Civil War (1775-1861), and their respective experiences in the North and Canada. The central research question of this study is: *How did African American slave refugees escape to the Northern US and Canada between the American Revolution War and US Civil War, and in what ways did freedom differ between each region?*

The first part of the question focuses on the motivations and methods by which freedom seekers escaped from the southern US to the North and Canada. Meanwhile, the second part focuses on the experiences of slave refugees in these respective territories. *Northward Bound* contends that freedom seekers fled from the South for numerous reasons, including the threat of impending sale, maltreatment, and the lifelong desire for liberty. This study examines how freedom seekers escaped from the South, starting with wartime refugee migration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and slave refugee migration in the antebellum era.

Regarding the second part of the question, this study builds upon Damian Alan Pargas' recent typology of freedom in North America. Rather than a singular, static concept, Pargas argues that liberty was fluid and varied between different geographical regions. He distinguishes between spaces of 'formal' freedom (Canada and Mexico), 'semi-formal' freedom (the northern US), and 'informal' freedom (the US South). Slave refugees in Canada enjoyed 'formal' freedom while their counterparts in the northern states lived in a state of 'semi-formal' freedom. Meanwhile, self-emancipators in the US South lived in a state of 'informal' freedom.[6] Regarding socio-economic opportunities, security from re-enslavement, and access to citizenship, black refugees in Canada officially held greater liberties and privileges. Yet freedom seekers in the northern US were not without freedoms or protections. This study demonstrates that slave refugees often chose semi-formal liberty in the North over formal liberty in British Canada.

Northward Bound analyzes how the motivations behind self-emancipation, directions of travel, and methods of escape evolved and shifted over the period. Particular attention is devoted to African American refugee migration during the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, as well as the migration of freedom seekers in the antebellum era, most often associated with the Underground Railroad (hereafter 'UGRR'). Furthermore, this study examines the settlement and experiences of slave

[5] For more on the Slavery Abolition Act and British abolitionism, see Natasha L. Henry, "Slavery Abolition Act," *Britannica.com*, accessed Oct. 9, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Slavery-Abolition-Act; Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[6] For more on Damian Alan Pargas' recent typology of freedom in North America, see Damian Alan Pargas, "Introduction: Spaces of Freedom in North America," in Damian Alan Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2018), 3-6.

refugees in the northern US and Canadian provinces between the American Revolution and the Civil War. In doing so, this study analyzes the differences between black liberty in the northern US and British Canada. This study focuses on three broader regions: the northern states (otherwise known as the 'free' or non-slaveholding states); the Canadian Maritimes (namely Nova Scotia and New Brunswick); and Upper Canada (roughly present-day southwestern Ontario). The decision was made not to include Lower Canada (roughly present-day Quebec) in this study because significantly fewer slave refugees escaped to this region during the period in question.

Northward Bound makes several important contributions to the historiography of slavery and freedom in North America. First, it offers insight into the nature of self-emancipation in the United States and Canada. Scholarly works on fugitive slaves in North America typically focus on the UGRR and northward slave refugee migrations in the antebellum era. By looking back to the late eighteenth century, it becomes evident that the nature of slave refugee migration was more complex and varied than previously assumed. During this period, it was common for enslaved people to escape from the South to the North, within the northern states or Canadian provinces, from the North to Canada, and even from British Canada to the northern states. In the early national period, when the geopolitical boundaries of the continent were quite fluid, self-emancipators fled in numerous directions. As slavery was gradually abolished in the northern states and Canadian provinces, slave refugees in the South sought asylum in these 'free soil' territories.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that family ties and kinship networks were often central to slave refugee migration to the North and Canada between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Contrary to previous studies, which typically emphasize the prevalence of individual (and predominantly male) escapes, this study illustrates that enslaved family units regularly attempted to escape from enslavement. Whereas previous studies of slave refugee migrations focus on nuclear families, this study argues that freedom-seeking family units typically fled in stages rather than as singular, complete units. Escape to the northern US and Canada often resembled patterns of chain migration, whereby freedom seekers followed other family members to specific destinations. Thus, in many instances, kinship networks played heavily into the escape of self-emancipators, including many of those who first fled alone.

More significantly, *Northward Bound* is the first comparative, transnational study of slave refugees in various regions across the northern US and British Canada. Rather than examine a specific region, this study treats the northern US and Canada as two broad spaces of 'semi-formal' and 'formal' freedom respectively (although it occasionally acknowledges regional differences). This study elucidates a better understanding of how 'freedom' was substantively different for slave refugees in each region. It illustrates how the rights, liberties, and protections afforded to refugees

varied greatly between the North and Canada. At the same time, it acknowledges that more slave refugees remained in the northern US than fled to Canada. Thus, it seeks to more clearly understand this seeming paradox: if formal freedom was achievable in British North America, why did most slave refugees choose to remain in the North? Which factors convinced them to accept semi-formal liberty in the 'free' states? How did they seek to expand their rights and liberties?

Northward Bound's comparative and transnational framework highlights the diversity of slave refugee experiences. Across the northern US and Canada, self-emancipated people settled in an array of urban and rural contexts, each of which presented opportunities and challenges. Cities and towns, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto, offered an impressive range of socio-economic opportunities. Meanwhile, rural settings enabled self-emancipators to gain experience with land ownership and establish independent settlements (although employment prospects were lower). Furthermore, slave refugees were at higher risk of recapture and abduction in certain regions. Upper Canada was more secure than the Mason-Dixon borderland for self-emancipated and free blacks. This study demonstrates that there was no single slave refugee experience, but rather a host of experiences across the North and Canada.

As mentioned earlier, *Northward Bound* builds upon Damian Pargas' typology of freedom. Historians of eighteenth and nineteenth-century North America employ terms like 'liberty' or 'freedom' without clearly defining them, detailing what they encompassed, or demonstrating how they varied over space and time. This study fills the gap by delineating between various 'types' of liberty, and different 'spaces' of freedom. This study argues that formal freedom in British Canada afforded greater rights, protections, and security than semi-formal freedom in the northern US. At the same time, numerous factors ensured that self-emancipated people in the North, especially in certain regions, enjoyed relative degrees of liberty and security. In particular, the conflict between state and federal laws, and the activism of black and white activists, created spaces of semi-formal freedom across the northern US.

Slave refugees in Canada were, by and large, secure from re-enslavement, and could ostensibly possess lands, attend schools, and exercise the rights and privileges of British subjects. Conversely, self-emancipators in the North were considered escaped human 'property' under federal law and could be re-enslaved. Given their 'illegal' status, they were also denied access to lands, education, and citizenship. Slave refugees in the North occupied a 'middle-ground' between slavery and freedom. On the one hand, they had liberated themselves from bondage by escaping from their enslavers. Additionally, they received some protections from northern state laws and civil society activists. Without formal freedom, however, slave refugees lived under the constant threat of recapture and re-enslavement. In this regard, comparisons can be drawn between slave refugees in the antebellum North

and undocumented people today.[7] The next section will examine *Northward Bound's* historiographical contributions in more detail.

Resistance, Self-Emancipation, and the Underground Railroad

Although historical works on North American slavery first rose to prominence in the early twentieth century, scholarly studies of enslaved resistance and self-emancipation are only a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the 1950s, studies of black enslavement in the United States typically overlooked the physical and psychological traumas of black enslavement. Instead, they often presented a vision of slavery that bore little resemblance to its reality. During the early twentieth century, most scholars subscribed to Ulrich B. Phillips' school of thought, which depicted slavery as a relatively benign institution. Phillips argued that slavery was a wholly positive force that 'Christianized' and educated enslaved communities. Deprived of agency, enslaved men, women, and children were portrayed as docile and grateful for their enslavers' generosity. Given this, resistance among enslaved communities was either downplayed or ignored entirely in historical studies. By and large, mainstream scholarship accepted Phillips' analysis. African American scholars, meanwhile, criticized Phillips' romanticized, white-washed interpretation of black enslavement in the United States.[8]

Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the field of slavery studies has grown significantly. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, historians began to re-examine US history through a new lens; one which emphasized black agency, activism, and resistance. Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* was among the first works in this new wave of scholarship to challenge earlier histories of slavery. It contended that slavery, far from benevolent, was actively harmful and oppressive. Stampp contended that southern enslavers were cruel tyrants who sought to maximize profits at any cost. Enslaved people were subject to inhumane conditions, brutal physical and psychological torture, and forced separations. At the same time,

[7] In recent years, various newspaper editorials and historical think-pieces have drawn comparisons between the 'fugitive slave issue' in the antebellum United States and the plight of undocumented people today. See Pamela Grundy, "Parallels of escaped slaves and undocumented immigrants," *Charlotte Observer*, Feb. 24, 2017. https://www.charlotteobserver.com/opinion/op-ed/article134830459.html. Accessed Oct. 9, 2019. Harold Myerson, "Op-Ed: There are echoes of the Fugitive Slave Act in today's immigration debate," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 1, 2018. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-meyerson-immigration-fugitive-slave-20180301-story.html. Accessed Oct. 9, 2019; Manisha Sinha, "The New Fugitive Slave Laws," *New York Review of Books*, Jul. 17, 2019. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/07/17/the-new-fugitive-slave-laws/. Accessed Oct. 9, 2019.

