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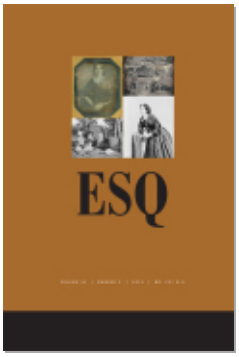

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"The Land of Liberty": Henry Bibb's Free Soil Geographies

JAMES FINLEY

In the years preceding the 1849 publication of the *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*, Bibb was an active member of both the Liberty and Free Soil parties, speaking and organizing throughout the Old Northwest, Upstate New York, and New England, up until his emigration to Canada in 1851 following the passage of the revised Fugitive Slave Act. Comprising a genealogy of third-party antislavery coalitions including the Liberty Party, the Liberty League, the Free Soil Party, the Free Democrats, and ultimately the Republican Party, the Free Soil movement was, in large part, characterized by economic resistance to the Slave Power, which, Free Soilers claimed, was weakening the U.S. economy, devaluing northern labor, degrading the natural resources of the South, and threatening to expand westward so as to create a continental empire for slavery.[1] Emerging from the labor and radical land reform movements of the 1830s, Free Soil articulated an agrarian antislavery message that critiqued the slave system in terms of labor while also resisting the expansion of slavery into the territories and even calling for public land to be made available to landless homesteaders.[2] The Free Soil movement began, in large part, amidst support for the Wilmot Proviso, which stipulated that any lands incorporated into the U.S. following war

with Mexico would remain free of slavery. Its author, Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot, believed that containment of slavery would lead to its ultimate eradication.[3] This emphasis on containment, I will suggest, reflects a faith in borders and limits that is belied by Free Soilers' fears concerning the expansive and contaminating effects of the Slave Power.

Bibb began lecturing and campaigning for the Liberty Party in Michigan and Ohio in 1844 before becoming a national figure in the latter part of the decade.[4] In 1846 he spoke to overflow crowds at the North-Western Liberty-Convention in Chicago and in 1847 he addressed the Vermont State Liberty Convention as well as the Liberty Party Convention in Elgin, Illinois. In 1848, as the Liberty Party was transformed into the Free Soil Party, Bibb spoke to the Maine State Liberty Party Convention in February and provided a well-received speech at the first Free Soil Convention, held in Buffalo, where he was a registered delegate. And in 1849, the year his *Narrative* was published, Bibb spoke at a Free Soil convention in Ohio.[5] Bibb's antislavery work was so thoroughly connected to the Free Soil movement that an 1848 editorial in the *North Star* expressed the fear that a "scandalous and libelous account" of Bibb, published in the *Buffalo Courier*, was in fact "a villainous attempt to injure the Free Soil movement, by damaging the character of Mr. Bibb."[6] In addition to his activity on behalf of the Free Soil movement, the production of Bibb's *Narrative* was shaped by Free Soilers. The introduction was written by Lucius Matlack, a "strong supporter" of the Liberty Party and formerly the editor of the party's newspaper the *American Citizen.*[7] The authenticity of his text was affirmed by a committee of Michigan Liberty Party men.[8] The text of the *Narrative* also includes a letter to the Michigan *Signal of Liberty* attesting to Bibb's antislavery work, signed by Arthur Porter, a founder of the Michigan Liberty Party, Charles Stewart, a Liberty Party nominee for Congress, and Silas Holmes, secretary of the Detroit Liberty Association.[9]

Early in the *Narrative* Bibb has been re-captured in Cincinnati and is transported along the Ohio River back to what

he refers to as a "land of torment" (66). While on board the ship, Bibb explains,

> I was permitted to gaze on the beauties of nature, on free soil, as I passed down the river, [where] things looked to me uncommonly pleasant: The green trees and wild flowers of the forest; the ripening harvest fields waving with the gentle breezes of Heaven; and the honest farmers tilling their soil and living by their own toil. These things seemed to light upon my vision with a peculiar charm. I was conscious of what must be my fate; a wretched victim for Slavery without limit; to be sold like an ox, into hopeless bondage, and to be worked under the flesh devouring lash during life, without wages. (66)

The landscapes of freedom, according to Bibb, are naturally beautiful, as humans and the environment coexist in utopian harmony. This passage, and others like it, have recently drawn attention from ecocritics who see in Bibb's text an antislavery dichotomy that codes Northern spaces as harmonious and beautiful in contrast to the fetid, abject, and hostile topographies of slavery.[10] Ecocritical scholarship on Bibb's text has focused predominately on his representations of northern wilderness.[11] Christine Gerhardt and Jeffrey Myers, for instance, both suggest that Bibb portrays non-human nature as liberatory spaces of refuge.[12] I believe that Paul Outka provides the most incisive ecocritical analysis of Bibb's text as he troubles the idea of "wilderness" and explains instead how for Bibb, landscapes were not simply either emancipatory or enslaving. The landscapes of slavery and freedom, Outka explains, are both contrasted and interrelated, as Bibb is reminded of slavery's traumas even as he gazes on the seemingly "pure" aesthetic beauty of "free" nature. Outka thus suggests that, for Bibb and others, "pure and beautiful nature" can serve as a "mnemonic trigger for

The Mower. Artist: Dominique C. Fabronius, circa 1863. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-55538.

the return of some unbearable moment of degradation to the commodified pastoral of slavery."[13]

Throughout the *Narrative*, Bibb reveals how culture, economics, means of production, and politics produce landscapes, so much so that even when Bibb appears furthest from human settlement, he makes plain that the "wilderness" he experiences has been shaped by human action. Outka's reading thus provides a necessary corrective to ecocritical scholarship that sees Bibb celebrating "wilderness" as a space outside of human history. But Outka's point concerning Bibb's traumatic experiences in ostensibly free landscapes does not fully address what has been missing in scholarship on Bibb's text, namely, an analysis of how Bibb's depictions of nature articulate a specific ideological argument against the slave system. As a result, I situate Bibb's depictions of nature and landscapes in relation to the agricultural, economic, social, and political antislavery arguments of the Free Soil movement

In designating this space "free soil," Bibb alludes to his political and ideological commitment to the antislavery Free Soil movement. The remainder of the passage emphasizes the dual concern with labor and land within Free Soil discourse. Bibb mentions the forest's trees and wildflowers, but also lights upon the farmers in the field, thereby celebrating a space that is decidedly agrarian. Bibb suggests that it is the particular manner of work performed, "honest farmers tilling their soil and living by their own toil," that makes this space beautiful. In this instance Bibb juxtaposes not only the environments of slave and free states but also, crucially, the forms of labor that characterize the different social systems. Work and nature in the North, according to Bibb's portrayal, are harmoniously interrelated. His depictions of the field, with its "ripening harvest" and the attention it receives from independent farmers, unalienated from either the land or their labor, imply that the field's beauty stems from its proleptic proximity to harvest time, the care it receives from its workers, and the living that it will provide them. Bibb's depictions of this landscape thus do not simply serve as a comparison to the topographies of slavery, but

also as a celebration of an economic, social, and ideological alternative.

