Introduction

IN EARLY 1840, AN ENSLAVED MAN NAMED MADISON Washington escaped from Virginia and made his way northward all the way to Upper Canada (modern-day Ontario). A success story of the so-called Underground Railroad, he lived for several months with Hiram Wilson, a white missionary who had become famous among anti-slavery advocates for his tireless work on behalf of fugitive slaves arriving in Canada during the 1830s. Now a free man under British law, Madison Washington nevertheless found that he could not live in freedom without his wife, who remained enslaved in Virginia. So, Washington decided to reverse the perilous route he had traveled to secure his freedom and returned to the United States in 1841.

Sadly, his rescue attempt failed. Washington was re-captured and sold to a slave-trader who put him on board a fast-moving brig, the *Creole*, alongside 134 other enslaved men, women, and children. The ship was engaged in the flourishing U.S. domestic slave trade, a lucrative business that transported thousands of enslaved people from states like Virginia in the Upper South to regions of intensive cotton and sugar production in the expanding Deep South and Southwest. The *Creole* was scheduled to carry Madison Washington and the rest of its enslaved human "cargo" from Richmond, Virginia, along the Atlantic coast to New Orleans, Louisiana.[1]

But the slave ship did not reach its destination. On November 7, 1841, Washington led nineteen of the slaves aboard the *Creole* in a violent rebellion. They overpowered the ship's crew and commandeered the vessel. Once in command, Washington and his compatriots demanded that the *Creole* be sailed into the port of Nassau on the British island of

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New Providence (the Bahamas). Washington knew from his time in Canada that Great Britain, which had abolished slavery over the four-year period from 1834 to 1838, maintained a policy of freeing and protecting enslaved men and women who were able to cross into British territory. And this is exactly what happened. British officials in the city of Nassau immediately freed all but the nineteen leaders of the shipboard rebellion, and they eventually freed the leaders as well.[2]

While little is known about their lives after they engineered their emancipation, Madison Washington and the freed men, women, and children aboard the *Creole* were not soon forgotten. The *Creole* rebellion unfolded at the same time that abolitionism was picking up steam in the United States, with anti-slavery activists pitting themselves against powerful slaveholding interests in an ongoing battle to sway American public opinion toward their cause. The drama of a seafaring rebellion led by a self-liberated slave captured the imaginations of anti-slavery advocates, and the fact that British officials opted to free everyone on board in accordance with British law caused an uproar among southern slaveholders.[3] For American observers both for and against slavery, the event proved in no uncertain terms that the international borders separating slavery and freedom were both permeable and politically significant.

A decade later, in 1851, a free-born African American woman in her late twenties named Mary Ann Shadd left her family home in Pennsylvania and resettled in Canada West (formerly Upper Canada) after the enactment of the infamous 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. She was horrified by what the new law meant for the safety of free African Americans and for the future of slavery in the United States. The Fugitive Slave Act deputized all U.S. citizens to assist slave-catchers on the hunt for self-emancipated men and women, and it denied African Americans accused of being slaves the ability to contest their legal status in court. An expansion of the federal government's commitment to protecting southern enslavers' human "property," the Fugitive Slave Act put self-emancipated people in more danger than ever, and it escalated the threat that free black northerners might be kidnapped and sold illegally into southern bondage. Like thousands of other black northerners, Shadd decided to leave for Canada, where she knew that she would be safe from the predations of American

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enslavers and that British laws would not discriminate based on the color of her skin.[4]

Once across the U.S.–Canada border, Shadd proudly claimed an identity as a British subject and encouraged others to do the same. Yet from her new home, she still continued her tireless work as an activist against slavery in the United States. Like many free middle-class northerners, she espoused the idea of "racial uplift," the belief that African Americans' material and moral progress would diminish white racism and raise the social and political standing of African Americans in the United States. She believed, therefore, that African Americans needed opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to be free and equal members of society – and that they could do so only as British subjects.[5]