[8] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton, 1918); Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929).

enslaved people were not helpless or content with their conditions. Stampp notes that men and women actively resisted their enslavement. They pretended to be sick, engaged in 'slowdowns,' sabotaged equipment, disobeyed orders, and ran away either temporarily or permanently.[9]

Revisionist scholars followed suit over the coming decades. George M. Frederickson, Christopher Lasch, Eugene D. Genovese, Herbert Gutman, John W. Blassingame, and John Hope Franklin, produced works that moved away from Phillips' 'top-down' framework toward an analysis of slavery 'from below,' as seen from the viewpoint of enslaved people. Moreover, scholars began examining the 'peculiar institution' through sociological frameworks. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson called slavery "one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave." Other histories developed scholarly understandings of the experiences of enslaved women. Deborah Gray White's *Arn't I a Woman?* became a benchmark for scholarly studies of enslaved women in the US South.[10]

In recent decades, Ira Berlin, Peter Kolchin, Stephanie Camp, Brenda Stevenson, Ann Patton Malone, Anthony E. Kaye, Damian Pargas, and Emily West among others have greatly expanded scholarly understandings of enslaved people, kinship networks, and communities. In contrast to early revisionist works, new histories have sought to rebalance this previous emphasis on agency with other factors. In his essay 'On Agency,' Walter Johnson argues that this focus "has reduced historically and culturally situated acts of resistance to manifestations of a larger, abstract human capacity," which in turn represented "the alienation of enslaved people from the historical circumstances and ideological idioms of their own resistance[.]" In short, recent works have sought to readjust the balance between the actions of enslaved people and the constraints of their oppressive surroundings. This is not a denial of enslaved agency by any means. Rather, it is a contextualization of enslaved peoples' motivations and actions. Only by gaining a full understanding of their geopolitical surroundings and personal circumstances can we glean why they made certain decisions.[11]

---

[9] Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

[10] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985). For a sample of early revisionist scholarship, see George M. Frederickson and Christopher Lasch, "Resistance to Slavery," *Civil War History* 13, no. 4 (1967), 315-329; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

[11] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993; New York: Penguin Books, 1995); Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-*

Self-emancipation and escape was the most powerful form of resistance to bondage. Since the 1970s, numerous studies have examined self-emancipation and 'slave flight' in North America. Gerald Mullin's *Flight and Rebellion* was among the first devoted specifically to self-emancipation and escape. Meanwhile, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves* remains the most comprehensive study on the subject. Based on their assessment of escaped slave advertisements, newspaper articles, legal petitions, court and legislative records, and documents from southern enslavers, this sweeping analysis offers the most insight into 'runaways' within the South.[12]

Histories of self-emancipation and slave flight have detailed several categories of runaway slaves. Those who escaped for brief periods to avoid punishment or cruel treatment are typically labeled 'truants' or 'temporary sojourners.' They fled to urban centers, forests, and swamps in the South for a brief respite from their enslavers. Southern cities, note Franklin and Schweninger, "offered opportunities for runaways to hide their identities, create new ones, live with relatives – slave and free – and mingle with others." While many simply sought a short break from their enslavers, either to avoid punishment or visit family, others sought permanent refuge within urban centers across the South. Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans among other burgeoning towns and cities absorbed thousands of slave refugees over the antebellum era. Their primary aim was to remain concealed among free urban black populations across the South. Meanwhile, other historical studies, such as Sylviane Diouf's *Slavery's Exiles*, examine 'maroons' (i.e., those who sought to organize independent settlements and communities outside mainstream society).[13]

Century Louisiana (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black & White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Stephanie H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Damian Alan Pargas, *The Quarter and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010); Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003), 117-118.

[12] Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Freedom: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[13] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 125 (quote). For more on truancy in the US South, see Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, Ch. 6; and Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 35-59. For more on 'informal' freedom within the South, see Damian Alan Pargas, "Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South," *Journal of Early American History* 7, no. 3 (2017), 262-284; Pargas, "Introduction," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitives Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*; Damian Alan Pargas, "Seeking Freedom in the Midst of Slavery: Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum South," in Pargas

Furthermore, tens of thousands of freedom seekers sought permanent freedom outside the South. Rachel Adams notes that self-emancipators "traveled in many directions in search of freedom." Crossing state and international borders, these refugees believed it was the only way to acquire permanent, true liberty. Many enslaved people headed south for freedom. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, self-emancipators sought sanctuary in Spanish Florida. Similarly, self-emancipators in the Lower South and Southwest regularly fled to Mexico via the Texas borderlands. Others fled to the British West Indies or elsewhere in the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Securing passage aboard ships and seafaring vessels, slave refugees hoped to reach Mexican, Caribbean, and Central and South American ports, where they could begin their lives anew. It is impossible to know exactly how many freedom seekers escaped to each of these regions although the total figure almost certainly lies in the thousands. Yet the most popular destination outside the South for slave refugees (particularly those from the Upper South) was the northern US and Canada.[14]

(ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, 116-136; and Viola Franziska Muller, "Illegal but Tolerated: Slave Refugees in Richmond, Virginia," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom*, 137-167. For more on maroons within the South, see Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[14] Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 61. Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie has also sought to 'remap' the histories of self-emancipation and black migration in North America. See Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, "Fugitive Slaves across North America," in Leon Fink (ed.), *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Jeffrey R. Kerr Ritchie, *Freedom's Seekers: Essays on Comparative Emancipation* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), ch.1. For more on black migration to Spanish Florida, see Larry Eugene Rivers, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Matthew Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). The literature on black migration to Mexico has grown substantially since the early 2000s. See Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in His Head': Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810-1860," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3 (2004), 709-723; Sarah E. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833-1857," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (2013), 351-374; James David Nichols, "The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2013), 413-433; Mekala Audain, "Mexican Canaan: Fugitive Slaves and free blacks on the American frontier, 1804-1867" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2014); Bram Hoonhout and Thomas Mareite, "Freedom at the Fringes? Slave Flight and Empire-Building in the Early Modern Spanish Borderlands of Essequibo-Venezuela and Louisiana-Texas," *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018), 1-26; Kyle Ainsworth, "Advertising Maranda: Runaway Slaves in Texas, 1835-1865," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 197-231; Mekala Audain, "'Design His Course to Mexico': The Fugitive Slave Experience in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1850-1853," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 232-250; James David Nichols, "Freedom Interrupted: Runaway Slaves and Insecure Borders in the Mexican Northeast," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 251-274; Alice L. Baumgartner, "Abolition from the South: Mexico and the Road to the U.S. Civil War, 1821-1867," (PhD Diss., Yale University, 2018). For more on black migration from the United States to the Bahamas, see Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, "Florida Slaves, the "Saltwater Railroad" to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy," *Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 1 (2013), 51-78; Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, "The US Coastal Passage and Caribbean Spaces of Freedom," in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of*

Unsurprisingly, histories of slave refugee migration to the North and Canada typically focus on the UGRR. Early histories overemphasized the role and contributions of white abolitionists. Wilbur H. Siebert's *The Underground Railroad* is the most well-known early study of the antebellum freedom network. Siebert compiled interviews, testimonies, and letters of former white abolitionists and their descendants, and found local newspaper accounts. Siebert's work was a monumental contribution to scholarly studies of self-emancipation and black migration. As Eric Foner writes, however, Siebert's accounts for certain locales were "prone to exaggeration" and he "tended to ignore replies to his questionnaires that did not fit his image[.]" Most significantly, Siebert's UGRR downplayed the contributions of enslaved and free African Americans.[15] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few UGRR histories emphasized black activism. William Still's *The Under-Ground Railroad* (1872) was the main exception. A former UGRR activist in Philadelphia, Still's research focuses on the actions and agency of freedom seekers above all others. African American refugees were not simply 'cargo' or 'passengers'; they were the primary architects of the antebellum black freedom movement.[16]