Here and elsewhere in the *Narrative*, Bibb represents landscapes and wilderness in a manner consistent with the environmental valences of Free Soil ideology. Free Soil's commitment to keeping the rural territories in the West free of slavery reflects the belief that the slave system destroyed otherwise productive landscapes. Seeing slavery as environmentally unsustainable, Free Soilers believed it would have to grow into new territory in order to survive. Many Free Soil arguments, writes Eric Foner, focused on agricultural data, claiming that "the southern economy was backward and stagnant, and slavery was to blame." Blaming slavery in this manner, Foner notes, constructed an environmental contrast, one that juxtaposed the beauty and productivity of Northern landscapes, despite its poor soil, with the landscapes of the South, dilapidated and blighted despite their superior natural resources.[14] Free Soil's emphasis on labor drew upon legacies of Enlightenment political economy, particularly Locke's argument that the creation of wealth stemmed from the mixture of labor and land. In claiming that slavery perverted this relationship between individuals, nature, and property, Free Soilers saw work and nature as inherently interrelated. The Free Soil emphasis of Bibb's *Narrative*, thus, is not limited to his focus on environments but is also reflected by the frequent attention that Bibb gives to work. Bibb mentions "work" or "labor" over sixty times in the text, consistently critiquing slavery as a system of alienating and unjust labor. Owners and overseers are more or less cruel, but all forcibly separate him from the "fruits of [his] own labor" (40). Bibb's analysis of slave labor is rooted in Free Soil ideology, showing that the conditions of slavery degrade not only labor in the South but labor across the entire nation. Further, he shows how labor and landscapes are dialectically related, consistently representing place in terms of labor and labor in terms of place.

What I term Bibb's "Free Soil critique" is somewhat distinct from traditional Free Soil argument, however. The *Narrative*, I will argue, articulates an ecological antislavery

ethic that renders race-based slavery unnatural, unsuited to the landscapes of the United States, and environmentally unsustainable.[15] Bibb thus imaginatively redeploys central components of Free Soil ideology to critique the slave system while at the same time, and more subtly, critiquing problematic elements of Free Soil ideology. In other words, Bibb draws upon Free Soil thinking to critique the slave system while simultaneously critiquing Free Soil and its lack of a full-throated call for immediate abolition and the privileging of the white working class over both free and enslaved blacks. In addition, these aspects of Bibb's Free Soil critique—both in condemning slavery and in reflexively challenging elements of Free Soil ideology—are more ecological than established Free Soil discourse, reflecting a deeper, more sensitive, and more radical understanding of material interconnection in regards to bodies, means of production, and topographies. Slavery did not simply affect particular spaces and specific individuals, and it certainly could not, as some Free Soilers suggested, be contained within certain limits. In addition, the racism of certain Free Soilers was neither natural nor consistent with an ecological antislavery ethic.[16] The very nature of slavery, Bibb's Free Soil critique explains, corrupts and pollutes *everything*. The *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* makes plain that abolition, and the Free Soil movement more specifically, cannot address questions of geography, labor, and the agricultural health of a rural nation without challenging racism and the barriers that free black farmers face in the North.

DEGRADED LABOR, DEGRADED LANDSCAPES

Bibb's depictions of various geographies and environments form an emancipatory telos pointing north toward free soil. The geographic arc of Bibb's *Narrative*, however, extends in two directions from the text's originary location in Kentucky, pointing both south to the abject and threatening swamps of Louisiana and north to the free soil of Canada. These differentiated environments, accordingly, reflect

differences in labor and are ideologically coded as a result. The Deep South, with its debased and brutalized labor, reflecting the ultimate lack of liberty, is characterized by anti-pastoral depictions of hostile and terrifying landscapes.[17]

The environment furthest from free soil and free labor is the plantation in Claiborne, Louisiana, where Bibb and his family are sold after an unsuccessful escape attempt. As the southernmost place that Bibb witnesses, it is characterized by the most alienating and horrific working conditions that Bibb experiences. By extension, this space represents the environmental nadir of Bibb's text, "one of the darkest corners of the earth … almost out of humanity's reach" (114). Wicked labor conditions are reified in this hellish environment. Bibb's primary criticisms, though, address the brutal working conditions. Bibb and his family are bought by cotton planter Deacon Whitfield, whose slaves are "ragged, stupid, and half-starved," worked from before sunrise to after sunset and grossly mistreated by "one of the most cruel overseers to be found in that section of country" (110). This initial description of working conditions heralds Bibb's depictions of the plantation landscape and the surrounding environment. Immediately after referencing "the sound of the driver's lash among the toiling slaves," Bibb shifts his attention to the general landscape, a space characterized by

> a very warm climate, abounding with musquitoes, galinippers and other insects which were exceedingly annoying to the poor slaves by night and day, at their quarters and in the field. But more especially to their helpless little children, which they had to carry with them to the cotton fields, where they had to set on the damp ground alone from morning till night, exposed to the scorching rays of the sun, liable to be bitten by poisonous rattle snakes which are plenty in that section of the country, or to be devoured by large alligators, which are often seen creeping through

> the cotton fields going from swamp to swamp
> seeking their prey. (115-16)

Here Bibb constructs a prototypical Free Soil homology: the hostility that the workers face from the domineering overseer is related to, reflected in, and compounded by, the hostile environment. The bugs annoy the slaves to a point of torture, making the field especially unpleasant and depriving them of rest at night. The land is damp and the sun is scorching which further exacerbate the already unbearable conditions. Bibb's depictions here make the environment seem like a prison, with alligators acting as both guards and overseers. Bibb's Free Soil critique thus reveals the landscapes of slavery to be thoroughly degraded, reflecting the particular labor conditions of plantation slavery.