In Upper Canada, Shadd became a prominent newspaper editor (the first African American woman to do so) and used her fiery editorials to advocate for the abolition of American slavery and for the political advantages of black emigration away from the United States. She frequently compared her new home in Canada with other places where slavery had been outlawed in order to assess where African Americans could live most comfortably and fight American slavery most effectively. Weighing Canada against the British West Indies, Liberia, Haiti, Mexico, and South America, Shadd encouraged African Americans to join her in Upper Canada because it guaranteed them "impartial freedom" – meaning that they would be equal in the eyes of the law and accorded all the rights of British subjects. She believed that this distinction made the British province "the only ground on which [African Americans] can make despots feel the force of their words and actions," and a place from which activists could exert a "reflex influence" upon slavery in the United States.[6]

In other words, Shadd saw Upper Canada as far more than just an escape hatch from the United States in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act. She saw it as a model for what it looked like when a powerful government was willing to guarantee the legal equality of all residents, and she saw it as a secure base camp from which black men and women could pursue socio-political change in the United States.

Mary Ann Shadd's anti-slavery emigrationism and Madison Washington's dramatic, transnational odyssey from slavery to freedom illustrate the significance of international "free soil" within the American

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anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, diverse anti-slavery efforts transformed Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Upper Canada, Mexico, some newly independent South American nations, Great Britain, and the British West Indies into places where anti-slave trade legislation and emancipation laws either immediately or gradually freed enslaved populations. These locations became "international free-soil havens" – places with the potential to free and protect self-emancipated men and women and offer equal standing for free African American emigrants.

Weaving together themes of black mobility, information circulation, jurisdictional dispute, and transnational abolitionism, this book investigates the individual and collective influence that these international free-soil havens had on the American anti-slavery movement over the fifty-year period between 1813 and 1863. Their influence was profound, variable, and complex. Over time, international free-soil havens developed into practical models of black freedom, offered concrete destinations where free and self-emancipated people could anticipate legal protection and equal standing, and became potent symbols of liberty in the fight against American slavery. Not only did they provide enslaved men and women, free people of color, and black and white anti-slavery advocates alternative possibilities to slavery and racism in the United States, they helped Americans develop and articulate ideas about national character, who belonged, and under what conditions. Free-soil havens abroad formed the international stage upon which the fight to end American slavery took place.

* * *

First identified by historians Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg in 2011, the "principle of free soil" created significant but often overlooked boundaries between slavery and freedom on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.[7] Unrelated to the American "Free-Soil Party" of the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of free soil in this context encompasses a far greater expanse of time and a much wider geographic field.[8] At surface level, it refers to places where slavery had already been curtailed or abolished, and where slaves could expect to be freed upon crossing the border. But this gets us only so far. Neither the characteristics nor the significance of

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international free-soil havens were static at any point in the nineteenth century. They were characterized by different forms of government, various approaches to anti-slavery legislation, differing degrees of anti-slavery sentiment, and varying levels of geopolitical power with which to police and enforce anti-slavery borders against neighboring pro-slavery interests. They also had complex internal social, political, and economic currents that shaped and changed them over time, just as the evolution of domestic politics in the United States regularly re-shaped the geography of slavery and black Americans' access to legal rights and protection.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, international free-soil havens were defined in different ways by different people in response to changing social conditions and evolving geopolitical relationships within and beyond the United States. Over time, international free-soil havens developed specific and distinct reputations among slaves, free black activists, and white anti-slavery advocates for their potential to harbor African Americans, influence the fight against U.S. slavery, and provide socio-economic opportunities for free people. Yet these reputations were always contingent. How different people viewed international free-soil havens and their relevance to the American anti-slavery project shifted in relationship to individuals' legal standing, the changing context of U.S. race relations, conditions on the ground in different free-soil locales, and the evolving landscape of slavery and freedom around the Atlantic.