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, historians began to reassess the UGRR and black freedom movement. Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line* was the first major study of the era to challenge Siebert's narrative. In this study, self-emancipators who fled from southern slavery were the primary actors. Gara argues that enslaved people formulated and executed their escapes with minimal assistance from external actors. Siebert's UGRR, he contends, was a myth constructed by white abolitionists and their descendants, designed for the benefit of northern white audiences. Instead, slave refugees primarily took refuge in northern black communities, not in the white

---

Freedom in North America, 275-315; Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage: The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[15] Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898); Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 12-13. For other early UGRR histories, which emphasized the contributions of white abolitionists, see Rev. William M. Mitchell, *The Under-Ground Railroad* (London: William Tweedie, 1860); Alexander Milton Ross, *Recollections and Experiences of An Abolitionist, from 1855 to 1865* (Toronto: Roswell and Hutchison, 1875); Eber M. Pettit, *Sketches in the History of the Underground Railroad, Comprising Many Thrilling Incidents of the Escape of Fugitives from Slavery, and the Perils of Those Who Aided Them* (Fredonia: W. McKinstry and Son, 1879); Robert C. Smedley, *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, PA: Printed at the Office of the Journal, 1883); H.U. Johnson, *From Dixie to Canada: Romances and Realities of the Underground Railroad*. (Orwell, OH: H.U. Johnson; Buffalo, C.W. Moulton, 1894).

[16] William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters Sec. Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of the Largest Stockholders and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers of the Road* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872). For more on William Still, see Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Ch. 2.

abolitionist UGRR 'stations.' By placing slave refugees and free African Americans at the center of his study, Gara rebuked the narrative forged by Siebert and others of a predominantly white-led movement. Almost six decades after its original release, *The Liberty Line* is arguably the most influential study of the UGRR. It remains an important study for historians of slave refugees, free African American communities and abolitionism in the antebellum United States, and scholars of cultural memory.[17]

In recent decades, numerous historians have contributed invaluable works to the historiography of the UGRR. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweningers' *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* examines the motivations behind self-emancipation and how freedom seekers escaped from bondage in exceptional detail. Other recent works have sought to balance Gara's insights with earlier histories of the UGRR. Keith Griffler, Eric Foner, and others argue that slave refugees and free blacks were the primary actors of the antebellum freedom movement, but also criticize Gara for dismissing the roles performed by northern whites. Both depict the UGRR as an interracial movement in which African Americans collaborated with white abolitionists to ensure the escape of slave refugees. Other scholarly works depict the UGRR as a series of overlapping, interracial networks. The significance of the UGRR and black freedom movement has been reaffirmed over the past few decades. Fergus Bordewich even dubbed the UGRR as the United States' first Civil Rights Movement.[18]

---

[17] Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1961); Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 13-14. For more on the construction of white abolitionist UGRR memory after the US Civil War and Reconstruction, see Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*. For more on the significance of historical and cultural memory, see David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (1989), 1117-1129.

[18] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*; Keith Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in Ohio Valley* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 8; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York: HarperCollins 2005; Amistad, 2006). Over the past few decades, numerous scholarly studies have expanded our understanding of the UGRR, slave refugees, and anti-slavery activism. For recent works on the UGRR and slave refugees, see Tobin, *From Midnight to Dawn*; William J. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania*, 2nd ed. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008; first published 2001); David W. Blight (ed.), *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004); Stanley Harrold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Carol E. Mull, *The Underground Railroad in Michigan* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010); Richard M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); David G. Smith, *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Richard M. Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2018); John L. Brooke, *"There is a North": Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019); Robert H. Churchill, *The*

Recent scholarship has made strides in connecting slavery and self-emancipation, and UGRR with the US Civil War. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, slavery was effectively erased as a central cause of the war by white Southerners and Northerners. Instead, growing sectionalism and 'states' rights' were regarded as the primary causes of the Civil War. This was perhaps most visibly symbolized by the emergence of neo-Confederate and 'Lost Cause' memory and ideology, which outright dismissed slavery as the central motivation behind secession. Over time, northern whites also overlooked slavery's centrality to the Civil War as part of a 'reconciliationist' strain of historical memory. African American scholars fought against this erasure of slavery in Civil War memory, but mainstream historical scholarship generally embraced Lost Cause and 'reconciliationist' memories.[19]

Since the mid-twentieth century, historians have recognized slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War. Far from bit players, these actors were instrumental in weakening southern slavery and hardening anti-slavery opinion. By escaping to the 'free' North, slave refugees tested the limits and boundaries of slavery in the United States and pushed northern whites towards embracing stronger free-soil, anti-slavery positions. Scott Hancock argues, "When slaves cross the fault line, they continually amplified tensions between the regions and the competing systems of law until the fault exploded into civil war. Black people, not simply slavery, pushed the nation to war."[20] Similarly, Matthew Mason writes that the escape of self-emancipators to the northern US and Canada "further alienated" white Northerners and Southerners, and contributed to rising sectional tensions.[21] *Northward Bound* examines how the debate over slave refugees solidified long-standing divisions not only between the northern and southern states, but also between the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.

Furthermore, *Northward Bound* examines the motivations behind self-emancipation and the nature of northward escape. It analyzes who and why enslaved African Americans chose to escape, how they escaped, and why they chose their

Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence in Antebellum America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[19] For more on US Civil War memory, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001); Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). For studies of the Lost Cause and neo-Confederate memory, see Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (eds.), *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

[20] Scott Hancock, "Crossing Freedom's Fault Line: The Underground Railroad and Recentering African Americans in Civil War Causality," *Civil War History* 59, no. 2 (2013), 173. Hancock's article also serves as an excellent overview of the evolving historiography on slave refugees and the UGRR between the Early Republic and Civil War.

[21] Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 120-121.

eventual destination. Most freedom seekers that made their way to the North and Canada fled from the Upper South (namely Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri). Numerous factors drove enslaved people to risk their lives and escape, including brutal treatment and a long-held desire to be free. However, none proved more profound than the threat of imminent sale and forced separation from loved ones. The interstate slave trade posed an indiscriminate threat to enslaved people. Most freedom seekers escaped on foot but some managed to secure other modes of transportation. Rather than seeking assistance from white abolitionists on a highly organized escape network, most self-emancipators took shelter in northern black communities.

While most freedom seekers escaped without external assistance, this should not suggest abolitionist escape networks played no role whatsoever. On the contrary, countless self-emancipated men and women were assisted by African American and white UGRR agents, as well as vigilance committees and anti-slavery societies. These networks were most developed in the Mid-Atlantic and New England. Activists in Philadelphia, New York City, Boston, and beyond provided food, water, shelter, and transportation to freedom seekers on their journeys to freedom. This study draws upon the records of prominent UGRR activists to examine the profile of self-emancipators and the networks which connected the Mid-Atlantic, New England, and Canadian provinces. In the former Northwest Territory, UGRR networks were less organized than their counterparts on the East Coast. Yet prominent African American and white activists operated throughout the region and offered assistance to self-emancipated refugees from the South.