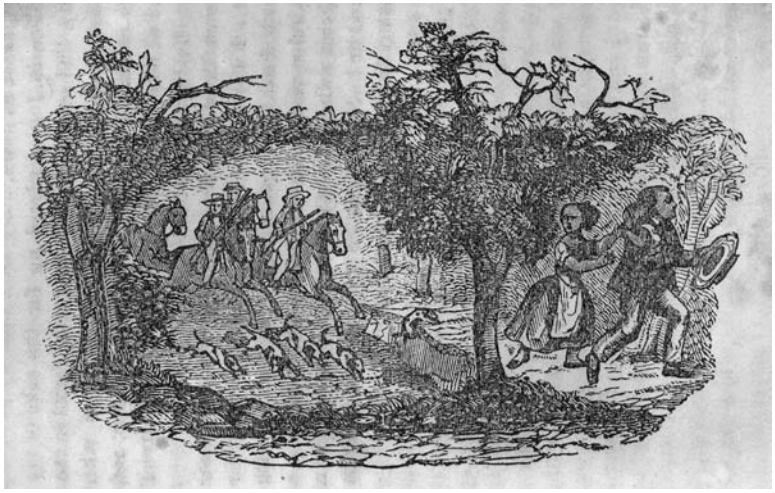
Because of these hostile conditions, Bibb and his family quickly decide to escape from Whitfield's plantation. Bibb recognizes that they will face environmental threats in their journey, as the hostility of southern landscapes is not limited to plantation space. Their escape will expose them "to wild ferocious beasts which were numerous in that section of country," but so great is the danger that they face on the plantation that they are willing to hazard these risks (121). In venturing into the "wild forest," they must travel "among the buzzing insects and the wild beasts," including the "snakes and alligators, with all the liabilities of being destroyed by them" (123). Bibb's language here directly echoes his earlier depictions of plantation space as crawling with bugs and beasts of prey, making it seem as though the environmental degradation of slavery extends beyond the plantation, corrupting the nonhuman environment of the Deep South. Slavery's pollutive effects, in other words, are not limited to particular locations but in fact extend beyond anthropogenic spaces into seemingly untouched wilderness.

In turn, Bibb seems to suggest, political attempts to restrict slavery to its current locations are doomed to fail. Bibb's sensitivity to ecological consequences and networks of material interrelation anticipate ecocritic Stacy Alaimo's claim that "Attention to the material transit across bodies

A Man Standing in Front of a Woman and Child Fighting Off Dogs. From *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written by Himself*. Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

and environments may render it more difficult to seek refuge within fantasies of transcendence or imperviousness."[18] Thus, we can see in this section the various components of Bibb's Free Soil critique. On the one hand, he focuses on the facts of slave labor's destructive effects on plantation environments, one of the central arguments Free Soil discourse. On the other hand, as Bibb addresses overlaps and transit between the plantation and nonhuman spaces, he reveals a sensitivity to ecological interconnection that is lacking in the Free Soil analytic. Slavery, and in particular its environmental effects, cannot be effectively addressed by Free Soilers' attempts to contain or limit the expansion of the slave system.

In an extended scene where Bibb and his family are attacked by wolves, Bibb depicts, in terrifying terms, the expansive reach of the slave system. Even after many days of travel through the wilderness, the environmental threats of slavery remain. While in the woods one night he and his family are awakened by the "awful howling of a gang of blood-thirsty wolves … there in the dark wilderness many miles from any house or settlement" (124). Bibb, fearing that he can do nothing to protect his family from the wolves, begins to pray to God, before his thoughts instantly turn to the Deacon Whitfield and his professed piety, "his hand-cuffs," "his thumb-screws," and his "slave driver and overseer" (126). Bibb spends half a page detailing the ways in which his thoughts, while faced with the wild wolves, instead return to the plantation space, reflecting a figurative invasion of wilderness space by slavery. By interrupting his description of the wilderness scene to remind the readers of the Deacon's cruelty and his system of torture, Bibb interpolates the terrors of this hellish landscape within his critique of the slave system. Bibb eventually drives away the wolves with a knife he took from the Deacon, a knife that the Deacon felt would offer him protection from his own slaves. Bibb's ironic reversal of using the Deacon's knife for his own defense and to effect his own escape, combined with his thinking of the Deacon while facing the wolves, foreshadows the family's next threat, a threat that even more overtly demonstrates the



Running from the Slave Catchers. Image courtesy of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

reach of the plantation system into the Southern wilderness. After the attack from the wolves, Bibb explains that he and his family "had not yet surmounted [their] greatest difficulty" (127-28). After a few days of "wandering about through the cane brakes, bushes, and briers," they are set upon by bloodhounds "coming in full speed on our track, and the slave drivers close after them on horse back, yelling like tigers, as they came in sight" (128). The slave catchers, who approach with a "determination to kill or capture" Bibb and his family, have themselves been so brutalized by the slave system that they are conflated with beasts of prey.[19] Bibb thus broadens the Free Soil argument that slavery degrades northern laborers to focus on the white working class of the South, suggesting that the corruptive effects of slavery force whites into near-animality. For Bibb, it is as though slavery's effects extend to bodies as well as landscapes.

