

Marcus P. Nevius, *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020. ISBN: 9-780-8203-5642-6 (cloth)

In *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856*, historian Marcus Nevius contributes to a story of labor and fugitivity in a wetland-scape of the antebellum US South. As a Black Geographer and political ecologist, I was drawn to this text through an interest in the ways in which wetlands wriggle through environmental and geographic imaginaries and how these imaginaries impact relations with and contestations over land. How can we read the Black geographies of wetlands as spaces of fugitive life-making that run counter to and disrupt mainstream environmental narratives in the United States? How might this allow for a more nuanced approach to the materialities of landscape through dynamics of difference and power?

The Great Dismal Swamp (hereafter: the Dismal), comprised a wetland system covering 2,000 square miles between so-called Virginia and North Carolina prior to the Civil War, featuring white cypress, bald cypress, maple, and pine, as well as hummocks interspersed among areas of dense vegetation, peat, and standing water, among more open areas cleared by fire. Artifacts and present-day ruins from the Dismal reflect a wetland-scape crossed by Powhatan traders connecting Occaneechee, Nottoway, Meherrin, and Tuscarora peoples along the fringes, prior to the semi-permanent communities of maroons and enslaved laborers.

Told through intersecting geographic imaginaries of the material, political, and economic ramifications for enslaved laborers and maroon communities' lives and livelihoods, this text is driven by the key question of what is to be made of the Dismal as a city of refuge. "City of refuge" is a moniker of abolitionist rhetoric given to a landscape that captured political imaginaries of the antebellum United States, and still captures historical and ecological imaginaries today. The title is also the central argument of the text: Nevius contends that the

maroons leveraged their labor in an extractive economy to organize and negotiate certain contingent forms of subsistence and freedom. This makes an important contribution to the broader histories of marronage throughout the Black Atlantic as well as to understandings of fugitivity, refusal, and labor in the antebellum US South.

Nevius takes the reader through the human and nonhuman geographies of the Great Dismal Swamp from the mid-18th century to the eve of the Civil War, articulating the swamp's nuanced political economy of resource extraction, enslaved labor, and landscape development. The author speaks to the swamp via the lives of shifting and semi-permanent maroon communities, enslaved laborers, and company agents, with an eye towards the broader story of marronage throughout the Americas. Through these paths of flight and networks of exchange within and without the swamp, Nevius connects the intimate and embodied scales of labor to community agency and organizing tactics for both maroon communities and enslaved laborers. A concrete record of the labor politics among the workers in the Dismal is not voiced in the archive, leading Nevius to make inferences by sitting with the lacunae, erasures, and silences.

The arc of the text stays generally true to the chronology of shifts of enslaved labor, environmental management, and land use in the region from the mid-18th century to the Civil War. Nevius starts by following the activities and documentation of the Dismal Swamp Company (DSC) and Dismal Swamp Canal Company (DSCC), who used enslaved labor to change the landscape and extract resources. He then shifts toward state documentation in the form of county registers about enslaved people in the swamp, ending with abolitionist documentation, periodicals, and creative works that take up the geographic imaginary of the Dismal. Throughout the text, Nevius' geographic focus remains on the swamp, mainly the populations working in timber extraction along the edges, as well as "fugitive camps" and "semipermanent settlements" of maroons deeper in. He also contextualizes this discussion of sometimes fugitive life in the Dismal with the Black geographies of clandestine travel in the

region, in addition to maintaining a close eye on the intimate and embodied scales of labor in the swamp.

Nevius structures the book into six short and insightful chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the early days of the Dismal Swamp Company as it sought to use enslaved labor to make the swamp exploitable for the Atlantic timber economy. In the second chapter, this larger economy interlocks with the internal economy of the swamp and the contestations around land and landscape. Chapter 3 illustrates the forms of organizing among the enslaved laborers, the infrastructural and environmental engineering carried out by enslaved laborers, and their ramifications for both maroon communities and company agents. The next chapter describes how the development of internal infrastructures of extraction and transport allowed the swamp companies to increase their presence, putting maroon communities at risk while simultaneously bolstering the internal economy. Chapter 5 zooms out slightly, narrating the slave rebellions occurring in the region, the resultant white fears of Black mobility and agency, and the reactionary control and monitoring of enslaved laborers by the state. In Chapter 6, the maroons, and the swamp itself, get taken up in the rhetorical power of abolitionist imaginaries. The Epilogue explores the legacy of the city of refuge through its ruins, and, in doing so, re-situates it in the larger story of the Black Atlantic.