In most UGRR histories, self-emancipation is depicted as an almost entirely solitary act, with freedom seekers escaping individually or in small groups of two or three. Like Bibb, most self-emancipators avoided escaping in family units due to practical difficulties and the heightened risk of recapture. However, these UGRR records reveal that enslaved families escaped at a higher rate than previously assumed. William Still and Sydney Howard Gay's records also highlight the nature and strategy of family escape more clearly. In particular, they demonstrate that enslaved family units frequently fled in stages or staggered their escapes to the North. *Northward Bound* illustrates the importance of considering family bonds and kinship ties to stories of self-emancipation.[22]

Surprisingly, only a handful of books devote significant attention to the complex relationship between self-emancipation, escape, and kinship ties. Most studies serve as biographies of freedom-seeking couples and families. Most notably, Karolyn Smardz Frost's *I've Got a Home in Glory Land* recounts the escape of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn from Kentucky to Upper Canada. Meanwhile, Bryan

[22] For more on William Still, Sydney Howard Gay, and freedom-seeking families, see Foner, *Gateway to Freedom.*

Prince's *A Shadow on the Household* examines the efforts of John and Arabella Weems to rescue their children. One of their children, Anna Maria Weens, later launched a desperate bid for freedom to reunite with her legally free members of her family. The cases of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, and Anna Maria Weems, are discussed later.[23]

Other studies examine the efforts of self-emancipated men and women to liberate enslaved families or reunite with loved ones after their escapes. Sydney Nathans' *To Free a Family* is perhaps the most notable example. Focusing on the story of Mary Walker, a "fair-skinned fugitive slave woman" who escaped from her enslaver during a visit to Philadelphia, it details her efforts to reunite with her family. With regards to leaving her children behind, Nathans contends that Walker "believed she had no choice – after a dispute with her owner, he had threatened to send her to the Deep South." For Walker, and many other freedom seekers, self-emancipation and escape was emotionally traumatic. "For her and thousands who fled," writes Nathans, "freedom came at a price; remorse at parting without a word, silence by the forced danger of disclosure, fear for her family's fate." Similarly, Karolyn Smardz Frost's *Steal Away Home* examines the efforts of Cecelia Jane Reynolds, a self-emancipator from Kentucky who escaped to Canada, to free and reunite with her enslaved family.[24]

Northward Bound builds upon these works by illustrating the efforts of freedom-seeking families to free themselves from bondage. Studies on the relationship between family and self-emancipation are crucial for better understanding the nature of escape from the US South to the North and Canada, and for gleaning insight into the emotional hardships of leaving enslaved spouses, children, and other relatives behind. Moreover, they offer a necessary corrective to the almost universally triumphant portrayal of self-emancipation and escape to the North. As Nathans notes, thousands of enslaved people "fled only when faced with an irrevocable change for the worse in their lives."[25]

---

[23] Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007); Bryan Prince, *A Shadow on the Household: One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom* (Toronto: Emblem, 2009).

[24] Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2; Karolyn Smardz Frost, *Steal Away Home: One Woman's Epic Flight to Freedom – And Her Long Road Back to the South* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2017). I have previously written on the relationship between kinship ties and escape to the northern US and Canada. See Oran Kennedy, "'The Strong Cords of Affection': Enslaved African American Families and Escape to the U.S. North and Canada, 1800-1861," in Joshua Farrington, Norman W. Powell, Gwendolyn Graham, Lisa Day, and Ogechi E. Anyanwu (eds.), *Slavery to Liberation: The African American Experience* (Richmond, KY: Eastern Kentucky University, 2019).

[25] Nathans, *To Free a Family*, 2-3.

Promised Lands? Black Freedom in the Northern US and Canada

Closely related to persistent myths of the UGRR is the romanticized notion of the North and Canada as safe havens for freedom seekers. The image of white Northerners and Canadians as abolitionists that defended slave refugees remains entrenched in popular memory. However, the reality for African-descended people in both regions was more ambiguous. For starters, slavery was legal and practiced throughout the northern states and Canadian provinces. In her book *The Hanging of Angélique*, African Canadian scholar Afua Cooper calls slavery "Canada's best kept secret." Other historians, such as Robin Winks, Frank Mackey, and Harvey Amani Whitfield, have demonstrated that black enslavement was practiced across Canada into the early nineteenth century. Meanwhile, scholars like Wendy Warren, Jared Ross Hardesty, and others have illustrated the roots of black enslavement in the colonial North. James J. Gigantino, II even demonstrates that slavery was practiced in New Jersey well into the Civil War Era.[26]

Historians have shed light on how anti-black prejudice shaped white attitudes to slave refugees and free blacks. "Though the North was free soil," notes Keith Griffler, "it was no promised land for African Americans."[27] Northern whites generally disliked the presence of African Americans and pressured state governments to restrict their settlement. In every northern state, blacks were denied equal rights and fair treatment in the social, economic, and political spheres. Even worse, northern black communities were subject to terror attacks from white Euro-Americans and European newcomers. While northern whites grew increasingly frustrated by the incursion of southern enslavers, kidnappers, and bounty hunters, most did little to prevent African Americans from being claimed as illegally self-emancipated people. In reality, the antebellum North comprised a series of *herrenvolk* democracies. In the words of James Brewer Stewart, a "harsh new spirit of modern racial essentialism" was prevalent throughout the North by the mid-1830s.[28]

---

[26] Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2006), 68; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2016); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); James J. Gigantino, II, "'The Whole North is Not Abolitionized': Slavery's Slow Death in New Jersey, 1830-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 3 (2014), 411-437.

[27] Keith Griffler, "Escaping the Land of the Free: History, Myth, and the Meaning of the Underground Railroad" (paper presented at Friends of the Network to Freedom Association Underground Railroad Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, 17 September 2009), 2.

[28] James Brewer Stewart, "Modernizing "Difference": The Political Meanings of Color in the Free States, 1776-1840," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4 (1999), 693. For an excellent overview of *herrenvolk* democracy, see Kenneth P. Vickery, "'Herrenvolk' Democracy and Egalitarianism in South Africa and the US South," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 3 (1974), 309-328.

Meanwhile, anti-black prejudice and racial discrimination were commonplace throughout Canada. Robin Winks' *The Blacks in Canada* demonstrates that freedom seekers from the United States faced tremendous hardship in the provinces, most notably from their impoverished and largely uneducated condition, as well as racism from Canadian whites. In this regard, Winks challenges the image of Canada as a 'Canaan Land' for freedom seekers. Jason Silverman's *Unwelcome Guests* also illustrates that Canada was not a post-racial utopia for people of African descent. Like Winks, Silverman emphasizes the racial prejudice of Canadian whites and their resistance to black newcomers. Nevertheless, Silverman places greater emphasis on the agency, resilience, and successes of slave refugees and free African American migrants.[29] Racial prejudice occasionally boiled over into overt hostility and efforts to block the migration of free African Americans and self-emancipated refugees into Canada. The prevalence of anti-black prejudice and discrimination undermines the romanticized image of nineteenth-century British North America. Reese Renford notes, "Canada was indeed the promised land of the slave's imagination. With this said, however, Canada was not a perfectly egalitarian utopia for Blacks."[30]

Central to this study is the following question: what is freedom? While employed frequently in historical scholarship, particular in studies of slavery and self-emancipation, there is often ambiguity or disagreement of its exact meaning. As Eric Foner writes, "freedom has never been a fixed category or predetermined concept. Subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations, it has always been a terrain of struggle, its definition constantly created and re-created."[31] Rather than offer precise definitions, historians often rely on readers to infer the meaning of freedom. In this regard, other fields have been more successful in defining different concepts of liberty. Political theorists have long wrangled with this question. Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" forms the bedrock of most modern analyses. He distinguishes between 'negative liberty' ("the absence of obstacles barriers or constraints," often framed as freedom *from* something) and 'positive liberty' ("the possibility of acting – or the fact of acting – in such a way to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes," often framed as the freedom *to* act). Other theorists have challenged Berlin's binary distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty. Philip Pettit championed the concept of 'republican liberty,' or the idea that freedom entails the possession of rights and privileges. Ian Carter

[29] Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971); Jason H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves* (Millwood, NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1985).
[30] Reese Renford, "Canada: The Promised Land for US Slaves," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 3 (2011), 215.
[31] Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994), 436-437.

describes freedom as a "status" and argues that it "is not simply a matter of non-interference, for a slave may enjoy a great deal of non-interference at the whim of her master."[32]

Northward Bound contends that, for slave refugees, freedom was not simply the absence of slavery. Rather, it was also directly linked to equality and autonomy. Land ownership, education, security from re-enslavement, civil and political equality, and citizenship were all considered integral to true liberty. With this in mind, this study builds upon Damian Pargas' typology by arguing that formal freedom in Canada provided greater access to lands, schools and colleges, civil and political rights, and equal citizenship. Meanwhile, semi-formal freedom in the northern US meant that slave refugees (as well as free blacks) were largely excluded from the means of elevation and equal citizenship. Furthermore, formal freedom conferred slave refugees with greater security from re-enslavement. Upon reaching Canadian soil, African American freedom seekers shed their enslaved status and were recognized as people with claims to British subjecthood. This was not the case in the northern US. Instead, the status of self-emancipators in this region was always contested and susceptible to change. At the same time, ambiguities and conflicts between state and federal laws, and the extra-legal resistance of African Americans and white abolitionists, provided slave refugees in the North with important protections from enslavers, kidnappers, and even federal marshals. In this sense, they lived in a state of incomplete, semi-formal freedom.