Because slavery is a system of thorough theft, it degrades labor, affecting all of those who work within the system. Bibb notes that slaveholders are not only motivated by greed and racism but also by a hatred of labor in general:

> The slave holders are generally rich, aristocratic, overbearing; and they look with utter contempt upon a poor laboring man, who earns his bread by the 'sweat of the brow,' … No matter whether he is white or black; if he performs manual labor for a livelihood, he is looked upon as being inferior to a slaveholder, and but little better off than the slave, who toils without wages under the lash. It is true, that the slaveholder, and non-slaveholder, are living under the same laws in the same State. But the one is rich, the other is poor; one is educated, the other is uneducated; one has houses, land and influence, the other has none. This being the case, that class of the non-slaveholders would be glad to see slavery

> abolished, but they dare not speak it aloud. (25)

Bibb makes sure to qualify his statement here that blacks and whites are both oppressed by the slave system, explaining that poor whites are not subjected to legally sanctioned racism. At the same time, though, he works to illuminate how little the system provides for poor white laborers. This sort of appeal to white working class sympathies was a central component of Free Soil discourse.[20] But Bibb's critique, while seeking to elicit the support of working class whites, does not privilege their interests above free blacks or the enslaved and thereby provides a necessary corrective to the tendency among certain Free Soilers to focus on "the *differences* between positions of the self-reliant 'free' white mechanic and the Black slave [as] a way to distance oneself from slaves."[21] By emphasizing connection and solidarity, rather than difference and distance, Bibb not only critiques racist aspects of Free Soil discourse but also posits a radical form of interrelation predicated upon natural similarity and sympathy. Bibb clearly supports Free Soil's rejection of the slavery contract, but simultaneously condemns its acceptance of the racial contract. Throughout his narrative, but particularly when addressing the shared concerns of black and white workers, Bibb rejects racism generally and environmental racism more specifically, whereby demarcations and differentiations are justified and naturalized based on particular understandings of the "state of nature."[22] In other words, Bibb critiques Free Soil's qualified abolitionism and its racist aspects as reflecting an antislavery analytic predicated upon distance and difference, whether that be environmental or racial. Bibb's Free Soil critique thus significantly extends Free Soil's claim that slave agriculture degrades farmland, showing both how hostile wilderness spaces are intertwined with the terror of plantation topographies and how humans are alienated, degraded, and animalized.[23] In focusing on the topographies of the Deep South, Bibb shows the thorough and widespread environmental corruption of slavery and thus demonstrates

the inadequacies of Free Soil's plan to limit and contain slavery.

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THE OHIO RIVER VALLEY: FREE SOIL BORDERLANDS

In contrast to the geographies of the Deep South, Bibb explains that border states "are said to be the mildest slave States in the Union" (35). While the material conditions of slavery are no less severe than what he witnesses in the Deep South, the landscapes surrounding the plantations in the Upper South are slightly more hospitable and somewhat less terrifying, it seems, because of their proximity to free soil and free labor. Bibb situates the Upper South, as well as southern Ohio, within the Free Soil dialectic, revealing how these areas are shaped by both slavery and freedom. In doing so Bibb troubles the contrast between slave and free geographies, depicting both sides of the Ohio River Valley together as a space similar to what ecologists refer to as an "ecotone," where ecological communities stretch, overlap, and blend, creating "an intrinsic space unto itself."[24]

Focusing on the borderland of slavery and free soil as an ecotone represents a crucial part of Bibb's Free Soil critique, for he reveals how slavery's expansive influence not only extends beyond the plantation into the southern wilderness but also threatens nominally free soil, suggesting yet again the inadequacies of attempting to limit or circumscribe slavery. Bibb presents the Kentucky wilderness as a middle space which, while preferable to the landscapes of the Deep South because of its proximity to free soil, remains hostile and unwelcoming due to the degrading influence of slavery. Slavery's expansiveness is no less threatening here than in spaces further south, though it is tempered by the ameliorative reach of free soil. Because of Kentucky's proximity to Ohio, Bibb can turn his attention to free soil and free labor.[25] In comparison to Whitfield's plantation in Louisiana, where hostile wilderness makes escape a severe risk, the woods of Kentucky are less threatening. As a child, Bibb manages to flee the plantation often, spending "almost half of my

time in the woods, running from under the bloody lash" (16). This temporary result is not an end in itself, nor are the woods outside the plantation his ultimate destination. Instead, he sees maroonage, or the temporary escape from the plantation to the surrounding countryside, as a form of practice or training, by which he can develop the skills necessary to escape slavery more permanently. As a child, "Among other good trades I learned the art of running away to perfection. I made a regular business of it, and never gave it up, until I had broken the bands of slavery" (15). Consistent with Bibb's emphasis on labor, he speaks of running away in terms of work, so that he literally and metaphorically works his way to freedom. Bibb notes that this act is his "business," implying both his work and his personal concern. Early in the narrative, then, and in proximity to free soil, we see a brief example of unalienated labor. Work in this manner does not just tend toward liberation but is itself liberatory, signifying both physical and social mobility. Bibb also demonstrates that this depiction of escape as labor and labor as escape is not simply a metaphor but a material practice inherent to his later success. He explains that he learned to take a horse's bridle with him when escaping, for were "any body [to] see me in the woods, as they have, and [have] asked 'what are you doing here sir? you are a runaway?'" he could respond "'no, sir, I am looking for our old mare;' at other times, 'looking for our cows.' For such excuses I was let pass" (17). Here Bibb subtly deploys the oppressive labor of the plantation for his own purposes, manipulating, literally, the master's tools to do his own work.

During another escape, Bibb spends the night in the woods near a large plantation, and he wakes to hear larks that "chirp and sing merrily" (77). The birds soothe Bibb for a moment, as though they have traversed the border and brought the sounds of free soil into the slave state. Almost immediately, however, he "heard the whip crack, and the voice of the ploughman driving in the corn field … and saw a number of slaves in the field with a white man, who I supposed to be their overseer" (77). Bibb is thus reminded that he remains in a slave state, and it is this disjunctive moment

that destroys the environmental harmony signaled briefly by the birds. Bibb's focus on the birds hints at the potential for free labor and harmonious nature in the South, despite the degradation and corruption that currently exists. But these brief instances of free labor and natural beauty within a slave state should not be interpreted as any sort of equivalence between the expansive nature of freedom and the expansive nature of slavery, for the signs of free soil are quickly erased as the workday begins. Instead, Bibb's juxtaposition of free labor and slave labor within the borderlands of the Upper South seems to suggest that while freedom can make any landscape beautiful for a moment, meaningful transformation can occur only with the complete absence of slavery. Bibb thus encapsulates the essence of the Free Soil argument that free labor will transform environments into ideal spaces, but he also argues that this ideal can be realized only within a nation that is entirely, not partially, antislavery. That is, slavery cannot simply be abolished in certain places while continuing elsewhere. Only the most thorough and immediate abolition can bring about the environmental utopia at the heart of Free Soil.