Like much scholarship in the history of slavery, Nevius is wrestling with and sometimes forced to speculate about the archival silences and unreliable representations of Black life in this period. The reader feels that the text sits with the many lacunae left behind by slaveholder documentation. Equally noting a dearth of written records left behind by enslaved people or maroons, whose lives and labor were necessarily conducted outside of the white record-keeping apparatus, Nevius foregrounds the “crucial glimpses that reflect the ways by which the Dismal’s enslaved people negotiated their lives” (p.12). I was struck by how Nevius’ discussion of these documents illustrates the ways in which they marked the material and physical geographies of a

wetland-scape while simultaneously erasing the human labor and livingness inextricable from the landscape.

At times, though, Nevius' analysis of company and state documentation reads as if Black folks were also relegated into the material geography and only become relevant through the gaze of economic valuation, state monitoring, fugitivity, or surprise. What the text lacks is a more rigorous examination of the ways in which archival silence compounds across multiple axes, particularly to erase the lives and labor of enslaved women. Beyond some anecdotal appearances and a short allusion to scholarship on enslaved women, I was left wanting a deeper discussion of the gendered labor politics of these landscapes and the silencing of enslaved women's stories in and around the swamp. What kinds of archival practice could bring these stories to light and are they meant to be excavated and known?

The contributions and strengths of the book, though, are manifold. I appreciated the kinds of myth-making that threads through these narratives, made material in the visual-ecological discourse of the wetland-scape. Nevius brings to light the overlapping material and discursive geographies of the swamp that spill out into larger economic, political, and ecological resonances. Particular insights for geographers may be the moments of embodied labor that constitute and extend through networks of colonial power and resource extraction or the fugitive relationships to space exemplified by clandestine movements through regional waterways and the always shifting semi-permanence of the maroon communities themselves.

The writing is detail oriented, yet still accessible; it's snappy, reads well, and keeps things geographically and conceptually concise. Nevius strikes a good balance between telling fleshed out stories and working through the historical material in a way that remains true to their limitations. His anecdotal discussions of the lives and stories of the enslaved people in and around the swamp are where his prose really shines. This text would work well in a survey course on the history of slavery or a regional discussion of slavery and labor in North Carolina or

the larger mid-Atlantic region. Chapter 1 would be a fruitful addition to an undergrad course on political ecology or environmental history. Chapter 6 would contribute well to an undergraduate discussion of abolitionist rhetoric and literature. Chapters 5 and 6 would contribute well to a graduate seminar around the intersections of geographical and environmental imaginaries, Black geographies, and contested and non-normative landscapes.

Geographers and political ecologists reading the text will likely also feel that Nevius' discussion of labor and resource extraction could benefit from a deeper discussion of the political ecology of the wetland-scape. While this is not the focus of the book, geographers and political ecologists can draw on his work to extend their own. For example, Nevius sometimes touches on the ecologies of the swamp through the lens of documentation by plantation agents. He describes the sandy soils along the fringes thought unsuitable for agriculture in comparison to the "open lands and tall reeds" (p.25) of the Green Sea assumed to have fertile black soils; the resource data in which enslaved people were seemingly flattened alongside cypress, cedar, oaks, maples, and elms; but more importantly, the project of environmental management and eco-engineering in which enslaved laborers built causeways, dug ditches, cleared areas, built canals, and grew crops. In this reading it often (ironically) felt like the reader was urged to see the timber but never the trees.

From the lens of critical political ecology, I was left wanting more about the forms of lifeways and world-building that occurred in a landscape deemed unapproachable yet exploitable in the environmental imaginaries of the planter class. Nevius' discussion of resource extraction, landscape development, and subsistence invites a rich discussion of the Black ecologies of the wetland-scape; the ways in which enslaved laborers and maroons cultivated ecological knowledge, environmental agency, and connections to the land that worked with and against economies of resource extraction. What may be left out of the archive or the archaeological dig is still in the soil, plants, and larger ecology still thriving in the Dismal.



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March 2021