Comparative Histories and Black Migration in the US and Canadian Historiographies

The historiography of black emigration from the United States to Canada can be roughly divided into two periods. First, the large-scale, wartime migrations of African and African Americans after the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. Thousands of self-emancipated refugees and free black migrants resettled in the Canadian Maritime provinces and the Bahamas. Numerous works have been published on the migration of the 'Black Loyalist' refugees from the United States to Canada after the Revolutionary War. Likewise, Alan Taylor, Gene Allen Smith, and others have shed light on black refugee migration to Canada after the War of 1812.[33] The common

[32] Quotes taken from Ian Carter, "Positive and Negative Liberty," *TheStanfordEncyclopediaofPhilosophy* (Summer 2018 edition), accessed Aug. 19, 2019. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/.

[33] Since the 1970s, the historiography of self-emancipation in the Revolutionary War, black Loyalist refugee migration to British Canada, and Black Refugees of the War of 1812 has expanded immensely. Key readings include Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961); Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 24-60, 114-141; Mary Beth Norton, "The

assumption is that the British government issued an amnesty to enslaved African Americans during each war to alleviate a shortage of manpower and create chaos and confusion behind 'American' lines. In turn, self-emancipators served in British lines and fully exhibited their affinity for the Crown. In the process, black refugees became black 'Loyalists.'

Yet there are several problems with this narrative. As Benjamin Quarles and Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie have noted, this assumes that African Americans "were supporters of the British rather than primarily liberty-seekers."[34] Moreover, this analysis presents a top-down version of events in which enslaved Africans and African Americans only fled to British lines in response to respective amnesties. This reductionist approach undervalues the role that self-emancipators performed in forcing the issue upon the British. Alan Taylor's *The Internal Enemy* takes a significant step in correcting this misconception. He claims that freedom seekers during the War of 1812 partly compelled the British to grant asylum by fleeing to their lines. Moreover, he argues that self-emancipators regularly refused to cooperate with the British unless they promised to liberate enslaved family members. In this regard, Taylor restores a great deal of agency to black freedom seekers while acknowledging their structural limitations (after all, the impetus to issue an amnesty to self-emancipators remained with the British government). *Northward Bound* adopts Taylor's balanced approach to black refugee wartime migrations by emphasizing the roles performed by self-emancipators in pressing the British to

Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 58 (1973), 402-426; John N. Grant, "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia, 1776-1815," *Journal of Negro History* 58 (1973), 253-270; Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); Sylvia Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 3 (1983), 375-398; Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Mary Louise Clifford, *From Slavery to Freetown: Black Loyalists after the American Revolution* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999); Cassandra Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2005), 243-264; Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2006); Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006); Alan Taylor, "The Late Loyalists: Northern Reflections of the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (2007), 1-34; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Random House, 2011); Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 47-53; Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[34] Quote from Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage: The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 15.

become 'reluctant liberators,' while still acknowledging the significance of top-down decision-making.[35]

The second strain of the historiography examines African American migration to Upper Canada roughly between 1820 and 1861. Unlike the earlier wartime migrations, this period witnessed an increasing stream of freedom seekers from the US South to the northern states and Canada. By the early antebellum era, the northern 'free' states became the primary destination for tens of thousands of slave refugees. Crossing the Mason-Dixon line, the Ohio River, and the Mississippi River, self-emancipated men, women, and children fled to urban and rural free African American communities throughout the North. As discussed earlier, refugees availed themselves of interracial freedom networks which aided them during their escapes. Upper Canada was the primary destination for freedom seekers who sought to leave the United States entirely. Most refugees crossed into the province via the Detroit and Niagara River borderlands, or via Lake Erie's steamboats.[36] Few studies have sought to compare the earlier wartime and antebellum black refugee migrations. Aside from Robin Winks' landmark study, there has been no significant attempt to bridge the historiographical gap between black wartime migrations to the Canadian Maritimes and antebellum migrations to Upper Canada. *Northward Bound* demonstrates that even within larger sites of formal freedom, there were significant regional differences that shaped the experiences of black refugee newcomers.

Similarly, the historiography on slave refugee migration to the northern US, as well as antebellum black communities more generally, is largely comprised of regional studies. In recent years, there has been a tendency to focus on specific cities or regions, such as New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, or the former Northwest Territory. As a result, there are now detailed histories of the UGRR, abolitionism, and freedom seekers in various locales, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and other urban and rural locales. The works of Gary Nash, Eric Foner, Leslie Harris, and Nikki Taylor among others have greatly expanded our knowledge of these subjects.[37] *Northward Bound* offers a compelling case for examining slave refugee migration in North America through a comparative lends. First, as there is now an abundance of local and regional histories, scholars must find new ways to analyze and examine this topic. While it is entirely feasible to write detailed accounts of freedom seekers in every town, city, and locale across the northern US, it is unclear

[35] Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*.
[36] This historiographical strain examines histories of the UGRR and black settlement in Upper Canada. For the former, see Gara, *The Liberty Line*; Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Blackett, *Making Freedom*. For the latter, see Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests*.
[37] For sample literature, see Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

how this would improve the quality of the historiography or the field as a whole. Moreover, local and regional studies are quite limited in what they can tell us about the shared and contrasting experiences of freedom seekers across the northern states. Histories of UGRR networks, abolitionists, and slave refugees in Boston, for instance, typically relate little or nothing about their counterparts in the Mid-Atlantic states or former Northwest Territory. Comparative studies yield valuable insights into how context shaped the lives and experiences of self-emancipated refugees across North America. By embracing a comparative and transnational approach, this study seeks to better understand how freedom for African-descended people varied across the northern US and Canada.

The Transnational Turn and Borderlands Studies

Apart from comparative approaches, borderlands and transnational studies offer a useful framework for understanding the history of self-emancipation, abolitionism, black refugee migrations, and the lives of African-descended people in North America. In the past, historical scholarship has been constrained by its emphasis on producing 'national' histories. Just as the international boundaries between Canada, the United States, and Mexico frame our understanding of contemporary society, economics, and politics, so, too, have they largely defined our comprehension of the historical past. The international boundaries which shape North America have never been permanent, fixed, or static. Men, women, and children have moved across international boundaries since they were formed. Without formal checkpoints or required documentation, crossing between the United States, Canada, and Mexico in the nineteenth century was significantly easier than it is today.

Migration and mobility are integral components of transnational and cross-border studies. Additionally, transnationalism encompasses the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, values, and beliefs. Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta S. Tucker define transnationalism as "the movement of people and culture back and forth across international borders[.]"[38] Far from impenetrable barriers, the porous international boundaries served as bridges between cross-border communities. Bearing this in mind, the transnational framework is suitable for this study of self-emancipation and freedom seekers in the northern United States and Canada. *Northward Bound* demonstrates that African Americans, African Canadians, and white abolitionists forged transnational communities and organizations, and established interracial freedom networks which extended across international borders. In doing so, they

[38] Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta S. Tucker, "Sources and Resources," in Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta S. Tucker (eds.) *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 260.

spearheaded a continental abolitionist movement and acquired transnational identities.