In addition to revealing the influence of free soil within slave states, Bibb demonstrates the presence of the slave power in free states. Bibb's portrayals of the borderlands north of the Ohio River address slavery's expansive influence on the labor and landscape of southern Ohio. He makes plain that in Cincinnati—through which he travels in nearly all of his escapes north—neither his labor nor his body is protected. As Eric Foner has noted, Free Soilers often depicted southern Ohio as though "parts of slave states [were] transplanted onto free soil. Such an attitude was understandable when one remembers that southern Ohio … with its large farms raising tobacco and its close commercial relations with the South, did reflect much of the southern way of life."[26] In Bibb's telling, Cincinnati is characterized by the struggle between the Slave Power and free labor and reflects the influence of slavery in the North, exemplifying a nominally free landscape that has been polluted by slavery. Bibb shows slavery's pollution in terms of racism and alienating labor,

representing his work experiences in ways that directly echo his time on plantations, while also delineating Ohio's commercial ties to the South. After an encounter with a tyrannical boss who would not pay Bibb his regular wages, Bibb finds this sort of labor "a little too much like slavery" (170). Further, Bibb witnesses both black and white slave catchers "getting rich by betraying fugitive slaves" and who tried to "induce [Bibb] to engage in the same business for the sake of regaining [his] own liberty" (69). The "qualifications necessary for [t]his business," Bibb notes, come naturally to "a drunkard, a gambler, a profligate, and a slaveholder" (73). Unlike his work in running away, this "business" is enslaving. The skills that this economy requires and values, Bibb suggests, are themselves examples of degradation, antithetical to honest labor and directly reflecting the influence of the slave system.

Just as Cincinnati's workers have been polluted by the slave system, the surrounding environment, accordingly, has been transformed into a hostile and unwelcoming landscape. Southern Ohio reflects slavery's influence to such an extent that Bibb—much in the way that he describes work in Ohio as analogous to work on the plantation—describes nature in Ohio in the same manner as he described the environments of the South. For example, Bibb draws attention to swamps and mud and the difficulty of travel through "a section of country where abolitionists were few and far between," at the very moment when "there happened to be a Southerner present, who was a personal friend of Deacon Whitfield" (180–81). Bibb thus implies that it is the very presence of a Southerner that seems to make the topography hostile. Bibb takes the Free Soil argument that slaveholding symbolized rank decay and transposes it to the material conditions of the Ohio landscape, as though literal contact with a slaveholder's body pollutes this environment.[27] This deployment of the pollution trope challenges aspects of Free Soil ideology as well, for Bibb's claim that it is slaveholders who are pollutive reverses the claims of the most virulently racist Free Soilers that the presence of blacks in the territories would pollute what they hoped to preserve as a thoroughly white

landscape.[28] Bibb's larger point here, though, is that Ohio, both in its physical proximity to the South and its lack of legal protection for black workers, cannot be thought of as free soil. The landscapes of Central Ohio as well appear corrupted. In traveling north from Cincinnati, Bibb struggles against many "external difficulties," such as pursuit by "proslavery hunting dogs of the South" and fear that he might be "captured while travelling among strangers, through cold and fear, breasting the north winds, being thinly clad, pelted by the snow storms through the dark hours of the night, and not a house in which I could enter to shelter me from the storm" (52). Bibb's depictions of the harshness of this environment serve to locate injustice and racism within the Ohio landscape, conflating the threat posed by the dogs with that of the wind, the snow, and the darkness. The land itself is rendered hostile to the fugitive. Further, as no house would provide him with protection, Bibb includes in this unwelcoming environment both individuals and a broader societal sympathy to slaveholders. Bibb thus echoes Free Soil arguments about the expansive reach of the slave system into the North but does so in a way that focuses on northern racism and the hostility that he, as a black worker, faces from communities that were deemed the base of the Free Soil movement.[29]

Bibb suggests that the overlapping environments within the Ohio River Valley are also reflective of intersecting economic systems. This multivalent sense of overlap here exemplifies how Bibb's Free Soil critique addresses the interrelations of landscapes and labor systems of slave and free states. Such an approach on Bibb's part undermines Free Soil's ideological investment in limits and boundaries, as evidenced by its belief that slavery could be contained within its current borders. Bibb goes a step further though. By depicting northern nature as corrupted by the slave power, and by condemning the economy and society of Ohio as corrupted with racism, Bibb goes directly to the heart of Free Soil, for it was the images of the land and workers of the North that represented the foundation of the Free Soil argument. In revealing how Northern environments and Northern labor

are corrupted by slavery, and in demonstrating how the Free Soil investment in limits and distance can lead to racist divisions and undermine solidarity among the non-aristocratic classes, Bibb suggests that slavery has breached the geographic and ideological borders of Free Soil. Not only is slavery in Ohio in the ways detailed above, but slaveholding ideology, and racism in particular, is within, and has corrupted, the Free Soil movement. Bibb thus not only makes a Free Soil argument against slavery but also, by interrogating its ideological contradictions, reveals how the philosophical contours of Free Soil thinking, like the political borders so central to its approach, have been polluted by slavery.

