Introduction

The Cultural Geography of Violence along the Underground Railroad

One summer night in 1845 thirteen slaves escaped from a plantation in northern Kentucky and ran for the Ohio River, led by Louis Talbert. They had planned to cross the Ohio on a raft, but building the craft took longer than expected, and only half of the band had made the passage before daylight. The delay of a day to bring the others over the river under cover of darkness cost them dearly. Their escape was now common knowledge on both banks of the river, and the underemployed white men of the area scoured the northern bank in hopes of a sizable reward from their claimants. Once they were all across the river, they were unable to travel far before daylight forced them to go to ground again. As they had now been forty-eight hours without eating, some of the party went to a nearby farmhouse to purchase food. Unfortunately, this desperate act revealed their location to the various slave-catching posses scouring the countryside. Slave catchers soon gave chase and the party of fugitives scattered, but most were recaptured. Talbert and three others managed to avoid capture, and slowly made their way overland to Newport, IN, a well-known abolitionist stronghold and center of the Underground Railroad. Quaker Underground activist Levi Coffin took in Talbert and his companions and facilitated their travel farther north to Canada.

Talbert returned to Indiana the following summer. He had left two sisters behind in slavery and wished to lead them to freedom. Coffin attempted to dissuade him, no doubt reminding him of the dangers awaiting him on the north bank of the Ohio even if he should be able to travel undetected through Kentucky. But Talbert insisted that the dangers were manageable: he knew friends in the neighborhood of his...
Introduction: The Cultural Geography of Violence

sisters’ plantation who would assist him, and, having made contact with the Underground Railroad, he now knew how to navigate the Northern borderland as well. Once in Kentucky, Talbert persuaded several friends to leave Kentucky and slavery behind, telling them “of the many good friends they would find on the road who would help them on their way to liberty.” In the end Talbert was unable to make contact with his sisters, but brought out four or five others. When they crossed the Ohio, Talbert led them quickly to the home of a Borderland Underground activist, who started them up the network of safe houses leading from the river back to Newport.

Talbert accompanied his friends to Canada, but returned a few months later and settled in Newport. He attended Union Literary Institute for two years and made two more journeys into the South. On the first he again failed to retrieve his sisters but brought another group of friends back out with him. While organizing the second he was captured in Indianapolis and carried back into slavery. The man who had enslaved him retaliated against his activities by selling him down to New Orleans, but Talbert escaped from the steamboat carrying him south and traveled overland across Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. He eventually returned to Newport.

Talbert was far from the only fugitive from enslavement to make the journey. Coffin later reported having assisted more than 2,000 escapees in his twenty-year residence in Newport, and he was only one of many activists in the neighborhood. Dozens of African Americans who had escaped from slavery stayed and settled in Wayne and Randolph Counties. In 1850 a group of Kentucky slaveholders, including the man who had enslaved Talbert, decided that the time had come to deal with the community’s defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act. A posse of fifteen rode into Newport looking for Talbert and several other escapees who had settled in the neighborhood. They obtained warrants and searched the homes of several Underground activists, but word of their coming had preceded them, and they came away empty handed. While Talbert and some other escapees made themselves scarce, fellow fugitive Cal Thomas and a crowd of several hundred other black and white residents gathered under arms in the center of the town to confront the posse. Angry that their journey was turning into a fool’s errand, the posse waded into the crowd and threatened to burn the town if resident escapees were not surrendered to them. When the man who claimed Thomas caught sight of him, he spurred his horse, drew a pistol, and ordered Thomas to surrender. Thomas in turn raised a rifle and told the man who had held
harnessed in slavery to turn his horse around or he would “blow him into eternity.”

As the situation threatened to deteriorate into a violent melee, several leaders of the Quaker community stepped between the parties and urged calm on all sides. Eli Osbourne, one of these pacifist mediators, advised the posse to leave town. In response, one of the posse leaders challenged him to a duel with pistols. Osbourne politely declined, offering instead to challenge the posse to a game of marbles, but only “if they would get down off their horses.” This subtle mockery raised a laugh from the crowd, and infuriated the posse, but they had little choice but to beat an inglorious retreat.¹

The story of fugitives from enslavement and of the assistance that they received from the antislavery activists who would come to style themselves the Underground Railroad is a story of violence. Violence is a current that runs through every fugitive account and every Underground activist reminiscence. The dynamics of that violence, however, were shaped by culture and varied across region. The details of Louis Talbert’s escape and the subsequent proslavery raid on Newport, together with dozens of other accounts left by Underground Railroad activists and fugitives from enslavement, illustrate a geography of violence, a shifting cultural landscape on which norms of violence shaped the fugitive experience and the operations of the Underground Railroad. In the South, the enslaved were by law subject to the enslaver’s will, and violent coercion, largely unconstrained by law, reigned over African American life in the slave states. Moreover, as Talbert’s initial experience on the north bank of the Ohio demonstrates, proslavery violence also ran rampant in the border counties of the free states. Fugitives, particularly those like Talbert who escaped from Upper South plantations in the vicinity of the border, often found traversing this borderland

to be more difficult and dangerous than their initial journeys through the South to the border itself. Yet the attempt to capture Talbert and others in Newport demonstrates that the proslavery violence that prevailed in the Northern Borderland faced geographic limits. Slaveholders who followed fugitives north beyond the confines of the border counties found that the violence inherent in their claims to mastery, rather than engendering public approbation, instead alienated entire communities. Instead of willing assistance, slaveholders and slave catchers faced organized opposition, public ridicule, and, sometimes, retaliation in the form of antislavery violence.