Beginning in the 1990s, historians and scholars from other disciplines have ramped up calls for more transnational studies of North America. In his influential 1999 article "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," David Thelen writes:

> The spread across national borders of institutions such as multinational corporations and CNN, of social movements such as feminism and environmentalism, and of unprecedented migrations of people have unleashed processes of hybridization and creolization as people shape new and multiple identities. Even the concept of citizenship, that unquestioned right of nation-states to bestow, has been shaken by movements that claim that people's rights should accompany them as human beings, not be bestowed on them as residents of a nation-state.[39]

The growing desire for transnational histories reflects a heightened awareness that we live in an interconnected world. Transnational movements and corporations, as well as intergovernmental and supranational organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU), illustrate that concepts like sovereignty, citizenship, and identity as characterized in terms of the 'nation-state' are less relevant than before. Instead, people and nation-states increasingly conceive themselves as part of a wider world, despite what recent backlashes may suggest. As Thelen notes, recent developments related to globalization compelled scholars to "take a critical look at what had once seemed so inevitable as to be nearly invisible, to view from new angles key moments when nations were made, challenged, changes, and unmade, to explore how they confronted internal and external threats and opportunities, and how they developed and may be losing their privileged position as the focus for popular identity and sovereignty."[40]

Furthermore, the rising prominence of black, Latinx, and indigenous voices in public and academic discussions, has fostered transnational dialogues. In recent decades, scholars have pioneered and developed the concept of black transnationalism between the United States and Canada. Meanwhile, the field of

[39] David Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999), 965-966. For more on the growth of borderlands, comparative, and transnational histories in North American scholarship, see David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (1992), 432-462. While Thelen's article "Of Audiences" focuses on the US-Mexican borderlands, its insights can also be applied to the US-Canadian borderlands.
[40] Thelen, "The Nation and Beyond," 966.

borderlands studies is closely related to, although not directly synonymous with, transnationalism. The field first rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, particularly after the formation of the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) in 1976. Early studies focused overwhelmingly on the US – Mexico border. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan note that it is "the one border to have generated a systematic and sustained body of work." However, recent works have made significant contributions to the transnational historiography of other border zones in North America.[41]

Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron's article "From Borderlands to Borders" provides a useful (if slightly strict) distinction between 'frontiers' and 'borderlands,' and a helpful analysis of the evolving border zones on the continent. In particular, Adelman and Aron devote significant attention to imperial conflicts between the United States, Great Britain, France, and indigenous groups over Canada (especially the Great Lakes region) and the Missouri Valley. The Great Lakes region, and particularly the Detroit River border zone, witnessed an upsurge in interest over recent decades. Released in 2005, John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David R. Smith, and Randy W. Widdis' *Permeable Borders: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region* employed both transnational and borderland frameworks in their study of the Detroit River border zone. More recently, Tiya Miles released *The Dawn of Detroit*, an exceptional transnational study of the same region.[42]

Over the past few decades, historians have written several studies of African American and African Canadian transnational communities. The Detroit River border zone has received the most attention from scholars. Afua Cooper called the river a "fluid frontier" and argued that it brought together black communities in Michigan and southwestern Ontario. Cooper stresses the permeability of the Detroit River. She claimed that African Americans and African Canadians often traveled back and forth across the US – Canadian border. Black mobility was a striking feature of the region and a vital component of transnationalism. Yet black activists fully understood the value of the international border to the antebellum freedom movement. From the late eighteenth century, they took advantage of the border to obtain and preserve their liberty. Other historians published works on transnational black communities in the Detroit River border zone. Gregory Wigmore's influential article emphasizes the porous nature of the borderland but, in a novel twist, illustrates how enslaved people

[41] Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.
[42] Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empire, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999), 814-841; John Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David R. Smith, and Randy William Widdis, *Permeable Borders: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1850-1900* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005); Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York: New Press, 2017), 8.

in Upper Canada fled to the United States. Furthermore, Karolyn Smardz Frost and Nora Faires each examined the evolving significance of the transnational boundary, particularly for the UGRR.[43]

The Niagara River borderland has received less attention from historians and borderland studies scholars. The region has not been overlooked entirely, however. Various scholars of Harriet Tubman, such as Catherine Clinton and Kate Clifford Larson, detailed her experiences in St. Catharines and provided some insight into the region's African Canadian communities. Michael Butler and Nancy Power's study examines the long history of slavery and freedom in the Niagara border zone. Recently, Dann J. Broyld has published several articles on African Canadian communities and transnational activism in the Niagara border zone. Overall, the historiography of this region is much less developed than the Detroit River borderland. This likely reflects the fact that the Detroit River was the primary gateway for black freedom seekers to Upper Canada.[44]

Not all borderlands in eighteenth and nineteenth-century North America were transnational ones, however. Over the antebellum period, new border zones emerged between 'free' northern US and the 'slave' South. The gradual abolition of northern slavery created new opportunities for freedom seekers, who fled to the North in higher numbers. Moreover, it brought the 'Lower' or 'border' North (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) into regular disagreement and conflict with enslavers and politicians in the neighboring Upper South. Three key border zones emerged between the so-called 'free' and 'slave' states: the Mason-Dixon borderland, the Ohio River borderland, and the Upper Mississippi River borderland. Several works focus on these border zones. David G. Smith's *On the Edge of Freedom* is among the foremost studies of the Mason-Dixon borderland. Smith examines the primary routes which freedom seekers took during their escapes to southwestern and south-central Pennsylvania, the primary actors involved, as well as interstate disputes over the broader issue. Stanley Harrold and Matthew Salafia have produced the most comprehensive histories of slavery and freedom in the Ohio River borderland, although they present contrasting arguments. Meanwhile, M. Scott Heerman, Harriet Frazier, and others have written excellent

[43] Afua Cooper, "The Fluid Frontier: Blacks and the Detroit River Region. A Focus on Henry Bibb," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30, no. 2 (2000), 127-148; Gregory Wigmore, "Before the Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom in the Canadian-American Borderland," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011), 437-454; Nora Faires, "Across the Border to Freedom: The International Underground Railroad Memorial and the Meanings of Migration," *Journal of American Ethnic Studies* 32, no. 2 (2013), 38-67; Karolyn Smardz Frost, "African American and African Canadian Transnationalism along the Detroit River Borderland: The Example of Madison J. Lightfoot," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (2013), 78-88.

[44] Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Little Brown, 2004); Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004); Michael Butler and Nancy Power, *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara* (Niagara-on-the-Lake: Niagara Historical Society, 1993).

books and articles on slavery, freedom, and self-emancipation in the Upper Mississippi River Valley. Across the border regions, tensions flared between southern enslavers and slave catchers, African Americans, northern whites, and state governments over the fugitive slave issue. At times, interstate disputes even spilled over into violence and extra-legal rescues.[45]

The Language of Refugeedom, Freedom-Seeking, and Other Terminology

Historians of self-emancipation and the UGRR have generally avoided employing terminology associated with migration theory and refugee studies in the past. Even today, there is still a measure of hesitation among scholars about describing fugitive slaves as 'asylum seekers' or 'refugees.' In a recently published book chapter, Afua Cooper, "why the need to keep labelling [sic] these settlers as "fugitives" and "refugees"? When we cast individuals in these roles, it sets up a scenario where [b]lacks are always the helpless recipients of charity and [w]hites are always the providers of it."[46] Yet the integration of modern terms in historical case studies is a sticking point for some scholars. At the same time, the language of bondage, self-emancipation, and refuge has evolved continues to develop over time. As our understanding of the past and present evolves, so must the language and terminology which historians employ regarding historical actors.

The English word 'refugee' originates from the French word '*réfugié*,' which was originally applied to the Huguenots, a minority group of French Calvinists. In 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which granted important rights and protections to Calvinists and formally outlawed Protestantism. During this period, preachers and worshippers faced heightened discrimination, schools were closed, and churches were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of Huguenot refugees fled the country. As the term, 'refugee' gained was increasingly applied to other groups seeking protection from religious and political persecution. Furthermore, national governments increasingly applied the term to other persecuted minorities.

---

[45] Smith, *On the Edge of Freedom*; Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting Over Slavery Before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Matthew Salafia, *Slavery's Borderland: Freedom and Bondage Along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); M. Scott Heerman, "'Reducing Free Men to Slavery': Black Kidnapping, the 'Slave Power,' and the Politics of Abolition in Antebellum Illinois," *Journal of the Early Republic* 38, no. 2 (2018), 261-291; Harriet C. Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those who Helped Them* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

[46] Afua Cooper, "Epilogue Reflections: The Challenges and Accomplishments of the Promised Land," in Boulou Ebanda de B'béri, Nina Reid-Maroney, and Handel Kashope Wright (eds.), *The Promised Land: History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 195.