For self-emancipated slaves, international free-soil havens offered destinations where, as fugitives from bondage, they expected to be freed and protected by local laws and international treaties. Enslaved people like Madison Washington frequently had some awareness of the evolving geography of freedom beyond the United States. In some cases, they learned of free-soil havens directly from enslavers who expressed frustration over their inability to retrieve or extradite lost "property" from across specific borders. In other cases, they learned from people who had personal experience or who had access to information. Escapees themselves were often able to pass along critical details about where to go, as well as who to trust and what perils to watch out for. A newspaper left where a literate slave might read it could become a conduit to the wider world. Individuals enslaved or employed in the overland and maritime

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transportation industries linking slave-based economies in the South and Southwest to northern and Caribbean markets could also connect enslaved workers to news and information. These nodes of communication and information exchange often took the form of rumor in enslaved communities, helping to create what historian Phillip Troutman has identified as "geopolitical literacy" among enslaved people.[9]

Still, the enormous risk of running away ensured that far-flung havens of freedom remained little more than a dream for the vast majority of enslaved African Americans. Furthermore, the majority of those who did escape bondage remained in the United States, either in free states north of the Ohio River or in urban spaces where they hoped to avoid recapture.[10] Nonetheless, enslaved people crossed international free-soil borders regularly throughout the nineteenth century. For some, international free-soil borders were simply closer than domestic free states, as was the case for enslaved people in the southwest who absconded across the border between the United States and Mexico. For others, especially in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the increased security that specific international free-soil havens provided made the longer journey worth it. Whether they remained in bondage, escaped to free spaces within the United States, or crossed international borders, enslaved and self-emancipated people viewed international free-soil havens as places of hope and freedom that interrupted the geography of slaveholders' power.

For free African Americans, international free-soil havens meant something a bit different. First and foremost, they offered possible alternatives to the oppression and discrimination that people of color faced in the United States. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, it seemed increasingly clear to many free black northerners that the United States and its white citizenry remained staunchly opposed to extending the promises and protections of the U.S. Constitution to people of color – despite African Americans' ongoing efforts and activism to define themselves into the fabric of citizenship.[11] International free-soil havens, by contrast, seemed unburdened by the social and civic weight of slavery in the United States. As a result, they became sites for the development and trial of a range of political, social, and economic ideas related to black liberty and empowerment.

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Throughout the nineteenth century, free-soil havens abroad inspired international black trade networks, alternative crop economies designed to undercut produce grown by slave labor, and the evolution of black nationalist thought and enterprise.[12] Particularly in moments of social and political rupture, like when states passed laws restricting black people's rights or when Congress passed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, free African Americans engaged in deep and sustained discussion about where they might go in order to experience meaningful freedom with equal standing before the law. Whether they left or, like the vast majority of free African Americans, stayed to fight for equality in the United States, free black people throughout the nineteenth century recognized international free-soil havens as a powerful force in the fight for racial justice.

Because international free-soil havens provided examples of black liberation – both as spaces where slavery had been immediately or gradually abolished and as places where free and self-emancipated people might experience liberty unfettered by the threat of capture or enslavement – anti-slavery advocates and reformers also saw them as key sites of study and social engineering. When neighboring empires and republics passed anti-slavery legislation and abolition laws, American anti-slavery advocates took note and took action. Black and white activists alike assiduously observed and assessed international free-soil havens in order to demonstrate the practicability of emancipation, and they evaluated the outcomes of other governments' emancipation processes in order to formulate specific arguments regarding how to dismantle slavery in the United States. These places, they argued, showed that the abolition of slavery was realistic, safe, and unlikely to cause the long-term economic damage forecasted by enslavers and their supporters.

Anti-slavery advocates and reformers also saw international free-soil havens as places to identify and even cultivate the legal practices and social interventions they believed would best support black freedom. They sent investigatory missions to places where slavery had been dismantled, offered philanthropic assistance to black communities, and advocated for black emigrants with local, regional, and imperial governments. Significantly, while evaluating and comparing the living conditions and socio-economic prospects facing people of African descent in disparate free-soil environments, black and white observers often

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reached contradictory conclusions about what practices and interventions were paramount for safeguarding black freedom – and what black freedom should even entail. African Americans tended to focus on all aspects of civic life, from access to education and economic opportunity to voting rights and the ability to hold public office. White observers tended to focus on administrative and legal mechanisms that guaranteed equality under the law, but not much else.

Although they did not always agree on what made international free-soil havens truly meaningful spaces of freedom, black and white anti-slavery advocates did agree that positive reports about the outcome of black freedom would contribute to the anti-slavery cause. Reflecting what historian Ibram X. Kendi has described as "uplift suasion," they believed that evidence of good behavior, industriousness, and success in freedom had the capacity to diminish racism and white opposition to abolition.[13] Laboring to prove what black people were capable of if the fetters of slavery and racism were removed, anti-slavery activists circulated their copious observations and conclusions with one another through the anti-slavery press. In the process, they defined the specific attributes that they believed made free soil "free" and that they believed would best contribute to emancipation if implemented in the United States.