■■■

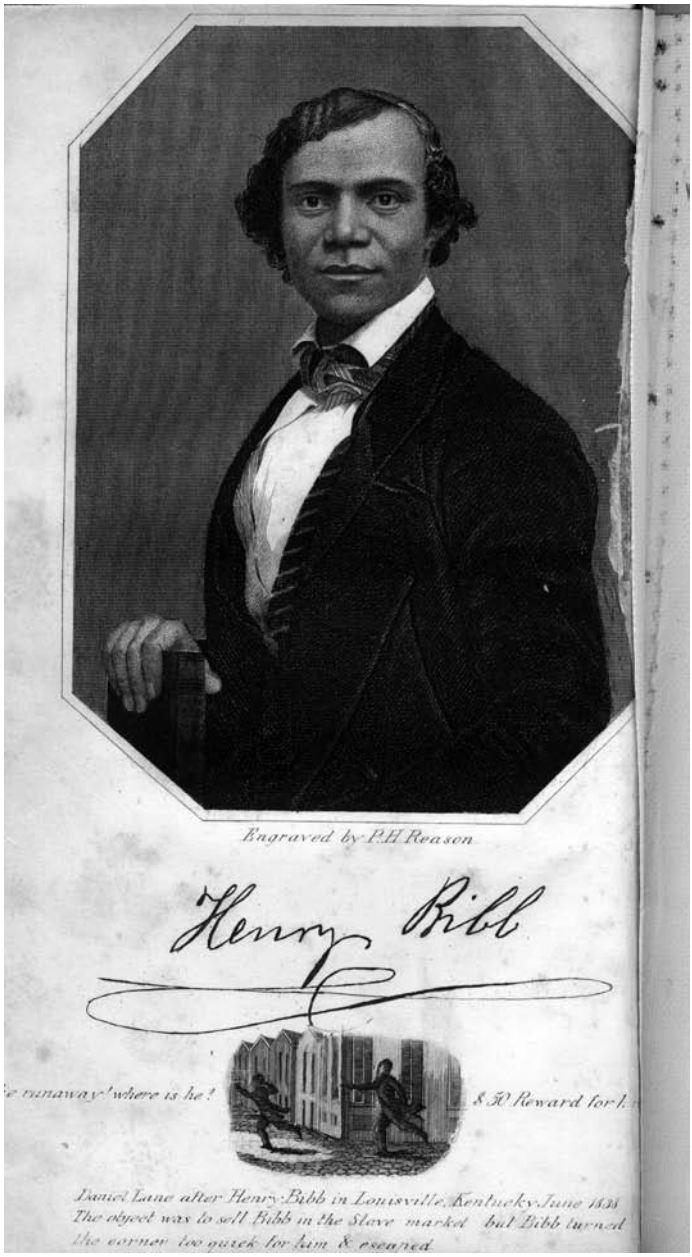
FREE SOIL: THE LAND OF LIBERTY

Even after crossing the Ohio River into the free states, Bibb demonstrates that he has not yet reached truly free soil, as he travels through hostile environments while being subject to alienating labor and racism. Not until he reaches northern Ohio does Bibb find himself sufficiently removed from the geographies of the slave system and only then can he start to think that he has arrived at free soil. But even in northern Ohio's Wood County, for instance, Bibb notices the influences of the slave system. Bibb offers his services as a cook to the landlady of a tavern who "was very pleased with my work" and "wanted to hire me for all winter," but Bibb feels unsafe in this space, fearing that "might be pursued" (55). Bibb also explains that in this region the "'wild-cat banks' were … flourishing," with paper money, or "'shin plasters' in abundance" (54). As he has many times before, Bibb feels that his labor is not protected, but in this instance the threat comes from both the Slave Power and the Money Power, whose banks and paper money were frequently attacked by the Jacksonian elements of the Free Soil movement.[30] Bibb thus refuses the offer to remain in Wood County but receives fifty cents in addition to his board for his work in the kitchen. This is Bibb's first explicit reference to being paid wages for his labor, and is thus literal evidence

that he is making his way beyond the expansive geographies of slavery.

Not until he reaches land that has an established and autonomous black presence does Bibb suggest that he has in fact reached free soil.[31] Bibb's Free Soil critique thus emphasizes the presence of black farmers in the North whose work combats both the Slave Power ideology and an all-white vision of free soil.[32] The day after stopping at the tavern, Bibb arrives in Perrysburgh, Ohio, near Lake Erie and the Michigan border, where he "found quite a settlement of colored people, many of whom were fugitive slaves" (55). In his portrayals of Perrysburgh, Bibb gives his first example of what free labor on free soil looks like. Upon arrival, "I made my case known to them and they sympathized with me. I was a stranger, and they took me in and persuaded me to spend the winter in Perrysburgh, where I could get employment" (55). Tellingly, they offer him sympathy *and* work. Bibb then explains that he "got a job of chopping wood during that winter which enabled me to purchase myself a suit, and after paying my board the next spring, I had saved fifteen dollars in cash" (55). Once again, Bibb directly references the wages that he earned for his labor. Perrysburgh is clearly a safe space, where both labor and liberty are protected, and Bibb returns to his "friends in Perrysburgh" the next year, waiting three more months for his wife to join him (83). Bibb returns to Perrysburgh once more in 1841, in his final escape north on his way to Detroit. While not his ultimate destination, Perrysburgh provides a crucial setting for Bibb's trajectory, as here he experiences, for the first time, valuation of his own labor as well as a community of free black workers.

Despite his affection for the people of Perrysburgh and the community that they have built, Bibb does not remain there, and it is his moving on that illuminates the last aspect of his Free Soil critique. Due to its synthesis of unalienated labor and land protected from the encroachment of the Slave Power, Perrysburgh seems like an exemplary community, consistent with much of Free Soil ideology and Bibb's Free Soil critique. Ultimately, however, Bibb suggests that free soil simply cannot exist in the United States for the fugitive



Frontispiece from Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written by Himself. Image courtesy of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

slave and thus he locates liberty and free labor in the landscapes of Canada, "over which waved freedom's flag, defended by the British Government, upon whose soil there cannot be the foot print of a slave" (51). Bibb sees Canada as the ultimate space of liberty since there "it was not possible for [fugitive slaves] to be captured" (68). Bibb portrays the end of his journey in material terms, saying that he "landed [himself] safely in Canada, where [he] was regarded as a man, and not as a thing" (16).[33]

Before ultimately emigrating to Canada, however, Bibb settles in Detroit, where he works various jobs, receives a brief education, and becomes active with the Liberty and Free Soil parties. Bibb sends the proceedings of a Detroit Liberty Party Convention to a handful of Kentucky slaveholders, including his former owner, William Gatewood, who, in 1844, writes him a letter in reply. Both Gatewood's letter and Bibb's response are included in the *Narrative*. In his reply, Bibb notes, "I am not property now, but am regarded as a man like yourself, and although I live far north, I am enjoying a comfortable living by my own industry" (176). Bibb's point that he is working independently and productively in the north serves as one more example for the Free Soil argument against slavery. But it is Bibb's response to the particular points of Gatewood's letter, I will suggest by way of conclusion, that most fully exemplifies the dual aspects of Bibb's Free Soil critique. Gatewood complains that "times are dull and produce low" in Kentucky (175). Gatewood's farm was in Trimble County, which agricultural historian Sam Bowers Hilliard notes was "the premier agricultural region of Kentucky" during the period.[34] As produce "low" implies not only low profits but also small crops, Gatewood's complaint serves to confirm the Free Soil argument against the unproductive nature of the slave system.