Article 120 of France's Constitution of 1793 declared that the country would "grant asylum to aliens banished on account of freedom."[47]

Over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mass refugee migrations continued to take place across the world. Despite numerous efforts, the first internationally accepted definition of 'refugee' was not approved until after the Second World War. In 1951, the United Nations ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Article 1 states that a refugee is someone who:

> owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationalist, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[48]

In recent decades, the term had been retroactively applied to groups who were not previously considered refugees. Yet enslaved people have remained conspicuously absent from the field of refugee studies. At the same time, the experiences of self-emancipators resemble those of refugees elsewhere. Fortunately, some historians have drawn direct comparisons between 'fugitive slaves' and refugees. In 2017, David Blight published an article for *The Atlantic* titled "Frederick Douglass, Refugee." He argues that Douglass' experiences "serve as a striking symbol of one of the first major refugee crises in our history… he was perhaps America's most illustrious *internal* exile. Indeed, until the Civil War all African Americans, slave or free, lived as exiles of a kind in their own land." Blight draws a link between Douglass (and other freedom seekers) with internally displaced people, undocumented people, and refugees today.[49] Meanwhile, the US National Park

[47] "Huguenot French Protestant," *EncyclopaediaBritannica.com*, Aug. 3, 2016. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Huguenot, accessed Jan. 27, 2020; Hélène Lambert, Francesco Messino, and Paul Tiedemann, "Comparative Perspectives of Constitutional Asylum in France, Italy, and Germany: Requiescat in Pace?" in *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2008), 17n4 (translated quote from Article 120 of 1793 French Constitution). My sincerest thanks to Irial Glynn for directing me to the 1793 French Constitution.

[48] "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," *unhcr.org*, accessed Aug. 29, 2019. https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.

[49] David W. Blight, "Frederick Douglass, Refugee," *Atlantic*, Feb. 7, 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/frederick-douglass-refugee/515853/, accessed Jan. 27, 2020.

Service explains, freedom seeker "demonstrates what was in the hearts of freedom-seeking African Americans who acted to make liberty a reality."[50]

Similarly, studies of the black 'Loyalists' and fugitive slaves during the War of 1812 designate these historical actors as 'refugees.' Alan Taylor's *The Internal Enemy* describes self-emancipators who fled to British lines as 'refugees.' Harvey Amani Whitfield refers to African Americans that arrived in the Canadian Maritimes after the War of 1812 as the 'Black Refugees' (the upper case 'R' distinguishes these refugees from the black 'Loyalists'). Other studies on the antebellum and Civil War Era describe self-emancipated Africans and African-descended people as refugees. David Williams' *I Freed Myself* refers to escaped slaves as refugees, while Ikuko Asaka's *Tropical Freedom*, refers to 'former-slave refugees.' Histories of the UGRR, such as Fergus Borderwich's *Bound for Canaan*, also refers to self-emancipated men, women, and children as refugees from slavery. Furthermore, there has been a shift in US Civil War studies away from discussions of 'contraband camps' to 'slave refugee camps.' Recent works from Abigail Cooper, Chandra Manning, David Silkenaat, and Amy Murrell Taylor illustrate the growing popularity of this terminology.[51]

Nevertheless, some slavery studies scholars remain hesitant about using the language of refugeedom. On the one hand, historians are naturally cautious about applying modern terms and language to historical actors. Yet, for some scholars, the term 'refugee' does not fully accurately reflect the condition of African American freedom seekers. Robert H. Churchill, for instance, argues that refugee is a "more neutral term" which does not quite capture the lived experiences of freedom seekers. "Escapees from slavery," Churchill contends, "were fugitives in the sense that they were, in law and practice, actively targeted for reenslavement." At the same time, Churchill perhaps fails to fully appreciate that African Americans, as well as many white Northerners, either disregarded or actively challenged these laws and practices. While federal (and state) laws may have regarded them as 'fugitives,' self-

[50] "Underground Railroad Terminology," *NPS.gov*, accessed Aug. 28, 2019. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover_history/terminology.htm.

[51] Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2006); David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*; Abigail Cooper, "Lord, until I reach my home": Inside the refugee camps of the American Civil War," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015); Abigail Cooper, "'Away I goin' to find my mamma:' Self-Emancipation, Migration, and Kinship in Refugee Camps in the Civil War Era," *Journal of African American History* 102, no. 4 (2017), 444-467; Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016); David Silkenaat, *Driven from Home: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). In their works, Cooper and Taylor provide fully justified explanations for referring to 'contraband' men and women as refugees.

emancipators and anti-slavery activists fought against this label. Moreover, it was never always clear when the term 'fugitive' applied. As will be shown, numerous episodes highlight the legal ambiguity surrounding numerous cases in the northern US and Canada. *Northward Bound* thus generally opts for the term refugee over fugitive.[52]

Additionally, self-emancipators, free African American and African Canadian activists, and white abolitionists in North America and the British Isles regularly employed the language of refugeedom. To some extent, this undercuts the argument that historical actors (particularly self-emancipated people) did not conceive themselves as refugees from slavery. Various articles, reports, and writings from the era reveal the prevalence of this language among formerly enslaved people, free-born blacks, and white abolitionists. In 1843, the *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter* published an article titled, "Refugee Slaves in Canada." In 1861, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* referred to the "Colored Refugees in Canada" which provided its assessment on the condition of freedom seekers in Upper Canada. One year later, William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* wrote of the so-called 'contraband' enslaved people in the Civil War South, "The word "Contrabands" … is not a proper term to be applied to human beings… Let them be called Colored Refugees, until we can obtain for them a recognized freedom and citizenship." Similarly, US abolitionist Benjamin Drew (whose collection of interviews with African Americans in Upper Canada informs much of this study) referred to self-emancipated people in Upper Canada as refugees.[53]

Of course, historians should question whether self-emancipated people in the northern US and Canada conceived of themselves as 'refugees,' or if the term was merely projected onto them by white abolitionists. There is no clear answer given the paucity of written testimonies and materials from formerly enslaved people. Yet they understood the weight which the term 'refugee' carried among white anti-slavery audiences and were willing to use it to their advantage. Henry Bibb even called his independent black land-owning scheme the 'Refugee Home Society' (discussed in Chapter Three). As will also be shown, however, some African American and African Canadian activists were highly concerned about white abolitionists perpetuating negative depictions of helpless 'refugees' in Canada. Nevertheless, slave refugees utilized this terminology to their advantage when necessary.

---

[52] Churchill, *The Underground Railroad and the Geography of Violence*, 18-19.
[53] "REFUGEE SLAVES IN CANADA," *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter*, Sep. 20, 1843; "COLOURED REFUGEES IN CANADA," *ASR*, Jan. 1, 1861; C. K.W., "Colored Refugees," *Liberator*, Feb. 14, 1862; Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856), accessed Feb. 1, 2016. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/drew.html.

Northward Bound embraces the language of refugeedom. It avoids the terms 'fugitives' or 'runaways' because, as the National Park Service explains, they "were constructs of the Southern slave-holding societal structure, or by some well-meaning but nonetheless patronizing abolitionists. As such, these terms reflect how slave-holding society viewed African American efforts toward freedom." Rather, it describes these actors as 'freedom seekers,' 'refugees (from slavery),' and 'self-emancipators/liberators.' On that note, this study also generally refrains from using 'slave,' 'slaveowner,' and 'slaveholder.' Once again, these terms reflect the hegemonic visions of southern white society, which sought to reduce African-descended people to 'property.' Like other recent works, *Northward Bound* thus attempts to '*re*-humanize' freedom seekers. Consequently, this study uses the term 'enslaver.' Other terms used in this study, namely 'kidnapper,' 'bounty hunter,' and 'human trafficker,' should not be conflated with enslaver.[54] On a minor technical note, *Northward Bound* is written in US English. Consequently, 'color' is spelled without a 'u' in the main body. The only exceptions occur when the traditional UK English spelling (i.e. 'colour') appears in the original text. Given that occurs regularly in this study, the author has opted not to include '[sic]' after each instance for this specific word.