The phenomenon of finding freedom across international borders was not new, however. Long before the term "free soil" entered the anti-slavery lexicon, knowledge that political borders and boundaries could be crossed in a gambit to secure one's freedom was already a familiar element of slavery's geopolitical landscape. In eighteenth-century North America, imperial powers held out the promise of freedom to one another's slaves in the hopes of undermining each other's economic and social security. During the ill-fated 1739 Stono Rebellion, for example, enslaved men and women marched from Britain's South Carolina colony toward neighboring Spanish Florida, responding to a well-known Spanish promise that freedom and protection would be granted to British slaves who converted to Catholicism.[14] Thirty-six years later, Dunmore's Proclamation of 1775 inspired thousands of "American" slaves to cross British military lines in an effort to secure their freedom during the American Revolution.[15]

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It was in the aftermath of the political revolutions severing imperial powers from their overseas colonies, however, that international free-soil borders emerged as truly salient reference points within the geopolitical landscape of Atlantic slavery. As American, Haitian, and Spanish American revolutions began to redraw political borders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they created a growing and evolving map of freedom based on the new nations' varying commitments to the idea of universal liberty.[16] Simultaneously, the loss of thirteen mainland colonies encouraged British abolitionists to pursue anti-slave trade projects that focused on ending the transatlantic slave trade, including establishing a black colony in Sierra Leone.[17] These changing circumstances all contributed to the emergence of international free-soil havens that seemed increasingly relevant to enslavers, enslaved people, free African Americans, and white reformers in the United States.

Of course, spaces of freedom were not unique to international locales. After the American Revolution, black and white reformers in the United States – and enslaved people themselves – leveraged ambiguity around the issue of slavery in the new republic to create free spaces at the state level in places like Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Over time, state-level anti-slavery legislation in places like Connecticut and New York and the prohibition of slavery in states carved out of the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin) further expanded spaces of freedom within the nineteenth-century United States.[18] These zones of freedom were enormously important for both free and self-emancipated African Americans, offering potential safety from recapture and opportunities for collective organizing and activism around emancipation, racial justice, and citizenship rights. In some cases, they even functioned as domestic free-soil havens when enslaved people crossed specific state borders and lodged freedom suits in court, hoping to secure their liberty based on local laws.[19]

Yet there was a fundamental difference between domestic spaces of freedom and the international free-soil havens that began to dot the horizon beginning in the late eighteenth century. In the United States, freedom at the state level was always circumscribed by the fact that, at the federal level, the institution of slavery remained sanctioned and

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protected. Enslavers' reach into ostensibly free spaces was a point of major contention and concern throughout the antebellum era.[20] While the vast majority of free black people and self-emancipated men and women nevertheless remained within the United States, the particular significance and appeal of international free-soil havens stemmed from the fact that slavery had been abolished throughout the land and at the highest levels of government, providing a higher level of protection against re-enslavement and, in many places, equal standing for black people. In other words, international free-soil havens were important destinations and meaningful sites of American anti-slavery thought and activism in part because the promise of freedom in domestic spaces was curtailed by the fact that slavery was condoned and upheld at the national level.

Often, the significance of international free-soil havens had as much to do with the debates they inspired and the possibilities they represented as it did with the lived experiences of those who crossed their borders. When opportunities arose to emigrate to international free-soil locales, black communities across the northeast and mid-Atlantic gathered to discuss the practical and ideological implications of relocating to places where black liberty and equality were enshrined in law. While the overwhelming majority of free African Americans stayed to fight for "birthright citizenship" in the United States, the possibility of free-soil migration sparked intense debate within individual communities, at national conventions, and through the pages of the black newspaper press over the course of several decades.[21] Should African Americans leave the country or continue to fight for equality from their homes in the United States?[22] Would leading successful lives in free-soil havens prove the merits of black freedom and thereby contribute to achieving abolition in the United States, or would it ultimately strengthen the institution of slavery by removing its most vocal antagonists? What allegiance did African Americans owe the United States and the fight for equality within it when there were other places where they could experience equality immediately? As free-soil alternatives expanded beyond the United States, they facilitated important discussions among black communities about national identity and citizenship at a time when slavery remained a defining institution in American life.[23]

The prospect of international free-soil migration similarly tapped into diverse conversations held among white anti-slavery advocates.