At its core, violence is a mode of cultural expression and an important site of cultural conflict. To be sure, the violence involved in the struggles over the recapture of fugitives from enslavement was, in part, instrumental, a continuation, as it were, of legal claims by other means. Nevertheless, an additional property of violence, alongside its instrumentality, is that it is inherently expressive. Violence is a mode of communicating norms of power, justice, and belonging. It is also culturally mediated: norms both shape and constrain individual violent behavior. Finally, the legitimacy of violence is always contested, and thus both violence and the reaction thereto convey claims to custom, morality, and collective memory.

Every society has a culture of violence, through which it expresses a coherent set of norms governing what values violence may be used to uphold, to what forms and limits violence must adhere, and, finally, who may initiate violence, who may wield it, and who may be targeted. In this sense, even a society dedicated to pacifism possesses a culture of violence. Stories told by fugitives, Underground activists, and news accounts of confrontations between slave catchers and northern communities evoke the collision between distinct cultures of violence: moments in which the clash of unspoken values, norms, and styles of violence left participants on all sides shocked, enraged, and embittered.

If cultural norms create patterns of violent behavior, that behavior is not randomly distributed across space. Discreet cultures of violence predominate within human societies, and are thus geographically bound. The arrangement of distinct cultures of violence within a human landscape constitutes a geography of violence. That geography can shift as people move, as new social and economic bonds form between different localities, and as norms of violence evolve. A geography of violence is an empirical reality that can be discerned by observing patterns of violent
behavior over dozens of individual cases and analyzing the cultural norms that produce these patterns.²

The geography at the heart of this book was composed of four regions, each of which exhibited a distinct culture of violence. This geography was a fundamental cultural context in which the Underground Railroad operated and to which it had to adapt. In running to the North, fugitives sought to make a decisive break with a Southern culture of violence which sanctioned white brutality as a means of enforcing racial hierarchy and black subordination and upholding masculine honor. To uphold honor and reputation against the transgressions of other white men, Southerners engaged in bloody and not infrequently lethal rituals included the display of weapons, assaults, canings, brawls, and duels. To command obedience from slaves and uphold racial subordination, white Southerners inflicted harsh beatings and whippings and more crushingly brutal retaliation in the form of torture, dismemberment, public Lynchings, and mass executions.³

Southern slaveholders and slave catchers who traveled to the North in pursuit of those seeking escape brought these cultural expectations and rituals with them, and engaged in a style of violence that combined the brutality of the violence of enslavement and the arrogance of an exaggerated display of hypermasculine domination stemming from the South’s

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culture of honor. I will refer to this culture of violence as the violence of mastery.

Those who pursued escapees into the free states found that the cultural response to the violence of mastery was profoundly different across three distinct regions of the North. In the last decade, several historians of the antebellum period have conceptualized the regions of the North and South adjacent the line dividing the slave and free states as a “borderland,” a region of cultural contact and cultural conflict. These historians, particularly Stanley Harrold and Matthew Salača, differ significantly on the geographic bounds of that borderland. For the purposes of this analysis, I have defined the Borderland Region of the North as extending one or two counties north of the Mason–Dixon Line and the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River, generally a distance of twenty-five to forty miles. However, in the region of southern Illinois known as Egypt, the Borderland extended as much as 100 miles north of the Ohio River (see Map I.1). By the late 1850s the Borderland extended across the southern border of Iowa and to the territory of Kansas.4

In this region, communities were largely receptive to proslavery violence. Many Borderland residents were of Southern origin, and underemployed white residents often acted as occasional slave catchers. Slave catching posses freely enacted Southern norms of racial violence, breaking into the homes of free blacks, and on a few occasions killing and dismembering escapees who resisted. Because most white Borderland residents found this violence to be culturally normative, Borderland communities rarely prosecuted those enacting it. In general, most Borderland whites supported fugitive slave renditions, the legal process by which fugitives were taken into custody and brought before an official competent to authorize their return to the South.