Gatewood's letter also expresses interest in learning about King and Jack, two other fugitive slaves. Bibb explains that they have settled in Canada West and are "well, and doing well. . . . They are now the owners of better farms than the men are who once owned them" (177). Bibb underscores that Gatewood's escaped slaves, who are "well and doing

well," are enjoying the personal and economic successes that Gatewood, according to his letter, appears to be lacking. In a similar letter written in 1848, Bibb writes that he is "well and doing well on 'free soil and free labor.'[35] Bibb's later letter echoes the "well and doing well" phrase that he used to describe King and Jack but in this instance he both directly associates it with his own condition and alludes to the slogan of the Free Soil Party. Writing from Pontiac, Michigan, and about to depart for the Buffalo Free Soil Convention, Bibb does not look to Canada, as he did in his 1844 letter concerning King and Jack, but instead locates Free Soil in the United States. Taken together as Free Soil exemplars, Bibb, King, and Jack are free and, through working for themselves on free soil, have become healthy, productive, and satisfied. As the final example of his Free Soil critique, Bibb focuses explicitly on black workers and their agency, incentive, and productivity. Bibb thus appears to speak not only to Gatewood but also to his audience in the North, warning them against foreclosing their conceptions of free labor and free soil to black workers.

Further, in his response to Gatewood, Bibb focuses directly on land. He is pleased to report that King and Jack have become landowners; by gaining possession of land through their labor and by running successful farms they serve as implicit contrasts to their former owners whose farms were presumably passed down for generations. In rendering King's and Jack's farms as "better," Bibb claims that they are more productive, more valuable, and perhaps even more secure than the Kentucky plantations from which they escaped. But Bibb's point here is not merely to critique Southern agriculture but also to celebrate black yeoman farmers in Canada. King and Jack exemplify a more expansive Free Soil ideal, one that embraces people of color. A crucial aspect of Bibb's Free Soil critique is that King and Jack simply could not own land and be productive in the United States due to the expansive influence of the Slave Power. On one level, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, reinforced by the Supreme Court in 1842 with *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, means that King's and Jack's labor and land would have

no legal protection in the United States. On another level, endemic racism in the North would further compound the difficulty for black yeomen like King and Jack to own and develop their land. The fatal flaw of Free Soil ideology, Bibb suggests, is that it simply condemns slave agriculture and slave society without proposing a viable alternative. By thinking that slavery could be limited to its current locations, and by privileging only white farmers' claims to homesteads in the West, Free Soil does not provide space, ideologically or geographically, for farmers like King and Jack. King and Jack have achieved the Free Soil ideal: owning a farm, working it themselves, improving the land through their labor; this achievement is possible only because they have left the United States. Truly free soil, and by extension free labor and free men, exists solely beyond the border. By juxtaposing a southern farm dependent on slave labor with independent black yeoman farmers in Canada, Bibb deploys Free Soil arguments against the inefficiencies of slave agriculture while simultaneously providing an alternative that reflexively condemns Free Soil for posing an environmental critique of slavery that does not address racism and does not sufficiently attack the root of the problem: the continuing existence of slaveholding in the United States.

Using the specific examples of free blacks farming in Canada, Bibb describes an alternative to landscapes where alienating labor practices and racism adversely affect not only the productivity of workers but the productivity of the land itself. Whereas Southern soil may be naturally more fertile and may have a longer growing season, slavery's systems of labor have turned southern space into economically unproductive and environmentally abject geographies. By focusing on modes of production, workers, and topographies, Bibb connects labor to land ideologically and materially, demonstrating the unnatural effects of alienating labor and racism while addressing the environmental benefits of free labor. In his letter to Gatewood, Bibb most explicitly ties environmental degradation to racism and exploitation. At the same time, his entire text, when read in light of the juxtaposition between the productive land of liberty and the degraded

landscapes of the South, reveals the imbrication of racial and ecological hegemony in a manner that Free Soil ideology only hints at. Bibb thus not only depicts labor and land in a way that would resonate with a Free Soil audience but also demonstrates ways in which Free Soil thinking about land and labor is severely circumscribed by its less than complete embrace of immediate abolition and antiracism.

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NOTES

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1. For a comprehensive history of the movement, see Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Norton, 1980). For a political history of the Liberty Party, see Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 2009). The classic study of Free Soil ideology is Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995). See also Frederick J. Blue, *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 2005) and Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005). For the origins of Free Soil, see Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004). Earle defines free soil broadly, comprising "an ideology, a party, and a movement—often all three at once" (13). The majority of historical studies, as Earle notes, have focused "entirely on national politics and limit their scope to the [Free Soil] party's brief existence. As a result, the radical roots and abundant ambiguities of free soil have been elided" (213 n.35). Consistent with Earle's argument, I refer to the "antislavery Free Soil movement" (which includes the Liberty and

Free Soil parties, as well as the economic and social valences of political antislavery) and distinguish it, when necessary, from the Free Soil Party. I wish to distinguish the antislavery Free Soil movement from the Free Soil Party because the movement included a diverse group of literary authors who took part in third-party antislavery politics to varying degrees of formality. Despite the importance of figures such as Henry Highland Garnet and John Greenleaf Whittier, literary studies of the movement and its antislavery rhetoric are nearly nonexistent. An important exception to this is Lance Newman, "Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" *American Literature* 81 (2009): 127-52.