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Nineteenth-century anti-slavery advocacy encompassed a wide and evolving array of ideological outlooks on slavery, abolition, and the strategies by which freedom should be achieved. From abolitionists who wanted immediate, uncompensated emancipation to conservative anti-slavery thinkers who believed in more gradual approaches to dismantling the slave system, there was enormous ideological and political breadth among slavery's nineteenth-century opponents.[24] Many of these differences formed and hardened in relation to the possibilities presented by free-soil havens abroad. While abolitionists tended to focus on how the example and practical implementation of abolition abroad could be replicated (or improved upon) in the United States, the idea of relocating black people altogether proved to be particularly captivating for conservative white reformers, gradual anti-slavery advocates, and individuals who abhorred slavery but believed that there was no place in the United States for non-white people.[25]

For those who thought that the United States should adopt a gradual approach to emancipation, free-soil relocation projects functioned as a kind of safety valve, taking the pressure off the slave system. Relocating free black people outside the United States, in their perspective, offered the U.S. a chance to save itself from a violent "race war" like the Haitian Revolution. In the meantime, they believed, more conservative anti-slavery measures could be enacted. Many also believed that removing people of color from the United States would make anti-slavery legislation more palatable to white Americans while simultaneously protecting free black communities from the debilitating effects of white prejudice.

However, while many conservative white anti-slavery advocates honestly hoped that free-soil relocation would promote an eventual end to slavery, their ideas regarding the removal of black men, women, and children from the United States reflected the pervasive racism of most white Americans. They might have seen slavery as a moral evil that needed to be overcome, but that did not mean that they wanted to live side by side with African Americans in the United States. Moreover, conservative reformers' interest in black relocation resonated with many slaveholders, who saw free-soil relocation as a promising strategy to delay progress toward freedom by removing a dangerous anti-slavery demographic: freed slaves.

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As self-emancipated people, free black men and women, and black and white anti-slavery advocates looked (and sometimes went) abroad to international free-soil havens, they defined and redefined what these places meant and why. Individually and collectively, free-soil spaces inspired and refined a wide range of ideas, opinions, experiences, and hopes over a half century. From a practical standpoint, free-soil havens often fell short of their promise – they rarely received as many migrants as anti-slavery enthusiasm made it seem, and they were largely unable to provide indisputable evidence of the positive socio-economic effects of emancipation. Many people who crossed international free-soil borders filled with hope eventually returned to the United States disappointed and disillusioned. Time and time again, discussion and debate regarding the relevance of international free soil to the fight against American slavery focused on the disparity between migrants' hopes and expectations and the reality of social prejudice, economic strain, and political upheaval that they often experienced abroad.

Nevertheless, these places figured into the anti-slavery imagination of freedom in powerful ways. Over time, as anti-slavery advocates discussed the implications of international free-soil havens for the future of American slavery, they developed a shared geopolitical language linking different places with a wide variety of phenomena such as escape, equality, free (non-slave) labor, economic opportunity, and anti-slavery violence. These places accrued substantial symbolic value within the American anti-slavery movement because, simply, people thought about them a lot. And thinking about them helped to structure the set of ideas they had about freedom.