The Borderland also encompassed the City of New York. Though it was not geographically contiguous with the rest of the region, the cultural

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4 Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Matthew Salača, *Slavery’s Borderland: Freedom and Bondage along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). My conception of the Borderland as described here adheres much more closely to that offered by Salača than it does to that presented by Harrold. Salača describes the manner in which the white populations of a borderland one county deep on either side of the Ohio River Valley coexisted in a shared political economy in which slavery and the tight control of free African American labor was a central feature. My own conception of the Northern Borderland, based on patterns of violent behavior, is somewhat more expansive than Salača’s, but follows his lead in adopting the county as a unit of analysis rather than the state-level unit of analysis offered by Harrold.
norms of the Borderland prevailed in the city. Historians have long noted the harsh racial animosity prevailing in the city and the particular dependence of the city’s mercantile economy on the cotton trade. This study does not identify the particular combination of white supremacy, commercial connections, and local corruption that caused the city’s receptivity to the violence of mastery, but it does highlight that receptivity as an empirical reality. The city’s white residents largely accepted the norms of proslavery violence. City officials routinely involved themselves in slave catching, and some engaged in the kidnapping of African Americans for sale to the slave states. Those residents who resisted proslavery violence courted severe retaliation in the form of physical abuse and harsh criminal sentences. The dynamics of proslavery violence that played out in New York City closely resembled those in other Borderland cities such as Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and New Albany, IN.

The pervasive threat of the violence of mastery across the region shaped the response of Borderland Underground Railroad activists, who focused on moving fugitives by speed and stealth beyond its reach. Some fugitives from enslavement, particularly those as lucky and as cunning as Talbert, were able to navigate the Borderland unassisted. But as Talbert’s subsequent journeys show, organized assistance made that journey easier, faster, and safer. Underground activists also attempted, often unsuccessfully, to “rescue” fugitives by liberating them from the custody of the slave catchers or local officials who had recaptured them on Northern soil and taking them to safety. They undertook this resistance at considerable risk of violent and legal retaliation.

Further north, the culture of violence shifted perceptibly. I refer to a region that spanned the middle and upper latitudes of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey as the Contested Region. This region also encompassed the Hudson River Valley between New York City and Albany. The Contested Region was the site of a cultural collision between the violence of mastery and what Edward Ayers has referred to as the “culture of dignity.” The culture of dignity, which prevailed across the region, emphasized law, justice, and the intrinsic value of all human beings as values that constrained the individual assertion of violence. The culture of dignity was the baseline normative structure of the North as a whole, but in the Borderland it was overwhelmed by the cultural influence of the South, and in the 1840s it would begin to lose its hold over the Upper North as well.

The culture of dignity gave the Contested Region its own cultural integrity, and as a consequence, the casual acceptance of the violence of
Introduction: The Cultural Geography of Violence

MAP 1.1 The geographical bounds of the Borderland, Contested Region, and Free Soil Region
Introduction: The Cultural Geography of Violence

Free soil
Contested region
Borderland
Border slave states

Canada

See inset below

New York
Connecticut
Rhode Island

Atlantic Ocean

New Jersey

Ohio
Pennsylvania
Virginia
North Carolina

Erie
Lake Ontario

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mastery and broad embrace of slave catching that marked the Borderland gave way to a culture of violence that tolerated the rendition of fugitives from enslavement only conditionally: it demanded that slave catchers proceed peacefully, adhere strictly to proper legal procedure, and observe local norms of equity, due process, and human dignity. In addition, slave catchers operating in this region had to refrain from acting on Southern norms of violence. Even unconscious performances of the violence of mastery commonplace in the Borderland might move residents of the region to intercede on the fugitive’s behalf, and when slave catchers engaged in more blatant cultural transgressions, entire communities in the Contested Region exploded in rage. It was in this region that the fate of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 would ultimately be decided.5

This shift in the culture of violence in turn shaped the operations of the Underground Railroad. Because fugitives from enslavement were able to travel more openly and safely in this region, Underground activity grew progressively less organized as fugitives passed into northern Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Many activists in this region provided only ad hoc, occasional assistance to fugitives, such as a meal and directions to the right road north, the opportunity to work for wages with which to ease their subsequent travels, and safe access to railroad lines whose Borderland depots were closely watched.

Finally, a third, Free Soil Region encompassed New England, all of New York State to the north and west of Albany, the Connecticut Western Reserve, Michigan, the environs of Chicago, and Wisconsin. My use of the term “free soil” should not be confused with references to the Free Soil Party that emerged in the late 1840s or with the Republican Party’s insistence that slavery be prevented from gaining a foothold in the Western Territories in the 1850s. Rather, I refer to this area as the Free Soil Region because of a political and social movement that emerged in the early 1840s in which the region’s residents demanded that their communities should constitute “free soil,” untainted by the forces of slavery. Over the course of the 1840s free African Americans and white abolitionists in the region embraced a new set of cultural norms and a distinct style of violence. Rooted in a growing African American ethos of self-assertion and community self-defense and in the abolitionist movement’s break with the culture of dignity, this new Free Soil culture of violence celebrated the permanent settlement of fugitives in their midst as