Sources and Methodology

Scholars have long struggled to write histories of slavery and self-emancipation in North America. The relative scarcity of writings and testimonies challenges historians to find ways to trace the lives of enslaved and self-emancipated men, women, and children. Narratives, autobiographies, and testimonies from formerly enslaved and self-emancipated people yield invaluable insight into the lives of enslaved African Americans. These literary works typically follow a similar pattern. Beginning at childhood, the author exposes the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system, documenting instances of corporal punishment and emotional trauma. After transitioning into adulthood, the author resolves to escape to the northern US and Canada to obtain their freedom. Autobiographies and memoirs proved hugely popular among nineteenth-century white audiences. However, autobiographies and memoirs were often embellished by abolitionist editors to evoke sympathy and anti-slavery agitation among their predominantly white readership. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of freedom narratives and autobiographies were written by men.[55] Nonetheless, autobiographies yield important insight into the lives and

[54] "Underground Railroad Terminology," *NPS.gov*.
[55] For more on the role of white abolitionist editors, and an excellent discussion on the utility and reliability of enslaved narratives, see John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves:

perceptions of enslaved people, their motivations for escaping, and the routes they took to the North and Canada.

Interviews, letters, and testimonies offer invaluable glimpses into the lives and experiences of slave refugees. Benjamin Drew's *A North-Side View of Slavery* (1856) recorded the testimonies of hundreds of black refugees across Upper Canada. Like autobiographies and memoirs, however, Drew likely altered certain details. Furthermore, these testimonies comprise a small fraction of the estimated total number of slave refugees in the province. Likewise, US abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe's *Refugees from Slavery in Canada West* suffers from similar issues. Nonetheless, it still offers important insight into the lives of slave refugees. Other interviews prove extremely useful for scholars of self-emancipation in North America. During the Great Depression, the US federal government commissioned the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), which involved approximately 2,300 interviews with formerly enslaved African Americans. Yet these sources suffer from similar limitations. Since most interviewers were white men, African American interviewees likely altered their answers to omit certain details. John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* also offers a vast range of newspaper clippings and testimonies from formerly enslaved people (including self-emancipators).[56]

Furthermore, 'escaped slave' advertisements offer an important glimpse into the demography of self-emancipators, the motivations behind escape, and the various routes to freedom in North America. David Waldstreicher writes, "Runaway advertisements, in effect, were the first slave narratives – the first published stories about slaves and their seizure of freedom." Although typically written from the perspective of white enslavers and bounty hunters, newspaper notices yield important details on black freedom seekers. *Northward Bound* incorporates escaped slave advertisements from US and Canadian newspapers. Moreover, nineteenth-century newspapers discussed the black refugee issue extensively and recorded the escapes of countless self-emancipators. African American and anti-slavery newspapers documented the journeys of freedom seekers from the US South to the northern states and Canadian provinces.[57]

Meanwhile, abolitionist and anti-slavery society records prove extremely useful for understanding the profile of freedom seekers and motivations behind their escapes, and the various networks which spanned the northern states and Canada. The

---

Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975), 473-492. David Doddington notes that approximately 88% of freedom narratives and autobiographies were written by men. See David Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 26n22.

[56] Samuel G. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West. Report to the Freedman's Inquiry Commission* (Boston: Wright & Potter, Printers, 4 Spring Lane, 1864).

[57] David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1999), 247.

best-preserved records were kept by abolitionists and anti-slavery societies on the East Coast, especially in Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) left behind detailed records of meetings and other activities. Elsewhere, abolitionist and anti-slavery societies published minutes and accounts of their meetings. Some UGRR conductors also kept personal records of the freedom seekers that arrived at their homes and offices. William Still and Sydney Howard Gay of Philadelphia and New York City respectively logged the details of several hundred black refugees in the 1850s. In Upper Canada, abolitionist missionaries detailed their activities in letters to the American Missionary Association (AMA).

British and Canadian government land, legal, and court records also document the journeys of self-liberated freedom seekers. Black Loyalist refugees that departed from New York City following the Revolutionary War, for instance, were recorded in the so-called 'Book of Negroes.' Upon arrival, provincial records detailed various aspects of the black Loyalists' lives, including where they settled, how much land they received, and the types of employment they occupied. Similar records can be found for African American refugees from the War of 1812 in Nova Scotia and Upper Canada. Land petitions illustrate the size and location of land received by black refugees, and other petitions reveal their primary concerns and grievances. Other government documents, including census records, listings of black residents, and correspondence, are employed in this study, although they also come with limitations. As noted earlier, census takers did not always record accurate information regarding people of African descent.

Chapter Synopsis

Northward Bound is separated into two parts and composed of five chapters. Part I (Escaping Bondage) is comprised of the first two chapters of this study and examines the escape of self-emancipated people. Chapter One illustrates how the northern US and British Canada became spaces of semi-formal and formal freedom respectively, and how slavery evolved and rapidly expanded within the US South. Furthermore, it examines self-emancipation and mass slave refugee migration during the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, demonstrating that freedom seekers exploited wartime chaos by fleeing to British lines to claim their liberty. Chapter Two focuses on self-emancipation and escape to the North and Canada via the black freedom movement and UGRR. It analyzes the routes and trajectories taken by freedom seekers, as well as the strategies employed during their escapes. Particular attention is devoted to the roles played by free African Americans, white abolitionists, and the UGRR in aiding self-emancipated refugees from the South. Like Chapter One, this

chapter also explores the prevalence of freedom-seeking families in the northern US and Canada.

Part II (Forging Freedom) is composed of three chapters that examine the settlement processes of slave refugees across the North and Canada. Chapter Three explores where and why freedom seekers settled within each region, how they supported themselves, and how they set about improving their social and economic condition. Special attention is devoted to the employment prospects and living conditions of slave refugees across the northern US and British Canada, as well as their efforts to procure lands and obtain an education. Chapter Three analyzes the range of opportunities available to self-emancipated African Americans, as well as the obstacles which kept them on the margins of society.

Chapter Four explores the recaption, rendition, and extradition of slave refugees from the North and Canada. By doing so, it aims to understand the security of freedom seekers in each region. The former remained subject to US federal law – in particular the Fugitive Slave Acts – which granted enslavers the right to legally retrieve their escaped human 'property' from the northern states. However, the logistical challenges of locating and recovering self-emancipators, the conflict between state and federal law, and the extra-legal resistance of African Americans and white abolitionists effectively transformed parts of the North into sanctuary spaces. Meanwhile, reclaiming self-emancipators from British Canada proved extremely difficult. Freedom seekers were effectively shielded by the Canadian and British governments' refusal to extradite slave refugees. Nevertheless, southern enslavers employed various legal and extra-legal strategies in their efforts to re-enslave slave refugees in Canada. Yet the resistance of African Canadian activists and white abolitionists, as well as the commitment of the Canadian and British governments to formal free soil, largely protected self-emancipated people from the fate of re-enslavement.

Chapter Five examines the political activism of slave refugees in the northern US and Canada, particularly regarding the transnational abolitionist movement, as well as campaigns for equality and citizenship. Self-emancipated African Americans became some of the most influential abolitionists in the transnational struggle against black enslavement. Through their autobiographies and newspapers, powerful oratory, and involvement with anti-slavery organizations, these men and women developed a unique strain of what Manisha Sinha calls 'fugitive slave abolitionism.' Slave refugees were instrumental figures within the campaigns for racial equality and citizenship. Across the North and Canada, they challenged racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation.

Furthermore, slave refugees in each region were directly involved in electoral politics. Across the North, they endorsed abolitionist and anti-slavery candidates and parties (including the Liberty Party and Republican Party). Some

slave refugees, such as Samuel Ringgold Ward, even assumed important roles within these new parties. Across the Canadian provinces, most black voters supported the Conservatives as a means of demonstrating their allegiance to the British Crown. Across Canada, slave refugees made their voices heard at the ballot box by voting racist politicians out of office. Meanwhile, a small number of slave refugees were also active in emigration schemes from the continent to West Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

In summary, *Northward Bound* argues that African American slave refugees from the US South possessed markedly types of liberty. Across the northern US, self-emancipators existed in a state of semi-formal freedom. Under federal law, they remained subject to recapture and re-enslavement. Yet they enjoyed important legal protections (namely personal liberty laws and freedom suits) and extra-legal protections. African Americans, white abolitionists, vigilance committees, and self-defense organizations ensured that recapturing freedom seekers in the North became increasingly difficult over the antebellum period. Meanwhile, in British Canada, self-emancipated refugees from slavery could attain formal freedom. After setting foot on Canadian soil, African American freedom seekers were generally shielded from the threat of re-enslavement. Some extradition and kidnapping cases threatened to undermine formal liberty. Yet the British and Canadian governments remained committed to formal 'free' soil, and African Canadians and white abolitionists rushed to the defense of extradition or kidnapping victims.