By bringing disparate locations and many viewpoints into one field of analysis, this book offers the first evaluation of how international free-soil havens collectively affected a national anti-slavery movement. It stands on mighty shoulders, bringing together a vibrant body of scholarship on African American migration streams and transnational anti-slavery activism in the nineteenth century. Various forms of relocation, to use an umbrella term, brought African American migrants across diverse free-soil borders throughout the nineteenth century – although these migration streams were characterized by vastly different philosophies regarding black freedom.[26] This book draws from rich histories of the

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black-led *emigration* projects that brought black people to Haiti and Canada, as well as the burgeoning literature tracing the experiences of black emigrants crossing the southwest border into Mexico.[27] It also incorporates scholarship on the longstanding debates over *colonization* – the relocation projects to West Africa typically associated with the white-led American Colonization Society.[28] And it builds on a robust foundation of scholarship tracing the routes to freedom forged by self-emancipated men and women who crossed international borders by land and by sea to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and even England, stirring enthusiasm from abolitionists and panic from slaveholders in equal measure.[29]

Anti-slavery activists also criss-crossed the Atlantic. Black and white abolitionists performed important advocacy work on British soil, and the British provided the American anti-slavery cause with powerful political, moral, and financial aid. In showing how international anti-slavery networks and the influence of British abolitionism shaped the contours of the long fight for freedom in the United States, this book follows in the footsteps of scholars like R. J. M. Blackett, Caleb McDaniel, Van Gosse, and Edward Rugemer.[30] People, aid, and ideas moved fluidly across international borders throughout the antebellum period, and, as scholars of these movements have shown, the history of the American anti-slavery movement simply cannot be told without these transnational connections.

Stitching together into one frame of analysis all the places that people went – and the networks, ideas, and migration streams they inspired – offers a new perspective on the anti-slavery movement in the United States. This approach not only offers a more complete reflection of how American activists, observers, emigrants, runaways, allies, and ideologues understood the geography of slavery and freedom in the world around them, it depicts how their various hopes, dreams, and expectations about freedom – as well as their strategies for how to achieve it – were often developed and honed by engaging with all these locales at once.

Charting the transnational geography informing how people conceptualized freedom beyond the borders of the United States, this book also reshapes an important and familiar narrative: the Underground Railroad to Canada. Both the Underground Railroad and Canada are powerful

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symbols of escape and freedom in U.S. cultural memory.[31] However, their close relationship in narratives of freedom has overshadowed the longer and more geographically diverse history of runaway slaves in North America and occluded the complex and uncertain process by which Canada *became* a powerful geographical reference point for abolitionist sentiment.

Placing the escape of self-emancipated slaves across the U.S.–Canada border into the context of the broader geopolitical currents dictating the practical and political relevance of different international free-soil borders allows for a more precise analysis of three interrelated phenomena: it shows how and why Canada became the premier international destination for self-liberated individuals; it illuminates how the *idea* of the Underground Railroad to Canada influenced anti-slavery activism in the United States; and it further contributes to our understanding of the enormous impact that border-crossing slaves had on national politics. Following in the footsteps of historical individuals like Madison Washington and Mary Ann Shadd, this book shows that Canada's significance within the American anti-slavery movement was fundamentally linked to an evolving geography of international free-soil havens and to the different visions of racial justice these spaces represented.

Bringing diverse migration streams into one field of analysis also expands our understanding of how nineteenth-century relocation projects affected ideas about national and political identities. While historians generally agree that African Americans' rejection of white-led colonization projects helped to forge a shared vision of identity and national belonging in the United States, my research reframes this analysis by suggesting that black political identity was formed as much through an *engagement* with the myriad opportunities presented by international free-soil spaces as it was by a rejection of colonization.[32] Examining the experiences of free-soil migrants abroad helped black Americans develop and articulate specific ideas regarding the value of American citizenship and what they wanted from the U.S. government.

At the same time, however, many white people in the United States, whether they considered themselves pro-slavery, anti-slavery, or entirely agnostic on the matter, felt that there was no room in the nation for free people of African descent. International free soil provided a strategy of

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rejection and exclusion. White Americans often saw black Americans as competition for labor and land, as harbingers of racial "amalgamation" or violence, or simply as unwelcome embodiments of difference and "otherness." They typically believed in black Americans' inherent inferiority and did not want them to be a part of the body politic. As a result, white people across the nation protested against abolitionism and any activism in support of racial equality, and many whites supported the forced relocation of freed slaves as a way to rid the country of non-white people. In short, white Americans throughout the nineteenth century exerted what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has labeled a "predatory identity." They mobilized around the principle that the United States was a fundamentally "white" nation and saw the presence (and, worse, the potential equality) of free black people as a threat to the American national identity.[33] By advocating for the relocation of free African Americans to free-soil spaces abroad, conservative anti-slavery advocates represented the interests of white people committed to racial homogeneity and white supremacy.