2. Aspects of this antislavery focus on land and labor have been rightly critiqued by both abolitionists and contemporary historians as both racist and conservative, for privileging the anxieties of the white working class at the expense of blacks—and, in some instances, wishing to keep the territories not only free of slavery but free of black people—and as insufficiently antislavery, calling for restricting slavery's expansion rather than its outright abolition. See Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 77-93, and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London: Verso, 2007), 43-92. More recently, Jonathan Earle has cautioned against viewing both the "party and ideology as unprincipled and cynical retreats" from racial equality and the concerns of those in bondage, for doing so "minimizes the complexity of Free Soil's ideological and racial trajectory" (*Jacksonian Antislavery*, 14, 124).
3. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 124.
4. Historians of Free Soil have given Bibb only passing mention. Sewell includes Bibb in his list of black abolitionists who "enthusiastically endorsed the Liberty Party" and who "worked mightily to enlist support for Liberty candidates" (*Ballots for Freedom*, 101). Johnson claims that Bibb was one of "the Liberty Party's most tireless black orators" (*The Liberty Party*, 251).
5. "The Great Convention of the North West," *Emancipator*, 15 July 1846, 46; "Proceedings of the State Liberty Convention, Vermont," *National Era* 18 February 1847; Johnson, *Liberty Party*, 198; "State Liberty Convention," *Liberty Standard*, 10 February 1848; Oliver Dyer, *Phonographic Report of the Proceedings of the National Free Soil Convention* (Buffalo:

G.H. Derby and Co., 1848), 24; "Celebration of the Passage of the Ordinance of 1787," *National Era*, 26 July 1849, 120.

6. *North Star*, 01 September 1848.
7. Johnson, *The Liberty Party*, 359.
8. This collection of authenticating documents, Robert Stepto has suggested, represents "collectively, what may be the most elaborate guarantee of authenticity found in the slave narrative cannon" ("I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994], 259).
9. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (New York: the Author, 1849), 185-86; hereafter cited parenthetically.
10. See, for example, Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*, (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2007), 54-56. On the importance of geography to slave narratives more generally, see Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2009), 253-61.
11. Ecocritical concern with nature in Bibb's narrative was anticipated by Melvin Dixon, who claims that Bibb "structured his entire narrative around [a] test of wilderness," where the non-human environment is metaphorized as a space for liberation and the construction of a new identity (*Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987], 26). Similarly William Andrews refers to Bibb's text as a road narrative, wherein Bibb reveals his character through travel (*To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* [Urbana: Illinois Univ. Press, 1986], 151-52). Prior to the ecocritical turn, critics largely focused on Bibb's recursive narrative and his portrayal of marriage and family. See, for example, Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).
12. Christine Gerhardt, "The Greening of African-American Landscapes: Where Ecocriticism Meets Post-Colonial Theory," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 55 (2002): 515-33; Gerhardt, "Border Ecology: The Slave Narrative of Henry Bibb, Nature, and the Frontier Myth" in *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on*

the African American Environmental Imagination, ed. Sylvia Mayer (Münster, Germany: LIT, 2003) 11-29; and Jeffrey Myers, in *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2005).

13. Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 77.
14. Foner, *Free Soil*, 41-42.
15. My use of the term "ecological" as a rubric is indebted to Timothy Morton who claims that "Ecological thinking … includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence." Morton notes that whereas environmental writing focuses on the "out-there" and the "not-me," ecological writing "keeps insisting that we are 'embedded' in nature" *(Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007], 4*)*. An ecological ethic in this case has to do with material interconnection, or the sense that "deep down everything is connected" (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010). This approach thus avoids the sort of holistic and utopian thinking that characterize Romantic or Deep Ecology incisively critiqued by Dana Phillips (*The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], 42-82).
16. For more on environmental and racial thinking see Finseth, 38-41, and Outka, 1-26.
17. See Michael Bennett, "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2001), 195-210. According to Bennett, antipastoralism inverts the conventions of the pastoral, condemning not only American country life but coding the wilderness as a hostile space, antithetical to African Americans' freedom.
18. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2010), 16.
19. Emmanuel S. Nelson has noted how, in Bibb's analysis, slavery's dehumanizing effects extend to whites as well, as a few southerners are depicted as "essentially inhuman" (*African American Authors, 1745-1945* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000], 25).
20. Foner, *Free Soil*, 46-47.
21. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 86, emphasis in original.

22. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 13. Mills explains that "if in the racial polity nonwhites may be regarded as *inherently* bestial and savage (quite independently of what they happen to be doing at any particular moment), then by extension they can be conceptualized in part as *carrying the state of nature around with them*, incarnating wildness and wilderness in their person" (87, emphasis in original).
23. As Kimberly Ruffin argues, the conflation of "slave" with "animal" was an explicitly ecological form of dehumanization (*Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2010], 34).
24. John O'Grady, *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin* (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1993), 32. For more on ecotones and literature, see Romand Coles, "Ecotones and Environmental Ethics: Adorno and Lopez," in *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Enlightenment*, ed. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 226-49.
25. Bibb lived and worked in Shelby, Henry, Oldham, and Trimble Counties, all of which are near the Ohio River and approximately 60-85 miles from Cincinnati.
26. Foner, *Free Soil*, 49.
27. Bibb's argument here echoes the Free Soiler George R. Russell's "hope to die in a land of liberty—in a land which no slave hunter shall dare pollute with his presence," qtd. in Albert Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 55.
28. See Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 131.
29. Two of the most prominent Free Soilers, James Birney and Salmon Chase were from Ohio, which, as Jonathan Earle has shown, more so than any other region, "arranged and then officiated at the marriage between Jacksonian egalitarianism and antislavery that produced the Free Soil Party" (Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 144).
30. See Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery*, 7-13.
31. For more on black agrarianism, see Smith *African American Environmental Thought*, 51-61. Smith explains that "under the black agrarians' reasoning, a free labor system alone might not be enough to ensure good stewardship; it is also important to afford political and civil equal-

ity to agricultural workers, which might in turn involve ownership of land by laborers" (57).

32. For a detailed description of the symbolic importance to the Free Soil movement of free black farmers in the North see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 134-58.
33. Bibb and his wife ultimately settled in Sandwich, across the border from Michigan, where he founded the newspaper *Voice of the Fugitive* and organized The Refugee Home Society, helping settle fugitive slaves in Canada. See Afua Cooper, "The Fluid Frontier: Blacks and The Detroit River Region, A Focus on Henry Bibb," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30.2 (2000): 129-49.
34. Hilliard, *Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984), 10.
35. Henry Bibb, "Interesting Letter From a Runaway Slave to his Ex-Master," *The True Wesleyan* 24 March 1849.