* * *

The ability to translate information about international free-soil locales into distinct, concrete ideas about slavery, emancipation, and national identity was made possible by the fact that American anti-slavery observers regularly produced information about them. Modeling a form of fact-finding social inquiry that became the backbone of transatlantic reform movements in the nineteenth century, politicians, activists, migrants, missionaries, and newspaper editors studied migrant experiences abroad and reported on them in the form of pamphlets, books, and editorials.[34] Generating enormous quantities of material, they created what communications scholar Carolyn Calloway-Thomas describes as "a rigorous and comprehensive database for propaganda purposes."[35] In the process, this book demonstrates, anti-slavery advocates developed an information culture that emphasized the particular value of eyewitness testimonials and firsthand investigations. Trusted agents conducted investigatory missions and published their travel accounts, anti-slavery societies solicited information from on-site officials or other designated "experts," and individuals with personal experience delivered moving

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speeches on the lessons of international free soil at conventions, on lecture circuits, and in the halls of Congress. These free-soil reports and reflections were circulated far and wide through the anti-slavery press and its pro-slavery counterparts.

The widespread circulation of such material was facilitated by the fact that U.S. print culture was expanding rapidly during these years thanks to rising literacy rates, increased infrastructure, new technology, and a vigorous practice of reprinting that developed in the absence of copyright laws. Americans in far-flung locales connected with each other each time they picked up a newspaper. And with diverse experiences and viewpoints reaching into the homes of growing audiences, readers developed shared ideas about the world around them. They created dynamic communities of shared interest across great geographical divides.[36]

Rather than unifying the nation, however, these developments were accompanied by a deepening sense of division.[37] For their part, anti-slavery advocates created a veritable print industry around the practice of cataloging the sins of slavery and disseminating their opposition to it far and wide. The expansion of American print culture created for them what literary scholar Jeannine Marie DeLombard has called an “alternative tribunal” for putting slavery on trial before a reading public – and which has left behind a rich record of the conversations and practices that gave their movement life.[38]

Yet even as material printed and circulated for a public audience reveals the myriad ways that anti-slavery advocates gathered, developed, and shared ideas about international free-soil havens, there are inevitably some stories that an archive of published material does not capture. As historian Mary Niall Mitchell has shown, for example, personal letters produced by school children in New Orleans illuminate the particular resonance of Haiti and Mexico in the way that young Louisianans imagined freedom.[39] In addition, the fact that presses publishing anti-slavery material were located in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest means that they generally slanted toward views and opinions circulating in those regions. While a broad focus on anti-slavery print culture does not fully account for such regional nuance or for unpublished reflections regarding international free soil, it does illuminate the scope and variety of free-soil conversations developing among an anti-slavery public increasingly

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interconnected through the national circulation of different forms of print media.

Anti-slavery advocates were also prolific writers. As historian Manisha Sinha aptly points out, “whatever [abolitionists] lacked in power, they made up for by outproducing their mighty opponents in newspapers, books, pamphlets, letters, diaries, memoirs, material, and artwork, creating a huge, complicated historical archive.”[40] Thanks to massive and ongoing digitization projects at libraries, museums, and other repositories across the country, there are now more of these anti-slavery print artifacts available at the click of a button than one could hope to sift through in a lifetime. Online libraries, collections, and databases extend this project’s reach far beyond the traditional research I conducted at brick-and-mortar institutions such as the National Archives of the United States and Canada, and at repositories such as the public libraries of Toronto and Boston. Digitized collections have, for example, allowed this project to bring together voices from sixty different newspapers encompassing a broad variety of viewpoints from across the United States. The wealth of archival sources now readily available enables this study to effectively recreate both the broad strokes and sharp detail of how nineteenth-century anti-slavery advocates understood the evolving geopolitics of Atlantic slavery and freedom.

The sheer volume of anti-slavery material available in this digital age presents unique methodological challenges, however, stemming from the de-textualized way they are typically navigated. Using keyword searches and their results can, in principle, lead historians to over-determine textual linkages and predispose them to see connections that may, in fact, have been more tenuous. Historians also risk missing data when using keyword searches because relevant material does not contain the precise words, phrases, or spelling used to conduct the search, or because optical character recognition software (OCR) may misread or simply miss relevant sources originally produced on nineteenth-century printing presses. And finally, digital archives – often presented in a document-by-document format – can obscure the original context in which the reading public actually met archival material.

Yet the potential limitations of such a large and potentially de-textualized archive are not insurmountable. In fact, as literary historian

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Ryan Cordell has shown, digital archives are uniquely suited to help scholars identify patterns that transcend individual texts and authors to illuminate how reading publics saw the world around them.[41] In this case, keyword searches within digital archives immediately reveal the frequency with which anti-slavery advocates discussed free-soil havens in material printed for public consumption. Furthermore, once keyword search results have been carefully scrutinized to determine that each document is a substantively relevant source, the likelihood of missing data suggests that the "incidence frequency" of international free-soil havens being discussed in print was likely *higher* than keyword search returns indicate. Restricting search parameters can also reveal more detailed information. Tabulating how frequently different free-soil havens were discussed within specific newspapers, for example, demonstrates the regularity with which readers of the anti-slavery newspaper press encountered information about multiple locales in the pages of a single edition. Conducting targeted keyword searches across many newspapers simultaneously shows that specific information regarding international free-soil havens was commonly reprinted in newspapers from Maine to Maryland to Ohio.

Most importantly, however, this study uses keyword database searches to supplement, rather than supplant, a traditional historical methodology based on the close reading of many historical sources. In researching this book, I used keyword database searches to reveal important patterns regarding how ideas circulated and were shared through an expanding print network, *and* I conducted cover-to-cover examinations of anti-slavery newspapers, pamphlets, and books to illuminate what anti-slavery advocates from across North America thought about free-soil havens abroad and their relevance to the American anti-slavery movement.

* * *

When examined in light of international free-soil havens and the international geopolitics that gave rise to them, the timeline of American anti-slavery looks different than a more traditional, national periodization of U.S. history before the Civil War. This study begins and ends at moments when the U.S. government was presented with specific recommendations

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regarding the future of free African Americans that were formulated in relation to international free-soil opportunities. In 1813, a well-known African American northerner, Paul Cuffe, presented a petition to the U.S. Congress for financial support to help black emigrants relocate to Great Britain's Sierra Leone colony in West Africa. After England abolished the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, its Sierra Leone colony was on the front lines of British efforts to curb other nations' human trafficking, and Cuffe saw it as a promising free-soil locale for African Americans looking for better opportunities than they had in the United States.

Exactly fifty years later, in 1863, a wartime commission appointed by President Abraham Lincoln reported back with its recommendations regarding the future of former slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. The commission's report was significantly influenced by interviews conducted with formerly enslaved men and women in Canada, all collected by a commissioner who believed that Canada could provide the most instructive guidance on the topic of black freedom. Framed by these episodes, this book introduces a timeline of the American anti-slavery movement that emphasizes the importance of international patterns and events reshaping the geography of Atlantic slavery and freedom in the nineteenth century.

In the last several decades, widespread interest in narratives of slavery and resistance has increased in the United States as Americans seek to understand and grapple with the many, often tragic, ways our nation's history of slavery and institutional racism still reverberates in our daily lives. Scholars, filmmakers, artists, activists, politicians, and the public continue to explore and examine the United States' long and continuing history of black oppression and resilience in order to see a path forward. In a sense, this study captures a fifty-year period in which nineteenth-century Americans were engaged in a similar process on an international scale. American men and women, black and white, looked out from the borders of the United States to draw hope and inspiration from the surrounding geopolitical landscape. As pockets of international free soil began to dot the horizon, they provided evidence that slavery could be eliminated and that racial justice could prevail.

Although anti-slavery advocates and reformers often disagreed about what lessons should be drawn from free-soil havens abroad, they did

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agree that studying the way these locales experienced the transition from slavery to freedom would prove instructive for dismantling slavery and achieving racial equality in the United States. As models, symbols, and destinations, international free-soil havens brought a transnational geography of slavery and freedom right into the heart of the American antislavery movement.

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